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Published online: 30 Oct 2023.

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ABSTRACT

Authentic assessments are designed to evaluate knowledge and skills that are relevant for students' life beyond university, emphasising practical, applied skills. They offer an alternative to assessments that don't explicitly foster transferability of skills. The present study examined undergraduate student perceptions of authentic and traditional assessments ($N=150$). We used a qualitative story completion methodology to examine three domains: student's emotional responses to authentic and traditional assessment forms, student's perceptions of how different assessment types may benefit their employability, and student's preferences for pedagogical support with authentic assessments. A qualitative content analysis revealed students generally perceive authentic, novel assessments to be exciting, motivating and inspirational; however, this was accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. More traditional assessments (e.g. essays and multiple-choice-question examinations) elicited feelings of comfort and preparedness, but students also felt worried, bored and unexcited by these assessments. Students appreciated creative freedom when lecturers set traditional assessments but would like more consideration of their feelings and need for support in authentic assessments. Hence, we argue, when advocating for authentic assessment, there is a balance to be struck between innovation and challenge, ensuring sufficient support for student's psychological safety and feelings of comfort. Implications for practice are discussed.

Introduction

In recent years, there have been moves away from traditional forms of assessment such as examinations and essays, towards more innovative and creative assessments that are relevant to students' lives beyond university (Archbald and Newmann 1988; McArthur 2023). This is the crux of 'authentic assessment' which is, broadly, an approach to evaluating student's learning that emphasises real-world, applied and transferable skills in contexts that resemble situations that students might encounter in their professional lives (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014). Authentic assessments tend to be performance or artefact based (e.g. interviews, presentations, portfolios) rather than based on more traditional academic outputs (e.g. essays or multiple-choice questions; see Colthorpe et al. 2021; Harris et al. 2021; Tan et al. 2022). Authentic assessments

are increasingly popular and necessary in higher education (Sambell and Brown 2021) to address a 'global skills gap' from increasingly demanding employers (Schultz et al. 2022). They thus have vast pedagogical potential, because they bring together disciplinary expertise with a concern for employability and articulation of student's skills. McArthur (2023) argues that authentic assessments should be beneficial to both students and to wider society, because they promote skills that have practical use when students graduate. However, it is not yet clear how students perceive these more innovative and authentic approaches to their assessment in higher education.

Indeed, elsewhere in the literature, while research suggests that students are generally happy and more engaged with teaching delivery that is considered to be 'innovative', compared with more traditional modalities (Abdel Meguid and Collins 2017), there is little evidence surrounding student *perceptions* of authentic assessment. Research has identified that authentic assessment has a positive impact on student learning (Villarroel et al. 2018) by bolstering autonomy (Raymond et al. 2013), motivation (Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner 2006) and problem-solving skills (Wu et al. 2015). A systematic review by Sokhanvar, Salehi, and Sokhanvar (2021) found that authentic assessments contribute positively towards student learning outcomes, and to critical personal development such as communication skills and self-confidence (see also Sotiriadou et al. 2020). Given that authentic assessments typically involve a more *active* approach from students (e.g. Wiewiora and Kowalkiewicz 2019), with increased autonomy (McArthur 2023), this could theoretically enhance students' confidence in not only their academic ability but also their personal development and self-esteem. Consequently, authentic assessments seem a welcome addition to higher education assessment practices. However, although research demonstrates improvements in student learning outcomes and skill development from authentic assessments, little is known about how students actually *feel* about doing an authentic assessment. Indeed, in order to maximise the meaningfulness, opportunity and utility of authentic assessment in higher education, assessment should not only be useful and practical, but students should be engaged with the process and feel well equipped to complete them (Knight and Ferrell 2022).

Some pedagogical research has begun to explore student experiences of different assessment modalities. For example, Holzinger et al. (2020) found from a cohort of 459 medical students that, although oral presentations were considered more important for attaining long-term knowledge, students' preferred assessment format was multiple choice questions (MCQs). Though both oral presentations and MCQs are traditional assessment formats, this suggests that assessments aligned to skills useful in the long term are not necessarily preferred by students. Work has explored student perceptions of what constitutes authenticity in an assessment context (Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner 2006); however, the majority of research on broader perceptions of authentic assessment typically centres on educators instead of students (e.g. McDermott et al. 2017; Ibrahim, Malik, and Avianti 2022). Thus, while the pedagogical benefits of authentic assessment are clear (e.g. Harris et al. 2021), there is a notable lack of research which explicitly considers the student experience and student perceptions.

Taking a student perspective on authentic assessment is important for several reasons. Firstly, anticipation of assessment is one of the most prominent contributors to student stress and poor wellbeing at university (Oaten and Cheng 2005; Koudela-Hamila et al. 2022). Therefore, efforts to reform assessments should consider the impact on the wider student experience. This is particularly important given the increased demands and academic pressures experienced at university (Macaskill 2013); students are seeking support for their mental well-being more than ever (Dawson et al. 2020). This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Deng et al. 2021). Therefore, educators should consider how we can best support students when assigning new and unfamiliar assessments, particularly assessment formats that include more student autonomy. This may be especially important at points of transition, such as the start of university, a time when students are undergoing huge academic adjustment and life change, which may bring alongside a host of different emotions such as feeling overwhelmed or anxious (Arjanggi and Kusumaningsih 2016).

It is essential that students feel they can engage in their learning in a 'psychologically safe' environment. Psychological safety refers to the creation of an environment where students feel comfortable to actively engage, ask questions and take risks (Edmondson 1999; Tsuei et al. 2019). This term was first introduced in the 1960s by organisational psychologists as a factor to aid exploration and acquisition of new behaviours (Schein and Bennis 1965). Within education, studies have shown that learner emotion such as stress can impact acquisition of new knowledge (McConnell and Eva 2012; Edmondson et al. 2016). Without psychological safety, students may not benefit from authentic assessments. Therefore, it is important to understand how students feel when undertaking authentic assessments.

The present study

While there have been investigations of how authentic assessment impacts learning, and studies of educator perceptions, there is currently a lack of pedagogical research which explicitly examines student perceptions. Here, we aim to fill this gap in the literature by centring undergraduate students' perspectives of authentic assessment, focusing on their emotional responses, perceptions of employability, and their preferences for pedagogical support with different assessment forms (authentic versus traditional), using a qualitative story completion study design. Therefore, the aims of this research are threefold:

1. To understand how students feel when they are set an authentic assessment compared to a traditional assessment.
2. To explore whether students perceive authentic assessments to be more valuable for their future employability compared to traditional assessments.
3. To capture what educators can do to ensure students feel psychologically safe when engaging in authentic assessments.

Methods

Participants and design

Participants were 150 undergraduate students in the UK, across a range of disciplines (including business studies, mathematics, politics, midwifery, English literature and medicine). Participants were recruited on Prolific, an online survey hosting platform, and paid the equivalent of £6.60 per hour. We initially recruited 60 undergraduate students on Prolific to assess the richness of the qualitative data. The average age of this initial sample was relatively high compared with the average age of students in the UK ($M = 27.27$ years old, $SD = 8.68$) and textual responses were short. We then recruited a further 90 students on Prolific, this time with an age filter of < 21 years old in order to ensure that our sample reflects the general demographics of the typical undergraduate student. Both data collection periods occurred within the same week (March 2023). The average age of participants in the final sample was 22.97 ($SD = 6.52$) with 84 women, 65 men and 1 non-binary student. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the School of Psychology, University of Leeds on 24th March 2023, Reference: PSYC-873. Sixty-six participants (44%) reported that they had completed an authentic assessment before.

Procedure

This study used an online story completion approach, which is a well-established methodology for collecting qualitative data online (Clarke et al. 2019). Participants were presented with a first-person story stem that they are asked to complete. Whilst potentially a more engaging

format for undergraduate students, this approach allowed us to tap into assumptions and indirect perspectives by evading the social demands connected with self-report techniques (Clarke et al. 2019). After providing demographic information, participants were presented with a clear definition of authentic versus traditional assessment and were provided with links to real assessment briefs in current use at the University of Leeds. An 'assessment brief' is a document which contains information related to assessment format, expectations, guidance and learning outcomes (Forsyth 2022). Participants were told that 'authentic assessments are designed to assess skills relevant to wider society, frequently aligned with future employment. The outputs of these assessment types can be diverse, and often draw upon genuine issues in society (Arnold 2022)', and were provided with examples. Traditional assessments were defined as 'an assessment designed solely to assess academic skills. This may be based around content understanding, academic writing, or research related skills', and participants were provided with examples.

After confirming they understood the difference between authentic and traditional assessments, participants were then presented with five sentence stems to complete, which asked participants' perceptions of both authentic and traditional assessments (i.e. using a within-subject study design) to allow us to make meaningful comparisons across participants. The story completion stems were related to three domains: (1) feelings about assessments (i.e. 'I have just left a lecture where I was set an [authentic/traditional] assessment. It involves [creating a podcast/writing an essay] After the lecture, I feel…'), (2) lecturer expectations (i.e. 'When my lecturer sets an [authentic/traditional] assessment, I wish they would…'), and (3) employability (i.e. 'When I think about my future career aspirations, the types of assessments that I believe are the most useful in terms of employability are…').

Results

Analytical approach

The data were analysed using directed qualitative content analysis. This type of analysis was considered appropriate, because it lends itself well to large datasets which require low levels of interpretation (Schreier 2012). Qualitative content analysis is also useful for analysing textual data from online surveys (Mayring 2004). Our approach was entirely inductive, rather than deductive; that is, we did not approach the data with any pre-determined codes (Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Assarroudi et al. 2018). The first (SJW) and second (MVP) authors initially coded the dataset. We first coded exhaustively and aimed to capture all the contents of participant's responses. We then met to discuss the coding and consolidated codes where there were few participant responses (< 3 participants in each code). For example, codes of 'worry', 'anxiety' and 'nervousness' were consolidated into one overall category of anxious/worried. We then classified these codes into three domains, and for domain one, we then coded each of these categories into three different sub-domains: positive emotion, negative emotion or neutral. All coding was checked and discussed between authors one and two, and the final summary was reviewed by the rest of the team.

Domain 1. Feelings towards assessment

A summary of participant's responses to the first question, which asked about feelings towards authentic and traditional assessments, can be seen in Table 1. The more frequent positive responses to authentic assessment typically centred around excitement ($n = 43$), motivation and inspiration ($n = 16$); however, there was also uncertainty and worry ($n = 36$), including a concern for the unfamiliarity of these assessments ($n = 26$). For traditional assessment forms, most of the

Table 1. Participants feelings toward assessment categorised by emotional valence.

Type of assessment	Emotional valence	Category	N	Illustrative quotes
Authentic	Positive	Excited	43	"I am excited to have a change to the normal assessments."
		Motivated/inspired	16	"Motivated to do this"
		Interested	14	"Interested in the assessment and ready to start preparing."
		Real life skills	12	"I am interested about doing more research into the topic as I feel like it is relevant to my everyday life."
		Happy/enthusiastic	11	"Happy, I have a lot of ideas and plans I look forward to getting into"
		Creative	10	"it allows me to have creative flexibility."
		Confident	9	"fairly confident in what I need to do."
		Fun	5	"I feel like this will be a fun task"
		Total	120	
Traditional	Negative	Anxious/worried	36	"Anxious as reading things out is very anxiety-inducing for me."
		Unfamiliarity	26	"Scared, I have not done this kind of thing before."
		Overwhelmed	17	"Overwhelmed with the amount of work I have to do."
		Concerns about workload	12	"Annoyed as its more work added onto my schedule"
		Confused	11	"A bit confused."
		Unsure	11	"Unsure how to proceed"
		Annoyed/irritated	8	"Annoyed at the length of time it will take for little contribution to my degree."
		Stressed	6	"Pretty stressed out"
		Self-conscious/worried about skills	6	"I do not think I have the skill set to complete the task as well as other people might be able to."
		Challenging	6	"I think this will be quite difficult for me"
		Low motivation	4	"a bit deflated and worried I will not be able pass the assessment."
		Total	143	
Traditional	Positive	Confident	53	"Completely confident, I have done these tasks before."
		Prepared	16	"This is something that I am used to doing and feel prepared to do after having the lecture."
		Comfort zone	26	"…essays are in my comfort zone and i am much more used to writing these"
		Clear expectations	8	"Determined because I know exactly what's expected of me."
		Fair and accurate assessment of academic skills	5	"…it's an important opportunity to consolidate my understanding of the topic and demonstrate my critical thinking skills."
		Enjoyment	7	"Excited because I really like researching and getting deep into a topic and working out the argument I want to follow and dissect."
		Total	115	
	Negative	Anxious/worried	57	"Nervous as this is very critical and I struggle with critical writing."
		Boring and unmotivated	53	"Quite bored. I have written a lot of essays and I don't find them fun or interesting."
		Academic worries	36	"I hope I do the correct research and get to the word [count]"
		Dislike/don't enjoy	11	"I hate writing long essays."
		Lack of representation of skills	9	"Another traditional assessment that doesn't always show what you are capable of"
		Total	166	
	Neutral	Total	19	"Relatively neutral. I don't hate the idea of writing essays but I don't enjoy them either."

positive responses centred around feelings of preparedness ($n=16$) and confidence ($n=53$), and participants expressed that these assessments were within their comfort zone ($n=26$).

Domain 2. Perception of employability

When asked about which type of assessments students perceive to be useful for their future careers, 95 students said 'authentic assessment' (e.g. 'authentic assignments because they give you experience applying the skills learned in academia'), 32 said 'traditional assessment' (e.g. 'traditional assessment as they encourage independence'), 25 said a mixture of both (e.g. 'authentic and traditional assessments. I believe both are essential and provide different skills and insights'), and five gave responses that could not be categorised (e.g. 'anything involving writing'). See Figure 1 for a graphic representation.

Domain 3. Preference for pedagogical support

We then analysed participant's responses regarding their reported preferences for pedagogical support (i.e. what students wished their lecturers would do when setting different assessments) for both authentic assessments (Question 4) and traditional assessments (Question 5). Table 2 shows the results of the content analysis. The most common response for authentic assessments was a preference for more depth and detail from lecturers ($n=53$) and clear expectations ($n=36$). Participants also expressed a desire for exemplars ($n=21$), increased support from lecturers ($n=15$), the option for an alternative format ($n=13$) and consideration of students' feelings from lecturers ($n=12$). For traditional assessments, participants indicated that they also desire depth and detail from lecturers about the requirements and content of the assessments ($n=38$), and value clear expectations ($n=26$). Increased support was also reported commonly, but with a particular focus on support with writing skills ($n=29$). Unique to the traditional format, participants also reported they wished lecturers would make traditional assessments more creative and allow more flexibility ($n=13$), as well as making them more interesting and engaging ($n=14$).
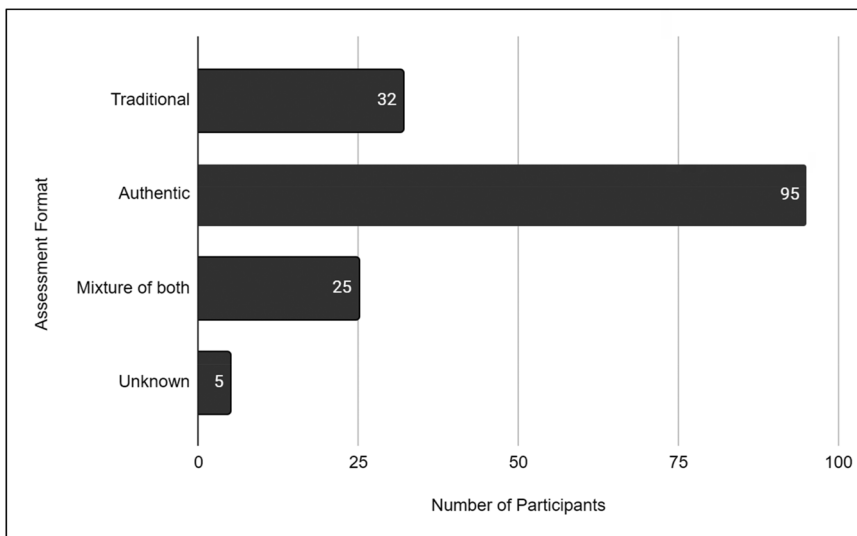

Figure 1. Participant perception of which assessment types provide useful employability skills.

Table 2. Participants preference for pedagogical support.

Type of assessment	Category	N	Illustrative quotes
Authentic	Include more depth and detail about the assessment	53	"Possibly give further detail in what they want us to do."
	Make expectations clear	36	"Give lots of clear instructions and tell us how they want us to complete it, as often it is something new and unclear."
	Provide exemplars	21	"Give examples of what a good authentic assessment looks like, or where to find good examples so I can understand what is being asked of me."
	Provide ample support	15	"...I would also appreciate more regular check-ins and feedback throughout the process, as opposed to receiving feedback only after submitting the final product..."
	Offer alternative formats	13	"Provide an alternative traditional assessment and allow students to be given a choice on which one they would prefer to complete"
	Appreciate and understand student feelings	12	"Be more understanding that people might struggle with confidence carrying out these assessments"
	Provide marking rubric	10	"Be very clear as to how its graded i.e. provide a detailed rubric"
	Explain relevance of the assessment	9	"Explain thoroughly how this may be useful in terms of the skills it will help me develop."
	Allow plenty of time	9	"Give a long amount of time before submission"
	Encourage freedom and flexibility	8	"Give us all the artistic freedom we want"
	Provide support with group dynamics	5	"Consider how [we] work out who is in what team, if teamwork is required."
	Set more frequently	5	"Set them more often and not essays"
	Ensure opportunity to reflect skills	4	"...give us an opportunity to convey what we understand and to show our skill"
	Allow students to choose their own groups	4	"Allow us to choose our groups if it is group based."
	Total	207	
Traditional	Include more depth and detail about the assessment	38	"Give more details on our instructions"
	Provide ample support and feedback for writing	29	"Help with more general essay writing skills rather than just going through the content the essay will be based on."
	Make expectations clear	26	"Really make it clear what they are and aren't looking for."
	Offer different formats of assessment / teaching to consider and reflect all students needs and skills	17	"Stick to practical work, as that is more useful in terms of learning and developing."
	Make assessment feel interesting and engaging	14	"Make it more engaging and exciting."
	Allow for creativity and flexibility	13	"...I would appreciate it if my lecturer would allow for some room for creativity and critical thinking within the framework of the traditional essay format."
	Provide exemplars	11	"Give me examples of what an ideal answer would be."
	Ensure sufficient / more time for assessment	9	"Ensure that enough time is given to complete the assessment."
	Provide marking rubric	7	"Provide a mark scheme"
	Outline the purpose and relevance	6	"Provide us with how this may be useful for us in future."
	Shorten the word count	6	"Be kept short. Long traditional assessments are mind-numbing."
	Prioritise authentic skill development	5	"Ensure that it is not a memory test. It is more useful to have all the information available and be assessed on how to analyse, critique and evaluate it rather than just see how much you can remember."
	Make easier / mark more lenient	4	"Mark it nicely."
	Do traditional more / give higher weighting to traditional	3	"Give these assessments slightly higher weighting if the module is graded with both traditional and authentic assessments"
	Total	190	

Note: a sentence stem reading "When my lecturer sets an [authentic/traditional] assessment, I would feel more comfortable if..." was also completed by participants, but the data significantly overlapped with domain 3 (preferences for pedagogical support), providing little to no unique contribution. Therefore, the data for this stem is not included.

Discussion

The present study aimed to understand undergraduate students' perceptions of authentic versus traditional forms of assessment in higher education. We used a qualitative story completion methodology to examine three domains: (1) student's emotional responses to authentic and traditional assessment forms, (2) student's perceptions of how different assessment types may benefit them in an employability context, and (3) student's preferences for pedagogical support with authentic assessments. Across the data, participants generally reported feelings of excitement, motivation and inspiration, but also uncertainty, worry and a concern for the unfamiliarity of authentic assessment. For traditional assessments, participants reported feelings of preparedness and confidence, and expressed that these assessments were within their comfort zone. When asked about future employability, 63% of participants thought authentic assessments were more relevant, 21% thought traditional assessments were more relevant, and 16% thought a mixture of both were most relevant for future employment. Finally, participants expressed a desire for detail, clarity and support across both assessment modalities, but specifically expressed a desire for lecturers to be considerate of students' feelings when setting an authentic assessment, and a desire for more creative freedom when setting a traditional assessment.

Students indicated that they appreciate the value of authentic assessments in terms of their future employability. However, they also want educators to better appreciate and consider their emotional needs when completing assessments that are new or innovative, which signals a need for increased psychological safety. Participants also stated they felt out of their comfort zones when completing authentic assessments, and this is likely due to a lack of experience with authentic skills and assessments (feeling inexperienced and unequipped was also explicitly mentioned by participants). Since previous research has shown unfamiliarity can hinder feelings of psychological safety (O'Donovan, De Brún, and McAuliffe 2021), it is important that educators consider the novelty of authentic assessments and how they can best support students. For example, opportunities to engage in formative, or lower stakes, authentic assessments may be important, to increase familiarity and students' assessment literacy (Frank, Simper, and Kaupp 2018). Students requested exemplars more for authentic assessments than for traditional assessments, again reflecting their lack of familiarity with this type of assessment. Engagement with exemplars can promote assessment literacy *via* a process of internal feedback (Carless 2022), and so this would be a useful practice when assigning authentic assessments.

It is important to note that authentic assessments inherently require more student autonomy (McArthur 2023). Although this may be a source of inspiration and empowerment for some students (Sokhanvar, Salehi, and Sokhanvar 2021), it may also leave students feeling overwhelmed and lacking in competence. Therefore, ensuring students feel psychologically safe is important to enable full engagement with authentic assessment tasks. Students in our dataset specifically stated they wished that lecturers would consider their feelings when setting an authentic assessment. This suggests that students do not feel as secure or safe when completing an authentic assessment compared to a traditional assessment, so educators may need to offer more support when outlining the assessment and provide increased emotional support.

Fostering and encouraging dialogue in education has been found to improve learners' sense of psychological safety (O'Donovan and McAuliffe 2020; Johnson, Keating, and Molloy 2020), and participants in this study likewise frequently mentioned a desire for more interactive support and feedback across assessment modalities, but particularly for authentic assessments. Thus, opportunity for interactive dialogue seems particularly crucial when setting authentic assessments. Johnson, Keating, and Molloy (2020) argue that it is essential to appropriately set the scene for such candid interactions. For example, rather than educators stating at the start of the session they will be discussing an assessment and going straight into it, they found more effective set-ups for learning interactions included much more background and perspective for students. This included a proposed plan for the session,

what the aim was, and an explicit invitation to contest, comment and ask questions. This ensured students felt more poised to speak up and knew exactly what to expect. A more equal power dynamic where educators are viewed as an ally, fostering dialogue without fear of judgement, was also found to increase psychological safety (see also Dokal et al. 2020). Therefore, we argue that ensuring plentiful time for dialogue in a non-judgemental space where expectations are clear may aid students' perceptions of psychological safety when conducting an authentic assessment.

In order to develop an environment that prioritises learning and minimises fear of failure, McClintock, Kim, and Chung (2022) outlines three core stages that educators can follow. The first is 'setting the stage' – this includes outlining the work, the students' roles and emphasizing the purpose of the task (aligning with work outlined by Johnson, Keating, and Molloy 2020). The second, also related to the discussion surrounding open dialogue, is 'inviting participation'. Here, modelling humility and growth is suggested for establishing an environment for productive dialogue. A concrete example could be sharing personal weaknesses or previous struggles, with narratives of how those issues were overcome. This also likely facilitates a more equal power dynamic, allowing students to see educators on a more human level. The final stage is 'responding productively'- ensuring educators highlight the strengths of students' work when providing feedback. An effort to destigmatise failure at this stage may also facilitate students' confidence and willingness to share future ideas. We argue this is especially relevant for students struggling academically, or who may be particularly unconfident.

It is important to note here that we have identified student's needs and preferences for authentic assessment. However, as with any investigation of student preference, these findings should not be translated to practice prescriptively. That is, our findings represent views and perspectives, but there are other pedagogical factors that are also at play. For example, given how authentic assessments require students to demonstrate a range of skills which test genuine mastery of their disciplinary content (Avery, Freeman, and Carmichael 2012), this means that they are inherently more challenging for students (Villarroel et al. 2018). Challenge and psychological safety are not necessarily always at odds with one another, but students may interpret feelings of challenge and discomfort negatively. Educators should thus think critically about the threshold level of pedagogical discomfort that students may be able to tolerate before this becomes a barrier to engagement. Psychological safety has been conceptualised as the ability to participate in new challenges and interpersonal risks irrespective of the potential for discomfort (Edmondson and Lei 2014; Wanless 2016). Therefore, this could be explicitly articulated to students, in order to manage expectations, anticipate and mitigate feelings of discomfort, and bolster the potential for psychological safety.

Future research might aim to study interventions tailored to maximise psychological safety when setting authentic assessments. Conceptualisations of educator perceptions of authentic assessments are currently limited in the literature. Ibrahim, Malik, and Avianti (2022) found that lecturers reported unique challenges when setting authentic assessments, but this was during Covid-19 which of course came with challenges in education more broadly. Authentic assessments are more novel and unfamiliar (compared to traditional formats) to educators as well as students, potentially meaning educators feel less equipped to adequately support students with authentic assessments compared to traditional ones.

To conclude, our findings demonstrate that students feel both excited and inspired by the prospect of authentic assessments, but also out of their comfort zones. Students seem to recognise that authentic assessments are generally more beneficial for future employment than traditional assessments, but desire an increased level of support and psychological safety. Educators should take this into account when designing assessments, considering how best to scaffold the assessment and support students. Future research should also consider the perception of authentic versus traditional assessments from the perspective of educators, aiming to identify how well-equipped staff feel to support students in innovative assessment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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