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The development of undergraduate employability skills through authentic assessment in college-based higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores how authentic assessment can be implemented to enhance opportunities to develop employability skills through problem-solving tasks. Based on the eight key tenets of authentic assessment (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington and Brown, 2014), this paper presents formative and summative assessment case studies which were created in partnership with external stakeholders on three separate degree programmes at an undergraduate college-based higher education provider. The case studies report on the development of employability skills through authentic learning design on courses ranging from level 4 to level 6 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. The cases add weight to the argument for embedding employability within the curriculum wherein the core skills/intended outcomes are delivered as part of the taught curriculum rather than as paralleled approaches which aim to develop employability as an add-on. Each of the case studies are individually distinct, however they each share commonalities that collectively produce an effective framework for authentic assessment design. These key components include effective collaboration with external stakeholders (employers) from within the respective sectors, the joint formulation of a 'problem' that allows students to apply real world skillsets to overcome, and lastly the opportunity for external stakeholders to contribute towards feedback that students receive in respect to the assessment carried out. Learning developers in higher education should look to utilise the conclusions of this paper to inform learning design in their contexts.

Keywords: authentic assessment; employability skills; employability-focused assessment design; problem-solving; college-based higher education.

Introduction

In the last 20 years higher education (HE) assessment has undergone something of a paradigm shift, moving from traditional, standardised tests that measure knowledge towards authentic assessments that offer a more complex and comprehensive assessment of higher order skills (Villarroel et al., 2018). This shift presents a wider opportunity to enhance assessment strategies within HE to reflect real world applications within professional settings, making the assessments, and thus the learning and development experiences, truly authentic. In this context, this article introduces examples of authentic assessment developed in a college-based higher education institution across three undergraduate pathways. A common theme across these courses is the holistic development of students, both in line with the strategic objectives of the institution and reflected in the validation process of the respective programmes. The case studies demonstrate the acquisition of complex skillsets that go beyond understanding the subject matter to the application of technical skills. Examining these three cases allows us to consider how higher education institutions (HEIs) effectively embed authentic assessment: what are the key considerations for educators in enhancing technical skills acquisition? How can those opportunities be designed into the curriculum through formative and summative assessment? This paper will address these questions by first examining the importance of employability before analysing the role that assessment plays in providing an effective conduit through which authentic employability skills can be developed. Three case studies are presented that consider how learning designers have implemented three different forms of authentic assessment in undergraduate curricula. Importantly the cases have received excellent feedback from students and employers that may be of interest and provide guidance to colleagues exploring more authentic assessment design.

The importance of employability skills in the higher education sector

While graduate employability has been of interest for several years, it has recently become the focus of greater attention (Damoah, Peprah and Brefo, 2021), with a bachelor's degree

no longer being sufficient to meet employers' expectations (Scott and Willison, 2021). Instead, graduates are required to demonstrate competence in further areas and possess wider skills (Pavlin and Svetlik, 2014; Scott and Willison, 2021). In 2018, a UK government review of post-18 education prioritised employer access to a skilled workforce. The subsequent review of the Teaching and Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (Pearce, 2019) has resulted in HEIs now being measured specifically on student experience and student outcomes (including postgraduate employment). One important implication of the introduction of student outcomes evaluations has been the renewed interest in approaches to authentic assessment.

Whilst it is common for universities to employ various initiatives to enhance employability, the most common method is a paralleled approach (Cranmer, 2006), whereby 'employability is delivered outside the course via careers and employability services' (Bradley, Priego-Hernández and Quigley, 2022, p.2162). It is an approach criticised as having limited impact on student learning and development. An alternative is the embedded approach wherein the core skills and intended employability outcomes are delivered as part of the taught curriculum. Bradley, Priego-Hernández and Quigley (2022) argue that this provides more equitable access for students. In the case studies presented, employability is embedded within the curricula and designed into the assessment. This requires students to present outcomes to external stakeholders and they receive immediate developmental feedback from external stakeholders. In this way the voice of the external employer is brought into the curricula.

The role of assessment in facilitating learning and student development

Assessment has traditionally been used to evaluate end point summative academic achievement according to particular academic standards. Sokhanvar, Salehi and Sokhanvar suggest that HE assessment practice is often 'impertinent to students' professional careers and separated from what employers will tackle in their workplace' (2021, p.3). This could be in part because HEIs have traditionally focused on knowledge transmission and learning/memorising facts, to be tested through unseen time-constrained examinations and essays (James and Casidy, 2018). However, well designed assessment provides a significant opportunity for practitioners to support learning progression. Where an assessment is well-designed, students' holistic development is prevalent (Elkington,

2020). More specifically, contemporary research has suggested that authentic assessment methods increase engagement in learning and furnish students with vital professional skills (Sokhanvar, Salehi and Sokhanvar, 2021).

The term 'authentic assessment' was coined initially by Wiggins (1989). It refers to tasks that students are required to perform or engage in and activities that integrate skill developments that they may require in the workplace environment (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington and Brown, 2014; Murphy et al., 2017; Sambell, Brown and Race, 2019; Sambell and Brown, 2021). The concept is associated with resolving complex real-world issues through problem-solving approaches (Sokhanvar, Salehi and Sokhanvar, 2021) in authentic contexts (Murphy et al., 2017; Villarroel et al., 2018; Manoharan, 2021). This is significant for students' learning in HE because it gives them hands-on experience of responding to the challenges of graduate employment and offers an alternative to traditional forms of assessment.

Authentic assessment is not, however, without its critics. Murphy et al. (2017) assert that the uncertainty in determining what students are required to demonstrate can be a barrier to its implementation. Moreover, Villarroel et al. (2018) cite the time, energy, and intellectual resources it takes educators to prepare authentic assessments as factors that can discourage such approaches. Furthermore, they suggest that its implementation might be hindered by a lack of conceptualisation of what authenticity refers to. McArthur (2022), a critical theorist, presents a pertinent philosophical analysis of authenticity in assessment. For McArthur, the dominant discourse surrounding authentic assessment holds the risk of it becoming merely a buzzword – something conducted without critical thought concerning its rationale. Opposed to dominant discourse, which describes authentic assessment as that which mirrors the 'real-world' or 'world of work', she instead argues that authentic assessment should be directed towards broader social and/or political significance. Additionally, she proposes that educators be clear about the reasons why the assessment is being undertaken and shift towards thinking of authentic assessment as a socially-situated achievement that is powerful and transformative for the individuals and actors involved (McArthur, 2022).

The case studies presented below are underpinned by Ashford-Rowe, Herrington and Brown's (2014) eight key tenets of authentic assessment (see Table 1) and McArthur's

salient appreciation of the notion of authenticity holding wider significant meaning for the society in which each case is situated. The eight tenets were used to inform how learning was designed in each case and acted as a guide for tutors planning the assessment and learning experiences.

Table 1: The key tenets of authentic assessment (drawn from Ashford-Rowe, Herrington and Brown, 2014).

Tenet of authentic assessment	Recommendations for practice
Challenge	Assessments should require students to demonstrate higher-order abilities such as analysis and evaluation to solve a problem.
Outcome	Students should produce a product or performance (i.e., outcome) which demonstrates specific skills and knowledge.
Transferable knowledge and skills	Assessments should support the notion that knowledge and skills learnt in one area or module can be applied elsewhere.
Metacognition	Active critical reflection through self-evaluation should occur.
Accuracy	Assessments should simulate and test real-world abilities and students should understand how their assessment reflects real-world employment scenarios/demands.
Environment and tools	Authenticity of the environment and tools should be maximised to reflect real-world contexts, but it is acknowledged that will differ in educational environments.
Formal feedback opportunities	Feedback is critical to performance as it enables continual development of skills and behaviours. Formalising feedback opportunities (through peers, tutors, and other key stakeholders) should encourage assessments to have value and meaning beyond the classroom.
Collaboration	Assessments should engage students' teamwork and communication skills to collaboratively address a problem.

Context

HE in England is mostly situated within universities, however a considerable proportion of HE takes place in further education colleges and is termed college-based higher education (CBHE) or higher education within further education (HE in FE). Nearly 8% of undergraduate students in the UK study in CBHE settings (HESA, 2021a). This usually involves university-validated or franchised degrees at or below bachelor's level (including two-year foundation degrees at level 5, one-year top-up degrees at level 6 or three-year bachelor's programmes), or level 4/5 Higher National Certificates/Diplomas. Level 4 programmes equate to the first year of a bachelor's programme, whilst levels 5 and 6 are equivalent to years two and three of bachelor's programmes.

The case studies were generated from three degree programmes at Barnsley College in the 2021/22 academic year. At the time, the college had 304 HE students with the majority studying on a full-time basis (n = 291) with the majority aged 18 to 23 (n = 215). The case studies were selected based on specific criteria. First and foremost, the assessment had to involve problem-solving. Additionally, the case studies had to demonstrate effective academic practice by allowing students to integrate scholarship into their solutions. Case studies were selected by reviewing past external examiner reports, student voice meeting notes, and student module review data. On completion of the review, three case studies were selected that met the inclusion criteria and demonstrated application at different levels of study.

Authentic assessment: the case studies

Case study 1: Criminology Level 4: summative assessment through immersive de-escalation activities

The context of this case study is a level four module 'Conflict Management', which exists on the Criminology, Communities and Criminal Justice foundation degree. The assessments in this module are designed to replicate the core skills demonstrated by professionals within the criminal justice sector. The module was cross-examined by a senior professional in (at the time) Her Majesty's Prison Service as part of the validation process to strengthen the legitimacy of relevant knowledge and skills transfer. The feedback was reviewed and applied accordingly to reflect current practices and expectations that correspond to the contemporary frameworks within the sector.

First, students were provided with an 'offender profile' that was developed in collaboration with the Intelligence Lead for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. The profile details crucial intelligence pertaining to an offender, for example, index offences, recent behaviour and attitudes, and history of mental health challenges. Students were encouraged to utilise this intelligence in informing the practical, immersive role-play de-escalation assessment (assessment one) that replicates a commonplace scenario within a prison establishment. The assessments focused on students' ability under pressure to make dynamic risk assessments within an unscripted exercise and demonstrate cognitive agility and problem-solving. Students incorporated theory, communication, and crisis negotiation strategies, alongside trauma-informed practice techniques to integrate primary interventions to successfully de-escalate and overcome the simulated scenario.

The second assessment component comprised a 'post incident report' to document, thoroughly and accurately, details in relation to the incident for the record. Students were required to remain within the confines of policy expectations and produce a report to a professional standard which adhered to confidentiality guidelines and detailed all significant occurrences of the practical role-play assessment. The final element of the second assessment required students to provide a reflection and evaluation of their performance within the simulated assessment. Students demonstrated metacognition through critical reflection strategies that aided learning and development.

Students undertaking this module were able to clearly articulate the importance and relevance of skills development through the authentic methods via internal quality monitoring and module evaluations as detailed below:

> The module was fun, enjoyable and opened opportunities to learn new skills and develop confidence in dealing with hostile and challenging situations. I would say I enjoyed the practical assessment the most as this is where we could put our knowledge into practice.

The innovative and authentic approaches to assessment were also recognised in the external examiner report:

> The combination of these two assessments for Conflict Management are an example of innovative work within higher education, they bring together strong

theoretical and practical knowledge in a style that is realistic and immersive. The assessment deals with real conflict, allowing students to show skills in dealing and handling the harsh realities seen within these environments.

The temporal aspect of the summative assessments detailed above lends itself well to a short timeframe, where simulated role play exercises are facilitated for students in groups of no more than three and last approximately 20 minutes per group. Potential limiting factors with regards to the investment of time and energy were mitigated in this instance through the nature of smaller cohort sizes within CBHE (Bullock and Henry, 2022), with the level 4 cohort consisting of 26 students.

In context, these assessments at level 4 link to that of further authentic assessment practices at levels 5 and 6 on this programme, whereby students are expected to apply skills directly within industry through the Applied Industry Experience module (level 5), integrate professional context projects to enhance a service, and take part in a full-scale hostage negotiation scenario facilitated by industry professionals at level 6.

Case study 2: Sport Level 5: formative assessment through problem-solving in 'Community Action Projects'

This case study is part of a level 5 module 'Employability, Enterprise and Creativity' which exists on degree programmes in Sport, Physical Activity and Health. The module adopts a year-long structure with two summative assessments. One of its learning outcomes requires students to 'Illustrate own personal and professional readiness against employment opportunities' and is assessed through a self-development mock interview. Using seminars and asynchronous learning, students undertook activities which promoted reflection and provided formative feedback opportunities to aid their employability readiness; one of which, was a six-week group task termed 'Community Action Project (CAP)'. The purpose of the CAP was to provide students with the opportunities to work on a live brief that would offer benefits to themselves as key actors (in terms of skills development) and the local community.

To design the CAP, meetings took place with key community stakeholders (managers of a charity organisation) to co-design a project brief comprising an authentic problem for students to solve. Appreciation of, and being responsive to, the charity's needs influenced

how learning was designed in this formative assessment. For the 2021/22 academic year, students were tasked with exploring how the local charity could make better use of an under-utilised community facility. Establishing parameters and gaining an understanding of the charity's vision and key performance indicators allowed for the creation of a brief which would holistically develop and unlock the key features of authentic assessment. Students were divided into three small groups (4-5 students per group) based upon aspired careers in health or sport/physical activity.

Prior to the CAP, students were presented with the co-designed brief including a portfolio of the facility (for example, its location, size, amenities, and inventory). Students were given six weeks (including four dedicated seminars) to design a solution for improving its usage before delivering their ideas in an oral presentation to the charity manager. In formulating their solutions, students worked collaboratively, agreeing roles and setting/reviewing weekly targets (in response to peer and tutor feedback) to ensure accountability and task completion. A central tenet of the CAP relied upon students understanding the brief and the community in which it was designed to serve. To do this, each group conducted primary and/or secondary data research to investigate the local community and propose a solution that not only made use of the facility but one that would have clear outcomes that would benefit all stakeholders.

The three solutions proposed were:

1. A multi-faceted project including sports participation and life skills workshops where young people would develop financial and time-management skills, learn first-aid, and explore cooking healthy nutritious meals.
2. Coupling short, fundamental exercise sessions with social opportunities for older adults to positively impact on physical and mental wellbeing.
3. Delivering 'Bingocise' events for the community's ageing population to address high levels of physical inactivity and loneliness.

In terms of learning design, a key priority was to design a formative assessment opportunity for development that motivated students to attend and engage. To accomplish this, students had to appreciate the holistic development they would gain as a result. The CAPs achieved this by establishing a live brief, which students recognised the local benefit

of, and through establishing clear weekly accountability measures that echoed project
work in their hopeful career sectors.

The CAPs were successful in meeting the tenets of authentic assessment (identified
above) and creating opportunities for students to develop real-world problem-solving skills.
This was identified as a key aim for student development within the module as at level 6
students are required to facilitate an independent 'Professional Context Project' that
involves them working independently with a community group/organisation to address a
local issue/problem.

Case study 3: Exercise, Health and Technology Level 6: authentic formative assessment through problem-solving to 'develop a technological resource to improve users' health'

The context of this case study is part of a level 6 module 'Exercise, Health, and
Technology', which is offered on degree programmes in Sport, Physical Activity and
Health. The assessment in question is the second of two module assessments and
requires students to create and justify the need for a technological resource. This resource
must solve a current health problem, for example, the increase in depressive symptoms
reported by students. Examples of technological resources created by students include:
wearable technologies to improve physical activity adherence, emotional health podcasts,
an online gaming befriending scheme, and a safety application for female runners to make
them feel protected. The rationale behind the design is not only to promote problem-
solving skills but to develop entrepreneurial skills. Solopress (2017) suggested that 56% of
students considered setting up a business. However, in the 2018/19 graduate outcomes
survey, only 15% of graduates reported being self-employed, running their own
businesses or developing a portfolio (HESA, 2021b). The delivery and design of the
module is shared between the module leader, the enterprise team at the institution, and a
new business support programme. In the forming stages, meetings were organised with
the organisations mentioned above to discuss the delivery plan. Moving forward, this has
progressed to a more organic, dynamic, and informal process where delivery plans are
changed based on industry developments. All organisations access the delivery plan and
collaboratively make and approve changes using the review function in Office 365. The
module was reflected upon by the students and the feedback suggests that students found
the module purposeful. Most pertinently, over 95% of the students felt that the module

improved their skills, knowledge, and understanding. In addition, it has generated numerous success stories. An example is shown in the figure below which comes from LinkedIn (cited with permission).

Figure 1: Graduate post-module appreciation

As Figure 1 demonstrates, students continue their learning after the module has concluded. For example, this student continued developing promotional/instructional videos for their resource (exercise application). Similarly, learning continues to be facilitated through the industry-specific mentors that students were allocated.

The assessment differed from the typical modules on their degree programme. Not only did it offer students the chance to solve a problem, but it challenged them to develop skills and subject knowledge that they perceived they had not developed in other modules. Most importantly, the assessment allowed students to create resources and develop entrepreneurial and digital skills. Furthermore, the assessment required students to utilise skills they had developed earlier in their undergraduate programme, for example, undertaking primary data collection with local populations, to address the contemporary problem.

The case study is delivered at level 6, and because of this, it has a direct impact on graduate outcomes. Recently, employers have noted that the graduates' digital and creative skills have helped them to develop new provisions or initiatives in their organisations. Most importantly, the number of graduates attempting to run their own businesses either as a full-time occupation or alongside a part-time role has increased.

Conclusion

To conclude, the three case studies presented in the paper enhanced the employability skills of HE students. The case studies demonstrate a number of key tenets of authentic assessment (outlined in Table 1). Each case utilised problem-solving as a hook for the learning through which students responded to authentic employment scenarios. The CBHE context in which the cases are situated appears to be an arena in which students' problem-solving skills can flourish.

The case studies offer examples of how undergraduate curricula can be designed to enhance student learning and development. It is clear from student and external stakeholder feedback that learning and development are closely linked to vital professional skills. In these case studies student learning is more intensely focused on critical thinking and the application of practical skills is precisely targeted at the challenges of very specific working environments.

The recommendations for learning developers seeking to design authentic assessment experiences are:

1) Allocate significant time for the co-design of the brief with employers, ensuring that the outcome of student assessment aligns with graduate skills needed in industry.
2) In developing scenarios, base learning design on the key tenets of authentic assessment (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington and Brown, 2014); doing so will unlock students' potential to develop problem-solving attributes.
3) Ensure that the assessment provides opportunities for students to present their outcomes to key stakeholders beyond the academic context (for example, employers) and receive feedback from these individuals to increase their readiness for graduate employment.

The case studies provide further evidence of authentic curricula's potential in enhancing problem-solving skills. The case studies demonstrate the potential of authentic assessment within an HE context (CBHE) and HE subject areas that are not typically associated with authentic assessment and add to the case for authentic assessment's use as a vehicle for effective learning and development.

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