

Self-Assessment in Higher Education: Students' Experience, Perceived Usefulness, and Support Needs

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Abstract

This study explores the role of self-assessment in higher education, with particular attention to its pedagogical value and students' perceptions within the university context. Grounded in the post-Bologna Process reforms, self-assessment is conceptualized as a formative and metacognitive practice that fosters learners' awareness, autonomy, and responsibility in their learning processes. It is framed not merely as a technical procedure but as a complex educational competence involving cognitive, reflective, and identity-related dimensions.

The research adopts a descriptive quantitative approach based on a survey combining dichotomous and Likert-type items administered at the University of Urbino during the 2024-2025 academic year. A total of 1,030 student responses were analyzed through descriptive statistics focusing on three dimensions: prior experience with self-assessment, perceived usefulness, and the need for supporting tools. Results show moderate and uneven levels of experience across age groups, without significant developmental patterns. In contrast, perceptions of usefulness are consistently high, exceeding 80% in all groups, alongside a strong demand for structured guidance tools.

Findings highlight a misalignment between limited exposure to self-assessment practices and students' strong recognition of their educational value. This pattern suggests that self-assessment is still not systematically integrated into university teaching, despite being widely perceived as beneficial. The study concludes that greater institutional integration of self-assessment, supported by clear criteria, teacher mediation, and structured tools, is essential to enhance student engagement, metacognitive development, and lifelong learning competencies.

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Self-assessment in the university context

The quality of higher education can be enhanced when assessment and self-assessment are integrated as complementary learning processes. Since the Bologna Declaration of 1999, a series of reforms across Europe has repositioned self-assessment as a core strategy for innovating traditional pedagogical frameworks. However, to provide a critical and better-structured synthesis of the literature, it is necessary to move beyond a descriptive summary and instead analyze the conceptual tensions, contrasting paradigms, and the mismatch between educational rhetoric and classroom reality.

A critical synthesis first requires precise conceptual distinctions to understand the unique pedagogical functions of terms often used interchangeably (Leach, 2012). While *The Treccani Encyclopedia* defines self-assessment as a “reflective process involving both learners and teachers,” more specific academic definitions describe it as a formative process in which students critically reflect on the quality of their work against established goals (Andrade & Du, 2007; Nicchia et al., 2025). According to Boud and Falchikov (1989), it refers specifically to “students’ ability to make judgments about their own learning, particularly their achievements and outcomes” (p. 529). This involves identifying standards or criteria to apply to their work and judging the extent to which they have achieved them (Boud, 1995). It must be explicitly distinguished from mere self-evaluation or self-grading. Authentic self-assessment is a qualitative, metacognitive process where students judge the quality of their work and learning processes against explicit criteria (Montalbetti, 2025); in contrast, self-evaluation or self-grading is often reduced to a quantitative act of assigning a numerical score, which may lack the reflective depth required to drive learning (Boud, 1995; Coggi, 2005).

This distinction is further clarified by the transition from Assessment for Learning (AfL) to Assessment as Learning (AaL). In the AfL framework, self-assessment serves as a “compass” to provide feedback for adjusting learning strategies in itinere (Montalbetti, 2025), whereas in AaL, a transformative approach, the act of self-assessing is itself the learning moment, where students monitor their own thoughts to bridge the gap between their current state and the desired goal (Trinchero, 2020; McNamee & Jie-Qi, 2005).

When appropriately implemented, student self-assessment extends beyond a merely procedural assessment function; it significantly enhances the learning process by fostering deeper cognitive and metacognitive engagement. By encouraging learners to become more aware of their own thinking, it naturally strengthens their ability to monitor and regulate their own progress (Zohar, 2004). This shift often leads to a greater sense of autonomy and ownership, as students begin to feel a genuine responsibility for their learning outcomes (Asadoorian & Batty, 2005), which in turn fuels higher motivation and a much clearer orientation toward their goals (Liang, 2006).

Beyond enhancing motivation, self-assessment enables students to identify specific gaps in their understanding. Once these gaps are identified, they can take targeted corrective actions that make their overall learning strategies far more effective (Liang, 2006). This constant loop of reflection stimulates a deeper connection with the course content, pushing students toward the kind of higher-order thinking and meaningful engagement that defines deeper forms of academic engagement and higher-order thinking (Teh, 2006). Ultimately, this benefit extends to the instructors as well; it provides them with a deeper insight into students' learning needs (Blanche, 1988), creating a more holistic educational environment that has the potential to raise academic achievement across age groups (Harris, 1997).

One of the central debates in the literature concerns the tension between the Paradigm of Accuracy (Harris, 1997) and the Paradigm of Authenticity (Nieminen & Boud, 2024).

The Paradigm of Accuracy, which is deeply rooted in psychological traditions, focuses primarily on how reliable a student's judgment is by measuring the correlation between their grades and those of their teachers (Boud & Falchikov, 1989). This perspective is often preoccupied with the "accuracy trap," particularly the Dunning-Kruger Effect, where evidence suggests that lower-performing students tend to overestimate their own competence, while cultural norms of modesty might lead others to under-rate their performance (Asadoorian & Batty, 2005).

On the other hand, the Paradigm of Authenticity challenges this focus on numerical precision, arguing that forced self-assessment can often feel mechanical or like simply "jumping through hoops." Instead, it proposes Ontological Authenticity as the core metric: the idea that self-assessment should help students understand "who they are becoming" as professionals rather than just what they know (Nieminen & Boud, 2024). In this sense, it becomes an eminently metacognitive activity, it concerns the student's ability to "step back" from themselves to objectify and reflect on their own lived experience (Mariani, 2013).

Despite the theoretical recognition of its importance, there remains a discrepancy between theoretical declarations and classroom practices (Montalbetti, 2025). While university policies and international frameworks like the 2030 Agenda emphasize student agency, empirical data shows a weak diffusion of self-assessment in formal higher education (Montalbetti, 2025). In many contexts, such as the Italian academic system, assessment remains tied to a certifying and selective function managed exclusively by the instructor (Lipari, 1995; Felisatti, 2019). This condition contributes to a potential gap in assessment literacy, in which both students and teachers may lack the competencies necessary to engage effectively with self-assessment practices. Faculty members may perceive self-assessment as unreliable, while students may interpret it as a strategic exercise aimed at satisfying teacher expectations rather than fostering authentic reflection (Salvucci & Susta, 2026). Furthermore, what has been described in the literature as an ‘authenticity gap’ persists because these practices are frequently disconnected from real-world contexts and from the ways professionals engage in reflective judgment in contemporary work environments (Nieminen & Boud, 2024).

In light of these considerations, self-assessment emerges as a fundamental dimension for reflecting on the quality of university teaching and promoting autonomous forms of learning. It should be understood as a competence that must be developed and does not arise spontaneously. It stems from the integration of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes (Visceglia, 2024) and requires a transition from unreflective "know-how" toward conscious, reasoned action (Cardinet, 1988). As emphasized by the 2030 Agenda, this competence is a soft competence fostering reflective processes essential for individual potential. These considerations suggest the need to reconsider self-assessment not as a marginal assessment practice, but as a pedagogical competence that may support students’ reflective and autonomous learning processes. It requires a shift toward an inclusive model where teachers act as facilitators, guiding students toward greater autonomy, responsibility, and awareness (Nicchia et al., 2025; Montalbetti, 2025).

Contribution of the study

Within this framework, the present study contributes to literature by investigating not only students’ exposure to self-assessment practices, but also the tension between their perceived educational value and the limited institutional integration of such practices. In particular, the study explores whether students’ demand for support tools reflects a broader issue of assessment literacy and pedagogical scaffolding within higher education.

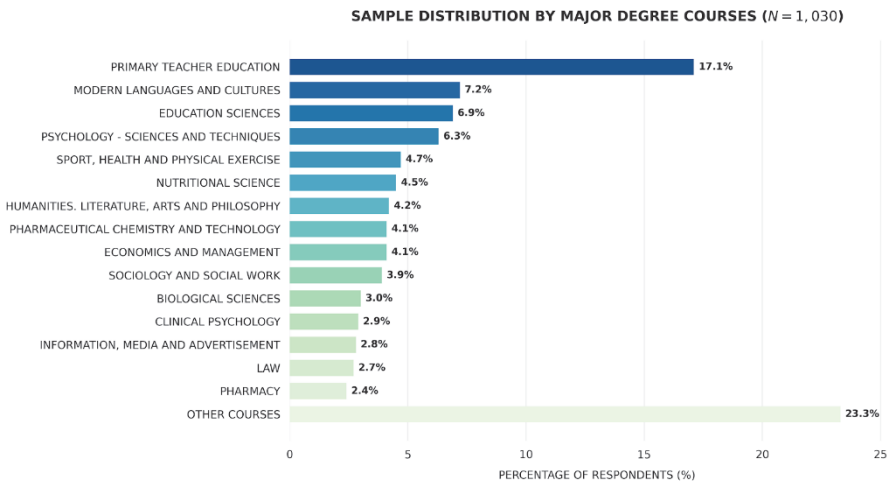
The case of the University of Urbino: methodology

To move beyond theoretical debate and explore how students actually perceive these practices, a case study was conducted at the University of Urbino. The core of this investigation was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to the entire student population (academic year 2024-2025) of the University of Urbino (approximately 14,400 enrolled students). Participation was voluntary and based on self-selection, resulting in a final sample of 1,030 respondents (Tab 1) (Salvucci & Susta, 2026). Figure 1 presents the 15 most represented degree programs. The remaining 23 programs were grouped into the category “Other Courses” to improve readability.

Tab 1- Sample composition table

Disciplinary Area	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Education & Training	304	29.51%
Sciences, Biology & Pharmacy	188	18.25%
Humanities & Languages	165	16.02%
Social Sciences & Psychology	135	13.11%
Law & Political Science	79	7.67%
Sports & Exercise Sciences	65	6.31%
Economics & Business	59	5.73%
STEM (Computer Science & Geology)	26	2.52%
Communication & Media	6	0.58%
Other / Unclassified	3	0.29%
Total	1,030	100.00%

Figure 1- Sample Distribution by Major Degree Courses



This corresponds to a non-probabilistic convenience sample drawn from the full population of the institution. Although the sample size is numerically substantial, the study does not aim at statistical representativeness, but rather at identifying descriptive patterns within a real institutional context.

The study specifically sought to address the following research questions:

(1) What patterns emerge between students' experience of self-assessment and their perceived usefulness across age groups?

(2) What are students' reported needs for support tools in self-assessment practices across age groups?

The questionnaire was designed to move beyond purely descriptive reporting by enabling a structured interpretation of students' perceptions within a pedagogical framework. In terms of design, the questionnaire consisted of 20 items organized into specific thematic sections, including personal and academic background, the emotional landscape of examinations, and perceptions of assessment processes. The questionnaire included both dichotomous (yes/no) items and 4-point Likert-type scales, depending on the dimension investigated. Examples of items included: "Have you ever participated in self-assessment activities during your university studies?", "Would moments dedicated to self-assessment be useful?", and "Would self-assessment questions, sample tests, or similar tools be beneficial?". The tool concluded with an open-ended section that allowed respondents to provide suggestions and reflections on how assessment practices could be improved. Although open-ended responses were collected, they were not included in the present analysis and will be examined in future qualitative investigations. To ensure the instrument's validity, items were developed based on established formative assessment frameworks and were subjected to a normalization process to effectively distinguish demographic variables from investigated dimensions. Content validity was ensured through expert review of the questionnaire items, which were developed based on established frameworks in formative assessment and self-assessment literature. This methodological rigor was intended to address the study's specific contribution to the literature by providing a robust framework for analyzing the "Assessment as Learning" (AaL) transition in practice.

Following the data collection phase, the information underwent a systematic process of coding and statistical analysis. Specifically, for the self-assessment analysis, three main dimensions were identified: prior experience, perceived usefulness, and the need for support tools. These variables were analyzed in relation to the students' age group, treated as an independent variable, in order to explore any differences between groups.

For each combination, absolute and relative frequencies were calculated to allow for comparison across groups of varying sizes, while contingency tables were utilized to highlight non-uniform distributions.

Subsequently, the data underwent an internal comparative analysis, based on a comparison of the different age groups, and a cross-sectional analysis, aimed at relating the three dimensions considered (experience, utility, and need for tools). This approach made it possible to identify any convergences or divergences among the analyzed variables, without, however, anticipating qualitative interpretations.

To summarize the results of the analysis, a summary table was prepared, providing a comprehensive overview of the key indicators for each age group. This presentation facilitated the identification of emerging patterns and served as the basis for the subsequent interpretive analysis.

The analysis process fell within the scope of descriptive statistics, aimed at organizing data for subsequent interpretation. However, because this is an exploratory study focused on a single institution, it is important to acknowledge the limits of generalizability; the results reflect a specific academic context and serve as a starting point for broader future research that could integrate teacher perspectives or cross-institutional data.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the analysis intentionally focused on descriptive patterns rather than inferential statistical testing. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative patterns within a specific institutional context rather than as generalizable causal relationships.

The case of the University of Urbino: results

The analysis of the self-assessment data was conducted by considering three main dimensions: students' reported experience, their perception of usefulness, and their need for support tools. These dimensions were examined in relation to demographic variables in order to identify any differences among the various age groups.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, data analysis was limited to descriptive statistics in order to identify patterns rather than test causal relationships.

The results regarding self-assessment experience show an uneven distribution across the age groups. In the 19-25 age group, 48.0% of the respondents reported having self-assessment experience. In contrast, the 26-30 age group showed a lower percentage, with positive responses accounting for 34.0%, the lowest value among all groups.

The lower level of reported experience within the 26-30 age group may reflect discontinuous academic trajectories, including students returning to higher education after interruptions or balancing study with employment responsibilities. Although the descriptive nature of the data does not allow causal interpretations, this pattern suggests that exposure to self-assessment practices may depend more on contextual pedagogical opportunities than on age itself.

The 31-35 age group recorded 43.8% experience, while the 36+ group stood at 44.3%. Overall, these moderate levels of experience do not show a progressive increase across age groups, which aligns with the literature suggesting that the effectiveness of self-assessment depends more on perceived authenticity and meaningful integration into the curriculum than on mere technical exposure (Nieminen & Boud, 2024). This pattern suggests that exposure to self-assessment practices is more dependent on curricular design than on student age.

Conversely, the perceived usefulness of self-assessment is consistently high across all groups. Among students aged 19-25, 81.0% recognize the value of these practices, a figure that rises to 82.5% in the 26-30 group. The 31-35 age group records the highest perceived utility at 95.0%, while the 36+ group remains high at 84.9%. This broadly positive perception suggests that students across all stages of life see the educational potential of self-reflection, regardless of whether they have been frequently invited to practice it in their formal studies. This consistently high perception indicates a strong latent recognition of the pedagogical value of self-assessment even in the absence of structured exposure.

A similar pattern emerges from the analysis of the need for support tools. Among students aged 19-25, 82.2% report a need for tools such as guiding questions or sample tests, while 17.8% do not feel this need. In the 26-30 age group, 83.5% express this need, compared to 16.5% who do not. In the 31-35 age group, the percentage reaches 87.5%, representing the highest value, while 12.5% do not consider such tools necessary. Finally, in the 36+ age group, 84.3% of students state that they need structured support, compared to 15.7%. These consistently high figures highlight a widespread call for structured support. This suggests that students perceive self-assessment as beneficial but insufficiently supported within current instructional practices. It should be noted that these results derive from a mixed-item design (dichotomous and Likert-scale questions), which allows for a more nuanced reading of both factual exposure and attitudinal dimensions of self-assessment.

The combined analysis reveals a recurring distribution: despite inconsistent levels of actual experience, there is a consistent and clearly expressed demand for self-assessment tools. This pattern suggests a misalignment between

students’ reported need for metacognitive benefits and the availability of structured scaffolding.

To summarize the main findings, a summary table (Tab. 2) is provided below that allows for a comparative analysis of the three dimensions examined.

Tab 2 – Summary

Age group	N.	Experience (%)	Usefulness (%)	Needs for tools (%)
19–25	662	48.0%	81.0%	82.2%
26–30	103	34.0%	82.5%	83.5%
31–35	80	43.8%	95.0%	87.5%
36+	185	44.3%	84.9%	84.3%

RQ1 is addressed by the observed discrepancy between experience and perceived usefulness.

RQ2 is addressed by the consistently high demand for support tools across all age groups.

Discussion and conclusions

The comprehensive analysis of the self-assessment results addresses the core research questions by revealing a pattern characterized primarily by a discrepancy between the levels of experience reported by students and their perception of usefulness (RQ1), accompanied by a marked need for support tools (RQ2). The findings contribute to the literature by empirically documenting the coexistence of high perceived value and limited structured exposure to self-assessment, thus reinforcing the reported difference between pedagogical discourse and institutional implementation in higher education contexts.

Overall, these results suggest a partial misalignment between the theoretical centrality attributed to self-assessment in higher education and its operational presence within students’ learning experiences. However, given the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study, these patterns should be interpreted as indicative rather than generalizable or causal.

The data indicate that self-assessment experience is generally moderate and varies across age groups without showing a progressive increase related to chronological age. This may suggest that such practices are not systematically embedded in university curricula but instead depend on specific pedagogical choices and learning contexts. While this interpretation remains tentative, it is consistent with the literature suggesting that the effectiveness of self-

assessment depends more on perceived authenticity and meaningful integration into the curriculum than on mere technical exposure (Nieminen & Boud, 2024).

At the same time, perceived usefulness of self-assessment remains consistently high across all age groups. Regardless of their level of direct experience, students widely recognize the educational value of these practices. This suggests a potential disconnect between familiarity with self-assessment practices and the recognition of their pedagogical relevance.

A similar distribution emerges in relation to the need for support tools. The consistently high demand across all age groups indicates that students may perceive self-assessment as beneficial but not fully accessible without structured guidance. This finding may point to the importance of scaffolding processes in supporting students' engagement with reflective practices.

From a broader pedagogical perspective, these results suggest that the effectiveness of self-assessment may depend not only on its conceptual recognition but also on how it is operationalized within teaching practices. In this regard, the role of the instructor as mediator of assessment criteria appears particularly relevant, especially in supporting students' capacity to engage with monitoring and regulating their own learning processes (D'Ugo, 2014).

At the same time, self-assessment should be understood as a pedagogical practice that requires explicit guidance and gradual development rather than an autonomous skill that emerges spontaneously. As noted in the literature, knowing assessment criteria does not automatically translate into the ability to use them effectively (Trinchero, 2020). For this reason, self-assessment can be interpreted as part of a broader learning process that integrates cognitive, relational, and reflective dimensions and that is embedded within teaching activities rather than added to them (Nieminen & Boud, 2024).

Fostering more structured self-assessment practices may therefore benefit from instructional designs that support feedback quality and students' reflective capacity over time. Within this perspective, teacher training and awareness may play a role in making assessment criteria more transparent and shared (Nicchia et al., 2025). In addition, collaborative approaches such as rubric co-construction and peer assessment may support students' progressive engagement with evaluative processes.

In conclusion, while the results show that self-assessment is not yet fully integrated into students' learning experiences, its perceived importance is consistently high across the sample. The strong agreement regarding its usefulness and the expressed need for support tools suggest a potential openness toward more structured integration within higher education curricula. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, as they reflect a specific institutional context and a descriptive analytical approach.

To further strengthen these findings, future research should move beyond the current scope by adopting longitudinal designs, cross-institutional comparisons, and by incorporating the perspectives of teaching staff. Such approaches would allow a more comprehensive understanding of how perceived value, instructional design, and actual practice interact in shaping self-assessment processes in higher education.

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