



## Briefing paper on first year assessment

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*Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student experience in Australian higher education*

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### Purpose

This paper is intended to frame the assessment discussion on ‘how do we do it properly in first year?’. It is also to serve as a resource and is presented in a way that indicates the various practical and conceptual directions in the research literature.

### 1. Introduction

This paper assumes the reader is familiar with the ‘multiple transitions’ facing first year (FY) students including the ‘challenge of engaging with the institution itself — its culture, tradition and those taken-for-granted practices’ and the need to learn ‘the new language and conventions of their disciplinary study’ (Krause, 2006, p. 4). Students also need to deal with ‘teaching practices which are foreign to them and ‘procedures which are difficult to understand’ (Krause, 2005, p. 11). As well, they express the need for ‘more helpful feedback on academic progress’ (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes, 2005, p. 88). Students who do not make the transition successfully may leave the institution and/or increasingly they may make formal complaints. Griffiths (2008) for example, reports on a surge of complaints to the independent adjudicator, Ruth Deech, in the UK (an estimated 20% more in 2008 on top of an increase of 30% in 2007). The complaints include ones about ‘lazy lecturers’, ‘inadequate teaching’ and ‘unfair marking’.

At its most basic level, assessment is about evidence and judgments. Students provide evidence of their learning, and teachers make judgments about this evidence that determine students’ academic success. There is a myriad of ways of improving how assessment is ‘done’ in FY, according to the research literature — some of these are specific to FY and some are generic but applied to the FY transition context. Scott (2006) has identified that ‘relevant, consistent and integrated assessment with prompt and constructive feedback’ is particularly relevant to student retention; 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, improvement has to involve the following (taking into account diverse student populations and their ‘multiple’ transitions):

- inducting students thoroughly into the academic languages and conventions (including assessment genres) required as the vehicles for evidence; and
- making expectations about the quality (standard) of this evidence clear and teaching students how to judge the quality of their own work before submission.

Section 2 presents a snapshot of the current status of initiatives to improve FY assessment indicated by the research literature. Section 3 lists a number of considerations and suggestions.



## 2. Current status of initiatives to improve FY assessment

The literature and university websites are awash with initiatives to improve assessment in FY higher education, with the key concepts being around variety, consistency, relevance and scaffolding. For the purposes of this paper, these initiatives have been deliberately grouped into three categories depending on whether they are basically lists of what is or should be good practice, theoretical models or frameworks, or intended as holistic ‘whole-of-institution’ approaches.

### 2.1. Evidenced-based lists of what is or should be good practice

Table 1 has various types of lists roughly grouped into four sections. Each example indicates the number of items in the list: for example, in the first group of ‘principles, rules, conditions’, the first entry is from Palmer (2002) who has developed a list with 4 principles (or rules or conditions); while in the next grouping (‘strategies’), the University of Sydney has developed 39 ‘ways’ to help FY students.

Table 1: A sample of evidence-based lists of what is or should be good practice

Initiative	Example	
	Number of	Reference
Principles, rules and conditions	4	Palmer (2002) generic but <b>applied to FY</b> and fourth year
	7	Nicol (2006). Relate to ‘good feedback practice’ — are generic but <b>applied to FY</b>
	10	Nicol (2007). Revised from 2006 version. Are generic but <b>applied to FY</b>
	10	Based on 500 Tips on Assessment by Sally Brown, Phil Race and Brenda Smith, Kogan Page (1996). Comprises generic points incorporating values and worded as ‘assessment should...’ <a href="http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/manifesto.cfm">http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/manifesto.cfm</a>
	11	Gibbs & Simpson (2004). Generic for ‘assessment tasks and feedback’
	11	REAP (project on first year assessment) — generic assessment design principles adapted from Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and Gibbs and Simpson (2004) <b>applied to FY</b>
	12	REAP — generic on ‘good formative assessment and feedback’ based on a wide range of research and <b>applied to FY</b>
	7	Chickering & Gamson (1991). Generic principles <a href="http://www.reap.ac.uk/resourcesPrinciples.html">http://www.reap.ac.uk/resourcesPrinciples.html</a>
	14	James Cook University. Generic rules <a href="http://www.jcu.edu.au/teaching/JCUPRD_016721.html">http://www.jcu.edu.au/teaching/JCUPRD_016721.html</a>
	9	American Association of Higher Education — generic principles <a href="http://www.apa.org/ed/aahe_principle.html">http://www.apa.org/ed/aahe_principle.html</a>
	16	**CSHE (see below). Generic core principles of effective assessment <a href="http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/CorePrinciples.pdf">http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/CorePrinciples.pdf</a>
	not applicable	Yorke (2007) provides commentary on principles of assessment developed by Gibbs & Simpson (2004), and Nicol (2006) focusing on some issues, e.g. formative and summative feedback, scaffolding learning, workplace assessment



Initiative	Example	
	Number of	Reference
Strategies	39	University of Sydney (developed by the Institute for Teaching and Learning, FY coordinators groups and Faculty welcoming and orientation committees). <b>Specific to FY</b> . These strategies are termed 'ways' and are grouped four headings that are integrated and complementary  <i>Orientation to University Life</i> (12 ways to introduce your students to university life) — numbers 9–11 relate to assessment <i>Communicating Expectations</i> (12 ways to communicate expectations and standards to your students) <i>Giving Feedback</i> (12 ways to give helpful, informative feedback) <i>Encouraging Academic Honesty</i> (12 ways to encourage your FY students to practice academic honesty)
	8	Krause K-L (2006). These assessment strategies are each to be found separately under 3 of 5 headings (the Five Cs of Good Practice in the First Year — Curriculum, Classroom, Colleagues, Campus, Community) — <b>specific to FY</b>
	8	Brown (2006) practical strategies <b>specific to FY</b>
	34	CSHE. Generic strategies for effective <i>online</i> assessment organised into 3 checklists (access and usage, teaching and learning, technical and administrative) <a href="http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/Online.pdf">http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/Online.pdf</a>
	36	CSHE. Generic and practical strategies to minimise plagiarism — and hence are about assessment <a href="http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/AssessingLearning.pdf">http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/AssessingLearning.pdf</a>
	36	Juwah et al. (2004), Higher Education Academy. These are practical suggestions grouped under 7 headings that show how to operationalise Nicol's (2006) 7 principles (see above). Generic
Checklist/guide or framework or tool	Organised around 7 themes	Harris, K-L. (2005). The Guide for Reviewing Assessment is a question and answer <i>checklist/guide/framework</i> of effective assessment. Underpinned by 16 principles (see above**). Intended for practical application. Generic
Tips on using assessment to <i>prevent</i> learning	19	Brown (2004–5) 'tongue in cheek' generic 'tips' to stimulate thinking by teachers. These are the reverse of all of the above

## 2.2. Evidenced-based theoretical models/frameworks for improving assessment

Table 2 illustrates four types of models or frameworks. The first two are about alignment of teaching and assessment, while the second pair focuses on feedback. Model 3 (Juwah et al., 2004) is an example of using a theoretical model explicitly tied to a set of assessment principles.



**Table 2:** A sample of evidence-based models/frameworks for improving assessment

Model or framework	Author
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Generic</b></li> <li>• One diagram of a constructive alignment model titled: 'Aligning curriculum objectives, teaching/learning activities and assessment tasks' (p. 28)</li> </ul>	Biggs (2003)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Generic</b></li> <li>• Two fairly complex diagrams titled: 'five-dimensional model for authentic assessment' (p. 73) that aligns with the 'five dimensional model for authentic instruction' (p. 72)</li> </ul>	Gulikers et al. (2004)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Generic</b></li> <li>• One diagram titled: 'formative assessment and feedback' (p. 5)</li> <li>• To be used with Nicol's 7 principles (2006)</li> <li>• Supported by 8 case studies</li> </ul>	Juwah et al. (2004)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Based on evidence from FY</b> and final year bioscience students across six subjects</li> <li>• Two diagrams titled: 'the guidance and feedback loop — main steps' (p. 60), and 'potential troublespots in the guidance and feedback loop' (p. 66)</li> </ul>	Hounsell et al. (2008)

### 2.3. Holistic institutional initiatives that support improved FY assessment

Various authors (Hounsell, Xu & Tai (2007a, 2007b), Krause (2006), Nelson et al. (2006), Orrell (2006), Skene et al. (2006), Macdonald (2006), Biggs (2003), Yorke (1998)) observe that, unless assessment for learning in FY is valued and part of an institution's culture of learning, then principles, strategies, checklists and theoretical models/frameworks are, of themselves, unlikely to be effective in the long term. These evidence-based, practical and conceptual ways of improving FY assessment, require commitment by a responsive institution using a holistic approach. These approaches or initiatives take many forms such as: policies, inventories, facilitated programs, strategic action plans, performance indicators, audits, models/frameworks. Refer to Table 3 for a sampling of FY specific holistic initiatives.

**Table 3:** Holistic initiatives that support improved FY assessment

Initiative	Author
<b>Model or framework</b> represented by a diagram 'dimensions of student engagement: a model' (p. 5) — organised under contexts ( 'institutional environment' and 'socio-cultural political economic context'). <b>Specific to FY.</b>	Krause (2006)
<b>Model or framework</b> represented by a diagram in 3 phases (transition, development, achievement) with suggested strategies for each stage. <b>Specific to FY.</b>	Taylor (2008)
Latrobe University — <b>holistic model.</b> Team of members had a special interest in and responsibility for FY year teaching and learning. Developed the <b>specific objectives for FY</b> orientation based on initiatives already in place in schools, extensive consultation and data collection. <i>One of these objectives was about assessment.</i> The plan suggests changes and innovations to enhance the FY academic induction and orientation <i>prior to enrolment, at entry, and throughout the first semester, even throughout the whole of the first year.</i> Implemented in 1998 through wide dissemination.	Pitkethly & Prosser (2001)
<b>FYE project website</b> to display the quality FY initiatives ( <i>including assessment</i> ) occurring at the University of Western Australia.	Skene et al. (2006)



Initiative	Author
<p><b>Change management processes</b> — piloting improved <i>models of assessment</i> across three universities to demonstrate ways of reducing teacher workload while <b>improving learning and assessment quality in FY</b> — especially by use of IT. Intended to be embedded and sustainable. Led by academic staff already based within faculties and departments with collaborative support from those with e-learning and technical expertise. Being trialed in 3 universities in UK — a large list of factors facilitating implementation has been identified.</p>	<p>Re Engineering Assessment Practices (REAP)</p>
<p><b>Foundations of Excellence initiative</b> — a <i>model</i> for development and implementation of an action plan <b>for change to enhance the effectiveness of FY</b>. Is a one year process with a task force (one advisor from the Policy Centre plus representatives across the university) that carries out a <i>current practices inventory</i> and uses this data (evidence) to assess levels of institutional achievement of <i>specific performance indicators</i> developed for each of 9 dimensions or principles. These are not really Principles but descriptions of what institutions should be doing in the areas of induction and transition (they constitute standards). <i>Only one of the dimensions is about assessment of students' learning</i>. Once assessed, a plan of change is developed and implemented.</p>	<p>The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (formerly the Policy Center on the First Year of College) — is an independent, non-profit, higher education policy, advocacy, and research center in North Carolina USA</p>
<p><b>Induction Audit</b> — a series of questions that institutions can use to examine current practice of inducting students into tertiary education, i.e. are <b>specific to FY</b>. Each question has examples of answers at 3 levels which are allocated points (1, 3 or 5) that can be added up to achieve a rating. Of the questions, <i>only one (no. 4.2) is specifically about assessment</i>. The sample answers are analogous to performance indicators.</p>	<p>The STAR Project (Student Transition and Retention) — UK</p>
<p><b>Five criteria</b> to support implementing a recognition process for institutions with <b>FY excellence</b>. <i>Only one of the criteria is about assessment</i>. These criteria are not criteria but standards describing the type of evidence that indicates a rating of excellence. Based on dimensions developed by Barefoot et al. (2005) and used in the Foundations of Excellence program.</p>	<p>Tomorrow's Professor Blog (July 5, 2005) — USA</p>

### 3. Key considerations and some suggestions

A number of observations can be made about the sample of initiatives in Section 2.

- They could be used as a resource in several ways, for example, you could:
  - select from the tables depending on your purpose, either singly or in combination, for example, from Table 1, Nicol's (2007) list of principles or from Table 2, Hounsell et al.'s (2008) diagram of 'the guidance and feedback loop' or from Table 3, Krause's (2006) holistic model 'dimensions of student engagement', or combine two or three of these
  - construct your own FY initiative by adapting one of the listed initiatives or synthesising several
  - evaluate the level of specificity to FY by ranking the initiatives according your own needs and then making a selection.
- The initiatives you select or make use of from the tables should be manageable for *both* you and your students and able to be implemented in your FY context.
- There are a number of recurring messages coming through the FY specific initiatives. These can be roughly grouped under the following two headings:
  - students need to be thoroughly inducted into *the academic languages and conventions* of the discipline/s, such as:



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- the meaning of particular verbs in assessment tasks — ‘discuss’ for example, means different things in different year levels and different disciplines, as do the verbs ‘analyse’ and ‘explain’
- how to write, research or orally present in different genres specific to the discipline (an ‘essay’ is different in different disciplines, as is a ‘report’, and an ‘oral presentation’, online assessment protocols need to be specified), while using the academic discourse, and giving students time to practice these skills
- showing them how to make use of examples and model answers/responses
- how to reference and how to present responses to assessment tasks in a scholarly way
- how to work in groups or teams productively, and the value of self and peer assessment.
- teachers need to make their *expectations* about the quality (standard) of students’ assessment work clear, by providing:
  - students with well written criteria and standards sheets (criteria sheets/grading rubrics) in advance
  - students with the skills to judge and reflect on the quality of their own work before submission using these criteria sheets (that is, so they are able to self assess)
  - students with access to annotated examples of different standards of responses to assessment tasks
  - a ‘low stakes’ assessment task delivered and returned early in the first semester (for example, by Week 4) to relieve student anxiety around assessment, to give students a sense of ‘how they are going’, and to provide feedback to both students and staff on early student progress
  - feedback to students in various ways including whole group, online, and student-specific.

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