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Harnessing Assessment and Feedback in the First Year to Support Learning Success, Engagement and Retention.

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It has been argued that intentional first year curriculum design has a critical role to play in enhancing first year student engagement, success and retention (Kift, 2008). A fundamental first year curriculum objective should be to assist students to make the successful transition to assessment in higher education. Scott (2006) has identified that 'relevant, consistent and integrated assessment ... [with] prompt and constructive feedback' are particularly relevant to student retention generally; while Nicol (2007) suggests that 'lack of clarity regarding expectations in the first year, low levels of teacher feedback and poor motivation' are key issues in the first year. At the very minimum, if we expect first year students to become independent and self-managing learners, they need to be supported in their early development and acquisition of tertiary assessment literacies (Orrell, 2005). Critical to this attainment is the necessity to alleviate early anxieties around assessment information, instructions, guidance, and performance. This includes, for example:

- inducting students thoroughly into the academic languages and assessment genres they will encounter as the vehicles for evidencing learning success; and
- making expectations about the quality of this evidence clear.

Most importantly, students should receive regular formative feedback of their work early in their program of study to aid their learning and to provide information to both students and teachers on progress and achievement.

Leveraging research conducted under an ALTC Senior Fellowship that has sought to articulate a research-based 'transition pedagogy' (Kift & Nelson, 2005) – a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts – this paper will discuss theoretical and practical strategies and examples that should be of assistance in implementing good assessment and feedback practices across a range of disciplines in the first year.

Keywords – First Year Experience; transition pedagogy; assessment and feedback; assessment for learning; first year curriculum design.

Introduction

We know that assessment and feedback drive student learning and that, 'for most students, assessment requirements literally define the curriculum' (James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002, p. 7). In recent times, both in Australia and internationally, detailed attention has been directed to the renewal and quality assurance of assessment practices as a critical component of overall pedagogical improvement in higher education. Indeed, the first strategic objective declared by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC, n.d.) in its mission statement is that the ALTC will 'promote and support strategic change in higher education institutions for the enhancement of learning and teaching, including curriculum development and assessment'. This renewed interest can be sourced to a number of contemporary drivers: particularly, the current focus on academic standards; the imperative to assess graduate attributes validly and reliably; the impact of work integrated learning initiatives; and a fundamental appreciation that 'assessment is at the heart of the student experience' (Brown & Knight, 1994, p. 12) and that assessment *for* and *as* learning is equally as important as assessment *of* learning.

It is suggested that nowhere are the efficacy and robustness of assessment design more crucial than in the critical first year of undergraduate tertiary study. However, until very recently, there has been little extensive scrutiny of first year assessment practices or attention directed to the strategic promotion of assessment and feedback as a first year learning engagement and retention intervention. The evidence suggests that the imperative here is urgent: for example, the 2008 *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement Report* (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2009, p. 22) found that only 38.6% of first year students considered that they had 'often' or 'very often' received prompt written or oral feedback from teachers or tutors on their academic performance. (By way of interesting contrast, 80.4% of staff thought students 'often' or 'very often' received prompt feedback (ACER, 2009, p. 22).) When first year students do receive feedback, only 33% of them consider it helpful (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005).

It has been argued elsewhere that intentional first year curriculum design has a critical role to play in enhancing first year student engagement, success and retention (Kift, 2008). A fundamental first year curriculum objective in this regard should be to assist students to make the successful transition to assessment in higher education (Kift, 2008; Nicol, 2009; First Level Assessment and Feedback Project (FLAP), 2009). Scott (2006, pp. xiii, xvi) has identified that 'relevant, consistent and integrated assessment ... [with] prompt and constructive feedback' are particularly relevant to student retention generally; while Nicol (2007, p. 5) suggests that 'lack of clarity regarding expectations in the first year, low levels of teacher feedback and poor motivation' are key issues in the first year. At the very minimum, if we expect first year students to become independent and self-managing learners, both teachers and students need to be supported to aid the early development and acquisition of tertiary assessment literacies (Orrell, 2005). Critical to this attainment for students is the necessity to alleviate early anxieties around assessment information, instructions, guidance, and performance. This includes, for example:

- Articulating expectations: inducting students thoroughly into the academic languages and conventions (including assessment genres) they will encounter as the vehicles for evidencing learning success in higher education and making expectations about the quality (standards) of this evidence clear;
- Engaging students by scaffolding and integrating assessment within the curriculum;
- Timely provision of feedback: providing regular formative feedback to students early in their program of study to aid their learning, to provide information to both students and teachers on progress and achievement, and to allow for identification of students in need of extra support;
- Encouraging independent modes of learning to aid future learning; and
- Helping students to make sense of assessment by taking a whole-of-program approach.

Leveraging research conducted under an ALTC Senior Fellowship that has sought to articulate a research-based 'transition pedagogy' (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2008) – a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts – this paper will now discuss a range of theoretical and practical approaches that exemplify the factors identified above across a range of disciplines in the first year.

Articulating expectations

Given the great diversity in entering preparedness and cultural capital of contemporary cohorts in our mass system, it would be fair to say that most commencing undergraduate students, whatever their background, are unfamiliar with tertiary assessment practices and uncertain about higher education's expectations regarding both assessment products (e.g., the types of assessments they will encounter) and assessment processes (e.g., the academic skills required to complete assessment tasks). To alleviate anxiety in this regard, first year students require assistance with the nature of the tasks set, as well as the type and standards of evidence required to prove their achievements. Being explicit about what is required for success is an important part of equitably unpacking for new students the culture of higher education and discipline learning. As Lawrence (2005, p. 23) says, we need

not only to explain and make clear the rules, but also to make explicit the hidden agendas, the covert or hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations and the expected (but not stated) behaviours intrinsic to achieving success in their discipline (Benn 2000). Boud (2001) argues that academics have expectations, but fail to articulate them and then make judgments about students who fail to demonstrate them.

a. Helping students to understand academic languages and conventions

To engage productively with assessment tasks, first year students require explicit induction into the academic languages and conventions of higher education and their specific discipline(s). Some key enablers in this regard include, for example:

- explanation of the meaning, and then consistent use, of particular verbs in assessment tasks: for example, 'explain' may have a different meaning for different teachers, year levels and disciplines, as might other assessment verbs for cognitive objectives;
- the consistent naming of assessment tasks across programs of study and explicit clarification of expectations regarding how to present responses to assessment tasks in a scholarly way: for example, how to write, research, or orally present in different discipline genres;
- assisting students to make use of examples and model answers;
- explicit and consistent advice about, and assistance with, referencing and paraphrasing expectations;
- detailed instruction and proactive support around how to work in groups or teams productively; and
- modeling and providing structured opportunities for practicing self and peer assessment 'to promote independence and autonomy and to aid learning in the future' (Falchikov, 2007, p. 135).

Examples of practical approaches in this regard, include:

Example 1: In a first year Education subject at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), students are broken up into small groups. Each group is provided with a copy of the same written excerpt and asked to respond in a specific way: reflectively, analytically, critically, emotionally, or by summarising. Responses are then shared with the class, and the fundamental differences between responses are analysed (Healy, 2008).

Example 2: A Psychology degree program uses the same assessment definitions and criteria throughout the entire program. These are formally articulated to students and staff through a written assessment guide which defines academic terms (e.g., what is an essay?; what is a research report?) and assessment criteria for each type of task (Gibbs, 2009).

Example 3: University-wide guides for citation, referencing, and academic writing have been developed at QUT as the benchmark from which any variations in style may be made as required by an individual subject, program, School, or Faculty. Students must be advised clearly if the referencing and citation requirements differ from those represented in *QUT cite/write* (n.d.).

Example 4: The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology *Study and Learning Centre* (n.d.) publishes a one page document that could be incorporated into any first year subject entitled '6 steps to successful learning', providing students with easy-to-understand explanations of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.

b. Helping students to understand the quality of evidence required

Utilising pro-active curriculum and teaching approaches, programs should make clear their expectations of the quality (criteria and standard) of students' assessment work. The timely provision of well written criterion referenced assessment (CRA) sheets is an important first step in articulating these expectations; however, the way in which the criteria and standards will be applied needs to be explained in 'dialogue' with students (ASKe, 2007). Ideally, students should be provided with opportunities to discuss and practice the application of the criteria in advance of assessment submission, to achieve a shared understanding of the performance criteria and standards. Examples of good practice nationally and internationally include:

Example 1: In a first year Biology subject at The University of Melbourne, students are given a marking scheme and are required to use the scheme to mark three student assignments from a previous semester (Gleeson, 2008). The design for a similar intervention strategy is suggested by the UK-based Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe, 2008), with Rust, Price and O'Donovan (2003) finding that Business School students at Oxford Brookes University who completed this non-compulsory intervention showed significant improvements in performance, which were sustained at a similar level one year later:

1. Four weeks before an assignment is due, students receive two sample assignments (e.g., one good, one average) on a similar, but different topic, to that set. Students are also provided with the assignment guide and the CRA sheet (criteria and standard descriptors) that they will be assessed against for their task. Students are asked to individually mark the sample assignments, providing a mark and feedback, and then invited to attend a follow-up workshop in a week's time.

2. The follow-up 90-minute workshop offered in groups of 40, involves small group work in which students discuss their individual marking approaches and agree as a group to a grade and feedback rationale. Each small group reports back their agreed grade and rationale to the whole class, and the tutor compares the rationales with the assessment criteria, explaining each criterion in turn. Each small group is then given time to review their grades in light of this discussion, followed by a final report back to the class. Students are then supplied with annotated and marked versions of the sample assignments.
3. When students finally submit their assignments, they include a self-assessment using the CRA sheet.

Example 2: In a large core Education subject at QUT, the first four weeks are devoted to completing small group mini-projects, which reflect the major assignment set in the second half of the semester. The marking criteria is negotiated and generated by the class as a whole, and the mini-projects are peer assessed in around week seven (Healy, 2008).

Example 3: To demonstrate expectations of tertiary academic writing, a piece of writing might be ‘corrected’ in large class on the big screen, using the track changes function for immediate feedback (Healy, 2008).

Example 4: The QUT Education Faculty has created an annotated assessment repository, available through the virtual learning environment (VLE), where students (and staff, including sessional staff) have access to annotated examples of different types of assessment and varying standards of work (i.e., poor, average, good). Links to relevant examples for individual subjects are embedded in subject VLE sites (Healy, 2008).

Engaging students by scaffolding and integrating assessment within the curriculum

It might seem trite to say but assessment in the first year, while challenging, should also be achievable at the first year level (high challenge delivered with high support: ACER, 2009). Assessment should build in complexity over the course of the first year, preferably cumulatively, and subsequently in complexity over the course of the entire degree program. Yorke (2005) refers to the importance of early assessment success and formative feedback to clarify expectations and reassure those students who doubt their ability to succeed. Encouraging ‘regular student engagement in learning activities in and out of class ... [is normally] achieved through a sequence of learning tasks that become progressively more challenging’ (Nicol, 2009, p. 6). By scaffolding assessment within the curriculum, students can be supported to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes sustainably and appropriately over time. Careful timetabling of assessment pieces across the first year program also ensures that the assessment regime is a manageable workload for both students and staff.

a. Helping students develop assessment literacies and first year discipline competence sustainably through scaffolded assessment

Assessment can be scaffolded for early learning engagement and success by arranging assessment tasks cumulatively, or so as to increase in complexity over time, or by breaking-up a larger task into component parts. Concomitant attention should be paid to the provision of resources and opportunities to support students’ process skills development initially and for each cognitive increment. The assessment device of ‘patchwork texts’ (Winter, 2003) might also be useful in this context; where students produce several short pieces of work (e.g., a book review, a lecture summary with commentary, an account of a relevant experience) with a view to ultimately reflecting and integrating some or all of them in a ‘stitched together’ final submission piece, having had the opportunity for peer feedback and editing along the way. Examples of other practical approaches under this head include:

Example 1: In the *Writing for Professional Practice* subject in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University, assessment begins with familiar tasks (e.g., essay writing), and then progresses over time to unfamiliar tasks (e.g., writing media releases). Formative feedback is provided with each piece of assessment and, as tasks increase in complexity, templates and models are provided for each new assignment type to support student learning (Radbourne & LeRossignol, 2008).

Example 2: In a large Education subject at QUT, the major assignment is broken down into smaller parts which build specific academic literacies (e.g., annotated bibliography, design proposal), with staggered due dates beginning early in the semester (week three). This approach enables clear and early feedback on, and scaffolded development of, individual academic literacies (Healy, 2008).

Example 3: In the *Legal Institutions and Processes* subject in the Law Faculty at James Cook University, assessment includes the completion of four blog postings across the semester. The first blog topic is simple – students introduce themselves to the other students. Later topics are more complex (e.g., writing a court report, critiquing a news report, commenting on research material) (Westcott, 2008).

Example 4: In a History subject at University of Sydney, a large essay assignment is split into three stages (McCreery, 2005). Stage one involves students discussing the essay question in groups in tutorials. Stage two, weighted 10%, requires preparation of a draft essay plan and bibliography, and attracts feedback from both tutors and peers. The last stage of the assignment, weighted 35%, is submission of the final essay. Through this process, students are provided with feedback at each stage, from multiple sources and in sufficient time to incorporate that feedback into the next stage of the assessment.

b. Helping students and staff to manage their workloads

Coordination of assessment due dates can assist both students and staff with time and workload management.

Example: The QUT Education Faculty generates assessment maps for each semester, which are available online to both staff and students. The maps are developed to ensure due dates in core subjects do not clash and that assessment tasks are appropriately spaced across the semester (Healy, 2008).

Timely provision of feedback

Provision of regular, formative feedback to students is motivating and aids learning, provides information to both students and teachers on progress and achievement, and allows for identification of students in need of extra development support. However, contemporary student cohorts have demonstrated that assessments will need to be both formative *and* summative for them to be taken seriously and valued. The trick is to get the balance between formative and summative right for the novice learner over the course of their first year, and especially over their first semester, of learning. In this regard, Taylor (2008) proposes an extremely effective assessment model for first year students that divides the semester into three overlapping assessment phases: assessment for transition (with low weight, low feedback), assessment for development (low weight, high feedback), and assessment for achievement (high weight, low feedback). Students also need to understand ‘what feedback is’ and how to make the best use of it. A booklet similar to that produced by Leeds Metropolitan University (Race, 2007) assists in communicating the repertoire of feedback possibilities and their uses to staff, students and quality bodies. Bearing these various aspects in mind, generally it may be said that feedback to students can be made more valuable through careful attention to two factors: the timing of feedback, and the process of feedback provision.

a. Helping students through timely provision of feedback

Feedback is most useful as soon as possible – ideally within the first 24 hours after submission (Race, 2009) – because students can then still recall the detail of their submission and are more likely to understand how the feedback may be applied for future improvement. While large cohorts make this logistically difficult at the individual level, it is possible to provide high quality generic feedback quite quickly: online or face-to-face as an overview of the cohort’s performance starts to emerge; or by issuing a pre-prepared one page handout immediately post-submission identifying what was expected under each criterion, features of a good answer, and common mistakes (Race 2009). Receiving feedback early in the semester, especially before the census date in the Australian context, is also important; particularly to relieve student anxiety and to provide a sense of achievement. Setting minimally-weighted pieces of assessment early in semester provides students with low-stakes opportunities to receive valuable formative feedback, which can then be applied to improve their performance on major assessment pieces later in the semester. Examples identified include:

Example 1: In an Engineering subject at University of Hertfordshire (UK), many students were having difficulty with fluid mechanics and thermodynamics, impacting on overall success and leading to high rates of failure and withdrawal. Retention and performance improved after the introduction of Weekly Assessed Tutorial Sheets (WATS), which were designed to consolidate learning and encourage consistent engagement. Students received personalised feedback via email within hours of each WATS submission (Brown, 2009).

Example 2: In a first year Law subject at James Cook University, students complete weekly, 250 word reflections. Each reflection attracts only a small percentage of the subject grade, but students are provided with important formative feedback (Westcott, 2008).

Example 3: In a large Education core subject at QUT, students are set a series of small tasks for completion between weeks two to six. These tasks are arranged to increase in complexity and weighting over time, beginning with a relatively simple task weighted 8%, building to the final, relatively complex task weighted 16%. Feedback is provided weekly, from week three to week eight (Healy, 2008).

Example 4: In two first semester Law subjects at University of Melbourne, students are set two, discipline-related, in-class tasks in week one:

1. a teacher-lead discussion and class reading on (for example) bullying law (via a newspaper article reporting a legal case of a student suing her school after being bullied). Students are required to submit a short handwritten opinion piece at the end of the class; and
2. students listen to a short lecture on a legal topic and then write a brief explanation of that legal concept. Both pieces are marked and returned to students the following week (week two). Students identified as requiring additional support are referred to the relevant university or discipline support services and resources (Larcombe & Malkin, 2008).

Example 5: The *Communication and Scholarship* subject at University of Southern Queensland provides early, low-stakes assessment which is linked to later, higher-stakes assessment. In week three, an essay plan is submitted, weighted 10%. This assignment is designed to exercise and test key academic skills (e.g., planning, argument development, structure, referencing, tone of writing), and feeds into the subsequent, 35% essay. Evaluations have revealed that the essay plan helps to reduce students' anxiety and provides early feedback on their performance (Taylor, 2008).

b. Helping students by optimising feedback processes

Feedback to first year students may be optimised by preparing students for the types of feedback they can expect, delivering the feedback in appropriate and alternative ways, and by encouraging students to internalise the advice they receive and act on it as a basis for future improvement in learning and assessment.

Example 1: ASKe research emphasises the need to reduce reliance on written feedback, which is said to be 'important when correcting errors, explaining technical points, and giving positive encouragement' but which, without an accompanying dialogue (such as, in-class examination of exemplars and tutor-supported peer-review discussions), 'rarely communicates tacit understandings about disciplinary content and academic literacy skills' (ASKe, 2007, p. 3; Race, 2009). ASKe (2007; n.d.) offers the following additional suggestions to 'make feedback work' by preparing students to engage with and use feedback:

- Align staff and student feedback expectations by explaining and agreeing the purpose of feedback;
- Identify where, when, and what types of feedback they can expect (e.g., written, oral, online);
- Using specific examples, show how feedback has been used previously by other students to improve subsequent assessment performance;
- Have students complete and submit a template with each assignment which describes the feedback they received previously, and how they have applied it to the current task;
- Encourage peer discussion in small groups about the feedback received and how it will be used;
- Consider giving feedback on draft (rather than final) assignments, requiring its use for improvement;
- Consider providing oral feedback via an audio mp3 file.

Example 2: Facilitate engagement by asking students when they submit their assessment to identify three aspects on which they would specifically like feedback, and then address those aspects (Nicol, 2009). Alternatively, include in feedback a series of action points for students to focus on for their next piece of assessment (Nicol, 2009).

Example 3: Online collaborative work is encouraged in a large, first year Psychology subject at University of Strathclyde. Each week after the lecture, a small learning task is posted on the VLE, with a due date the following week. Once submissions have closed, the teacher selects model answers from amongst those submitted, and posts those online for other students to compare their own submissions against. An online student discussion board is also provided to facilitate peer support and feedback (Nicol, 2009).

Example 4: Teachers in a Business subject at Oxford Brookes University (UK) have designed feedback to encourage 'active learning' (Handley et al., 2007, p. 8): students are able to 're-write and re-submit' part of

their assignment one week after receiving feedback, with additional marks of up to 5% available. Verbal feedback is provided to students via two mechanisms: generically to seminar groups and individually in five minute appointments. The individual feedback includes asking students what mark they were expecting, what went well in their assignment, what could be improved, and which part should be re-written and re-submitted. The approach encourages students to engage with and apply feedback for learning enhancement.

Example 5: FLAP (2009, pp. 5-6) notes that ‘being assessed can deeply affect students’ and emphasises the importance of providing feedback in a way that ‘encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem’. It suggests making the early feedback focus on successes, rather than mistakes, to build self-efficacy. Bandura (1997, p. 217) puts it slightly differently when he says: ‘The less individuals believe in themselves, the more they need explicit, proximal, and frequent feedback of progress that provides repeated affirmations of their growing capabilities’.

Example 6: Race (2009) suggests providing a range of feedback options (e.g., written, self, peer, online, face-to-face (individual or class discussion); and within those, auditory, visual, or kinaesthetic forms). Allowing students to select their preferred mode may enhance engagement by catering for different learning styles.

Example 7: Many, including Race (2009), advocate providing formative feedback without marks, as grades often ‘blind’ students to engaging with the qualitative feedback. Marks or grades could be made available:

- after feedback has been read and students have identified and communicated the ways they will apply it for future improvement (Nicol, 2009);
- after students have estimated their own grades, based on the formative feedback provided. Race (2009) suggests an incentive to encourage engagement with this self-assessment: if the self-assessment score is within 5% of the teacher-assessed scores, the higher mark will be recorded. In cases where the score differs by more than 5%, students should be spoken with individually.

Encouraging independent modes of learning to aid future learning

The transition for many school-leaver novice students from highly structured, directed learning environments to higher education settings where they are expected to be independent and autonomous learners is complex and highly stressful. The development of autonomy and self-regulation can be supported in many ways (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), but in this context particularly by offering students motivating authentic assessment tasks, by encouraging self-reflection on the learning process, and by providing students with opportunities to take control of their own learning. Providing students with choices regarding their learning can lead to ‘empowerment’ (Nicol, 2009, p. 6), and empowerment is maximised when the choice extends to students being able to shape their assessment in ways that are meaningful to them.

a. Helping students to become independent learners by providing authentic tasks

Assessment tasks may be authentic (e.g., replicating the real world of work and practise) and thereby more motivating and interesting for students in culturally, relational, or vocational ways. In the first year, students particularly crave engagement with their peers, learning being a ‘profoundly social experience’ (Scott, 2006, p. xvii), while program and vocational relevance helps solidify program and career choice (Kift, 2008).

Example 1: In the *Writing for Professional Practice* subject within the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University, the bulk of written assessment occurs in an online environment. This approach is culturally authentic for many first year students, whose personal written communications (in their everyday lives) occur primarily in online contexts (Bone, 2008).

Example 2: In a large, first year Maths subject at University of Southern Queensland, the first assignment, due in week two, requires students to reflect on their previous maths experiences, confirm vital subject information, and develop a semester study plan for the subject (Taylor, 2008). This approach provides an opportunity for early formative feedback and allows for the identification of students who may require additional support. Developing a study plan encourages students to take charge of their own learning.

Example 3: In a first year Information Technology (IT) subject at QUT (Nelson, 2008, p. 10), all learning and assessment activities revolve around a series of organisational case studies which represent the common domains of IT application. These cases are used as ‘as proxies for experience, to frame assessment items, and as a common reference point across the program’. Through them, students are supported to explore career

and self, through assessed online modules. In another first year subject in the same program, an authentic teamwork project requires the design of an event website, according to a standard IT systems development method. The assessment is weighted at 60% for individual work and 40% for teamwork.

b. Helping students to become independent learners by encouraging self-reflection

Self-reflection and self-assessment are critical to first year learners' self-efficacy and ability to evaluate their own learning achievements and future learning needs; 'to regulate their own learning' (Nicol, 2009, p. 37).

Example 1: In Pharmacy subjects at the University of Strathclyde, students are required to complete a self-reflection cover sheet for each written assignment, on which they rephrase the essay question and self-assess their performance, including an estimate of the grade they expect (Nicol, 2009).

Example 2: In a Medical degree at University College London, confidence-based marking (CBM) is used in online multiple-choice tests to encourage self-reflection. CBM involves students selecting an answer and indicating their confidence in that choice on a three-point scale. The final mark per question is a combination of these two responses: 'When the answer is correct the mark depends on the confidence level ... If the answer is wrong, then the higher the confidence level the higher the penalty' (Nicol, 2009, p. 48).

c. Helping students to become independent learners by providing choice

Independence is fostered when learners are enabled to take control of their own learning. By providing students with opportunities to shape their assessment in ways meaningful to them, student engagement can be enhanced and independent learning approaches are encouraged. Even in first year, choice can be offered to students in terms of topic, timing, method, weighting, or assessment criteria: for example, online learning tasks enable students to study in their own time, encouraging independent learning engagement (Brown, 2009). Other examples identified include:

Example 1: In a first year Law subject at James Cook University, students are required to complete weekly reflections for assessment. Students are free to select the topic of their reflections, drawing on content from lectures, the student's own professional skill development, or from the law in context. Both the reflexive nature of this assessment and the degree of choice afforded students serve to scaffold the development of independent learning approaches (Westcott, 2008). In *Contract Law* in the same program, students are required to submit a tutorial portfolio to showcase work they have completed in and for tutes. Students are given choice in their identification of which items in the portfolio are to be graded (Westcott, 2008).

Example 2: The Learning by Design (LbD) approach built into QUT Faculty of Education programs allows students in many subjects to select from a range of possibilities for expressing their learning outcomes. This supports independent learning approaches, whilst also fostering engagement and catering for student diversity. For example, in one subject, students demonstrate a micro learning-teaching segment and choose their delivery method: they can produce a poster; perform micro-teaching to their peers; create a video of performance with a class group; or prepare a PowerPoint presentation to inform parents of the classroom focus (Healy, 2008).

Example 3: In a postgraduate subject at University of Edinburgh, students are invited to add their own specific criteria to those provided on the marking grid, all of which are then taken into account (Nicol, 2009).

Making sense of assessment by taking a whole-of-program approach

Though not specifically first year, it is worth noting finally that, by taking a whole-of-program approach to assessment, students can be assured of greater consistency as regards grading expectations and assessment formats, whilst also being provided with program-long and -wide scaffolding of skill development (Gibbs, 2009). Currently, students express frustration at rarely being provided with a sense of overall program cohesion and progression (Kift, 2008). Providing students with the opportunity to engage in cumulative assessments across the course of the entire degree is one obvious antidote to this dissatisfaction and further provides coherence and authentic challenge, while crucially building in complexity from first to final year.

Example 1: A Geology degree sequences assignments (six fieldwork trips) throughout the three-year degree program, providing formative assessment on each assignment, but only providing summative assessment at

the end, in a final year mapping exercise. This enables students to apply formative feedback progressively, while 'each successive trip added new learning outcomes, integrated past learning outcomes, and increased the expected level of sophistication'. (Gibbs, 2009, slide 10).

Example 2: Within a four year Engineering program, every project assignment was 'planned as part of a coherent approach to programme-level learning outcomes'. Each project added new learning tasks, all being ultimately assessed summatively in the final year project (Gibbs, 2009, slide 11).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that too little attention has been paid to date to supporting first year students to make the crucial transition to tertiary assessment practices and processes, and that strategic renewal of first year assessment and feedback is an under-utilised engagement and retention intervention. Many first year students under-perform in their assessments because they do not understand tertiary expectations or the discipline's or task's requirements (Rust et al., 2003). Research data tell us that students do not receive early formative feedback on their progress and are not assisted to use the feedback they do receive to improve subsequent performance and learning. If there was just one thing that we should focus on to change fundamentally the 'prevailing nature of the first year experience' (Tinto, 2009, 1) of undergraduate higher education, it would have to be harnessing assessment and feedback practices to support early student learning, success and retention. This paper has suggested some theoretical and practical approaches to progress this urgent agenda.

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