Assuring Best Practice in First Year First Session Assessment:
Report on Tier One and Tier Two Course Reports

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Assuring Best Practice in First Year First Session Assessment: Report on Tier One and Tier Two Course Reports

Executive Summary:

The Project was recommended by the *Student Experience & Engagement Committee* (SEEC) and endorsed by Senate Education Committee in late 2012 for implementation across UWS. It arose from a review of the 2012 *Commencing Student Survey* (CSS), the results of which have subsequently been confirmed by analysis of the 2013 CSS and the Autumn 2013 SFU results for first year units. The analysis confirmed that in the eyes of our students there is *room for improvement* in our assessment practices, a message common at the national and international level. Resultant calls for assessment renewal have consequently been articulated across a substantial volume of research and scholarly literature.

As a result of the requirement to complete an assessment schedule discussions among teaching teams and within *School Academic Committees* took place, in some instances leading to modification to assessment due dates in some courses and raising awareness of the importance of such planning and scheduling more generally across the academy. That being said, there are some practices demonstrated through this process which raise concern on a number of levels and offer opportunity for improvement of both the *student* and *staff* experience of assessment.

There is overwhelming evidence, that this project in and of itself has raised awareness of important quality issues. It has resulted in positive discussions in schools as they engaged with the process, and has been the impetus for ongoing change in a number of schools.

The reports and review of existing practices also reinforced the validity of many of the "needs improvement" issues raised by students, and thus the opportunity for significant improvement in assessment practices. The implementation of such ongoing improvement strategies is of strategic importance to the student experience and, in terms of the focus of this particular project, for improving student transition, success and retention – a major university priority.

There is a need to *institutionalise* processes to ensure a holistic, integrated and developmental approach to assessment *across units* becomes *standard practice* at UWS. This needs to include processes for ensuring the implementation of best practice principles to support student transition, skill development and ultimately potential for student success. The following recommendations are designed to achieve this outcome:

Recommendation 1: That course assessment mapping is provided by DAPs, following collaborative planning across the teaching team and submitted for peer review and approval by School Academic Committees where it is assessed against the quality benchmarks outlined in the Tier 1 report. In particular this should include endorsement that the assessment schedule (range of types/genres, number and spread) are appropriate for students transitioning to tertiary study.

Recommendation 2: That a course level (i.e. all core/definable units in a program and/or major etc) *student assessment schedule* be developed from this mapping and made available to commencing students on their course vUWS site.

The recently developed *UWS Curriculum Mapping Tool* is available to assist by mapping assessment items and characteristics across units which can then be presented as a session schedule, as well as allowing the mapping of the assessment items to course learning outcomes. If deemed useful, an enhancement could be made to the CMT to enable the automatic production of a student assessment schedule for a defined set of units in a particular session.

Recommendation 3: That all undergraduate programs implement as standard practice an appropriate *early, low-risk assessment* item within a core first year unit to identify students who are not engaged or who need additional support with core academic skills.

Following student need identification through appropriate early, low-risk assessment, students should be made aware of resources and programs to support their learning needs and/or receive academic advising concerning the most appropriate program of study for them, such as reduced load, or alternatively recommend a different pathway such as a UWS College program which would provide more appropriate support to maximise their potential for success.

Recommendation 4: That UWS explore options for systematising such academic advising processes, including the capacity for automatic transfer to a UWS College pathway program following the academic advising process and student agreement, without further application or approval delays.

Recommendation 5: That the assessment modes and definitions developed as part of the CMT project be adopted and promoted for use across UWS so as to improve the consistency in assessment task information for students.

Recommendation 6: That collaborative work of Learning Advisors (Academic Literacy) and staff from the *Hub for Academic Literacy* work be prioritised to working directly with teaching teams responsible for first year first session units to assist with writing/explaining assessment processes and requirements, criteria and standards and development of exemplars.

Recommendation 7: That DAPs implement peer quality review processes within their program to ensure the quality review of unit outlines and learning guides, including assessment information, demonstrating the quality benchmarks identified in this project.

This project has illuminated the need to take seriously and to ensure the intentional teaching and development of communication skills and multi-literacies (academic literacy, information literacy, IT literacies etc) as well as the explicit assessment of these literacies. It is imperative that the relevance and importance of such generic skill development is clearly communicated to students and that they understand they have a responsibility to work strategically to develop such skills.

It is necessary that all assessment items include appropriately articulated criteria and standards relating to this component of assessment which are **consistent across units at the same level**. The working party considers it is worth exploring the introduction of *a hurdle requirement* for this component of the criteria.

Recommendation 8: That the university examines and develops processes for supporting the implementation within assessments of *hurdle requirements* which clearly articulate the criteria and standards students must attain in those criteria in order to pass the assessment task/unit.

Prior to the implementation of any such hurdle however, it is essential that the quality of the assessment, its communication, coherence and integration across the course, and the provision of exemplars, along with appropriate support mechanisms, are put in place. Learning and feedback opportunities need also to be built into learning and teaching strategies and assessment to support student development of appropriate skill levels.

It is also important to communicate clearly to students the skill development, linked to graduate attributes and employability (i.e. successful graduate studies) related to generic skill development – that it is not just about content or disciplinary knowledge and that they have a responsibility to invest time and effort into the realisation of those skills. The communication of such explicit information will provide relevance and context to direct student focus and effort.

Recommendation 9: That the University supports and resources the ongoing development of units within the first session of study in all undergraduate courses designed to explicitly develop academic/multi literacies, including the articulation of best practice principles.

As part of the development of these units, the university should examine opportunities for constructing alternative pathways dependent on the entry level competencies of students. Those demonstrating competency would take a particular path with greater challenge/extension – perhaps

using online/blended mode. The possibility that this option could reduce the numbers of students (those who cannot demonstrate a defined level of competency) required to participate in timetabled classes – may then provide opportunity for smaller tutorial groups (rather than reducing the number of tutorials scheduled) so that more intensive group work etc, could be undertaken to develop required competencies. The possibility was also raised that higher performing students (those who demonstrate the required level of competency) could become mentors for other students if the opportunities were constructed.

Assuring Best Practice in First Year First Session Assessment: Report on Tier One and Tier Two Course Reports

Purpose

This report provides a consolidated picture of First Year First Session assessment practices across UWS undergraduate programs in Autumn session 2013, as reported in the *Assuring Best Practice in First Year First Session Assessment Tier One and Tier Two reports*. Evaluation of reported (Tier 1) and reviewed (Tier 2) assessment practices against a range of best practice principles which underpinned the T1 & T2 reports is provided with opportunities for improvement identified. Recommendations for further action are presented for consideration.

Background and supporting evidence

The *Assuring Best Practice in 1st Year 1st Session Assessment Project* was recommended by the *Student Experience & Engagement Committee* (SEEC) and endorsed by Senate Education Committee in late 2012 for implementation across UWS. The project was developed following review of the 2012 *Commencing Student Survey* (CSS), the results of which have subsequently been confirmed by analysis of the 2013 CSS and the Autumn 2013 SFU results for first year units. This analysis, presented below, shows clearly that in the eyes of our students there is room for improvement in our assessment practices. This message is replicated nationally and internationally in student surveys and considerable literature, some of which is presented in this report, has been devoted to the need for such improvement and strategies for doing so. It clearly supports the need to closely examine assessment practices against best practice principles in order to understand the student perspective and identify improvement strategies.

Survey Results:

Commencing Student Survey (CSS): Within the course experience domain of the CSS the item: **"clear assessment requirements"** was rated highest importance by commencing students**.** As figure 1 demonstrates, this item also showed the largest gap between the *importance* (rating - 4.632) 2,371 student respondents placed on the issue and their assessment of our *performance* (rating – 3.941) for both years (gap of 0.695 in 2013[1])**.**

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[1] Only one item in the CSS exceeded this gap in both years, which was a non-course related item: *Clear Enrolment* Process (gap 0.965 in 2013). Actions to improve this experience are being examined.

Figure 1: 2013 CSS Item Importance v Performance ratings
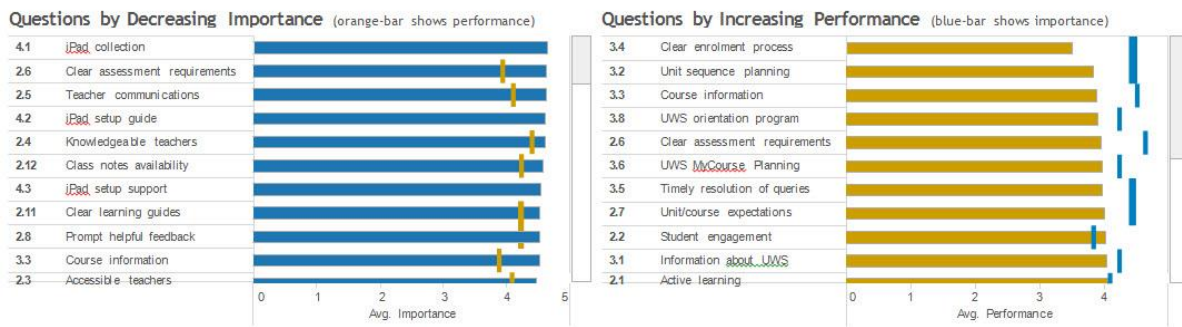
A review of qualitative comments reinforced the primacy of this issue to the student experience. The ratio of Needs Improvement (NI) to Best Aspect (BA) for the item: "Assessment Task" at 3:1 was the highest of any item (Figure 2). It also attracted the largest number of comments (921) in terms of what students nominated would be of most help to them at that time ("most help now").

Figure 2: Commencing Students comments categories, 2013.
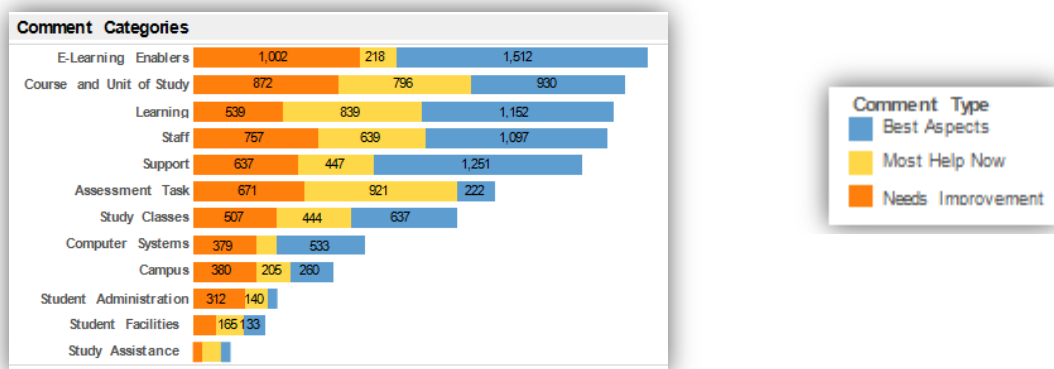
Breaking down the assessment task comments further (Figure 3 below) reveals a high proportion of NI and "Most help now" (MHN) comments related to "assessment expectations" (NI = 272 & MHN = 302), "timing" (NI = 112 & MHN = 302), "feedback" (NI = 79 & MHN = 81) and "assistance" (NI = 96 & MHN = 226).
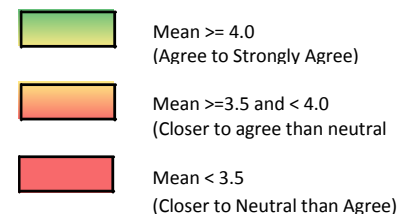
Figure 3: CSS Assessment Comments sub-categories
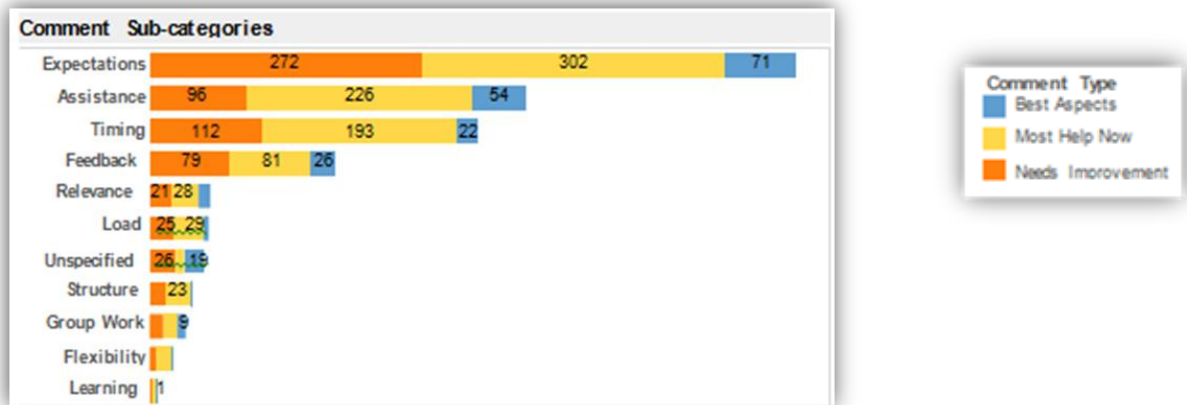
Student Feedback on Units: As Figure 4 below highlights, relative to other items on the SFU, those related to assessment generally receive lower satisfaction ratings, with feedback consistently receiving the lowest rating.
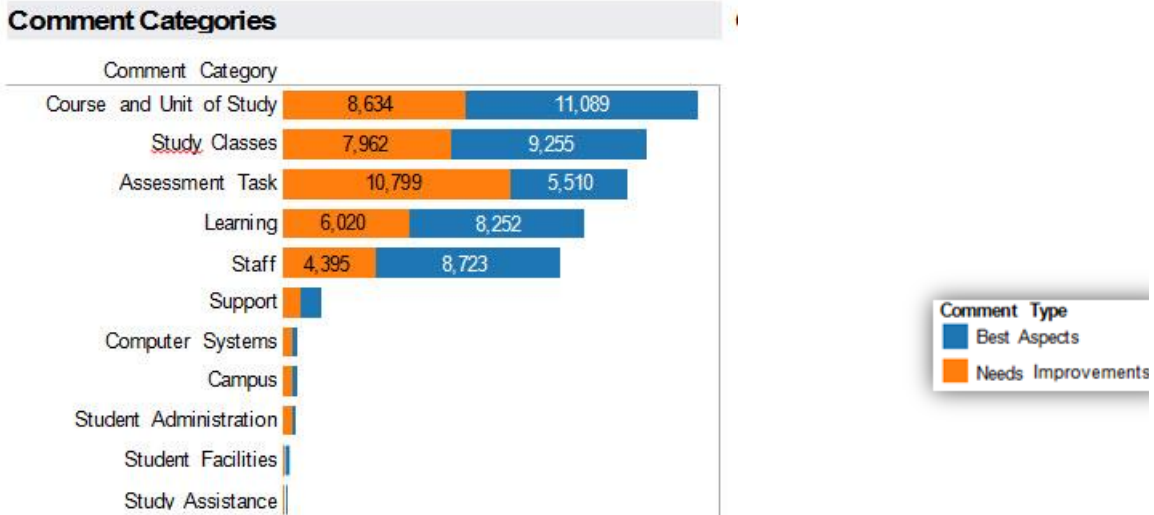
Figure 4: SFU Ratings per item for the previous five sessions – all UWS units

Item	2011.1	2011.2	2012.1	2012.2	2013.1
1 - Unit Content	4.12	4.11	4.15	4.11	4.13
2 - Relevance	4.03	4.05	4.05	4.04	4.07
3 - Learning Design	3.91	3.93	3.94	3.93	3.89
4 - Assessment Activities	3.86	3.88	3.89	3.87	3.88
5 - Assessment Feedback	3.69	3.73	3.73	3.76	3.78
6 - Assessment Guidelines	3.83	3.82	3.86	3.84	3.84
7 - Learning Resources	3.81	3.83	3.84	3.84	3.86
8 - Learning Flexibility	3.84	3.87	3.86	3.88	3.88
9 - Learning Spaces	3.96	3.98	3.99	4.00	3.99
10 - Workload	3.89	3.90	3.92	3.92	3.94
11 - Equity/Fairness	4.20	4.22	4.24	4.23	4.18
12 - Generic Skills	3.90	3.94	3.94	3.94	3.95
13 - Overall Experience	3.95	3.95	3.97	3.96	3.93

Mean >= 4.0
(Agree to Strongly Agree)

Mean >=3.5 and < 4.0
(Closer to agree than neutral

Mean < 3.5
(Closer to Neutral than Agree)

Review of qualitative comments on the *Student Feedback on Units Survey* (SFU) results for 2013 Autumn Session first year units (i.e. the 1st session of study for the great majority of students) further reinforces the importance of quality assessment to the student experience. Qualitative comments classified as relating to "Assessment Tasks" showed a NI:BA ratio of 2:1 (Figure 5). This contrasted to all other categories where BA comments exceeded NI comments. By way of contrast, student comments concerning "Staff" (quality and teaching skills etc) indicated a reverse ratio of only one NI to every two BA comments (1:2).

Figure 5: Student comment categories - Autumn 2013 1st Year SFU

Comment Categories

Comment Category	Needs Improvements	Best Aspects
Course and Unit of Study	8,634	11,089
Study Classes	7,962	9,255
Assessment Task	10,799	5,510
Learning	6,020	8,252
Staff	4,395	8,723
Support		
Computer Systems		
Campus		
Student Administration		
Student Facilities		
Study Assistance		

Breaking down the assessment task comments further (Figure 6) reveals a high proportion of NI comments related to "assessment expectations" ($n = 3,123$), "timing" ($n = 1,414$), "feedback" ($n = 1,862$), "assistance" ($n = 1,001$) and "load" ($n = 1,089$), showing a consistent picture to that of the CSS completed by students early in the session.

Figure 6: Assessment sub-categories – Autumn 2013 1st Year SFU

Comment Sub-categories

Comment Sub...	Needs Improvements	Best Aspects
Expectations	3,123	1,429
Feedback	1,862	622
Timing	1,414	435
Assistance	1,001	602
Unspecified	659	871
Load	1,089	
Structure	512	416
Relevance	552	34
Group Work	444	
Flexibility		
Learning		
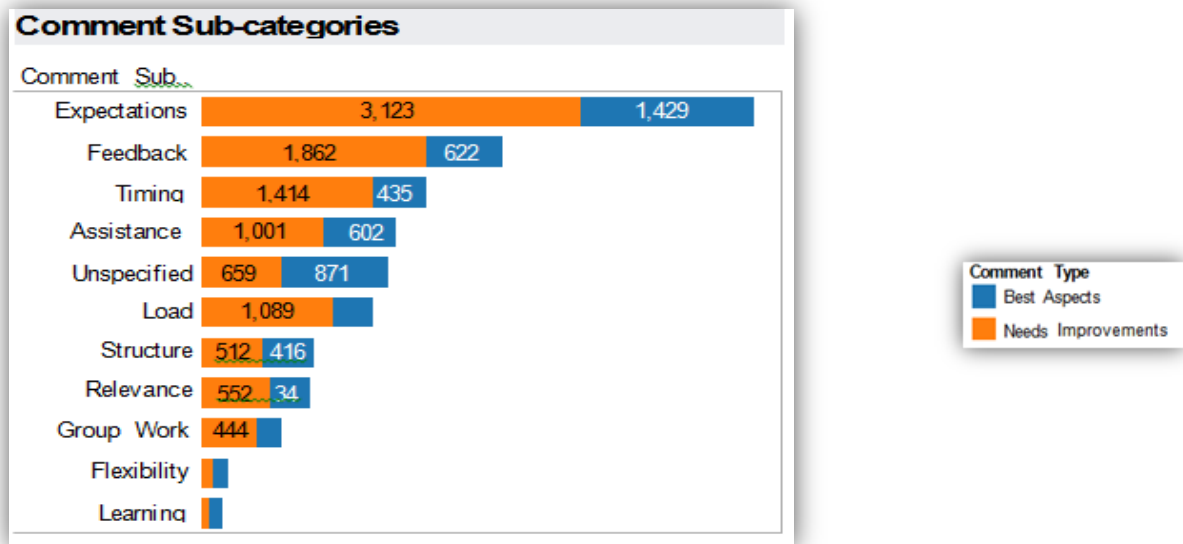
Other evidence:

Anecdotal advice from staff working in the *Library Roving* program where students receive immediate advice and assistance with their assessments, confirms that many students find it challenging to understand assessment instructions, what is being asked of them, what is expected, and how to go about approaching assessments. Staff also reported confronting difficulties in being

able to clearly and unambiguously understand some assessment tasks and thus being able to provide clear explanations to direct and guide the development of student understanding and action.

Feedback provided by mentees (commencing students) in the *Equity Buddies* program run through the School of Education also reinforces these findings with a lack of confidence and/or competence with academic skills identified as a major area of concern to commencing students. Specific aspects identified relating to this issue included:

- Unfamiliarity with different writing styles;
- Not knowing how to "break open an essay question & how to approach it";
- Difficulty in understanding readings & how to paraphrase;
- Difficulty discerning what was being asked for in assignments, which were not "clearly explained straight up";
- Difficulty understanding learning guides and marking criteria;
- Not knowing how to approach research (where or how to get information) or how to do referencing;
- Not knowing how to identify acceptable resources.

A summary of the key aspects of assessment for which this qualitative data indicates *room for improvement* is presented below in Table 1 along with examples of what students consistently say about this aspect of their assessment experience.

Table 1: Key aspects of assessment tasks identified by our students as "needs improvement"

Aspects of the assessment tasks	Examples of what students say
Clear Assessment Requirements	
1. **Lack of clearness and clarity of information provided concerning assessments**	NI: *"More explicit information on assessments and essays would help. Not that I am not grateful for all the help I've received".* NI: *"The aspect that needs most improvement is the instructions on assessment sheets. Several of my assessments were not clear on what they wanted us to do this made it quite difficult to interpret".* NI: *"Some, not all, need clearer explanations on assessment tasks. Group tasks with individual aspects integrated are poorly described and instructed".* NI: *"Course outline is limited and not effectively communicated. Assignment briefs are written poorly and hard to understand".* NI: *"Learning guides - quality seem to vary wildly and how each unit makes use of them is different. For example one unit has a marking rubric for each assignment in the learning guide then uses a different one posted in vUWS often closer to the due date making it confusing".*

Aspects of the assessment tasks	Examples of what students say
2. Difficulties in understanding what is being asked for and associated expectations – i.e. "what people want from me"	**NI:** *"Some assignments do not display what specific requirements are. Very open ended with not much direction".* **MHN:** *"A section in vUWS where there are examples of the different types of assessments that a student may need to do within the duration of their course, for example Essay, Literature Review, Research Project. To give an idea of* ***what is expected****."* **BA:** *"I have enjoyed the atmosphere in my classrooms. Students and teachers are keen to share knowledge and experiences. This goes a long way to clarifying any issues with work, assignments and it's a great bonding time".*
3. Desire for *exemplars* so that they can "see" what is expected	**NI:** *"Tutors need to explain more about assignments and give demonstrations during tutorial times. Especially for first year students. There are times where I felt lost for example: what is the structure of a journal or an essay? They just give you the job and expect you to know".* **MHN:** *"Sample questions while completing similar assignments".*
4. Inconsistency in understanding and information provided by different staff, with fairness as an issue raised in comments	**NI:** *"x tutors seriously lacking knowledge of the assignments. Unable to clearly explain questions. Needs to be rectified"* **NI:** *"Some lecturers though very helpful are not always clear with course requirements and instructions"* **NI:** *"I think some teachers really don't know what the requirements are for the assessments, so, if we need to clarify anything, we sometimes get different answers. It's quite confusing but gets resolved in the end though. I just hope that everything was just clearer in the first place".* **NI:** *"Communication between teachers and students. For lecture teachers to stop telling students to go ask your tutor teacher and when we do ask our tutor teacher they tell us don't email us about the assessment I don't have time to reply to 100 people, if you have questions ask your lecturer".*
Scheduling of Assessment	
1. Assessment items in different units being due at the same time	**NI:** *"More sense of direction on how things are expected to be done. The overload of assessment due in the same week!"* **NI:** *"A better spread of assignments. Not crammed into a short space of time".* **MHN:** *"Advice from staff or current/past students on how to do well in individual units. Help with time management* ***especially for when assessments are due at the same time****".*
2. Unmanageable assessment load across units	**NI:** *"Input of work by lecturers to students are extreme and overloaded with exams and assignments due every few weeks. Less preparation time given in all the units and gets too stressful and overloaded".*

Aspects of the assessment tasks	Examples of what students say
3. Timely feedback	**NI:** "I can only state on my behalf, again I am a 1st year student and feel that for one of my classes the grades for my 1st assessment take so long to come back to me. I believe having this grade will help with my next assessment to make sure I am on the right track".

It is worth noting that it is not just UWS students who express relative dissatisfaction with assessment processes. Nationally, Scott (2005) has reported assessment (standards, marking, expectations, management and feedback) as a recurrent *hot spot* consistently receiving a higher ratio of NI comments to BA comments. Scott (2008) notes that 'clear requirements on what is to be produced in assessment [as well as] timely and constructive feedback on the outcomes' is a key expectation of students expressed in the literature (p.6). Price, Carroll, O'Donovan & Rust (2011) note that the UK National Student Survey consistently shows that assessment processes are the aspect of their study which students report the least satisfaction with. Price et al (2011) concluded that this could not come as a surprise to anyone in higher education, since for many years' researchers in the field have been telling the "same story".

The broader context – *The first year student experience:*

First session assessment practices are an important dimension of the *first year student experience*. As Tinto (1993) states, a first year student's initial experience at university, **particularly in relation to assessment**, can impact significantly on their long term engagement and retention.

The FYE literature consistently emphasises, among other things, the importance of quality assessment to assist student transition and development of the necessary skills to be successful students and ultimately successful graduates. The dominant message can be summed up as the need for a fundamental **reconceptualization of the purpose of assessment**. As Krause (2006) argues we need 'a shared understanding of how to integrate assessment and feedback structures ***into*** [and across] the curriculum so as to enhance student learning'. In other words, shifting from:

> **'Assessment *of* learning' to 'assessment *for* learning' in the first year'.**

The UK Higher Education Academy in a recent publication (2012) summed up the issue thus:

> **'how [do] we put the significant resources devoted to assessment to *better use* to support student learning, safeguard standards, improve retention and increase student approval* – to improve assessment's *fitness for purpose* generally' (p.8)**

Intentional teaching and development of "generic skills": External bodies such as TEQSA and the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) make it clear that universities are responsible for ensuring student development and demonstration of skills by graduation, and to illustrate how the development is intentionally designed into a program of study and assured (i.e. assessed). The HESP in the *Draft Standards for Course Design and Learning Outcomes* (March 2013) makes clear that the standards require not only 'the mastery of specific disciplinary and/or interdisciplinary knowledge and skills characterising a field of study' – the traditional focus of academics, but they also require that course   learning outcomes are informed by:

- The generic skills and attributes required of graduates (UWS Graduate Attributes);
- The application of generic skills and attributes in the context of the field of study including the communication skills required, and
- The requirements of employment related to the field of study.

The requirement to teach, develop and assess "generic skills" was noted way back in 2002 by James, McInnis & Devlin as one of the key drivers for *assessment renewal* in higher education. Interpersonal and communication skills (written & oral), along with teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving skills consistently rank highest in terms of graduate attributes valued by employers. Consistent anecdotal reports from employers reveal a perception that graduates do not rate highly in terms of many of these skills. The 2007 UWS Employer Survey supported these observations, confirming the importance of communications skills, but ranking them relatively low on the extent to which, in employers' view, recent graduates possess these skills (Grebennikov & Shah, 2008). Hart, Bowden & Watters (1999) claim that writing skills consistently rated poorly by employers, followed by the observation that this was 'somewhat surprising', given the common use of essays and other written tasks as an assessment tool in higher education. They then raise an important point, relevant to the issues outlined in this report:

> **'Students may not even be aware of the fact that the preparation of a written essay [or other written work] is an *exercise in developing writing skills* as well as a means of conveying content knowledge'.**

Commencing students require learning and teaching strategies to support the development of communication skills and academic literacies which should be intentionally embedded and scaffolded throughout the curriculum. Just as external bodies (industry and professional accreditation bodies) make it clear graduates require such generic skills, institutions articulate them as graduate attributes and teaching teams as course learning outcomes – thus academics have a responsibility to explicitly **teach and assess** them.

However, Hart et al (1999) go on to note:

> `'Some academics may feel *ill equipped to judge the quality of writing* and consequently limit their judgements to the content. Little attention on the part of teachers or learners may be paid to the *systematic development and assessment of the process of writing* as a distinct graduate capability and a component of meta-cognitive functions such as reflective practice, collaborative problem solving, or clinical reasoning'.

It is for this reason that UWS has invested in recruitment of Learning Advisors – Academic Literacy staff, supplementing existing HALL (Hub for Academic Literacy) staff, to work directly with academic staff to embed academic literacy and associated skill development within curricula – this project was designed to "kick start" that process.

Clearly, commencing students, *transitioning* to university studies have particular learning needs, not the least of which is to be inducted into an academic culture, including assessment practices and expectations.

The first year curriculum, including assessment, needs to be intentionally and coherently designed, planned and scheduled to facilitate this transition. Widening participation and resultant increasing diversity in students enrolling in university studies makes this increasingly imperative. The quality benchmarks identified in the *Assuring Best Practice in 1ˢᵗ Year 1ˢᵗ Session Assessment Project* are key considerations, among other things, in planning and designing appropriate curriculum to support student transition generally (Kift, 2009), as well as for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds specifically (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012).

The importance of making explanations clear: A major finding from a recent OLT funded project: *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds* (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012) was 'the importance of making expectations clear for low SES students in language they understand' (p.26).

> 'Staff and students pointed to both the benefits of *thorough explanations* of assessment requirements and criteria and the use of *accessible language* and *examples* to ensure student understanding' (p.26).

Devlin et al (2012) articulates the underlying imperative, reflected in the UWS findings reported above, as the need to **bridge sociocultural incongruity**. This need whilst articulated by Devlin et al specifically in the context of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, is also particularly

relevant for students who are first in family and is fundamentally important for all students transitioning to university study. Given the UWS student profile and our stated commitment to widening participation; to *opportunity* and excellence, assuring that our assessment practices meet such standards is essential to the universities mission.

> **Adequacy of assessment information is necessary to establish a sense of purpose and direction for students, and thus to engage them in assessment processes and learning from assessment (Meyers & Nulty, 2009).**

Adequacy of assessment information can be ensured through providing students clear and coherent assessment guidelines and criteria, as well as communicating those with them via multiple media, such as written documents, electronic postings and face-to-face interactions (Vu, 2011).

Boud & Associated (2010) assert that 'students themselves need to develop the capacity to make judgements about both their own work and that of others in order to become effective continuing learners and practitioners'. Students need to be able to 'identify high quality work and relate this knowledge to their own work', increasing the likelihood that they will reach high standards themselves. (p.1)

The importance of Peer and Self-Assessment: Peer and self-assessment have been shown to enhance student understanding of assessment processes, and encourage them to take responsibility for their learning (Crisp, 2010; Price et al, 2011).

The quality benchmarks included for review in the Tier 1 and Tier 2 reports seek to raise awareness of these issues and a reflection on current practice.

A Student Workload Perspective:

The amount of time a UWS student is expected to spend on their studies is generally stated as 10 hours per week for each 10 credit point unit. For a fulltime student this equates to 40 hours per week. Over a semester this equates to 120 hours per unit for a 12 week session, or 480 hours over a 12 week session for a full time student. Workload requirements of course, will ebb and flow across the semester when assessment items require completion, and hence it is usually this semester long average which is used when student workload requirements are conceptualised. If however, a substantial number of substantive assessment items are due in one week, or over a couple of consecutive weeks, then significant pressure will be placed on students, with resultant anxiety. This

is particularly true for transitioning students who need to develop appropriate time management skills, at the same time as coming to terms with university norms and expectations.

It is worth noting that the 40 hour expectation is long standing and appears consistent with the notion of a 40 hour working week, which in industry has subsequently been reduced to 38 hour maximum "required" working hours per week. At UWS the standard per week for a full time staff member is now 35 hours. It is also worth noting that the 40 hour (4 x 10) expectation is long standing, having been conceptualised in a time when many university students were full time students in the true sense – being a student was their sole primary role with minimum work and other responsibilities.

This is clearly not the case today, with reports consistently demonstrating that today's student's face many conflicting responsibilities, including work and family responsibilities. Universities Australia (2013) report that 80.6 per cent of full-time undergraduates were in employment in 2012 (down from 85.5% in 2006). They also reported that average hours worked during semester for those students increased from 14.8 to 16 hours over the same time period with one quarter working over 20 hours per week during semester. Between the 2006 and 2012 surveys they note that more students are reporting working longer hours concluding that 'though slightly fewer students were in employment, those employed are *working more'* (p.45; current author's emphasis).

These statistics of course only reflect paid employment commitments, whereas many students face other commitments, such as parenting and caring responsibilities, additional to life experience opportunities competing for their focus and time. Acknowledgement and consideration of these aspects in planning student activities and workload is important. This is not to argue for reduced rigour or standards, but for intentional and coordinated planning of learning activities, including assessment, so as to ensure reasonable and manageable expectations, to achieve maximum learning impact.

Understanding and gauging workload: The time allocation of 10 hours per week, per unit includes all learning and teaching associated activities such as class attendance, readings and preparation for tutorials, research and writing of assessment tasks, examination preparation and sitting time. To what extent we plan learning and teaching activities and assessment activities with a clear understanding of the amount of time a student would need to devote in order to successfully complete those activities, particularly *beginning* students, is unknown. This question also needs to be considered *across* units, i.e. "what does the total student workload look like"? How does the total load compare to these widely accepted norms (40 hours per week). It is also relevant to ask, just

how appropriate or widely accepted *is* this norm? Interestingly, Price et al (2010) noted that a *UK Higher Education Policy Institute* study 'estimated that students needed around **30 hours per week** (i.e. 25% reduction on the UWS norm) of study to achieve the learning outcomes set for full-time higher education study'.

> **Actual workload is only one component which can lead to students feeling of overload. How that workload is scheduled, the clarity and consistency of how it is communicated and unfamiliarity with expectations will also impact.**

Conflicting and confusing instructions and advice, not knowing where to seek help and advice or from whom, feelings of inadequacy and of not belonging ("I am the only one who doesn't understand") will also compound feelings of overload and student anxiety. A student experiencing overload and anxiety will not be capable of efficient learning, nor the development and demonstration of academic skills needed for success.

Adding a transitioning student perspective: Research into the *first year experience* shows clearly that commencing students struggle to adapt to university and spend a significant amount of time, energy and anxiety in the first few weeks in simply "finding their way around", understanding the "rules of the game", where to go for help and "understanding" new terms and expectations etc. This raises the question as to whether, for commencing students, it is reasonable to assume that a full ten hours per unit in the first few weeks should be considered available solely for the purpose of learning & teaching related activities, further potentially reducing the available time for student engagement in learning.

The project thus sought to gain some insight into this issue by asking teaching staff to estimate the amount of time it would take a student to complete assessment tasks. Determining workload – or the right amount of time needed to complete a task, including reading, researching and thinking, is an extremely complex one with limited guidance available to assist in making such judgements (Karjalainen, Alha & Jutila, 2006).

The broader context – *The staff experience and workload:*

Again, much of the literature notes the significant challenges faced by academics teaching, very often *large* first year units consisting of students with diverse entry level skills, who are **new to university study.** The comments of students in the CSS and SFU surveys indicate the desire of

students for greater "assistance" and greater clarity in assessment tasks and understanding of "expectations" in particular. Inevitably first year teaching teams (unit coordinators; lecturers and tutors) are the first port of call for student enquiries concerning these matters. It goes to show that increasing clarity, coherent planning and communication of assessment requirements, offers significant potential to reduce the "busy work" of staff.

Evidence for this assertion is provided by a recent case study @ UWS where an academic literacy advisor worked closely with a unit coordinator of a large core health science unit (Professional Health Competencies) delivered to first year, first semester students. The aim of the collaboration was to embed literacy support into the first assignment (Annotated Bibliography). Details of the improvement strategies implemented are outlined in Appendix 1[2]. This project resulted in significant quantifiable improvements across a range of indicators as reported by the unit coordinator:

Table 2: Measure of "busy work" reduction reported by the unit coordinator

Measure	2011	2012
Number of emails seeking clarification of assessment	110	88
Number of questions posted on the discussion board regarding the assessment	376	210
Number of assignments with a similarity index over 30%	140	115
Academic Misconduct Cases	9	4

These outcomes not only indicate that an improvement in student experience and understanding can be realised by such actions, but also demonstrate that a significant reduction in staff workload can be achieved through implementation of such strategies.

It is clearly important, as Kift (2009) stresses, that assessment workload is manageable for *both staff* and *students.* Taking a whole-of-course approach to the planning and development of assessment, enabling student learning and assessment to be *integrated* and *scaffolded* horizontally and vertically offers the best opportunity to achieve this outcome. The modularisation of courses, where units are planned and taught in relative isolation militates against such an outcome (Higher Education Academy, 2012) requiring strategic action to overcome.

The recently developed *UWS Curriculum Mapping Tool* is available to assist in this task by enabling mapping of unit and course learning outcomes, as well as assessment items and their characteristics across units. Visual representation (as well as summary tables) of such key curriculum elements can be automatically produced to demonstrate their alignment and scaffolding across the curriculum, provide evidence to evaluate the adequacy of that alignment, identify gaps, inconsistencies, under-representation of key elements, as well as strengths and coherence across the curriculum.

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[2] *Helping new students develop academic literacy: A UWS case study, by Lisa Armitage & Cathy Tannous.*

Outline of the Project

A two tiered strategy was proposed – the first tier being universal, i.e. to be implemented across *all* undergraduate courses, and the second, more comprehensive tier to be implemented in targeted courses/units dependent on the availability of Learning Advisors - Academic Literacy (LA-AL) staff to work with course teams to implement the strategy.

1. Tier 1 Strategy: *Quality Assurance Review of all 1st year Autumn core units:*

This strategy involved teaching teams (course, key program or major unit sets) reviewing and reporting on the following key quality benchmarks:

Quality Benchmark	Key Supporting Literature
Preparation of a whole-of-course assessment schedule – confirming that the amount and spread of workload and progressive development of academic skills across the semester is appropriate for a full time 1st year transitioning student	Krause, 2006; Kift, 2008; Higher Education Academy, 2012; James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002;
Identify the unit with primary responsibility for embedded academic literacy skill development OR how this development is embedded and integrated across the units	Krause, 2006;
Identification within the schedule of an early, low risk assessment (completed and returned before week 4) and brief outline of the assessment task	Kift, 2009; Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012;
Confirm that *one* referencing style is utilised consistently across all core units	
Confirm that descriptors for types (modes) of assessment items, common across units are used consistently and consistent criteria and standards are applied	Kift (2009)

It should be acknowledged that the elements described above represent basic good practice and were already embedded to varying degrees in practice within many UWS undergraduate programs. Thus the requirement for many was simply to document and report. It was envisaged that there may be other programs where the process of assessment mapping may be new and may illuminate issues, such as excessive or conflicting assessment, which would require attention.

It was recommended that the report (Appendix 1) be completed by the DAP, endorsed by SAC and submitted to Education Committee. This supported a key goal of the project - to initiate discussion of these best practice principles and adequacy of course performance against these

principles, among teaching teams and within the school academic committee, who were required to endorse the reports.

2. Tier 2 Strategy: *Comprehensive Quality Review & Improvement of Prioritised Courses:*

Large load bearing courses were identified with a recommendation for implementation of the Tier 2 strategy across core units in prioritised courses. This was additional to (i.e. extending) the tier 1 strategy and involved Learning Advisors - Academic Literacy (LA-AL) staff working with course teams to undertake a more comprehensive review and undertake quality improvement work where possible, relating to the following quality benchmarks.

Quality Benchmark
Review assessment across units to ensure: • Agreement on common/essential assessment types for 1st year, 1st session core units with common understanding of requirements across units and teaching team members; • Essential elements (performance criteria) for those assessments – i.e. what is actually being assessed, why is it important and how is this particular assessment type the most appropriate for demonstrating the criteria; • A progression within each item that builds the associated skill(s) over time; • A common marking rubric for each type of assessment with consistency in understanding of expectations across units and teaching team
Write, prepare or identify exemplars and articulate/indicate specifically how they fulfil the criteria – annotating the exemplars and preparing for student reference.

Review learning guides across core units with respect to:
     • Style;
     • Format;
     • Components;
     • Order;
     • Referencing Style;

Quality and clarity of explanation of assessment provided to students (based on principles articulated under review of assessment above);
Clarity of language and appropriateness for students transitioning to higher education and the discipline.

Tier One Reports

Tier one reports addressing the below components were submitted by all Schools for all undergraduate programs managed by those schools, with the exception of the School of Business who were in the midst of curriculum mapping and review at that time.

1. Whole of course assessment schedule:

Whole of course assessment scheduling, a component of whole of course assessment planning provides the following two key outcomes:

> **Provides a shared understanding of how assessment and feedback is structured *across* the curriculum so as to enhance student learning;**
> **Provides a picture of what assessment looks like to a full time student – *from the student's perspective***

The number of assessment items, their spread and degree of integration across units are important for structuring learning for all students, but particularly transitioning students. This includes the extent to which task sequencing enable opportunity for students to build skills, develop their understanding of different types (genres) of assessment tasks and associated expectations, and to learn from feedback. Clause 23 of the *UWS Assessment Policy – Criteria and Standards-based Assessment* implicitly recognises this aspect of quality assessment as well as assessment as a tool *for* learning. The policy states: 'Determining the amount of assessment given should rely on a balance between effective measurement and effective learning; assignments should be comprehensive enough to measure achievement, but not so excessive as to detract from learning'. Though the policy is silent on the number of assessment items, in general practice at UWS over the past decade during which time concern for *over-assessment* has been a focus, a common expectation of *two or three* items per unit has been propagated.

Scheduling of assessment tasks:

Across UWS there was a large degree of variation in the way assessment tasks were scheduled, the load expected of students and the number of individual tasks per unit.

The completion of an assessment schedule across all core units within a program emerged as common practice across many areas of UWS, but also represented a *first* for many other programs. As a result, the requirement to complete an assessment schedule precipitated discussions among teaching teams and within *School Academic Committees*, in some instances leading to modification

to assessment due dates in some courses and raising awareness of the importance of such planning and scheduling more generally across the academy. That being said, there are some practices demonstrated through this process which raise concern on a number of levels and offer opportunity for improvement of both the *student* and *staff* experience of assessment.

A number of points are instructive about the schedule provided in Table 3 below (a reproduction of a submitted schedule) namely:

- Three major pieces of written work are due in the same week (week 7);
- Each of these pieces of written work represent three different genre, each of which will be a new experience for the students (note: even university level essays differ significantly in their expectations to those HSC students complete) (see box on following page);
- Though there is early low risk assessment, the tasks are not of a type which would provide any information to students about their preparedness for university level written assessment;

Table 3: Example of one Course Assessment Schedule

Assessment		Week due – percentage assessment weighting													
Unit	Task	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Exams
1	Quiz	2%	2%						2%		2%		2%		
	Case Study											30%			
	Essay or Report						20%								
	Tutorial participation		1%	1%	1%	1%	1%			1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	
	Final Exam														30%
2	Quiz			4%				6%			5%				
	Test														
	Final Exam														45%
3	Quiz		0%		0%				10%	0%			10%		
	Annotated Bibliography						30%								
	Case Study													40%	
	Tutorial Participation		1%	1%	1%	1%	1%			1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	
4	Case Study						50%								
	Final Examination														50%

If we accept that assessment, particularly for commencing students, should be predominantly *for* learning – that it should help students to develop and build skills and understanding of university level assessment practices and expectations, with opportunity to learn from feedback then the implications of this scheduling are significant, including:

- There is no opportunity for students to learn from and utilise feedback on their writing, expression, referencing, or appropriateness and adequacy of research to inform their work – i.e. **for the progressive development of academic skills across the semester**;
-

- The lack of any writing task and subsequent feedback prior to all three of these substantive items being due, means that students have no way to evaluate the adequacy of their skills and to seek assistance prior to having to produce three significant pieces of written work;

- To add further to the complexity of the task confronting students, each of the three tasks constitute quite different writing genres, requiring differing structures and other requisites, *all at the same time;*

- From a staff perspective, the scheduling means that three groups of academics will be confronted with the same errors or inadequacies in student writing, expression, referencing, appropriateness and adequacy of research and spend time providing feedback on these issues.

Whilst the scheduling outlined in the example above is at the extreme in terms of number of substantive assessments due in the one week, is not an aberrant picture across UWS first session units.

The multiple genre's students are required to produce *in their first session* is relevant, as academics generally appear to underestimate the complexity of such tasks for commencing students. For example, Wilson, (2011) asserts:

> **'There are a range of data sources to indicate that essays in the first year are a source of great angst for both students and staff, and may be more complex than we (staff) think' (Wilson, 2011).**

Preliminary outcomes of a current OLT project of which UWS is a participant supports Wilson's view:

In the Beginning: The first year curricula for social sciences and humanities in the context of discipline threshold standards, asked third year student to reflect on their university experiences in the discipline of history. This is the first discipline to be investigated in this 2 year project. Overwhelmingly, the common responses from the students, at UWS and the other participating universities are that the "history essay" as an assessment task is a major challenge, especially in first year. Students perceived the history essay as a difficult genre and reported that university expectations for academic literacy are much higher than those of secondary school. Students made comments such as:

"Probably the most important skill I now have is a proper understanding of how to write a tertiary-quality essay. Although the basic structure of an essay is exactly the same in high school, the level required even in first year units is markedly higher. In addition, in-text references/footnotes was something completely new for me in my first year – at high school all you need is a reference list at the end of assignments, set out however you want!"

"I picked up tertiary-level essay writing and referencing quickly, but I believe an increased emphasis on these 'basics,' so to speak, would be a huge help to first-year students as many struggle in these areas."

"I believe that an understanding of how to write a history essay, and how this differs from writing essay in other disciplines, is important for first year students. I was fortunate enough to have a tutor that made the specific requirements of a history essay quite clear to me in my first semester."

The disciplines of Sociology and Political Science will be surveyed next. (Bronwyn Cole, June 2012)

In most units the majority of assessment tasks were scheduled between weeks six to 13, with a spread across the session. Within the School of Humanities and Communications Arts many courses have a cluster of assessment in weeks three and four. It was also noted that even in cases where assessment across the unit involved weekly quizzes and class tests, assessment weightings were frequently skewed toward the end of semester.

Many courses tend to have smaller, more frequent item submission, with lower percentages (such as online quizzes). This strategy, it has been argued, has been adopted to engage students with the learning materials – to "keep them actively engaged". However, as Boud & et al (2010) note:

'many separate low-value pieces of assessment can fragment learning without providing evidence [to either students or staff] of how student's knowledge and skills from a unit of study are interrelated. This is often compounded across subjects, leading students to experience knowledge [and skill development] as *disconnected elements*' (p.3).

In some units there was a concerted effort to spread assessments across the semester. This was achieved in nursing (for example) through meetings between unit coordinators in the same course to ensure that student workload was spread out and reasonable. Apart from such pre-existing approaches ensuring co-ordination in scheduling, the review has also led to these practices

becoming more widespread in other Portfolio areas such as HCA, where meetings between unit coordinators are now occurring.

Understanding of "task": There was a discrepancy between interpretations of what constitutes a discrete task. For example, although some school policies mandate a limit of two or three assessments in total, in reality these are sometimes broken into multi-part assessments with multiple due dates.

It is also important that a range of different assessments are utilised constructively across the course of study to enable the development and demonstration of appropriate learning outcomes. Achieving such an outcome requires collaboration, as well as planning and scheduling of assessment across the course of study.

Many universities have implemented processes to ensure such outcomes are realised. An example is provided below from the Faculty of Business, at the University of Technology.

> *"The UTS Faculty of Business 'Subject Overview Spreadsheet' SOS was designed specifically to assist academic staff develop units of study by providing an overview of the core unit and Majors structure of degrees. Both Faculty level graduate attributes and unit level learning outcomes are embedded in units taught by the Faculty of Business. These attributes and outcomes are assured by linking to relevant assessments tasks in each unit. One goal of the SOS therefore was to ensure the appropriate distribution of assessments and attributes for course development. Criteria within each degree (core + Major) are established with respect to the minimum and maximum number of each assessment type (e.g. no more than X multiple choice assessments and at least Y essays in a degree). While changes to the assessment regime in a unit are permitted, the new assessment must continue to ensure learning with respect to the unit's underlying attributes and outcomes, and maintain the distribution of assessment types across the degree. In the case for instance that a Unit Coordinator wishes to add a multiple choice assessment and the maximum number of that assessment type has been reached in the degree already, they must negotiate with another Unit Coordinator to remove a multiple choice assessment from their unit. The implementation of the SOS in this way not only ensures a balanced distribution of learning outcomes and assessment, but also encourages collegial discussion and increases awareness by colleagues of what is being taught within individual units."*
> (Craig Ellis, August, 2013)

Recently, as part of the development of the UWS *Curriculum Mapping Tool* (CMT) a list of assessment modes, with definitions, have been developed to guide assessment mapping and classification. Propagation and adoption of such a guide across the university may assist to improve this aspect.

Student workload and estimates of student time required to complete assessment tasks: In most cases, the reports on amount of time students spent completing assessment tasks were estimates, based on staff expectations about how long it would likely take students to do background research, reading, and writing, and associated practical tasks. Significant variability is evident across staff estimates provided for similar tasks (i.e. same task type and word limit). There is also large variation in student workload between units evident across units in the same and in different courses, with ranges noted from 50 hours in one unit to 12 hours in another unit within the one course. Such differences suggest little coherence and coordination in planning and raise questions about what relative importance or relevance students may perceive of the differing units. Accumulated workload for assessment only in some practical courses was also a matter of concern with estimates sometimes reaching over 100 hours per unit, based on completion of practical items such as models, prototypes, 3D CAD drawings and similar.

Staff estimates v Student reported time spent on assessment tasks: A small scale survey of students in a number of tutorial groups within two courses (2 tutorials per course) was undertaken in Autumn 2013 by Dr Evelyn Hibbert (LA-AL). It enabled the comparison of staff estimates, as presented in the Tier One reports for those units, with the time which students themselves reported spending on the tasks. Perhaps not unexpectedly, student reported time to complete tasks varied widely. What was also evident was that for almost all assessment tasks, the actual time students reported spending was greater than the time estimated by academic staff, sometimes by around 400% greater.

Table 4: Comparison of staff time estimates and student reported time

Assessment Task	4 X Reflection Tasks				Summary exercise	Essay plan	Bibliography	Annotated Bibliography	Essay	Case Study	Debate
Academic estimate (hours)	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	1.5	1	1	6	10	10	4.5
Average amount of time it takes students (hours)	1.25	0.67	0.44	0.47	1.68	1.21	6.32	23.68	44.64	27.95	10.37
Amount of time in comparison to the estimate (=student time/academic estimate)	2.5	1.34	0.88	0.94	1.12	1.21	6.32	3.94	4.46	2.80	2.30
Mode (student time)	0.5	0.5	0.33	0.33	1	1	3	8	24	10	5

The only tasks where reported student workload was similar to staff estimates were in final examples of *repeated* assessment tasks which they had opportunity to complete (practice) and receive feedback on, including discussion in tutorials. This outcome would appear to support the previously noted desirability of integrated assessment, where student practice and skill development is enabled.

2. Unit with primary responsibility for embedding academic literacy development:

The term "primary responsibility" is used in recognition that all units have a role to play in supporting academic skill development and incorporating related criteria within assessment. It also recognises that across UWS there has been a strategic move towards incorporating a specific unit into each course in which to explicitly embed such skill development.

Almost all courses identified a unit designated as carrying primary responsibility for embedded academic literacy skill development. Law however reported that academic skill development was embedded and scaffolded across units, rather than having one specific unit with primary responsibility. Where planned and implemented coherently across all core units this is a highly desirable approach. It also reinforces the need for such integration, coherence and planning across courses where there is a designated unit – coherence of expectations and approach, along with scaffolded skill development is the key principle.

Whilst beyond the scope of this initial review it is important to note the need for ongoing development (vertical alignment) of academic skills embedding in second semester units and beyond. This is essential to facilitate the continuous development of student skills as they progress through their degrees and build toward achievement of stated graduate outcomes.

3. Early low-risk assessment:

In her *First Year Curriculum Principles* Kift (2009) articulates the need for scheduling an early piece of formative assessment to be submitted and returned before Week 4 in order to:
- Relieve early student anxiety
- Provide feedback to both students and staff on student progress and achievement;
- Identify students in need of extra support

Few courses reported scheduling of an early low-risk assessment. In the vast majority of cases where there was an early assessment item(s) in the schedule it was not an appropriate task to fulfil the above goals articulated above by Kift (2009) (i.e. they were most often a quiz). Only a small number of courses had low-risk written tasks in evidence. Nursing and HCA are examples of schools in which early low-risk assessments are operating to identify preparedness for tertiary study and precipitate action. In the BA program, students are entitled to re-submit their first assessment, on the ground of poor literacy only, so that feedback and opportunity for improvement, learning and skill development is provided.

It appeared from responses that the purpose and function of having a early low-risk assessment task was poorly understood. It is thus important to identify what is meant by 'early low-risk assessment' in this case, as articulated above by Kift (2009). This early assessment, marked and returned before HECS census date, is meant to communicate information to students about their preparedness or otherwise for tertiary study. It is not meant to involve a large amount of content information (which would be impossible before HECS census date) or to comprise an online quiz, which usually cannot communicate enough information to students about their preparedness for study. Rather, the task should be designed to focus on demonstrating to students their facility with the 'soft skills' necessary for academic study. Doing so provides the opportunity to implement academic advising including, where level of skill demonstrated is inadequate, referral to support resources/activities, recommendation of a reduced enrolment load or a differential pathway (e.g. UWS College pathway course). In this regard, it represents a focus on assessment *for* learning, rather than assessment *of* learning.

4. Referencing styles:

The majority of units are using a consistent referencing style within the one course. There has been a great deal of discussion about this issue in all schools and staff appear generally mindful of the issues around the consistent application of a single referencing style. Some circumstances have been noted where styles are consistent within units, while still allowing for variation within courses. Where this occurs, it is generally made explicit. Staff mindfulness of the issue can be seen in the unit Analytical Reading and Writing, a core academic literacy unit, which explicitly teaches multiple referencing styles because of the interdisciplinary demands of HCA courses.

Issues were also identified around reference lists in unit outlines and learning guides that did not follow the school's referencing policy. This can lead to inconsistencies between learning guides and unit outlines, and between styles mandated by the school. Such practices provide inappropriate

models for students, can lead to student confusion and appear unfair when assessment criteria allocates (and subtracts) marks for such inconsistencies in student workload. Strategies for ensuring the correct modelling of reference styles to students should be ensured through peer enhanced quality review processes within schools.

5. Assessment item descriptions and marking criteria:

> **In her *First Year Curriculum Principles* Kift (2009) asserts the '*need for consistency* regarding communication of assessment expectations across the first year – use consistent criteria and standards, naming of assessment tasks, use of assessment verbs, etc'.**

There is a perception across schools that there are consistent naming of ostensibly 'the same' assessment types, however this was not always found to be the case. Some schools such as Nursing are aware of this as an issue and are currently reviewing the consistency of assessment descriptions. In the school of Social Sciences and Psychology, core units were created together resulting in consistency of assessment type descriptors. The *School of Humanities & Communication Arts*, in the process of completing their Tier 1 mapping, commenced productive discussions between core unit coordinators around assessment descriptions.

One issue noted from the review was the number of different assessment types named in the Tier One report. In some courses there are eight different assessment types reported. In one case *over eight within the one unit* (note-taking quiz, content review quiz, paraphrase, reflection, essay plan, major assignment, debate plan, debate, annotated bibliography). This places a large demand on students studying first year, first session units who are required to understand and adapt to the requirements of such a broad range of assessment types.

Tier Two Reports

The tier two component of the project focused on a comprehensive quality review and improvement of core units in prioritised courses. These reviews were undertaken by Learning Advisors-Academic Literacy (LA-AL) staff either relatively independently, with reports provided to DAPs/School, or in concert with teaching teams. In most cases a snapshot of current practice has been captured and in many instances improvement work is ongoing with LA-AL staff working collaboratively with academic staff.

1. Review of assessment across units:

Tier one responses suggesting academics thought there was a common understanding of essential assessment types. A comprehensive review of learning guides however, found that there was considerable variation between the assessment names and the genres actually required from students. Sometimes assessment names were generic, giving very little information regarding the form of the task. For example, 'quiz' may mean MCQ, short answer questions, a longer written task conducted in a classroom setting or online variations of these. It has been suggested that the term 'quiz', when applied for a longer written task, is being used to reduce student anxiety about assessment. 'Essay' is also used to cover a wide range of word limits and differing approaches to text such as argument, report, explanation and perhaps others.

The term 'case study' was used to mean both responses to a series of short answer questions and an 'essay style' literature review *within the one course*. Another major area of confusion across the university is the increasing use of reflective writing tasks which are often not well defined and vary considerably across units, courses and schools. As noted earlier, the dissemination and use of assessment types and definitions developed as part of the CMT development may assist in this regard.

In some schools (for example Social Sciences and Psychology) considerable effort has gone into the development of quality marking criteria, generating generic rubrics which can be adapted for individual units, providing consistency across tasks within a single unit and within courses. However, across the University sometimes the relationship between marking criteria and assessment descriptions was not always consistent. The lack of clarity in most instances was compounded by the absence of exemplars demonstrating expectations.

From an examination of the learning guides, there was no clear evidence of progression of academic skill development from one assessment to the next within units, let alone within courses.

2. Annotated Exemplars:

Of the units examined in the tier two review the only annotated exemplar found in a learning guide was in the unit *Introduction to Sound Technology* in the *BA Music* course. This outcome is surprising given that Clause 28 of the *Unit outline and learning guide policy* (since January 2009) has prescribed as mandatory content the provision of 'annotated models of student essays or reports, or marking guides, to clarify expectations about what is required for assessment activities'.

The Higher Education Academy (2012) assert that

> **'Standards are best demonstrated through discussion around anonymous *exemplars* of different responses to the same piece of assessed work' (p.20)'.**

3. Learning Guides:

Although most schools comply with the general mandated inclusions for learning guides great variation was found in learning guides across the university in style, format, components, order and referencing style. Some schools, such as Social Science and Psychology, have uniform formatting and style for learning guides while others do not. As a result of this review, revision of learning guides with a view to standardising formatting and styles is underway in a number of schools, such as the *School of Computing, Engineering and Mathematics* and *School of Science & Health*. Concerted effort is underway in some schools to ensure that consistent formatting of learning guides that will facilitate the ease with which students are able to locate information concerning assessment, weekly teaching and learning activities, as well as required reading.

The review also showed different expectations for learning guides from school to school. In some schools the learning guide is used as a 'roadmap' to the unit, containing all the information relevant to a unit, and are viewed almost as a 'contract' concerning the requirements of a course. Other schools post a large amount of material relevant to the course on vUWS, in tutorial guides, or in other locations. It was noted that this places a large demand on students in first year first session to be able to find all the information required to guide learning and their successful transition into university learning.

Inconsistent, poorly structured and connected information, combined with large volumes of information will lead to confusion and difficulty in sorting relevant and important information from less important information, often representing "noise" and reducing focus on constructive activities and learning. Clarity and clear direction and guidance are essential, particularly for transitioning students.

4. Explaining Assessment – Clarity of purpose & appropriateness of language for transitioning students:

Practices in outlining and explaining assessment tasks varied greatly, even between units in the one course. One issue identified involves the use of marking rubrics both in elucidating assessment requirements for students and in the actual marking of tasks. Marking rubrics were not always included in learning guides, however when they were, marking criteria often did not accurately

reflect the stated assessment aims. On occasion, the weightings of categories in rubrics did not match the aims of the assessment as outlined in the assessment description, and there often appeared to be confusion in what to include under the terms "assessment criteria" and "marking criteria". Other problematic areas include the quality of rubrics in terms of their ability to enable students to improve performance and their facility for objective and reliable marking of large cohorts. It has also been noted that occasionally different marking rubrics were used than were provided in the learning guide. Marking rubrics are either undergoing or planned for review in a number of schools in the university, such as *Nursing* & Midwifery and *Humanities and Communication Arts*.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

There is overwhelming evidence, that this project in and of itself has raised awareness of important quality issues. It has resulted in positive discussions in schools as they engaged with the process, and has been the impetus for ongoing change in a number of schools. For example, in the school of *Humanities and Communication Arts* the English major has now commenced team meetings for unit coordinators, and a working party to review assessments in the compulsory units and standardize assessment types and nomenclature. They are also working toward standard descriptors for assessment requirements and articulating criteria and standards to be used with flexibility across the units.

The reports and review of existing practices also reinforces the validity of many of the "needs improvement" issues raised by students, and thus the opportunity for significant improvement in assessment practices. The implementation of such ongoing improvement strategies is of strategic importance to the student experience and, in terms of the focus of this particular project, for improving student transition, success and retention – a major university priority.

> **The fitness for purpose and validity of the assessment process is best achieved 'through effective collaboration between all those who teach on a programme, all orientated towards the [constructive development and] assessment of programme learning outcomes' (Higher Education Academy, 2012, p.19).**

There is a need to *institutionalise* processes to ensure a holistic, integrated and developmental approach to assessment *across units* becomes *standard practice* at UWS. This needs to include processes to ensure the effective implementation of best practice principles to support student

transition, skill development and ultimately potential for student success. The following recommendations are designed to achieve this outcome:

Recommendation 1: That course assessment mapping is provided by DAPs, following collaborative planning across the teaching team and submitted for peer review and approval by School Academic Committees where it is assessed against the quality benchmarks outlined in the Tier 1 report. In particular this should include endorsement that the assessment schedule (range of types/genres, number and spread) are appropriate for students transitioning to tertiary study.

Recommendation 2: That a course level (i.e. all core/definable units in a program and/or major etc) *student assessment schedule* be developed from this mapping and made available to commencing students on their course vUWS site.

The recently developed *UWS Curriculum Mapping Tool* is available to assist by mapping assessment items and characteristics across units which can then be presented as a session schedule, as well as allowing the mapping of the assessment items to course learning outcomes. The use of this tool by a limited number of courses to date has led to course-based discussions on assessment load (both the number and types of assessment within a given year, but also across the entire course). If deemed useful, an enhancement could be made to the CMT to enable the automatic production of a student assessment schedule for a defined set of units in a particular session.

Recommendation 3: That all undergraduate programs implement as standard practice, an appropriate *early, low-risk assessment* item within a core first year unit to identify students who are not engaged or who need additional support with core academic skills.

Following student need identification through appropriate early, low-risk assessment, students should be made aware of resources and programs to support their learning needs and/or receive academic advising concerning the most appropriate program of study for them, such as reduced load, or alternatively recommend a different pathway, such as a UWS College program which would provide more support and staged progress, maximising their potential for success.

Recommendation 4: That UWS explore options for systematising such academic advising processes, including the capacity for automatic transfer to a UWS College pathway program following the academic advising process and student agreement, without further application or approval delays.

Recommendation 5: That the assessment modes and definitions developed as part of the CMT project be adopted and promoted for use across UWS so as to improve the consistency in assessment task information for students.

Recommendation 6: That collaborative work of Learning Advisors (Academic Literacy) and staff from the *Hub for Academic Literacy* work be prioritised to working directly with teaching teams responsible for first year first session units to assist with writing/explaining assessment processes and requirements, criteria and standards and development of exemplars.

Recommendation 7: That DAPs implement peer quality review processes within their program to ensure the quality review of unit outlines and learning guides, including assessment information demonstrating the quality benchmarks identified in this project.

This project has illuminated the need to take seriously and to ensure the intentional teaching and development of communication skills and multi-literacies (academic literacy, information literacy, IT literacies etc) as well as the explicit assessment of these literacies.

The working party heard anecdotally of students progressing through their program of study without having passed the commencing unit charged with developing such skills, suggesting that specified levels of achievement in such capabilities are not a pre-condition for students passing units and progressing throughout their program of study. Such an outcome implicitly communicates to students that *the need to put effort into developing and demonstrating such skills* is not a pre-requisite for passing their course, despite the importance of such outcomes for graduate success (and indeed their articulation in graduate attributes and course learning outcomes). It is imperative that the relevance and importance of such generic skill development is clearly communicated to students and that they understand they have a responsibility to work strategically to develop such skills.

It is necessary that all assessment items include appropriately articulated criteria and standards relating to this component of assessment which are **consistent across units at the same level**. The working party considers it is worth exploring the introduction of *a hurdle requirement* for this component of the criteria.

Recommendation 8: That the university examines and develops processes for supporting the implementation within assessments of *hurdle requirements* which clearly articulate the criteria and standards students must attain in those criteria in order to pass the assessment task/unit.

Prior to the implementation of any such hurdle however, it is essential that the quality of the assessment, its communication, coherence and integration across the course, and the provision of exemplars, along with appropriate support mechanisms, are put in place. Learning and feedback

opportunities need to be built into learning and teaching strategies and assessment to support student development of appropriate skill levels.

It is also important to communicate clearly to students the skill development, linked to graduate attributes and employability (i.e. successful graduate studies) related to generic skill development – that it is not just about content or disciplinary knowledge and that they have a responsibility to invest time and effort into the realisation of those skills. The communication of such explicit information will provide relevance and context to direct student focus and effort.

Recommendation 9: That the University supports and resources the ongoing development of units within the first session of study in all undergraduate courses designed to explicitly develop academic/multi literacies, including the articulation of best practice principles.

As part of the development of these units, the university should examine opportunities for constructing alternative pathways dependent on the entry level competencies of students. Those demonstrating competency would take a particular path with greater challenge/extension – perhaps using online/blended mode. The possibility that this option could reduce the numbers of students (those who cannot demonstrate a defined level of competency) required to participate in timetabled classes – may then provide opportunity for smaller tutorial groups (rather than reducing the number of tutorials scheduled) so that more intensive group work etc, could be undertaken to develop required competencies. The possibility was also raised that higher performing students (those who demonstrate the required level of competency) could become mentors for other students if the opportunities were constructed.

The importance of ongoing improvement to the first year experience, transition and success: The quality benchmarks incorporated into the Tier 1 & Tier 2 Reports, implemented within a holistic and whole-of-course approach are key components of the conceptual framework for the STaRS (*Student Transition, Retention and Success)* Project. This project was recently established to provide institutional leadership and coordination of initiatives and activities to support student transition and the first year experience. A conceptual model for such an approach (see below), incorporating the benchmarks outlined in the Tier One and Tier Two reports, is being implemented in two pilot (B. Engineering and B Construction Management) HIPSTaRS (*Holistic and Integrated Planning for Student Transition, Retention & Success*) Projects. The vision of the project is alignment of strategies and resources across the University at both the curricular and co-curricular level in order to achieve a holistic, integrated and cohesive student experience to support their transition to university education and optimise learning outcomes. The project also aims to better support and assist
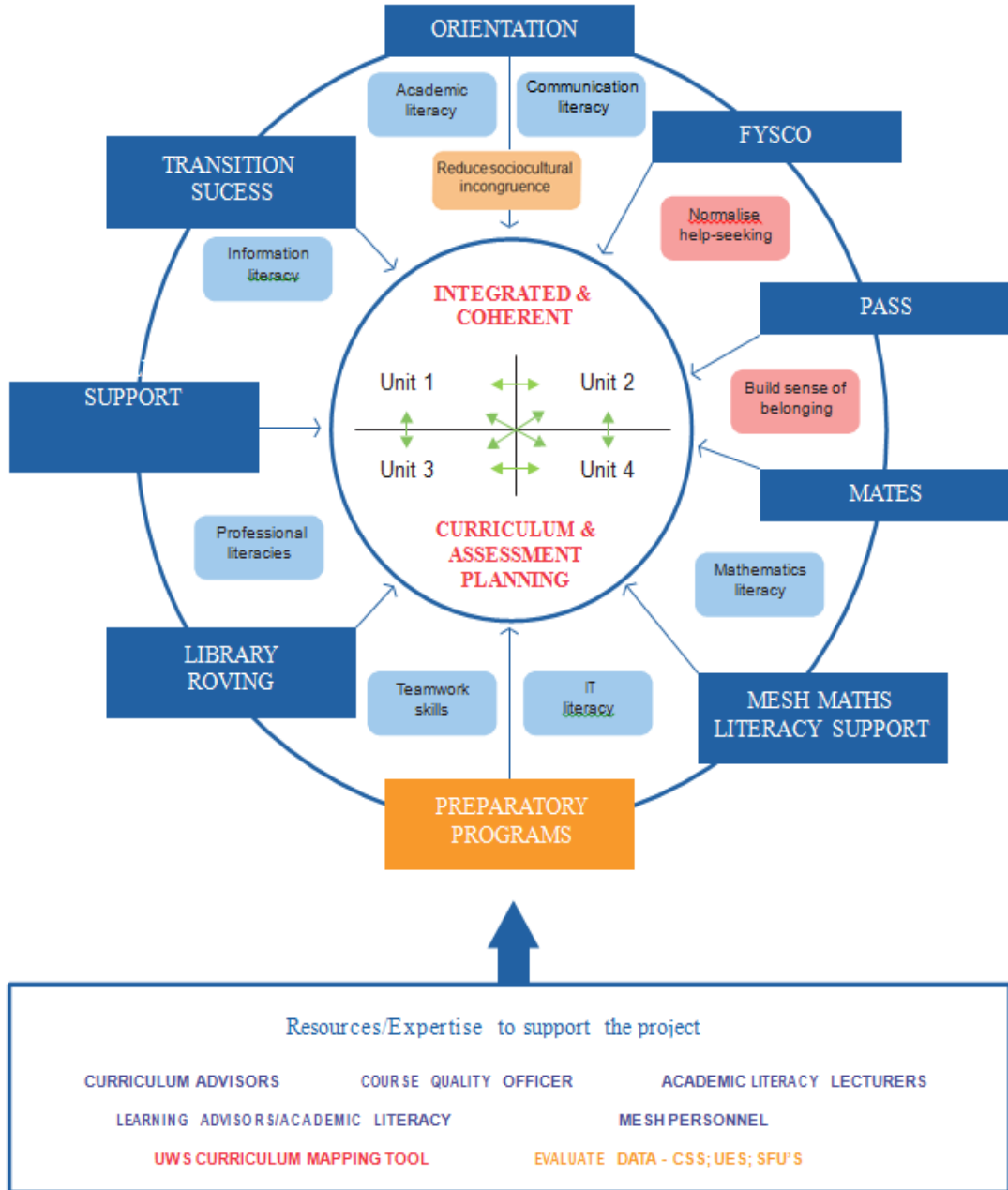
academic staff managing and teaching these first year core units, improving staff experience and workload. The framework also emphasises the importance, and subsequently, the benefits of strategically connecting the curriculum to all resources and activities available across the institution to support student transition and learning.

The projects initial goals were:

1. **Curricular:** Enhanced cross unit integration and planning to enable:
   1.1 consistency in style and presentation of information to students;
   1.2 clarity in information provided to students, using language appropriate to a transitioning student (particularly assessment requirements and expectations);
   1.3 consistency in criteria and standards rubrics across units;
   1.4 cross unit (whole-of-course) planning of assessment;
   1.5 intentional integration of learning and assessment activities across units;
   1.6 development of exemplars of student work for assessment genre's required;
   1.7 embed multi-literacies development and support within the "transition" unit;
   1.8 develop and employ blended learning strategies to support student learning;
   1.9 develop understanding in students as to the importance of such multiple literacies to their success as a student and ultimately as a graduate;
   1.10   explore possibilities of introducing e-Portfolio into the course.
2. **Co-curricular and curricular support:** Align and integrate existing transition and student learning support strategies and associated resources provided across UWS to support the total student experience and assist teaching staff/unit coordinators.

HIPSTaRS Conceptual Framework

(Holistic, Integrated Planning for Student Transition, Retention & Success project)

ORIENTATION

Academic literacy

Communication literacy

FYSCO

Reduce sociocultural incongruence

TRANSITION SUCESS

Normalise help-seeking

Information literacy

PASS

INTEGRATED & COHERENT

SUPPORT

Unit 1   Unit 2

Build sense of belonging

Unit 3   Unit 4

MATES

CURRICULUM & ASSESSMENT PLANNING

Professional literacies

Mathematics literacy

LIBRARY ROVING

Teamwork skills

IT literacy

MESH MATHS LITERACY SUPPORT

PREPARATORY PROGRAMS

Resources/Expertise to support the project

CURRICULUM ADVISORS	COURSE QUALITY OFFICER	ACADEMIC LITERACY LECTURERS
LEARNING ADVISORS/ACADEMIC LITERACY		MESH PERSONNEL
UWS CURRICULUM MAPPING TOOL	EVALUATE DATA - CSS; UES; SFU'S	

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Appendix 1

Helping new students to develop academic literacy: A UWS case study

The following is a case study of collaborations between the Student Learning Unit (SLU) and academic teaching staff in the School of Science and Health undertaken in 2012. The aim of the collaboration was to embed literacy support into the first assignment of the Professional Health Competencies unit delivered to first year, first semester students. This account begins with a rationale for, and description of the work undertaken by SLU, followed by an evaluation of the collaboration compiled by the unit coordinator, Cathy Tannous.

Overview of a unit specific literacy collaboration in the Professional Health Competencies unit
Professional Health Competencies is a core first year, first semester inter-professional unit delivered to approximately 900 students across thirteen degrees in the School of Science and Health. It was identified by the unit coordinator that instances of academic misconduct and low grades were often due to students feeling overwhelmed and unsure at this early stage of their study. SLU was enlisted to provide literacy support to strengthen students' understanding and confidence in the micro-skills necessary to begin writing at an academic level. The first major writing task, an annotated bibliography, was targeted for intensive skill development with SLU constructing a comprehensive learning resource, a one hour literacy lecture for students, and a professional development workshop for the academic team as detailed below:

A comprehensive learning resource for the first major writing task
A learning guide to support students to research and write up an annotated bibliography was developed using unit specific content. The guide covered the purpose, expected structure and step-by-step process of compiling an annotated bibliography and included a complete annotated model of the genre using texts supplied by the unit coordinator. The learning guide was posted on the unit vUWS site and students were directed to the resource during lectures and tutorials and when enquiring about the assessment task.

A one hour academic literacy lecture delivered by SLU staff
SLU staff delivered a one hour academic literacy lecture in timetabled lecture mode to Professional Health Competencies students focused on the micro-skills relevant to the first assignment. It was noted by SLU staff that many Professional Health Competency students participated in voluntary skills workshops delivered by SLU and took advantage of one-on-one consultations in the Skills for Study program available in all campus libraries.

The Effective Feedback Workshop (EFW) delivered by SLU to the Professional Health Competencies unit teaching team
Strengthening assessment feedback was identified by the unit coordinator as a necessary strategy to support students' academic literacy learning. SLU staff delivered the EFW to approximately 12 Professional Health Competency tutorial staff. The workshop was tailored to facilitate discussion about time constraints for markers, strategies for developing and maintaining quality feedback, and issues and possible interventions specific to the student cohort. A focus of the EFW is developing a consistent metalanguage across teaching staff to confidently and consistently 'diagnose' problematic student writing and also offer a range of constructive suggestions for future improvement.

Unit Coordinator Evaluation – Cathy Tannous
Dr Lisa Armitage from the Student Learning Unit collaborated with me in the unit Professional Health Competencies to achieve 2 aims:

1.   Develop resources that would help students understand the requirements of the first written assignment – an annotated bibliography

2.   Develop marker skills so that more effective feedback could be provided on students' written work

Annotated bibliography

I collaborated with Dr Armitage to develop an annotated bibliography resource sheet specifically tailored to assisting students with their first written assessment. During 2011 students indicated in SFU's that this assessment item was difficult because it was in a format that they were typically unfamiliar with. The assessment item required that students search for 4 resources (1 journal article, 1 book, 1 gov publication, 1 podcast) on a given topic and then after reviewing the item write up a short annotation consisting of a description and evaluation of the source. Proper APA referencing was also required. On Dr Armitage's advice, the number of sources was decreased from 5 (2011) to 4 (2012) to allow students more room to describe each item well enough within the 1000 wd limit. Dr Armitage also provided a 1 hour lecture on different formats of writing, reading, note-taking and paraphrasing. While this collaboration was intense at the beginning, I feel that it was of great benefit to students. It also resulted in a decrease in the number of emails, and discussion board posts regarding the annotated bibliography. For example: Decrease in emails received regarding AB in 2011 = 110; in 2012 =88. Decrease in number of questions posted on the discussion board regarding AB in 2011 = 376; in 2012 = 210.

In 2012 I also presented an additional lecture on how Turnitin is used and ways to use Turnitin to improve writing skills. I believe this lecture, plus the efforts of Dr Armitage's lecture/resource sheet assisted in producing a reduction in the number of assignment submitted with a reduced similarity index in Turnitin. I also believe it alerted students to the importance of writing in their own words. Number of assignment with a similarity index over 30% - in 2011 = 140; in 2012 = 15.

This means that there were more students writing their assignments in their own words, rather than taking words directly from the sources they were reviewing. Please note that the drop in sources from 5 to 4 would have also contributed to this decrease – slightly – as there would have been 1 less reference to cite (and references always contribute to the similarity index), but this outcome is significant. In my experience, during academic misconduct meetings, students typically identify lack of skill as the reason for why they copied another student's work. I did not follow up on academic misconducts for the annotated bibliography in 2011 so it is difficult to make a comparison with the number of students investigated this year. However, I did follow up students in the second – case study assignment – and the number was reduced by half. In 2011 9 students were interviewed for academic misconduct in the case study assignment. In 2012 this number was reduced to 4.

Effective Student Feedback

Dr Armitage also provided a workshop to the unit coordinators and tutors in the units 400871 and 400870 regarding strategies to help improve the type of feedback provided on students' written work. This lecture was recorded and made available (through vUWS) to other tutors not able to attend the session. Verbal feedback from tutors was that it was very helpful. I am currently collating outstanding feedback sheets and will send these to you tomorrow. I randomly checked assignments from different tutors and had noted that the quantity of feedback have improved. I was unable to assess whether there was any change in the quality of comments provided by the marker. The mean number of students indicating that they "were able to learn from feedback received in the unit" had increased in 2012. SFU data for item 5 in 2011 was 3.5; and in 2012 was 3.8 (above school and UWS averages).

2   *Prepared by Dr Lisa Armitage (PVC Education Portfolio) in collaboration with Cathy Tannous, School of Science and Health, UWS*

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Appendix 2

Quality Assurance Review of all 1st year Autumn core units* - Course Report (to be submitted, with endorsement by SAC to Education Committee for each program)

Name of Unit set (Course/Major grouping)_____   Participating Team members (unit coordinators & others)_____

		Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Stuvac	Exam Period
Unit Name:	Assessment Task														
Unit Co-ord Name:	Size (words or time or other indicator)														
	Amount of time it takes the average student to complete (ask students)														
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Unit Co-ord Name:	Size (words or time or other indicator)														
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Unit Co-ord Name:	Size (words or time or other indicator)														
	Amount of time it takes the average student to complete (ask students)														

1. a) Identify the unit with primary responsibility for embedded academic literacy skill development OR identify how academic skill development is embedded and integrated across the units:
   b) What academic skills are being intentionally developed in this core unit(s)?

2. Identify the early, low risk assessment item in the plan ("early" means to be completed and returned before Week 4) and briefly outline the assessment (or attach criteria & standards):

3. Identify the core unit(s) through which student transition messages are to be communicated:

4. Confirm that one referencing style is utilised across all core units and identify that style:

5. Confirm that descriptors for types of assessment items are used consistently across units (i.e. a common descriptor means the same thing in each unit):

6. Confirm that the team agrees that the amount and spread of workload and progressive development of academic skills across the semester is appropriate for a full time 1st year student:

Submitted by: Date: Endorsed by SAC: Date:

* The elements identified for review and assurance are based on best practice principles (Kift, S, *First Year Curriculum Principles*) http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/transitionpedagogy/reportsandresources/principleso1.jsp