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PAPER

Exploring student assessment literacy: how undergraduate students actualise and transform their assessment strategies

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ABSTRACT

Research on student assessment literacy (SAL) has explored broad conceptualisations of what SAL entails and how to develop SAL interventions. However, there has been limited research from the student perspective on how SAL actualises and transforms throughout the student lifecycle. Through the narratives of 21 final year undergraduate students, the present study explored SAL strategies in completing coursework assessment, showcasing student perspectives on (1) coursework preparation, (2) engaging with support, and (3) engaging with feedback. Findings highlight the centrality of student identity to SAL actualisation and transformation as participants negotiated the various stakes involved in university assessments through their unique learner identities. Some participants exhibited minimal SAL transformation but high levels of actualisation. In contrast, others transformed in relation to high-stakes assessments in the second and third years but were selective in the degree of actualisation. Student assessment strategies are greatly influenced by their historical and ongoing assessment experiences.

KEYWORDS: student assessment literacy, student autonomy, self-regulation, feedback literacy.

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Introduction

Ongoing financial constraints in England's higher education (HE) sector are leading to greater adoption of standardised assessments as a cost efficiency measure and to mitigate reductions in staff to student ratios (Rowsell, 2025). Not only does this counter progress made towards inclusive assessment but arguably challenges the Office for Students (2022) requirements to mitigate student disadvantage. In the context of strained resources and a requirement to provide support to disadvantaged students, there is a greater need to develop student assessment literacy (SAL), given that SAL places an emphasis on student autonomy and self-regulation, potentially reducing staff-student dependence (Cassidy, 2011; Xu et al., 2024). Smith et al. (2013, p. 45) outline SAL:

> first, students need to *understand the purpose* of assessment and how it connects with their learning trajectory. Second, they need to be *aware of the processes* of assessment and how they might affect students' capacity to submit responses that are on-task, on-time and completed with appropriate academic integrity. Third, opportunities for them to practise *judging* their own responses to assessment tasks need to be provided so that students can learn to identify what is good about their work and what could be improved.

Hannigan et al. (2022) and Chan and Luo (2021) further develop on this conceptualisation by proposing a comprehensive and a holistic understanding of SAL respectively, while maintaining the centrality of student agency and self-regulation. Despite the importance of agency and self-regulation, limited research has been conducted from the student perspective. This includes how students apply SAL (actualisation) and how SAL practices transform over time to account for changes in assessment stakes and demands (transformation). Limited understanding of the student perspective in their actualisation and transformation of assessment literacies undermines an evidence-based approach to SAL development.

This paper aims to contribute to SAL research, through narratives of 21 final year undergraduate students, highlighting strategies for completing written coursework assessments throughout their time at university. The coursework context is essential due to the interval between the issuing of an assignment and the deadline date. The interval period encourages students to self-regulate learning as well as autonomously seek and engage in a range of support structures, which may include support offered by tutors, peers, and relevant

online resources (Gibbs & Lucas, 1997). Given that most universities use digital portals for coursework submission and feedback delivery, students can also access feedback to potentially transform their SAL practices (Knight & Ferrell, 2022). Additionally, there is the context of varying assessment stakes: England's HE sector generally applies non-consequential first year assessments (students must pass most modules to enter second year), second year assessments typically account for 25-30% of the final degree grade, and the final year accounts for the remainder 70-75% (Goodall, 2012). Within the scope of this context, the present study explored three themes concomitantly related to SAL and coursework assessments, including (1) how students prepare for their submissions, primarily related to managing time during the interval between issuing of an assignment and deadline date: this reflects students' knowledge of the processes of assessment (Smith et al. 2013). This is followed by (2) engagement with support and (3) engagement with feedback, which speaks to Chan and Luo's (2021) notion that SAL necessitates appreciation of, and engagement with, holistic competency development. In uncovering SAL actualisation and transformation within the context varying assessment stakes and how that may impact students' abilities to manage time, engage with support and feedback, the present study hopes to inform SAL development as England's HE intuitions continue to adopt standardised assessments and reduce staff to student ratios (Rawsell, 2025).

The dearth of SAL research based on student perspectives must not be confused with research on assessment literacy (AL) in general which has been ongoing since the 1990s (Stiggins, 1991). Earlier research on AL explored subjectivities in interpreting explicit assessment guidelines suggesting that students need to be assessment literate (O' Donovon et al., 2001). AL was defined as students' abilities to appreciate the purpose/process of assessments, and assessments standards, alongside being able to apply correct skills to a particular task (Price et al. 2012). While such broad conceptualisations are necessary in making sense of AL, the implication of this view is one of student deficit, which only determines the need for students to develop correct knowledge and skills about the purpose, content, and processes of assessment (Chan & Luo 2021). As the discourse on AL has developed, the student deficit approach has declined with AL encompassing not only student characteristics and their ability to interpret assessment standards (SAL), but also the impact of teacher assessment literacy (Pastore & Andrade, 2019), feedback literacy (Winstone et al., 2017a), collaborative assessment literacy (Meijer et al., 2020), and language assessment

literacy (Levi & Inbar-Louise, 2020). Hannigan et al. (2022) argue that SAL conceptually encapsulates the intended purposes of teacher assessment literacy and, to a considerable extent, feedback literacy, where teachers' engagement with students during assessment not only underpins the evaluation of learning, but also reciprocally advances teachers' understanding of assessment and feedback practices. With broader developments in AL research in mind, the present study includes literature on AL and feedback literacy given that both are closely related to student characteristics (Winstone et al., 2017b).

Research context

Much of the current literature on SAL can be categorised as interventionist, adopting co-creation methods and shifting away from the 'community of practice' approach advocated by Price et al. (2012). Student centred and/or co-creation approaches encourage active collaboration of staff and students in the design of assessments whereby students begin to recognise the processes of assessment, and the expectation of academic staff, thus developing their assessment literacies (Zhu & Evans, 2024). Co-creation of assessment strongly supports its role in fostering the development of SAL, and it is reasonable to propose that when students actively participate in designing assessments, they cultivate agency and self-regulation. This process is reinforced by evidence that increased interaction between staff and students reduces the common mismatch of expectations observed in university settings (Universities UK, 2022).

Adoption of co-creation approaches, however, continue to present operational constraints, which have subsequently limited their wider use. A survey on assessment adoption by Knight and Ferrell (2022) highlighted that complex (inclusive) assessment practices have limited uptake, while others speak of the need to balance resource intensive assessment with staff workload (Lambert et al., 2023). Under current circumstances where universities are actively scaling-down their curriculum offer resource intensive co-creation assessment approaches are less likely to be adopted. It is also noteworthy that much of the research on SAL and co-creation has been small scale (Andrews et al., 2018; Deeley & Bovill 2017; Deneen & Hoo, 2023). These specific research contexts highlight two constraints: (1) limited insight into scaling-up co-creation practices and how that may impact known operational challenges around funding and staff workload, and (2) the inherent limitation of action research which is undertaken in 'controlled' environments (Coghlan, 2019). Methodologically, student agency

and self-regulation transformations overtime are not fully accounted for. It is possible that SAL developments made through co-creation interventions are limited to the context of the respective research context.

There have been some notable studies, certainly in the context of feedback recipience, which have attempted to understand student agency and self-regulation. Orsmond and Merry (2013), for example argued that there are varied levels of engagement with feedback in relation to high and low achieving students. High achieving students, according to the authors, seek to clarify their feedback and subsequently transform their assessment practice; this is less the case with low achieving students. In contrast, Winstone et al. (2017b) make the case that student agency is impeded due to unrealistic expectations and the ambiguities around applying feedback in future assessments. There are further subjectivities that arise from students' cultural background, and pre-university experiences in making sense of SAL development (Rovagnati et al., 2022). What these studies reveal is the centrality of the student identity, potentially formed prior to entering university, in making sense of SAL, whether it is in relation to being a high or low performer, holding an absolutist or relativist view of knowledge (O'Donovan, 2017), or having an intrinsic or extrinsic view of learning (Medina-Gual & Monereo, 2025). What these studies do not reveal is the degree of SAL actualisation and transformation over the course of the student journey which, in many ways, undermines a more holistic approach to supporting students within contexts of limited resources. This article seeks to fill this gap, by exploring narratives of SAL actualisation and transformation throughout the student journey and in the context of coursework assessment.

Method

Narrative enquiry served as the principal method to interrogate institutional dynamics and their impact on student agency (Clandinin, 2007). Biographical storytelling in narrative enquiry ensures internal validity as the chronology of events and experiences establishes order where associations across narratives can be made (Eichsteller, 2019). To this end, narrative enquiry coheres to the research aims of exploring SAL throughout the undergraduate lifecycle, enabling what Smith (2018) defined as theoretical transfer where HE practitioners can use the rich narratives for sense and meaning-making in their own educational domains.

Other methodological decisions were purposive and pragmatic in relation to research aims and the practical challenges of data collection (Braun & Clark, 2021). Sampling was restricted to final year undergraduate students on courses that used written coursework assessments. All the participants (female n=14, male n=7) were Leeds Beckett University students and recruited through various university channels including through ethical gatekeepers such as course directors, module leaders, and the student union (see participant profiles below). Participants can all be categorised as traditional with respect to age (below 25), with characteristics of transitioning to university directly from secondary education without educational breaks. The small purposive sample presents one of the key limitations in the research design. Universities are typically comprised of diverse students and will require more targeted measures. The narrative method does, however, address the broad structural dynamics of assessment stakes which impact all students (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2024).

Narrative interviewing was the primary method of data collection with set questions used to initiate participant responses; further probing was used to develop depth (Kartch, 2018; Riessman, 2008). The nature of the questions stemmed primarily from the dynamics of coursework assessment and assisting recall of past events. This entailed exploring participants' most recent assessment experiences in relation to (1) managing time, which referred to when students began drafting, editing, and proofreading coursework assignments before submission, followed by questions around the use of (2) support and (3) feedback (Cottrell, 2024). All participants were asked the same questions related to managing time and engaging with support and feedback, including probing questions which explored how SAL practices changed over time. Ethical approval from the university and consent of participants were gained prior to interviewing. Interviews were undertaken online through MS Teams with recordings transcribed for analysis. One of the key ethical challenges typical of narrative interviewing is managing the power relations between interviewer and interviewee: this is certainly the case for students and tutors (MacLean, 2019). This was mitigated by allocating participants to the various members of the research team who were not directly involved in teaching respective participants (King et al., 2019).

In exploring how students may react to the varying stakes of university assessments, there is an implied recognition that external factors will impact the level of SAL actualisation and

transformation. This is true from the perspective of extrinsic motivational theories such as Behaviourism and Expectancy-Value Theory; higher stakes would in principle incentivise higher levels of SAL actualisation and transformation (Urhahane & Wijnia, 2023). However, given that members of the research team had varying views about student motivations and how motivations may change overtime given environmental or identity factors, the findings are open to interpretation, insofar as drawing links on how assessment stakes may impact diverse students. Participants were questioned on why they undertook certain assessment literacy practices without probing factors that might relate to their identity or their social-cultural conditions. This is another limitation of the study, though care was taken to ensure a high degree of theoretical transfer whereby HE practitioners would be able to interpret the findings with respect to their contexts and the types of students they engage with (Smith, 2018).

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Name (pseudonyms)	Course	Interview year	Student type	Gender
Asif	Business Management	2025	A	M
Safa	Early Years	2024	A	F
Dawood	Law	2025	A	M
Maryam	Education Studies	2024	A	F
Holly	Early Years	2024	A	F
Charlotte	Education Studies	2024	A	F
Sara	Childhood Studies	2024	A	F
Natalie	Early Years	2024	A	F
Zara	Education Studies	2024	A	F
Umar	Accounting	2025	B	M
Shazia	Childhood Studies	2025	B	F
Rayhaan	Criminology and Law	2025	B	M
Laura	Psychology in Education	2025	B	F
Saba	Education Studies	2025	B	F
William	Business and Law	2025	B	M
Eesa	Law	2025	B	M

Ibrahim	Physiotherapy	2025	C	M
Laraib	Education Studies	2024	C	F
Suman	Education Studies	2025	C	F
Sumairah	Education Studies	2025	C	F
Sonia	Education Studies	2025	C	F

Findings

Student narratives revealed three types of students (Type A, B, C), this typology reflects common responses to when participants transformed in relation to assessment stakes. Type A students exhibited limited transformation with regards to assessment stakes, Type B students transformed in reaction to rise in stakes in the second year, while Type C students transformed in reaction to their final year which holds the highest stakes (see participant profiles above).

Coursework preparation

In relation to coursework preparation, Type A students displayed early assessment preparation, maintaining distinct phases of assessment planning throughout their undergraduate years, exhibiting high levels of SAL actualisation with respect to time but limited transformation. For Type A students there were limited negotiations with the varied stakes afforded to the three years of university:

> Pretty much right at the start, you'll get the assessment brief. You might make a few notes on what we're gonna look at … for last semester I remember starting the write-up–back end of November based on my notes. So, about a month and half before deadline … Proofreading, I do it throughout writing … Personally, starting early and not having the stress of last-minute work, I think that's what I've done throughout my entire academic journey, even before uni (Dawood: Type A).

Natalie (Type A) states:

> I did really well in level four (first year), which I'm very proud of. So, I kind of tried to keep the same attitude and the same processes because I thought, 'Well it worked for me then, I don't want to change anything'… I think, that's just been a thing even at school, at secondary school, A-levels, that was just the standard thing.

For Dawood and Natalie, effective SAL practices have been established from their pre-university experiences, and they actively sought to maintain these practices, irrespective of the varying stakes involved in the successive years of undergraduate studies. Type B students, in contrast, displayed higher degree of coursework preparation in second year and maintained respective preparation practices in third year. In this respect Type B students were most sensitive to the increase in assessment stakes. When asking Type B students why they made these changes, there was less of a sense of reacting to higher stakes, and more of a sense of returning to good practices developed prior to entering HE:

> In my first year of uni, because I knew that it didn't contribute to my grade, I started working on my assignments late, I was just thinking about getting 60's. When I received my first-year grades it made me feel a bit down, I didn't do as well as I could. So, those experiences and knowing that I could get good grades in A-levels just gave me the motivation to work harder and improve my grades (Umar: Type B).

> In the first year I started late in the semester… But in second year, I decided, 'you know what? Going forward, last minute prep is not going to work'. In uni *[sic]* there is a lot to do with structure and referencing and you need time to write in-depth. In college I did make sure I revised in time for exams and did my work but at university, the first year didn't matter as much, so I just relaxed (Rayhaan: Type B).

When Type A and Type B students were asked why they adopted certain strategies, the responses, for the most part, were based on developed ways of approaching assessments in secondary education: for Type A students this meant maintaining those assessment approaches from the first year and, for Type B, reinstating in second year. In contrast, Type C students exhibited lower levels of SAL actualisation and transformation in relation to coursework preparation until the final year, typically displaying late starts without defined phases of coursework planning. When asked why they approached assessments early in the final year and not in the second year, Type C students generally provided multiple responses, either like Type A and B, they recalled historical practices of assessment preparation as stated by Suman below, or simply referenced the varying stakes in second and third year whereby the lower stakes of second year did not, for them, warrant, SAL transformation compared with the higher stakes in third year. Peer influence also reinforced practices around preparing for assessment close to deadline. Suman (Type C) states:

> In the first year I wasn't really bothered because everyone used to say your first year doesn't really count. Then obviously in second year I did start working a bit more in advance but still late like a few nights before deadline. Now in final year I feel like I get it checked more. I'm more cautious, I started very early… I've always worked last minute; that's been something I've done all my life. Exams, I used to revise last minute…, a lot of my friends used to do it similar timing, like towards the end. So I was like, if they've not started it then I'm fine.

Sumairah (Type C) adds:

> With first and second year, I was quite last minute. But in third year I did start early, because I feel like with third year, you have more pressure to want to get a higher grade because you know that you're towards the end; second year is worth like 25% or 15%? so when I was getting some low 60s or high 50s, I was just like, it's fine.

What the responses of these three categories of students indicate is that SAL actualisation and transformation is influenced by the degree of negotiation between varying assessment stakes and student identity, with some instances of peer influence (see also Rovagnati et al., 2022). Type A students seek to maintain their assessment practices irrespective of the context, as they see themselves embodying good academic skills, Type B students negotiate their identity by increasing SAL actualisation in second year and maintain good practices into the third year, while Type C students transform and actualise high degree of SAL only in the final year, generally with respect to the highest assessment stakes.

Engagement with support

The interim period between the issuing of the assignment and the deadline creates room for students to seek relevant support. Though multiple forms of support were discussed during the interviews, this section focuses on seeking support from academic staff, whether that was during class, or in additional one-to-one tutorials. Responses were similar to the previous theme in as much as they relate to when students sought support. To begin, Type A students were uniform in the volume of support they sought which did not change given the varying stakes of university assessment. Maryam (Type A) speaks about attending tutorial sessions consistently throughout her time at university and emailing staff for clarification: 'I think for every assignment I tried to do drop-in tutorials, those on the timetable, and if I needed to I would email back and forth, I tried to do that for every assignment at university'.

Safa (Type A) also spoke about engaging with drop-in sessions and tutorials and how this engagement was utilised consistently, '…it was very similar to first year. We were just told when tutorials were and then we had maybe a half-an-hour one. I just attended them'. In contrast, for Type B students, engagement with support was targeted starting from the second semester of the second year leading into the final year. Laura (Type B) spoke of increased contact with staff in second year through emailing. This is also the case with Eesa (Type B) who increased his communication with staff in his second year; interestingly Eesa also spoke of limiting staff contact in third year, due to popular questions/concerns being addressed by staff. This relays the view that Type B students can be more adaptive to their needs and display more targeted practices in actualising SAL rather than simply reacting to increasing assessment stakes:

> I did start emailing a lot more in the second year, asking questions. When I was recapping stuff at home I'd realise that I didn't actually quite understand something in the depth that I could do, then I might ask something on an email (Laura: Type B).

> I've never requested tutorial time to help with assignments, no. I have sent emails, in second year where I would have a problem with the wording of the question. I just wanted more of an understanding as to what it actually meant so it would help me down the line. The only reason why I haven't done it in third year, is because some of the questions I had were popular questions amongst everyone else, to which tutors sent out a widespread email (Eesa: Type B).

Type C students generally sought more support in the latter half of their third year and used support more generally rather than seeking targeted support as displayed by Type B students. Sonia and Laraib (both Type C) in Education Studies began seeking more support in final year. Laraib referenced a tutor named Roy (pseudonym), who was her dissertation supervisor sharing, 'yes, so I have attended Roy's tutorials, he is my supervisor, and had a few other ones that I've been to'. Supervision meetings are generally not categorised as additional support but function as part of ordinary pedagogical practice when undertaking dissertation projects. This suggests a lower volume of support being sought by Type C students even in the final year. Similarly Sonia (Type C) took a causal approach stating that:

> I haven't really contacted staff for support, not that much. I mostly just work by myself. It's mostly like casual questions that I'll ask at the end of the lesson and

> like maybe about an assignment, but nothing like formal. I do email, just whenever I have a question really.

With regards to seeking support a similar picture is developed to the previous theme, in as much as the three categories of students begin to transform their SAL in relation to the varied stakes of university assessment. Where Type A students are active in seeking support throughout their time in university, the forms of support sought is general and uniform, with limited transformation in seeking support over the three-year period. Type B students begin to seek support in the second year and are more targeted with the forms and degrees of support they access. Type C students typically seek limited and more general support, usually in the final year. In this respect the varying stakes signal when students seek support; this is true for Type B and C students, however the volume of support does not fully correlate with assessment stakes, as all students engaged with support in varying ways.

Engagement with feedback

In relation to engaging with feedback, Type A students provided more varied responses. Asif (Type A) felt feedback was generic and of little value as he continued to gain higher marks. Asif usually 'skimmed' over feedback and did not require staff to clarify. Holly, another Type A student, engaged with feedback more actively but, like Asif, did not seek clarification. Asif (Type A) reflected: 'to be honest regarding feedback I only skimmed through the feedback and I usually see the same points and I'm like, "Oh yeah, it's that point again"'. Holly (Type A) responded:

> I found out a lot on how I can improve through feedback. Like what my weakness was, which I never knew about or was aware of. So that definitely in the last three years has been really prominent and like when I'm writing and being aware on how I can implement some of the recommendations. I don't remember going to staff to clarify, a lot of the feedback was clear enough.

In contrast Type B students were more likely than any other students to return to staff to clarify feedback after their first set of feedback in their second year, and then to actively transform their assessment practices based on respective feedback:

> I did clarify feedback during second year, I remember getting some feedback and frankly, I just did not get it! So I did ask my tutor to clarify … and it helped, it helps me see my own flaws where I don't see them (Shazia: Type B).

William (Type B) responded:

> Yeah, I have always looked at feedback just to see which parts I have done well or which parts need improving on. I would say from second year I went to the module leader to clarify and explain to me what I need to do properly to make it stronger.

For Type C students, engagement with feedback was general with none of the participants categorised as Type C returning to clarify feedback:

> I usually don't go back, in some cases feedback helps, yeah, some cases you're just like, 'What are you saying?' [Laughs]. Feedback needed to be clearer. We weren't getting told, 'You need to push this up to 60 or 70'. It was more, 'This is what you should have done' (Laraib: Type C).

> Yeah. I'd say for the first few years, it didn't really like click that I should be reading these comments. I did check start of final year but I didn't go back to clarify because, like I said, I work like within the week of the essay being due. I'm mostly just focused on doing that. I know my common issues around structure and referencing which I've tried to improve this year (Sonia: Type C).

Narratives on feedback engagement are more varied compared to previous themes, particularly around the reasons why students will actualise certain feedback practices (Orsmond & Merry, 2013). For Type C students there is a sense that the lack of feedback receptivity is due to the type of feedback not being what students needed or perhaps the feedback was unclear reflecting the point mentioned by Winstone et al. (2017b) that student agency around the use of feedback is impeded due to unrealistic expectations or ambiguous feedback. Type A students, like Asif, who are accustomed to gaining good assessment outcomes, appear to have limited need to clarify feedback, while Type B students show high engagement with feedback to ensure mistakes in first year are not repeated and good assessment practices are maintained.

Discussion and conclusion

In summary SAL actualisation and transformation is multifaceted and individual experiences and histories will impact SAL strategies in successive years of university assessments. Findings cohere with studies that have focused on students' perspectives on AL and feedback literacies in that students' perceptions about learning, likely developed before entering university,

impact how they actualise and transform in their SAL practices (Medina-Gual & Monereo, 2025; O'Donovan, 2017). Students who view their strategies to be effective actualised respective SAL practices consistently throughout their undergraduate years and are likely to actualise a more uniform practice with limited transformation. Other students may negotiate their approach with assessment stakes and are more adaptive based on specific assessment demands, feedback, and the respective impact of high stake second- and third-year assessment. Students with lower levels of SAL actualisation may only transform late in their academic journey often reacting to the highest stake assessments in the final year of their undergraduate study.

Recommendations

There are two key recommendations for SAL development. Firstly, to ensure programmatic SAL development rather than engaging in modular or stand-alone interventions. Programme teams must work together in mapping the student journey keeping in mind how diverse students may negotiate the varying stakes of successive university learning. Programmatic oversight may be effective with funding shortages, by removing overlaps and/or limited transferability of single or disjointed interventions. Secondly, SAL development must engage in reflections on student identity and its historical development alongside clarification on the demands and stakes of successive university assessments at each level. Student reflections on past successes and failures are likely to have the greatest impact on SAL actualisation and transformation.

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