

Developing University Students' Assessment Literacy and Autonomy through Coaching and Mentoring

Andrew G. D. Holmes^{ID}

School of Education, The University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX, United Kingdom

Abstract

This conceptual paper explores how university students' assessment literacy and learner autonomy are developed, and the potential role coaching or mentoring can play. Its purpose is to inform and stimulate discussion with and amongst university educators. It argues that assessment literacy and learner autonomy may be mutually supportive, reinforcing constructs that operate synergistically and can be developed through coaching and mentoring within a curriculum that is designed to allow for and incorporate this. A recently developed model of curriculum development, the C-BAss framework, is identified as being a suitable vehicle for introducing coaching and mentoring for assessment literacy and autonomy into higher education academic programs.

Keywords: C-BAss, assessment literacy, autonomy, coaching, learner autonomy, mentoring

Introduction

This conceptual paper builds on my previous research about learner autonomy and coaching and mentoring (Holmes, 2018, 2021, 2023) and more recent work on developing assessment literacy (Holmes, 2024), along with work on curriculum development I have been involved in as a key member of the C-BAss project at the University of Hull. I suggest that coaching and mentoring processes that provide student-supportive developmental guidance offer a useful approach to developing both assessment literacy and learner autonomy. Furthermore, autonomy and assessment literacy may be mutually supportive and synergistic: with increased autonomy leading to improved assessment literacy and vice versa. I have, as yet, no empirical evidence to prove this. However, I refer to Sagan's (1995) maxim, that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Assessment Literacy

Assessment literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to understand and engage with assessment processes (Smith et al., 2013). It involves the ability to interpret assessment criteria, provide and receive feedback, and use assessment outcomes to inform learning (Popham, 2009). Assessment-literate students should be better equipped to navigate contemporary higher education assessment tasks and achieve their academic goals (Pastore & Andrade, 2019) because they have both a better understanding of assessment processes and requirements and the skills required to be successful. Key components of assessment literacy include the following. Firstly, understanding assessment criteria. Students need to comprehend what is expected of them in assessments. This includes understanding marking rubrics, grading criteria, and the alignment between pre-specified learning outcomes, or competences, and

assessment tasks (Carless, 2015). Secondly, engaging with and utilizing feedback to improve future learning. Effective use of feedback is recognized as being central to student improvement (see, for example, Adarkwah, 2021). Students need to learn how to interpret feedback, identify actionable steps from it and apply them to future work (Henderson et al., 2021; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Thirdly, self-assessment and critical reflection on one's progress. Developing the ability to evaluate one's own work facilitates deeper engagement with the learning process (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

Learner Autonomy

Is the capacity of students to think and act for themselves, to take responsibility for their learning, make informed decisions, and regulate their learning processes (Little, 1991; Reeve et al., 2008). Autonomous learners are typically self-directed, motivated, and capable of setting and achieving their own learning objectives (Holec, 1981). Key components of learner autonomy include the following. Firstly, self-regulation enables autonomous learners to identify and set goals, monitor their progress, and adjust their learning/study strategies as needed (Zimmerman, 2002). Secondly, motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation. Autonomy may be linked to intrinsic motivation, where students engage in learning for its own sake rather than external rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thirdly, reflective and reflexive practice. Reflecting on learning experiences helps students to understand their strengths and areas for improvement, contributing to developing a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

It is widely acknowledged that developing learner autonomy is a key goal of higher education, or a "central education objective" (Kinsella et al., 2024, p. 1192). Sun (2024) suggests that it is "a paramount goal as a vehicle for enhancing academic performance." It is an enabler for students preparing for professional life after

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew G. D. Holmes, School of Education, The University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX, United Kingdom. **Email:** a.g.holmes@hull.ac.uk

graduation and empowers them to take responsibility for, and ownership of, their learning and development goals (Kinsella et al., 2024). As I have previously argued (see Holmes, 2018), learner autonomy is a particularly complex phenomenon, often conflated with and confused with independent learning. Assessing autonomy is challenging and problematic for several reasons (see Holmes, 2021, for a full discussion), and it may not be feasible to do so in a way that allows for grading of students. There is considerable debate as to whether it is a product or a process, or both, and an educator's position in respect of that will impact how they believe it may be assessed. My position is that it is what Knight labels as a "wicked" competency. "Wicked" competencies are achievements that cannot be neatly pre-specified, take time to develop and resist measurement-based approaches to assessment (Knight & Page, 2007, p. 2), yet employers highly value them.

The Potential Relationship Between Assessment Literacy and Learner Autonomy

Although they are frequently considered separately, assessment literacy and learner autonomy are often 'skill sets' that are complementary (note, I use the term 'skill set' here, although I do not suggest that autonomy is a specific skill, it is more a mindset). Both coaching and mentoring as developmental guidance processes have been shown to support the development of autonomy, with a substantial body of research literature available to demonstrate this. I suggest that more autonomous learners have a greater likelihood of developing effective assessment literacy skills than less autonomous learners; because autonomy facilitates developing critical reflection, self-efficacy, and self-assessment (Belletti & Vaillant, 2022), which are all key components of understanding and engaging with assessment effectively. Those learners who are more autonomous and self-directed are more likely to engage in critical reflection and self-evaluation and engage with feedback. Without having to be prompted to do so by an educator, they are more likely to recognize the need to develop and improve their assessment literacy. As Panadero and Alonso-Tapia (2014) have acknowledged, those students who perceive their learning environment to be supportive of autonomy are more likely to engage in academic tasks, to take greater responsibility for their learning, and to achieve better academic outcomes; all of which are aspects of assessment literacy.

Structured processes of developmental guidance through coaching and mentoring, focusing on assessment literacy skills, may also support developing increased autonomy, with the development of one reinforcing the development of the other. As learner autonomy and confidence improve, so will recognition of the need to develop assessment literacy skills. As assessment literacy develops, so will confidence and autonomous behavior in this area.

Challenges in Developing Assessment Literacy

Traditional university assessment practices (such as exams and end-of-module essays) often prioritize summative outcomes over formative development, potentially leaving little room for learners to engage in a meaningful way with assessment processes (Carless, 2015). This frequently undermines the development of assessment literacy and autonomy by positioning students as passive recipients of assessment outcomes (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Three key limitations of more traditional assessments may be noted. Firstly, a focus on grade achievement. The emphasis on grades can lead to a surface approach to learning (Biggs, 1988), where students prioritize memorization over understanding (Haggis, 2003; Ramsden & Ramsden, 2003). Furthermore, this approach is often accompanied by limited formative feedback. Traditional assessments often provide limited and/or delayed feedback on the completed summative task. Very frequently, students have started other assessment tasks before they receive formal feedback on initial ones, part of the problem of what Winstone and Boud (2022) have recently referred to as the 'entanglement'

of assessment and feedback. This reduces feedback's effectiveness in guiding future learning (Sadler, 2010). Thirdly, there is a lack of student involvement. Students may not be involved in the design and implementation of authentic assessment processes. Together, these may limit their ability to develop assessment literacy and hinder their development of autonomy. As I have previously suggested (see Holmes, 2024) there are a number of strategies to develop assessment literacy, including: adopting a Constructivist pedagogy, a constructively aligned curriculum with carefully designed authentic assessment tasks, the use of exemplars, clear unambiguous assessment briefs that are understandable to students along with advice, guidance and support about responding proactively to feedback, the encouragement of goal setting, self-assessment and reflection, scaffolded learning experiences, and explicit instruction about assessment.

Challenges in Assessing Autonomy

Assessing learner autonomy is inherently problematic, as it involves measuring a complex and multifaceted construct with several interrelated components that are difficult to separate (Benson, 2011; Holmes, 2021). Traditional assessment methods, such as exams and standardized tests, are unlikely to contribute to assessing it or its development (Boud, 2000). Alternative approaches, such as reflective portfolios and self-assessment, can do this to an extent (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The main challenges in assessing autonomy are briefly summarized below (see Holmes, 2021, for a more comprehensive overview). 1 Subjectivity, autonomy is a subjective construct, which makes it difficult to measure objectively (Little, 1991). 2 Context-Dependence, developing autonomy is influenced by contextual factors, such as the learning environment and institutional policies and practices (Benson, 2011). If policies, practices and the learning environment are not conducive to developing autonomy, or designed to facilitate its development. In that case, it is unlikely to be developed in a way that is meaningful, never mind assessable. 3 Long-Term Development, autonomy develops over time, and at a different pace for different learners; this necessarily makes it extremely challenging to assess within the constraints of a single university module or semester (Boud, 2000). 4 It is an 'essentially contested concept'. As I have previously argued (Holmes, 2021, p. 8-9) "Within programmes of higher education, it would seem to be an "essentially contested concept" (Gallie, 1956), i.e., something that is impossible to conclusively define, but perfectly possible and rational for people to discuss and justify their holding of one interpretation rather than a competing one" Further that "if it is acknowledged that autonomy may not be possible to conclusively define and that there are different interpretations, it implies that its assessment is problematic". I have suggested that "For accredited programs of higher education, until more detailed and 'workable-in-practice' definitions are available, developing learner autonomy...is possible, yet its assessment is not" (p. 13). That is still my position today. Whilst there are various approaches available that may measure autonomy, or autonomous behavior, such as that developed by Fisher et al. (2001) and Macaskill and Taylor (2010) self-directed learner readiness scale, I do not believe that autonomy, per se, is assessable in a way that allows it to be graded. I am not however suggesting that we need to assess autonomy as a necessary part of developing a student's assessment literacy, but that by using processes of developmental guidance provided through coaching or mentoring we can facilitate its development alongside that of assessment literacy.

Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching and mentoring are generally regarded as being distinct practices that share a common goal of facilitating personal and professional growth (Garvey & Stokes, 2021). Both

typically involve a one-to-one relationship between an experienced individual and a less experienced individual. Typically, coaching utilizes a more structured, goal-oriented approach, which emphasizes the development of specific skills and competencies (Cox et al., 2023). Whereas mentoring usually involves a more holistic, long-term relationship, which encompasses a range of support processes, such as guidance, counselling, and, in the American context, sponsorship (Parker et al., 2008). Both are grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, which emphasize the importance of dialogue, reflection, and scaffolding in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). These approaches align well with the principles of developing assessment literacy and learner autonomy, as they prioritize active engagement, self-regulation, and collaborative learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Constructivist learning theory (Constructivism) posits that learners construct knowledge through experiences and interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). And as Kinsella et al. (2024, p. 1190) identify, autonomy is “best cultivated dialogically, i.e., within interpersonal communications and relationships”. There is considerable evidence available in respect of the benefits to students (e.g., Alzen et al., 2021; Capstick et al., 2019; Kraft et al., 2023; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018).

Coaching and mentoring can provide developmental interactions, experiences, and the scaffolding needed for students to build their understanding of assessment processes and develop increased autonomy. Coaching or mentoring can create opportunities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue with educators and peers. Potentially, this will lead to a much deeper understanding of assessment criteria and feedback, therefore improving their assessment literacy.

Coaching for Assessment Literacy

Coaching typically involves a structured, goal-oriented process in which educators work with students to develop specific competencies (Whitmore, 2009). In the context of assessment literacy, coaching focused on this may help students to better understand assessment criteria, interpret feedback, and use assessment outcomes to inform their learning (Earl, 2013). Several coaching techniques can support this. Goal Setting, whereby coaches work with students to set clear, achievable goals for their assessments, is effective (Whitmore, 2009). Similarly, feedback interpretation and actioning, whereby coaches help students to interpret and better understand feedback, reflect on this, and identify actionable steps they need to take to improve future work, can be helpful (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Reflective practice, where coaches work to encourage students to informally reflect on their learning and assessment experiences, or more formally, using models of reflection such as those developed by Brookfield (2017), Gibbs (1988), and Kolb (2007). Critical reflection and reflexivity by students about assessment should lead to a deeper understanding of assessment processes (Boud & Molloy, 2013) and hence improved assessment literacy.

Integrating Coaching and Mentoring; and Assessment Literacy into Practice

To better integrate developmental guidance processes in the curriculum, educators should adopt a student-centered approach that prioritizes formative assessment and reflective practice (Carless, 2015). This may include, inter alia: 1 formative assessment processes, such as quizzes, in-class practice, reviews of draft submissions, and providing students with regular feedback and opportunities for improvement (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). 2 Peer mentoring; universities may establish peer mentoring programs where senior students guide first-year students through the assessment process. 3 Providing specific academic support (Smith et al., 2013). 4 Reflective portfolios, involving assessments where students compile evidence of their learning and critically reflect on their learning and development

progress over time (Carless, 2015). I do not, however, believe that there is ‘one size fits all’ off-the-shelf coaching or mentoring approach that universities can adopt without tailoring it to their specific institutional situation and their learners’ needs. What is important is that whatever system, scheme, model, or process is implemented, it must ‘fit’ with the institution’s existing procedures and processes. It also needs to be embedded within the curriculum, rather than being a bolt-on addition, or afterthought that is not given the same priority as other aspects of the teaching and learning process.

Institutional Barriers and Challenges to Implementing Coaching or Mentoring

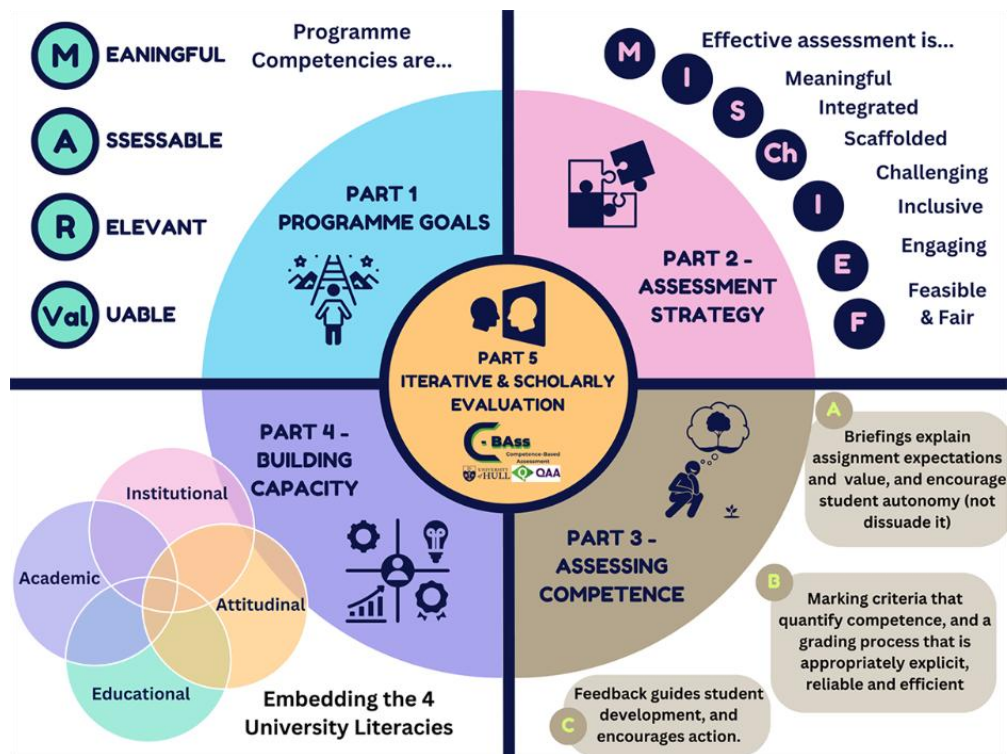
There are several barriers and challenges to overcome that may hinder the implementation of developmental guidance interventions. Educators and institutions may be reluctant to move away from traditional assessment methods, particularly if they are perceived as being effective or cost-efficient (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). In institutions/programs dominated by summative assessment, this may be particularly challenging. Educators may feel unprepared or unsupported in adopting new approaches, particularly if they lack training in coaching or mentoring techniques (Bachirova et al., 2021; Parker, 1985). Institutions may prioritize standardized assessments due to accountability pressures such as those from external professional validating bodies, making it difficult to introduce more flexible, student-centered approaches (Carless, 2015). Implementing developmental guidance programs requires time and resources, which are frequently limited in many contemporary higher education institutions. Universities may lack the funding to provide professional development for educators or to hire the additional staff that may be required to support new initiatives (Smith et al., 2013); even introducing peer-mentoring requires time and effort from academic staff. Educators may struggle to find time for one-on-one coaching or mentoring sessions, particularly with large student cohorts (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Institutional policies and structures can also hinder the development of assessment literacy and learner autonomy; the culture of an institution will impact the success of any developmental guidance initiatives. For example, a highly competitive academic environment could discourage collaboration and risk-taking amongst students, which may be necessary for developing autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000), or it may discourage students from mentoring their peers.

A Potential Approach to Implementing and Embedding Coaching and Mentoring Processes to Facilitate the Development of Students’ Assessment Literacy and Learner Autonomy – The C-BAss Curriculum Development Framework

I suggest that it is useful to carefully and critically examine the existing curriculum to ensure it is authentically constructively aligned (Biggs, 1996) and does not exhibit signs of ‘constructive disalignment’ which is what occurs when any element of a program’s educational experience is not aligned with the needs and expectations of its stakeholders (students and society) (Holmes & Henri, 2025). The curriculum should be designed with a constructivist pedagogy that emphasizes authentic and equitable assessment practices aligned with stakeholder needs. This should be achieved using an appropriate model for curriculum development that allows coaching and mentoring to be embedded within it.

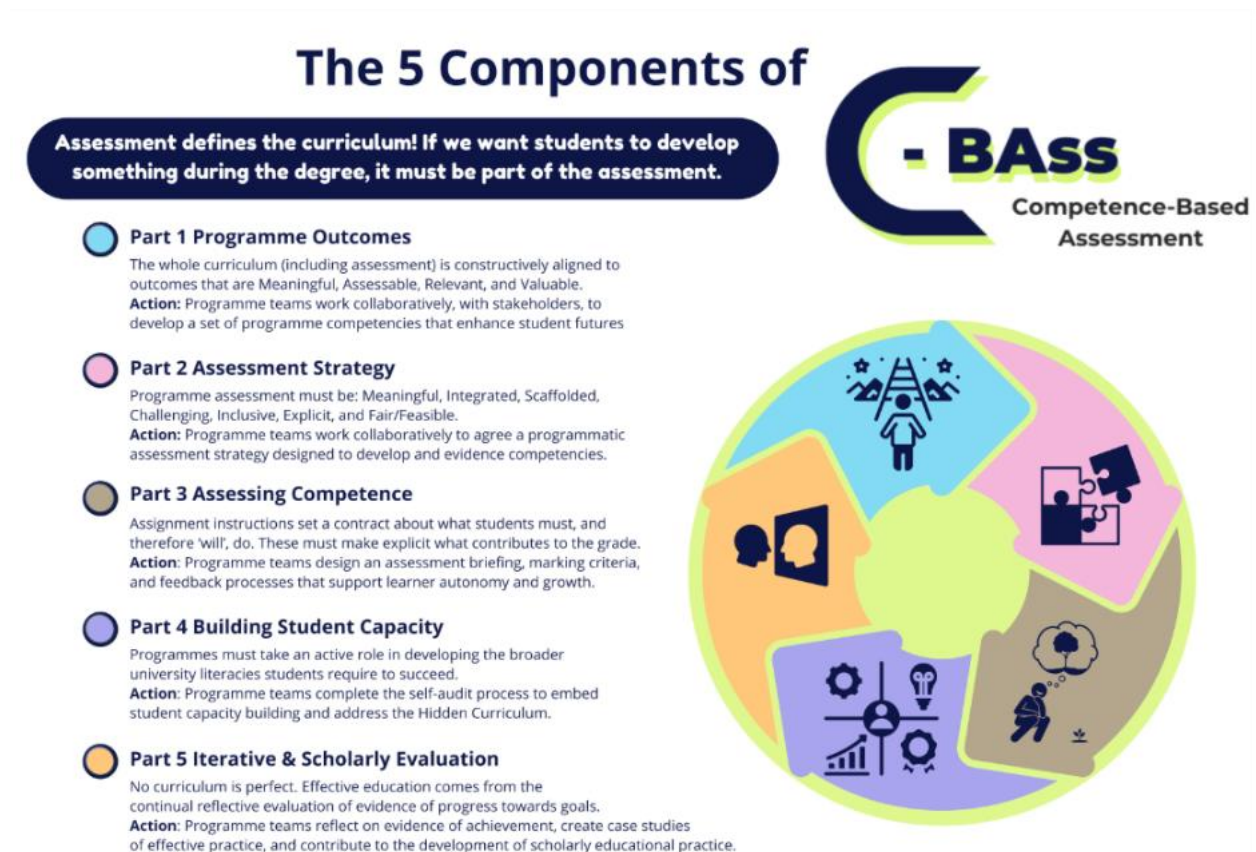
One such model currently being piloted within a UK University is the C-BAss framework (Holmes & Henri, 2024). C-BAss already includes consideration being given to developing both learners’ assessment literacy and learner autonomy. In re-designing a curriculum using the C-BAss framework, educators will be able to identify where, when, and how best to incorporate coaching and mentoring most efficiently and effectively for their institution and the needs of their students. During the process of re-design, coaching and mentoring can be incorporated and integrated at all levels, avoiding them being a ‘bolt-on’.

Figure 1
The C-BAss Framework Model



Note. From "Introduction to the C-BAss framework" by , A. G. Holmes and D. Henri 2025, (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/news-events/blog/is-constructive-disalignment-undermining-higher-education-for-everyone>). Copyright 2025 by The Quality Assurance Agency.

Figure 2
The Five Components of C-BAss



Note. From "Research Repository." University of Hull, (<https://hull-repository.worktribe.com/person/317355/dom-henri/news>).

As Figures 1 and 2 show, C-BAss is a five-stage process for curriculum development that addresses key challenges facing higher education by focusing program design on developing and assessing the competencies essential to student aspirational futures. It recognizes the central and powerful role assessment plays in Higher Education and that assessment practices should encourage student autonomy. C-BAss is underpinned by extensive research into existing pedagogical and assessment good practice, providing educators with a structured yet flexible process to authentically and constructively align programs of study with the needs of both students and employers. The five stages are linear, yet it is possible to adapt them to an institution's or program's specific circumstances.

The C-BAss stages are briefly summarized below.

1. Develop and agree within the program teaching team the key goals of the program i.e., the graduate outcomes and/or program competencies/learning outcomes. This is carried out before program content and delivery are considered.
2. Design a final year assessment strategy that allows students to evidence and develop those outcomes at the expected level. Then create an authentic, constructively aligned, and scaffolded curriculum that prepares students by developing the skills, knowledge, and capacities necessary to be successful in the final year assessment. The development of assessment literacy should be regarded as both essential and central to the curriculum. This involves using backwards design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) at the program level to ensure that every student has had the opportunity to develop their capacity to be successful in the final year assessment.
3. Create a fair, transparent, and discursive approach to how assessment, marking, and feedback are communicated to students that is then applied consistently across and throughout the degree program at all levels from first-year to final-year.
4. Adopt a holistic approach to building the student literacies and capacities identified as being necessary for your students to succeed at your university. This will necessarily include assessment literacy.
5. Implement an approach to programme design and delivery that recognizes the need for continuous reflective practice and contribution to scholarly activity.

The C-BAss framework is currently being piloted within UK higher education institutions, with several research case-studies being developed and published online at QAA Competence Based Education Project – Collaborative Enhancement Project

Conclusion

Developing students' assessment literacy and autonomy are essential tasks for contemporary university educators. I have presented an argument for integrating coaching/mentoring processes into the curriculum to develop assessment literacy and autonomy synergistically, through a constructively aligned program developed using a framework such as C-BAss. Coaching and mentoring as developmental processes offer the potential for an effective way to provide students with the support and guidance necessary to engage successfully in assessment and take ownership of their learning. By adopting a holistic student-centered curriculum, using a model such as C-BAss, educators may better enable students to become assessment-literate, autonomous learners who are prepared for the challenges of higher education and beyond.

Recommendations

Further research is necessary to obtain empirical evidence to validate the ideas put forward in this paper. It is recommended that future research employ longitudinal case studies of programs using C-BAss to incorporate coaching and mentoring, measuring changes in aspects such as student self-efficacy, confidence in assessment tasks, feedback uptake, use of self-regulated learning behaviors, and student attainment.

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