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Assessment by engagement: building confidence and autonomy in the first year

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ABSTRACT

Assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping first-year university students' engagement and academic development. Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of innovative approaches, traditional summative assessment practices continue to dominate the sector, often failing to meet the diverse needs of students. This paper explores student experiences of Assessment by Engagement, an approach that prioritises equity, personalisation, and collaboration. Assessment by Engagement combines continuous summative assessment with embedded dialogic feedback and co-creation of assessment tasks, enabling students to become active participants in their learning and assessment. Through thematic analysis of interviews with students at a post-1992 UK Higher Education Institution, this study examines how Assessment by Engagement influences student engagement, confidence, and autonomy. The findings highlight three key themes in student experiences: continuous assessment enhances engagement; embedded feedback cultivates confidence; and co-creation can foster autonomy. These insights suggest that Assessment by Engagement offers an equity-driven alternative to traditional assessment models by deepening student engagement and fostering inclusive and responsive learning environments for diverse cohorts.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive; student engagement; dialogic feedback

Introduction

The first year of university is a critical transition stage in students' experiences of higher education, often accompanied by new social, academic and financial challenges. These early experiences are formative, shaping students' academic development and sense of identity within higher education. It is a period that can also be marked by anxiety and imposter syndrome. There is an ever-present risk of students' early disengagement, particularly among underrepresented student groups (Husbands, Linceviciute, and Yetkili 2024). Assessment is a powerful factor in shaping student learning and thus plays an important role in this transition period (Sambell and McDowell 1998). Traditional summative assessment practices too often fail to accommodate the diverse backgrounds and individual needs that students bring to university. Assessments can add to the challenges that first-year students face, making their transition to university even harder. Research has long highlighted the need for assessment that supports worthwhile learning in the first year and beyond, whether by emphasising formative feedback, fostering relationship-centred learning or providing frequent, low-stakes opportunities for skill

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development (Nicol 2009). Indeed, assessment is now ‘widely understood as a matter of inclusion’ (Nieminen 2024, 1).

This paper explores student experiences of Assessment by Engagement (AbE), an approach designed to address the challenges of transition to university. AbE aims to support students to understand what successful engagement looks like, develop effective study habits, and build academic confidence. It reconceptualises assessment as a collaborative process that is embedded within teaching and learning. AbE merges formative and summative elements to offer continual summative assessment with embedded feedback loops, building on learning-oriented assessment practices that are well-established in the sector. It is not a fixed set of assignments but rather a flexible framework that operates through three interlocking approaches: personalisation; dialogic feedback; and co-creation.

Personalisation

To facilitate continuous engagement, AbE incorporates structured, student-led personalisation. Adapting assessment to diverse learners’ needs enhances inclusivity and engagement (Tai et al. 2023). In AbE, personalisation occurs through goal setting, choice in the form and focus of engagement tasks, and co-design of assessment activities. Early in the first semester, students complete a skills audit to assess their strengths and areas for development, enabling tutors to tailor support and feedback accordingly. Students regularly revisit and refine their goals in collaboration with their tutors, ensuring that engagement tasks are aligned with their individual progression needs.

Dialogic feedback

Effective engagement also requires meaningful and iterative interactions through structured feedback. Dialogic feedback has been shown to improve both student performance and satisfaction with feedback (Hill and West 2020). In AbE, feedback is embedded into four scheduled student-tutor meetings across the academic year: at the middle and end of semester one, and the beginning and middle of semester two. These meetings provide structured opportunities for feedback on engagement tasks, such as the skills audit and written reflection. Our team designed a set of targeted questions to encourage self-reflection and support students in developing feed-forward. This iterative approach ensures that feedback is not a final judgment but a tool for continuous improvement.

Co-creation

Genuine collaboration with students within curricula design processes provides a means of engaging and empowering students (Bovill, Bulley, and Morss 2011). In AbE, co-creation takes place both in whole-group settings and through tutor-student collaboration. Whole-group co-creation occurs midway through semester one, when each cohort collectively defines what engagement looks like in their sessions. Cohorts have defined engagement as posting regular class discussion summaries in a forum, meeting a certain percentage attendance or participating in peer feedback on their academic development portfolio. At the start and middle of semester two, student-tutor meetings focus on the co-design of assessment tasks, allowing students to shape both the topic and format of their engagement tasks.

By integrating these three approaches, AbE fosters participatory assessment that moves beyond passive evaluation to actively engage students, with the aim of promoting long-term academic confidence and success. These approaches are mutually reinforcing, adaptable, and scalable, allowing for flexibility across different programmes and institutional contexts. Table 1 illustrates how these approaches are embedded within AbE in our setting.

Table 1. Assessment by engagement outline.

Week	Engagement task	Personalisation	Co-creation	Feedback	What is assessed
4	Five-minute presentation.	Students choose their presentation question or design their own in collaboration with their tutor.	Partial co-creation: students can choose or co-create the presentation topic.	Audio feedback: <i>via</i> the virtual learning environment (VLE), with a highlighted marking criteria and an indicative grade band.	Communication and engagement in choice or co-creation.
5	Personal development portfolio, including: 200-word reflective writing Skills audit relating to self-efficacy Creation of three SMART goals to achieve by week 12	Students set SMART goals drawing on their skills audit and determine the scope of their goals.	None.	Dialogic feedback: Week 5 tutor meeting to discuss strengths, development areas, and goal setting.	Reflection, self-efficacy and engagement in goal setting and discussion.
6–11	Attending and engaging in sessions.	Cohort defines engagement, which includes agreeing what percentage attendance is required within weeks 6–11. They also agree a definition of engagement in session, which may include presenting small group discussions back to the group or taking a defined role in group activities each week.	Group co-creation: students negotiate engagement expectations together.	Dialogic feedback: Week 12 tutor meeting to review engagement and reflect on goals.	Engagement, as defined by the cohort.
12	Academic development portfolio, including: academic skills quiz 1000-word essay 150-word reflection on their learning journey	Students choose or co-design their essay question.	Partial co-creation: students choose or co-design their essay question.	Written feedback: <i>via</i> VLE, including a final pass/fail grade for the module and highlighted marking criteria with an indicative grade band for the academic development portfolio.	Engagement with the topic through essay writing and reflection.
13	Attend student-tutor meeting.	Students set their own goals for the next four weeks and co-design the assessment task.	Full co-creation: students design the topic and format of the assessment task.	Dialogic feedback: Tutor meeting in week 13 discussing semester one feedback in order to develop feed-forward.	Engagement in discussion and goal setting.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Week	Engagement task	Personalisation	Co-creation	Feedback	What is assessed
14–16	Complete a co-designed assessment task on a topic and in a format of their choice. The task must incorporate an AI tool and include a written or verbal reflection on its ethical use.	Students independently complete the assessment task they co-designed.	Full co-creation: students complete the task designed with their tutor.	Video feedback: <i>via</i> VLE, with highlighted marking criteria and indicative grade band.	Critical engagement with the topic, communication (written, digital or verbal), and research.
17	Attend student-tutor meeting.	Students set their own long-term goals and co-design their next assessment task.	Full co-creation: students co-design the next assessment task.	Dialogic feedback: Tutor meeting in week 17 to reflect on progress toward goals and set new goals.	Engagement in goal setting and discussion.
18–24	Complete a co-designed assessment task that explores the impact of the digital world on their academic discipline. Students choose both the topic and the format. Previous tasks have included micro-websites, podcasts, videos, and blog posts.	Students independently complete the assessment task co-designed with their tutor in week 17.	Full co-creation: students determine both the topic and format of the task.	Written feedback: <i>via</i> VLE, including a final pass/fail grade for the module with highlighted marking criteria and indicative grade band for the assessment task.	Critical engagement with the topic, communication (written, digital or verbal), and research.

Since 2020, AbE has been implemented in the first year of four-year degree programmes at a post-1992 widening participation institution. Each year, an average of 250 students have taken modules assessed by engagement. These cohorts are diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, and declared disabilities, with an average composition of 23% Asian, 24% Black, 12% Mixed and 40% White. The average cohort is 77% female, 56% are aged 21 and over. Sixty-nine percent of students come from areas ranked in deciles one to three of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, meaning they live in the 30% most deprived areas in the country, based on factors such as income, employment, education, and health. Students study two forty-credit modules assessed by engagement, which explore connections between their academic discipline and theoretical frameworks on social inequality and digital identity. These modules follow a blended delivery, including two hours of online activities, four hours of small-group seminars, and a one-hour workshop each week. Alongside these modules, students study two twenty-credit modules focused on building discipline-specific knowledge and understanding, which are assessed by a single summative assessment. All first-year modules are graded on a pass/fail basis, with indicative grade bands provided as part of the feedback process.

AbE was developed in response to problematic first-time module pass rates and continuation rates. In 2018/9, 48% of students had at least one resit in their first year of study, and the continuation rate was 69%. Since introducing AbE, there have been improved pass rates across all first-year modules, demonstrating the influence of this mode of assessment on student engagement and outcomes. Following the implementation of AbE, resit rates fell by 34%. Retention rates

improved by 11%, despite a 106% rise in enrolled students. Notably, modules assessed by engagement consistently achieve higher pass rates than those using traditional summative assessments. On average, these modules have a six percent higher pass rate, even when taken by the same students at the same time. While data demonstrates that AbE has had a positive impact on pass rates, this study goes beyond quantitative analysis to explore students' experiences of engagement-based assessment.

Literature review

The role of assessment in higher education

Assessment can contribute to student engagement by validating achievement and success. Students in general place great emphasis on achieving a certain grade. A positive early assessment experience can foster greater student engagement and investment in learning. Conversely, a negative early experience can contribute to alienation and anxiety (Thomas et al. 2019). Institutional priorities for certification and quality assurance processes also prioritise a numeric grade, ensuring that summative assessment continues to dominate (Jackel et al. 2017). Despite the clear benefits of formative assessment in promoting student growth it is too often separate from summative assessment, rather than integral to it. Students, often entering higher education with prior educational experiences dominated by summative assessments, may ignore formative opportunities as they are perceived to be unnecessary (Sotardi and Dutton 2022). This distinction between formative and summative assessment has been criticised for creating a 'false binary' that restricts the broader potential of assessment to support multiple objectives (Boud and Soler 2016, 402). The modularisation of degree programmes has further entrenched graded summative approaches, leading to assessment that is 'discrete and content-bound' rather than 'integrative and processual' (Williams 2014, 567).

AbE uses continual summative assessment to dissolve this false binary, and embed deep learning (Trotter 2006). It builds on numerous assessment innovations that have shown increased student engagement through high-frequency assessment, especially when paired with targeted feedback on learning (Holmes 2015; Wang and Zhang 2020). In AbE, small, distributed learning tasks become progressively more challenging across the year of study. These engagement tasks provide tutors with data points that enable them to make informed judgments about personalising learning opportunities. Regular student-tutor meetings provide opportunities for dialogic feedback on self-assessments, skills audits and goals. This approach incorporates completed feedback loops, thus responding to the unique education experiences, learning styles and goals of each student and enabling them to progress at their own pace. AbE's emphasis on iterative learning addresses the shortcomings of traditional models, such as the grading 'arms race' described by Harland et al. (2015), thus providing equitable and inclusive framework that adapts to the needs of diverse cohorts.

Student engagement and the first-year experience

University students have consistently reported lower levels of well-being compared to the general population, with the first year described as a time of heightened anxiety (Lizzio and Wilson 2013, 393). Assessment often contributes to this anxiety and can be a significant challenge to student retention and success (Boud and Falchikov 2007). However, this need not be the case. Assessment can be a powerful tool to foster engagement, which is a key driver of student success (Krause and Coates 2008, 494). Student engagement is a complex concept, encompassing how students behave, feel, think and socialise, and it is central to learning performance, retention, persistence, experience and achievement (Gunuc and Kuzu 2015). Kahu's model of

engagement conceptualises engagement as a dynamic, multidimensional process influenced by affective, cognitive, and behavioural factors, all of which interact within a broader socio-cultural and institutional context to shape students' learning experiences and academic success (Kahu 2013, 766). AbE builds on this understanding by embedding engagement within assessment, integrating it into the development of productive student learning processes, what Carless terms 'learning-oriented assessment' (Carless 2015, 964).

AbE is informed by both Kahu's model of engagement and Bryson's principles for engaging students to "'become" and develop transformatively' (Kahu 2013; Bryson 2014, 18). AbE fosters engagement by enabling students to take an active role in their learning and assessment, aligning with the affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions of engagement outlined in Kahu's model. Dialogic feedback enhances affective engagement by fostering confidence through structured discussions that reduce anxiety and clarify expectations. Personalisation supports cognitive engagement by embedding goal setting and self-reflection, ensuring that students actively shape their learning journey. Co-creation strengthens behavioural engagement, as students participate in shaping assessment tasks. Since introducing AbE, pass rates have improved across all first-year modules, demonstrating its broader influence on student engagement and outcomes leading to increased motivation and commitment. These engagement mechanisms are embedded within an assessment framework that prioritises equity and inclusivity. AbE provides students with opportunities to develop their judgement and assessment literacy, equipping them with the skills and confidence necessary to succeed in higher education (Boud, Lawson, and Thompson 2013, 941).

Innovative assessment practices: moving toward equity and co-creation

The limitations of traditional assessment have driven a surge in innovative approaches encompassing authentic, co-creation, programmatic and more. These innovations reflect a move toward participatory assessments that foster deep learning, critical thinking and student autonomy, positioning assessment as an integral part of the learning process (Bryan and Clegg 2006; Sambell 2016). Within AbE, student autonomy is fostered through co-creation, a process which places students at the centre of their assessment and learning. Bovill et al. define co-creation as occurring 'when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches,' occupying the space between student engagement and partnership (Bovill et al. 2016, 196). Co-creation has been successfully implemented in various educational contexts, including with large and diverse cohorts, and has been shown to positively impact student engagement (Colson, Shuker, and Maddock 2022). As a collaborative approach, co-creation not only enhances student agency but can also support equitable assessment by ensuring that it is responsive to students' needs.

AbE takes a scaffolded approach that gradually transitions from tutor-directed tasks to activities that are co-designed as the academic year progresses. This gradual move to co-creation addresses some of the complexities inherent in this approach, by enabling students to build their confidence before taking on greater autonomy. It is a method that reflects McNaught and Benson's findings on the positive impact of scaffolding on student engagement and retention (McNaught and Benson 2015, p. 85). The scaffolded model provides students with structured opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the assessment and learning process before taking on a greater role in shaping their assessment tasks. Rather than the adjustment model of assessment design, AbE follows the principles of Universal Design for Assessment by providing multiple means of engagement and active participation (O'Neill and Maguire 2019). AbE provides a framework that supports tutors and students in co-creating engagement, helping students to consciously identify and develop the strategies that make them successful learners. It is an approach that offers equitable opportunities for all students to meet learning outcomes without lowering academic standards. In this way, AbE embraces an inclusive model which creates an environment where every student can demonstrate their learning effectively.

Methodology

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who had experienced AbE during their first year of study. Students were invited to participate during their second year, allowing time to reflect on their experiences with AbE after encountering different modes of assessment in subsequent stages of their programme. The selection process did not consider whether participants had passed AbE modules on the first or subsequent attempts. The sample reflects the diverse demographic characteristics of the broader cohort, with eleven participants interviewed, including younger and mature students; Black, Asian, Mixed and White students; those identifying as neurodiverse; and students from a range of degree programmes, including Initial Teacher Education, History, Theology, Law, Criminology, and Psychology. Participants were drawn from four cohorts, representing both September and January entry points. Although all invited students participated, the voluntary nature of the process introduces a potential self-selection bias. Those who chose to take part may have had particularly strong views, whether positive or negative, about their experiences with AbE. The small sample size also limits the generalisability of the findings. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings, as they may not fully reflect the perspectives of all students who engaged with AbE.

An experiential qualitative framework was chosen to centre the students' lived experiences of the assessment process. This allows for an exploration of how they perceived and experienced AbE. Unstructured interviews were used to capture students' nuanced and subjective experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015, 21). Participants were interviewed by members of their first-year programme team, making this an insider research study. While insider research can introduce potential biases, such as the influence of prior relationships on participants' willingness to share critical feedback, it also offers the opportunity to leverage their contextual understanding of AbE and their rapport with participants, facilitating richer data (Mercer 2007). To mitigate these potential biases, the interviews were unstructured, allowing participants freedom to discuss their experiences without prompting from the researcher. The use of unstructured interviews provides rich data but led to varying depths of response. The interviewer maintained a neutral stance, encouraging participants to share candid feedback, including any criticisms of AbE. To address the power dynamic involved in the interview process, participants were assured both in the informed consent process and at the start of interviews that feedback would remain confidential and would not impact their studies.

Interviews, lasting between 45 min and one hour, were conducted either face-to-face or *via* Microsoft Teams, depending on participant preference. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis began alongside data collection, and saturation was reached when no significant insights emerged from additional interviews, indicating that the data collected were sufficient to capture the full range of participants' experiences (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee in line with guidelines for research involving human participants. The study adhered to the principles of the British Educational Research Association, ensuring informed written consent was received from all participants, their confidentiality maintained, and they were informed of their right to withdraw (BERA, 2018). Identifying information was removed from the transcripts to protect participants' anonymity, with each interview labelled by participant number (P1, P2, etc.).

Data analysis was guided by reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (Braun and Clarke 2021). This inductive, participant-centred approach allowed themes to emerge naturally from participants' responses, focusing on semantic meanings rather than seeking hidden interpretations. However, some deeper underlying assumptions were also explored, such as mature students' views about younger peers and concerns about traditional exams. To mitigate potential researcher bias, a reflective journal was maintained throughout the process. However, familiarity with AbE may have inadvertently emphasised its positive aspects. The coding process generated numerous labels based on keywords and phrases from the interview transcripts. Patterns of meaning within the data set were analysed and initially grouped into

six key themes, clustered around ideas relating to ‘preparation’, ‘feedback’, ‘engagement’, ‘adaptation and transition’, ‘supportive learning environments’, and ‘assessment as preparation for success’. Through further review, these patterns were consolidated. During this review phase, the aim was to understand the semantic themes that highlighted students’ experiences of AbE, and how this form of assessment influenced their approach to university study. Engagement, confidence, and autonomy emerged as the overarching themes, illustrating how participants perceived AbE as fundamental to their success in their first year of university.

Findings

Three key themes were identified through a reflexive thematic analysis, reflecting the most significant and recurring aspects of students’ experiences with AbE. Table 2 provides a summary of the three themes: continuous assessment enhances engagement; embedded feedback cultivates confidence; co-creation can foster autonomy.

Continuous assessment enhances engagement

Many students noted that the structure of regular tasks through the continuous assessment helped them to build the skills needed to succeed in their assessment in year one and beyond. One participant shared, ‘Yeah, miles ahead, miles ahead. So, my assignments have all been seventy-plus apart from one... And that is because of assessment by engagement. It got me miles ahead in terms of research, in terms of preparation, in terms of reading, in terms of just generally knowing what to do, knowing how to reference, how to structure, knowing how to hand in the assignment’ (P2). Continuous assessment eased students’ transitions into higher education: ‘I would have been like panicking, like I’ve never done this before. So I was, like, really grateful that they kind of baby stepped you into it’ (P7). Another participant highlighted the practical aspects of the approach, stating, ‘I don’t have to worry about the system, I don’t have to worry about finding things. I know how to access things. So I’ve been able to focus on what the lecture is, what’s the content, and what am I to do’ (P8). They found that ‘if it wasn’t for those assessments, my engagements, I would have been very lost... they were a really good directive tool’ (P8).

Table 2. Theme summaries.

Theme	Summary
Continuous assessment enhances engagement	Continuous summative assessment within AbE contrasts with students’ prior experiences of high-stakes summative assessment, which often eroded confidence and hindered academic progress. The ongoing assessment offers frequent, low-stakes opportunities to develop key academic competencies. This structure not only enhances core skills but also plays a pivotal role in reducing self-doubt. Continuous assessment provides a level of structure as learners track their progress weekly, fostering an active learning experience where participants feel encouraged to participate.
Embedded feedback cultivates confidence	The regular, personalised feedback within AbE fosters an environment where students feel supported and valued. Through feedback loops and using different forms of feedback, including audio feedback and one-to-one meetings, students receive guidance that clarifies their progress and highlights areas for growth. The ongoing dialogue not only shifts the focus from grades to skill development but also reinforces a strong tutor-student relationship.
Co-creation can foster autonomy	AbE positions students as active partners in their learning and assessment, which can foster a sense of autonomy and ownership over their academic journey. By co-designing assessment tasks, students develop a stronger sense of agency and confidence in their abilities. This collaborative approach validates student contributions and encourages a shift from passive learning to active participation. As students have a greater say in their learning process, they become more engaged, autonomous, and better equipped to navigate the challenges of their first year in higher education.

Many participants contrasted their experiences with the AbE against their prior encounters with traditional assessments, with several referring to the ‘tyranny of the exam,’ citing the immense pressure to perform well on a single assessment. One participant explained, ‘Everything seems to hang on that one assessment. It’s nerve-wracking’ (P11). Another participant noted, ‘I like assessment by engagement because I think it’s really worked for me. I think if I’d had to be faced with exam after exam each term, that would have been quite stressful. We’re juggling work and home and everything else’ (P5). For another, ‘I think the whole idea of assessment by engagement is really good, especially when you haven’t been in education for so long. And then you come back to it, you kind of feel like, am I in the right place? Am I doing this correctly? And then you feel like I’m going to have an exam and that’s not the case. It’s like you’re building them up to be able to continue. So yeah, in the sense from that perspective, it’s very good’ (P6). Many participants appreciated the shift represented by AbE from passive learning to a more active, participatory style. One participant commented, ‘I prefer assessment by engagement because you’re actually contributing... You feel like you’re contributing to the lectures. Whereas with my other experiences, it was very much bums in seats, you’re being spoken at constantly’ (P11).

Embedded feedback cultivates confidence

AbE incorporates multiple feedback opportunities in a variety of forms, from embedded tutor meetings to recorded feedback provided *via* the virtual learning environment (VLE). This regular, structured feedback helps students feel supported, reinforcing their progress and encouraging self-reflection. One participant reflected on the value of this feedback, noting, ‘There was lots... It gave me a lot of food for thought’ (P3). Beyond simply receiving feedback, students highlighted how these interactions fostered a sense of connection and reassurance. Another participant expressed appreciation for the support this enabled between them and their tutors: ‘There’s always somebody that will get back to me and speak to me and assure me that I’m on track. I think it’s helped me transition back into education... It was really good to have that one-to-one with my tutor’ (P5). For many, feedback not only clarified expectations but also built their academic confidence. Participant seven reflected, ‘I do feel a lot more confident. I think it was doing those presentations, doing the essay, and just getting good feedback. It has a boost in my confidence’ (P7). This sense of growth and assurance highlights how embedded feedback goes beyond assessment. It cultivates a learning environment where students develop resilience, self-efficacy, and the belief that they can succeed.

The feedback-focused nature of the AbE model encouraged students to shift their focus from simply achieving high grades to prioritising skill development and personal growth. As participant eight explained, ‘my tutor was very specific at don’t chase the grade, don’t do this. It’s not just about chasing the grade. I’m so much looking at feedback all the time now, you know, and it is about the feedback’. For participant ten, the transition to academic writing was particularly challenging, including the need to adapt to new technologies, but consistent feedback was critical to her ‘keeping going,’ and in the end ‘it’s what got me to actually stay [at the university]’. Indicative grading emerged as another valued aspect of the feedback model of AbE. Another participant reflected on the psychological impact of receiving an indicative grade band, stating, ‘When you get an indicative grade... It’s a confidence thing, and it may be something small, but it’s something that stays with you and you say, “you can do this”’ (P11).

Co-creation can foster autonomy

Participants reported that AbE facilitated a strong sense of ownership over their learning experience. Several students highlighted how the autonomy embedded in the approach encouraged active participation and self-direction. One participant explained, ‘It was up to you to define how involved you were, how interactive, you know, accessing the online materials, attending lectures,

and going maybe to student support, you know, things like that' (P1). Another reflected on how the success of AbE depended on personal investment, stating, 'My memory of assessment by engagement is that it's perfect. There has to be a level of maturity. You know, this is up to me... I want to engage' (P2). Co-creation was also identified as a key mechanism in gradually building student confidence in autonomous learning. One participant described how tasks progressed from developing core academic skills to co-design of assessment, stating: 'It kind of built you up to it. There was an activity to construct sentences, then paragraphs, and then how to reference it. So we were built up, especially if you engaged more. And then, later on, we had more of a say... in what we were doing. Like, we could pick the topics that suited us, even how we presented our work. It wasn't just about following instructions... it felt like we were actually making it ourselves' (P6).

As the academic year progressed and co-creation became a bigger part of AbE, students move from choice in their engagement tasks to having the opportunity to co-design these tasks. One participant reflected on this shift: 'At first, it was all about getting the basics down, but later, we could actually choose how we wanted to approach things. That's when I started feeling like I actually had control... rather than just doing what was set' (P4). This shift posed challenges for some students, particularly those used to more traditional forms of assessment. One participant described the initial uncertainty that came with having greater control over engagement tasks, stating, 'It was a bit overwhelming, like... I get to decide? I wasn't sure if I was doing it right' (P10). Another participant, who was diagnosed with dyslexia, described the value of being able to shape their own learning process: 'My brain might work differently to somebody next in my group [but] that structure is invaluable' (P9). While many participants reflected positively on having greater control in designing their engagement tasks, some expressed concern that this approach relied on self-motivation. One participant noted that while they thrived in this model, they worried that others might struggle with the level of independence required: 'I would never want it to stop because I think it's a real benefit, [I worry that] people just don't take it seriously enough' (P3).

Discussion

Participants' reflections on AbE as a means of 'building up' their skills and confidence align with research on the value of continuous assessment in fostering a sustainable approach to learning (Boud and Falchikov 2007). Many participants perceived integrated feedback as particularly significant, describing it as a factor in building confidence and resilience, with one stating that it influenced their decision to remain in higher education. However, it is important to note that these reflections represent student perceptions rather than an objective measure of success. Participants described greater engagement in the assessment process, which they felt gave them more control over their learning and helped some participants develop a stronger sense of autonomy. This finding is consistent with existing research on co-creation, which suggests that when students are involved in shaping their assessment, they are more likely to engage with the process (Bovill et al. 2016). However, co-creation was not universally experienced as beneficial, and some participants described feeling uncertain or overwhelmed at first. While participants generally found AbE engaging, they also highlighted challenges. Some students, particularly those accustomed to more traditional assessment structures, found the transition to AbE challenging. One participant described feeling overwhelmed when first asked to co-design tasks. Another noted concern about the level of self-motivation required for AbE, which suggests that structured oversight is necessary to support students with this approach. One participant questioned whether the level of challenge was sufficient, acknowledging that greater academic stretch could have been beneficial but also recognising that this might have made the assessment unmanageable. These reflections suggest that while AbE can foster confidence and autonomy, it also requires careful guidance from tutors to ensure that students feel supported.

One of the challenges in developing continual summative assessment is its resource intensiveness. Unlike traditional summative assessments, AbE requires sustained tutor-student interactions for co-designing engagement tasks and supporting goal setting, demanding significant staff input. While these interactions enhance student engagement, ensuring workload equity across the teaching team has been essential for the sustainable operation of AbE. To mitigate resource demands, individual meetings have been integrated into module delivery hours, rather than treated as additional responsibilities. To support both staff and students in adapting to this approach, we have developed a structured framework for tutor-student meetings to maintain consistency, which has been particularly important for students unfamiliar with co-creation. Some students required additional guidance early on to clarify expectations, necessitating a team-wide approach. AbE also requires ongoing assessment moderation, requiring adjustments in established quality assurance processes. Staff implementing AbE face the challenge of ensuring consistency in assessment outcomes while allowing for the personalised and co-created tasks. This has been addressed through alignment with learning outcomes, transparent marking criteria and the ongoing moderation. Regular team meetings have been crucial in fostering consistency.

As previously outlined in table one, we have implemented AbE in a way that aligns with our cohort's needs and institutional context. However, the underlying principles of AbE: personalisation; dialogic feedback; and co-creation offer a flexible framework that can be adapted to different settings. At our institution, elements of AbE have been implemented in various programmes, including the integration of tutoring meetings in undergraduate Psychology and the adoption of co-created assessment in the BA Applied Humanities accelerated degree. This adaptability suggests that AbE can enhance engagement, equity, and inclusion across diverse higher education contexts, though its effectiveness will depend on institutional structures, disciplinary requirements, and the support available for both students and staff in its implementation.

Conclusion

This study explored student experiences of AbE, examining how it influenced their perceptions of their engagement, confidence, and autonomy during their first year of university. Findings suggest that continuous assessment, embedded feedback, and co-creation contributed to students' sense of academic ownership and personal growth. Participants reported that AbE eased their transition into higher education, providing structured opportunities to build academic skills. Integrated feedback played a crucial role in developing students' confidence and resilience, with some attributing their academic persistence to this approach. The scaffolded approach that moves from choice in engagement tasks to the co-design of tasks helped students gradually take ownership of their assessment process, although some found the initial shift to greater autonomy challenging.

While the study highlights the potential benefits of AbE, there are also associated challenges that must be addressed for successful implementation. Some students initially struggled with the self-directed nature of the approach, suggesting that structured support and clear guidance are essential. Resource intensiveness remains a consideration, as AbE requires ongoing tutor-student interactions, ongoing moderation, and professional development for staff. However, despite these resource demands, operating AbE for cohorts of 250 students has not presented an insurmountable obstacle when integrated into module delivery hours.

A contribution of this study is its demonstration that AbE provides a flexible framework that can be adapted across different institutional and disciplinary contexts. The specific implementation of AbE in this study reflects the needs of the institution's student cohort and teaching team. However, the core principles of personalisation, dialogic feedback, and co-creation allow for variation in how AbE could be implemented in different settings. As higher education institutions seek more inclusive and equitable assessment models, AbE provides a model that places student engagement at the heart of the learning process. Further

research is needed to examine the long-term impact of AbE on student retention and academic outcomes, particularly through comparative studies with traditional summative assessment models.

Ethics statements

Certificate of Research Ethics Approval from Newman University, dated 19/4/22. Application number: S2021/011. PDF of Certificate provided.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability statement

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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