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Comparing notes: A cross-institutional conversation about authentic assessment in sport business undergraduate study

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Authentic assessment is widely used in higher education, yet despite broad agreement on its value, its meaning remains subjective. This creates varying expectations amongst educators, students, and external partners (Ajjawi et al., 2024). In this blog, we compare how authentic assessment is designed and delivered across two sport business programmes, exploring where our approaches align, where they diverge, and what we gained from the process. Some of the most useful conversations happen between competitors, if we are willing to have them.

We teach sport business at different institutions, with different cohort sizes, industry partnerships, and interpretations of what authentic assessment looks like in practice. Although we recruit from a similar student pool, we set aside competition in favour of something more valuable: sharing practice, challenging assumptions, and developing richer approaches than either of us might have reached alone.

Shared foundations, different designs

Both programmes place authentic experiential learning at their core, with live client briefs and industry input into assessment design (Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Students work on real problems for real organisations, ranging from sponsorship proposals and analytic tasks to sustainability-focused technology concepts, while also developing employability skills and reflective practice.

However, delivery differs significantly. At Manchester Met, large undergraduate cohorts (200+) use a single-day live assessment after a semester of teaching input and preparation. Students receive a brief in the morning, work intensively, and present that same afternoon, mirroring the pace of consultancy work. Scale introduces constraints: clients cannot attend every presentation, so only selected outputs are shared afterwards. While practical, this inevitably affects the ‘authenticity’ of the experience.

At Liverpool Business School (LJMU), a comparable module with around half the cohort size runs over a full semester on the Sport Business programme. Students have more time to iterate, deepen their thinking, and sustain client engagement. The longer timeframe brings its own limitation: it cannot easily duplicate the urgency of decisions made under real-time pressure, but it does facilitate the development of longer research phases and ongoing peer and client collaboration.

Interestingly, Manchester Met's single-day model finds a parallel in other programmes within Liverpool Business School and across LJMU more widely. On the Sport Business programme, however, the compressed model is run over a three-week block, but with a

key distinction: industry partners shape the brief but are less embedded within delivery than in Manchester Met's approach.

Same challenges, different solutions

Cohort size proved more interesting than we expected. Both programmes face similar design tensions, particularly in balancing process and output. Authentic assessments generate diverse outputs, meaning tightly defined criteria can quickly become limiting. Both institutions emphasise evaluating the quality of thinking and decision-making, not just the final product, allowing variation without losing consistency in awarding marks.

At LJMU, variation across business consultancy projects, multiple clients, sectors, briefs, and outputs created a comparability challenge. The solution was a structured report template that all students follow, regardless of project type. This captures both process and output, giving assessors a consistent basis for comparison without constraining creativity. A similar approach at Manchester Met reinforces that such structures are not a compromise on authenticity but the mechanism that makes it workable at scale.

Group work remains a persistent challenge. Authentic tasks are often collaborative, but fairly assessing individual contribution is complex. At Manchester Met, large cohorts amplify issues such as non-engagement, requiring significant academic time to negotiate and rebuild groups and consolidate active students, a challenge that is as much pastoral as pedagogic. One solution is a hybrid assessment structure, with group outputs assessing collaborative work combined with individual components tied to specific roles.

At LJMU, students can choose whether to submit as a group or individually. This preserves the collaborative experience while giving students control over how their contribution is represented. Both approaches highlight a shared tension: ensuring fairness without creating excessive burden.

What transferred and what didn't

Neither institution had the complete answer, but more was transferable than we expected. Manchester Met's single-day live assessment model was particularly compelling to LJMU as it captures an aspect of real professional practice that longer projects can miss: the need to make good decisions quickly, with incomplete information, under constraints you didn't choose. This prompted reflection on how time constraints can be intentionally built into learning design. This aligns with Connolly, Dickinson and Hellewell's (2023) argument that students should reflect on "real-world employment scenarios/demands". Authenticity, in this sense, is not simply about working with external partners but about replicating the conditions of professional practice.

Reflection provides another point of contrast. Both programmes use reflective assessments but with different emphases. At LJMU, a vlog asks students to reflect on their development across their degree and connect it to future career plans. At Manchester Met, reflection sits within professional skills portfolios, focusing on analysing specific experiences in depth.

This raises a useful question: is written reflection genuinely the most effective format for students, or simply the most familiar for staff to assess? Each approach serves a different purpose; one captures immediate learning experiences, while the other supports longer-term sense-making, suggesting that the value lies in alignment with intended learning outcomes rather than format alone.

Summary

This comparison reinforced that shared challenges are often best addressed collectively rather than in isolation. Despite institutional competition, open dialogue created opportunities for innovation and critical reflection. While not everything transfers across contexts, enough does to make collaboration worthwhile.

The instinct to protect practice from competitor programmes is understandable but ultimately limiting. The benefits of openness, including improved design, shared solutions, and richer student experiences, outweigh the risks. In this case, comparing notes proved not only valuable but necessary.

References

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