

# Engaging diverse first year student cohorts: Moving from theory, through policy, to action.



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Turning Vision into Promising Practice  
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Student success [at university] is largely determined by student experiences during the first year.

Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N., & Barefoot, B. O. (Eds.). (2005). *Challenging and supporting the first-year student*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

# From theory to practice

Student retention is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education...The result has been an ever more sophisticated understanding of the complex web of events that shape student leaving and persistence... But for all that, **substantial gains in student retention have been hard to come by...** More importantly, there is much that we have not yet done to translate our research and theory into effective practice.

Tinto (2006-7, 1-2)

# FYE approaches

- **1<sup>st</sup> generation FYE**
  - Essentially co-curricula – on the curriculum's periphery
- **2<sup>nd</sup> generation FYE**
  - Curriculum focus – enhancing the student learning experience through pedagogy, curriculum design, and L&T practice
- **3<sup>rd</sup> generation FYE**
  - 1<sup>st</sup> *and* 2<sup>nd</sup> generation delivered seamlessly across the institution, its disciplines, programs & services *via* academic & professional partnerships
  - = **Transition pedagogy** –  
*a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts.*

Kift & Nelson (2005)

[http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2005/pdf/refereed/paper\\_294.pdf](http://conference.herdsa.org.au/2005/pdf/refereed/paper_294.pdf)

# A transition pedagogy for a mass sector

- Because of **diversity** – there is a need to change our curriculum approaches
  - *Widening access has fundamentally changed the assumptions that can be made about students' [entry] skills and knowledge. This has not always led to the necessary changes in learning, teaching and assessment approaches.* Johnson (2002, 11)
- Because of **changing patterns of student engagement** (e.g. working longer, attending less) we need to focus on contact we do have with our students
  - **Therefore** primary focus on (virtual & physical) classroom
- **Curriculum** as the 'glue' and the 'organising device'

# New Zealand & Australia

Similar issues in both NZ & Aust: eg –

- Concern around retention, progression & completion; also re student experience, satisfaction & (more recently) engagement [AUSSE]
- Accountability – esp govt intervention & focus on T&L
- [Global] Competition; while ICTs have changed student exp
- Student & staff workloads (including competing demands & resourcing; changing drivers; looking for synergies)
- Effects of student fees AND opportunity costs/waste re attrition
- Increasing diversity of FY cohort in terms of –
  - Preparedness for and expectations of tertiary study
  - Membership of at-risk and equity groups
  - Widening participation → Varied entry level skills & knowledge; differing cultural capital

# Some starter questions for you

- What are your institution's major issues for first year student engagement?
- From the student perspective, how joined-up are your institutional processes around student engagement (e.g, re sessional staff training and support, teaching quality, student services and support, curriculum renewal, leadership, IT infrastructure, staff reward & recognition, etc)?
- What three things do you think you should focus on for maximum effect?

# What matters to retention and the student experience

Scott, G (2006) *Accessing the Student Voice*

→ “*The total experience of university*” is what counts (including interactions with staff, with peers, timely & tailored support, sense of belonging, management of expectations, etc) but also relevantly -

- **Course design**: Clear, coherent, responsive, flexible, relevant, engaging, achievable, and motivating;
- **Assessment**: relevant, consistent & integrated;
- **Feedback**: early, prompt & constructive.

[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/access\\_student\\_voice.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/access_student_voice.htm)

# What is 'curriculum'?

- The whole program of study: including
  - the individual subjects/ modules
  - the 'educational conditions in which we place students' (Tinto, 2009)
    - teaching, learning and assessment; uni, staff and peer contact
    - 'a learning environment: a planned arrangement of space, time, resources, people and ideas' (QUT MoPP)
  - co-curriculum activities offered (outside formal curriculum) with which students are encouraged to engage

The totality of their learning experience with us – academic and social

# First year curriculum objectives for your degree program?

- What do you think the FY curriculum objectives should be?
  - ie, complete this thought –

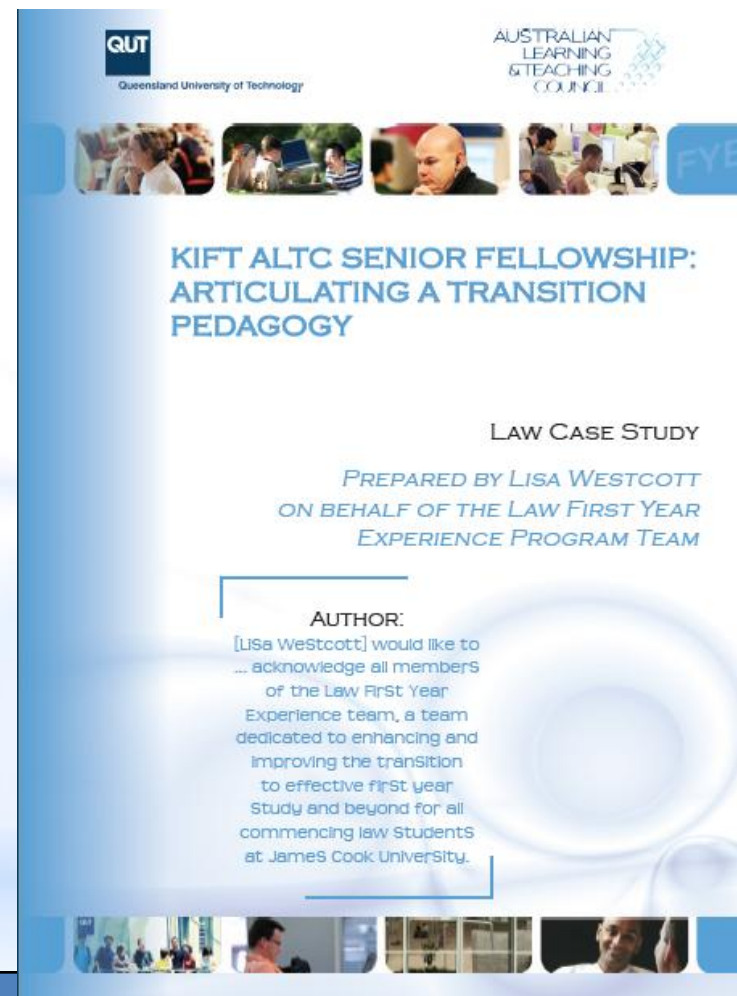
At the conclusion of the first year of the [your degree], you (students) should be able to –



# A Law Case Study of FY Curriculum Design

<http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/articulating-transition-pedagogy-law-case-study-ms-lisa-westcott-james-cook-university-australia>

- Under ALTC Fellowship
- Westcott et al, JCU Law School
- Available on ALTC Exchange at above url
- NB Must first join the Exchange and subscribe to FY Group (instructions at <http://www.fyecd2009.qut.edu.au/resources/> )



# ALTC Law Case Study suggested (1) –

- Effectively delivering a **fully integrated FY educational package** that implements (across all subjects) constructive alignment of learning outcomes, teaching settings and assessment practices;
- Implementing a whole of FY, student-centred approach to **overcome the compartmentalisation of syllabus subject matter**, learning and teaching settings, and assessment;
- Enabling a transformative, **transitional experience that sets the foundations for students** to become self reflexive, independent, responsible learners and ethical scholars;
- Enhancing the **development of FY students' skills and capacities** to reverse unacceptable rates of attrition in first year and later years;
- Encouraging the development of broadly based legal, technological, critical and emotional **literacy of students**; and
- Facilitating an **ongoing team-based approach to staffing and teaching** the FY program that is explicitly **inclusive of sessional staff** to ensure their identification with, and ownership of pedagogical aims of the program.

## ALTC Law Case Study suggested (2) –

- In addition...
- ‘...design team also agreed on a set of key skills and attributes that were to be developed, including:
  - a capacity for self directed learning,
  - reading for comprehension,
  - written and oral communication skills,
  - interpersonal communication skills and teamwork,
  - legal research both in traditional hard copy and electronic form,
  - a capacity to identify legal issues and resolve legal problems,
  - legal method and reasoning,
  - critical analysis,
  - value clarification, and
  - ethical awareness.

## *From theory, through policy, to action*

Getting the context right for staff to get the context right for students.

- What context is that?
- What (if any) policy work needs to be done?
- What is the institutional vision?
- How will this work get done?
- What else (ducks and carrots)?

# Of ducks and carrots



## Action

- Data analysis
- What is good teaching & support
- What is a good student exp
- Leadership & governance across silos
- Area plans
- Top level plan(s)
- Vision

## Reward & recognition



# Evidence of institutional commitment to FYE

- Evidences an ‘institutional commitment to first year student learning & engagement’ and focuses attention on (as per Yorke & Longden, 2008) –
  - Proactive management of student transition;
  - **Curriculum (and co-curriculum);**
  - Emphasis & resourcing the FYE;
  - Systematic monitoring & evaluation of student achievement, and acting on the evidence thereby collected;
  - Academic leadership.

# Coherent institutional context to support FYE

- ***FYE Policy***

EG at QUT, an agreed context for institutional action –

- ‘QUT will deliver a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated approach to the FYE...’ [http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/C/C\\_06\\_02.jsp](http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/C/C_06_02.jsp)
- ***Curriculum Design Policy*** [http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/C/C\\_04\\_02.jsp](http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/C/C_04_02.jsp)  
Refers to: student diversity, engagement, role of FY curriculum in whole of program design, assessment, and ‘standardised monitoring and intervention processes for student engagement in the first year’.
- FYE perspective in T&L roles [http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/B/B\\_03\\_05.jsp](http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/B/B_03_05.jsp)

Supported by more detailed FYE protocols

- ***Policy Protocols: FYE*** [http://www.otq.qut.edu.au/guidelines/protocols\\_fye.pdf](http://www.otq.qut.edu.au/guidelines/protocols_fye.pdf)
- ***Policy Protocols: Orientation & Transition***  
[http://www.otq.qut.edu.au/guidelines/protocols\\_orienttrans.pdf](http://www.otq.qut.edu.au/guidelines/protocols_orienttrans.pdf)
- (Forthcoming) ***Assessment Policy*** and ***Assessment Protocols***

## 2.5 Designing assessment for a whole of course approach from the first year of study

Five key ideas guide the design of assessment for first year students and are also relevant to assessment across the course.

### QUT's Assessment Protocols (April 2009)

(To accompany  
revised QUT  
Assessment  
Policy)

1. **Variety** – provide types of assessment that feature different aspects of learning relevant to the discipline to engage students, cater for diversity in learning styles and to broaden students' learning preferences.
2. **Consistency** – be consistent with the use of assessment terms within a unit and across the first year (e.g. descriptions, weighting and criteria) to reduce confusion for students new to university study. Provide consistency in terms of expected workload and weighting for similar assessment tasks across first year units.
3. **Relevance** – create relevance between the assessment task and unit activities and between the assessment task and the real world to motivate and engage students. Relevant assessment items should provide evidence of graduate capability development and should be suitable for inclusion in the students' QUT or personal portfolio.
4. **Scaffolding** – ensure the process skills as well as the content knowledge that students need to complete an assessment item are taught or practiced and that early feedback and extra support is provided so that students can overcome any areas of difficulty they experience. An assessment related activity should be scheduled within the first four weeks of the semester to provide students with feedback on how they are progressing in the unit. Advice should be provided to students about what to do with the feedback they are given. First year assessment should provide opportunities for peer and self-evaluation.
5. **Monitoring** – ensure that assessment items within a unit and across a course are designed and scheduled to facilitate the monitoring of student engagement in learning. The assessment pattern must be organised so that all first year undergraduate students encounter at least one individual item of formative or summative assessment aligned with unit learning outcomes prior to the withdrawal without financial penalty date.

The course coordinator is responsible for oversight of the curriculum architecture (see MOPP C/4.2) including assuring that the assessment patterns are mapped across the course from first year to the final year and seek to maximise the range of assessment types. This range is not only relevant for *variety, consistency, relevance, scaffolding* and *monitoring*, it is also an important equity principle.

Consistency  
in  
assessment  
to reduce FY  
confusion

Formative  
Assessment  
within first  
four weeks

Assessment  
to facilitate  
monitoring of  
student  
engagement

Attention  
directed to  
process skills  
required to  
complete  
assessment

# Six (6) Curriculum Principles [HE word bingo]

[Concurrent with good teaching and good support]

- Transition
- Diversity
- Design
- Engagement
- Assessment
- Evaluation and Monitoring



A curriculum that does serious transition and retention work!

# A Worksheet

- To plan for enacting a transition pedagogy within the classroom and develop tools for strategising with teaching team leaders.

## *Worksheet – Principles into action for practice*

### Prompts:

- What's my experience?
- What's working now?
- What ideas do these statements trigger for me?
- What can I do?
- How important is this?

# First Year Tertiary assessment literacies: e.g.

- Explanation and consistent use of assessment verbs; consistent naming of assessment tasks;
- Explicit clarification of assessment expectations: eg, how to write, research, orally present in different discipline genres;
- Assist students to make use of examples & model answers;
- Explicit & consistent advice & assistance with referencing & paraphrasing expectations;
- Instruction & proactive support re group/team work;
- Well written criterion referenced assessment (CRA) sheets **AND** 'dialogue' about way criteria and standards will be applied (ASKe, 2008: <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/documents/ASKe%20Intervention.pdf> );
- Assistance with 'what feedback is' & how to make the best use of it (Race, 2009: [http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/Feedback\\_Booklet\\_Phil\\_Race.pdf](http://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/Feedback_Booklet_Phil_Race.pdf) ).

# UK Open University: Am I ready to study in English?

<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=3638&topic=all>

OU Home | Study at the OU | About the OU | Research at the OU | Search the OU | Contact the OU

OpenLearn LearningSpace

Am I ready to study in English? You are currently using guest access ([Log in](#))

Home > LearningSpace > All Units > Study Skills > EAL\_1

Search units | Advanced Search

### My preferences

- Join EAL\_1

### Learning Tools

- Using Learning Tools
- FM Live Communication
- FlashVlog
- Knowledge Maps
- Learning Journals
- Learning Clubs
- Shared Activities
- Activity report
- Unit forum

### Rate and Review

- View reviews
- Give a rating

★★★★★  
Rated by 15 user(s)

### Alternative Formats

- Print this unit
- Unit Content RSS
- Download this unit

### Tags

- QuickStart



Time: 5 hours  
Level: Introductory

### Introduction

Introduction

Are you thinking about starting a college or university course? If so, this unit provides an opportunity for you to reflect on your English language skills. There could be many reasons why you might want...

### 1 Am I ready to study in English?

1 Am I ready to study in English?

### 2 What sort of English do I need to be able to study at higher education level?

2 What sort of English do I need to be able to study at higher education level?

You may well be confident in using English in everyday situations, but the kind of English you need for study is rather different. It is what is known as 'Academic English', or 'English for Academic

### Log in

Username

Password

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### Related educational resources

**OpenLearn links**  
[OpenLearn Scotland](#)

**Open University links**  
Study this topic at the OU  
[open2.net: Education](#)

**OpenLearners also studied:**  
[Knowledge Mapping QuickStart Guide](#)  
[Essay and report writing skills](#)  
[English grammar in context](#)

**Other sites**  
[See other resources](#)

# Open University: Self assessment exercises

- **Reading & understanding** academic course books/materials
  - to help you assess how easy you find it to understand course materials: to get the overall meaning and the key ideas.
- Identifying (and making notes on) main points from written & spoken materials and expressing ideas in own words
- Express concepts & ideas in your own words; summarising
- Structuring & organising your writing so that the meaning of your argument or description is clear
- Using appropriate grammar, punctuation and spelling
- Self assessment grid – for each self-assessment tasks/exercises, select skills box A, B or C.
  - Did task – a) easily, b) with some difficulty, or c) with great difficulty

# Taylor (2008, 23) Strategies for assessment

<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1059&context=jutlp>

## Assessments for development

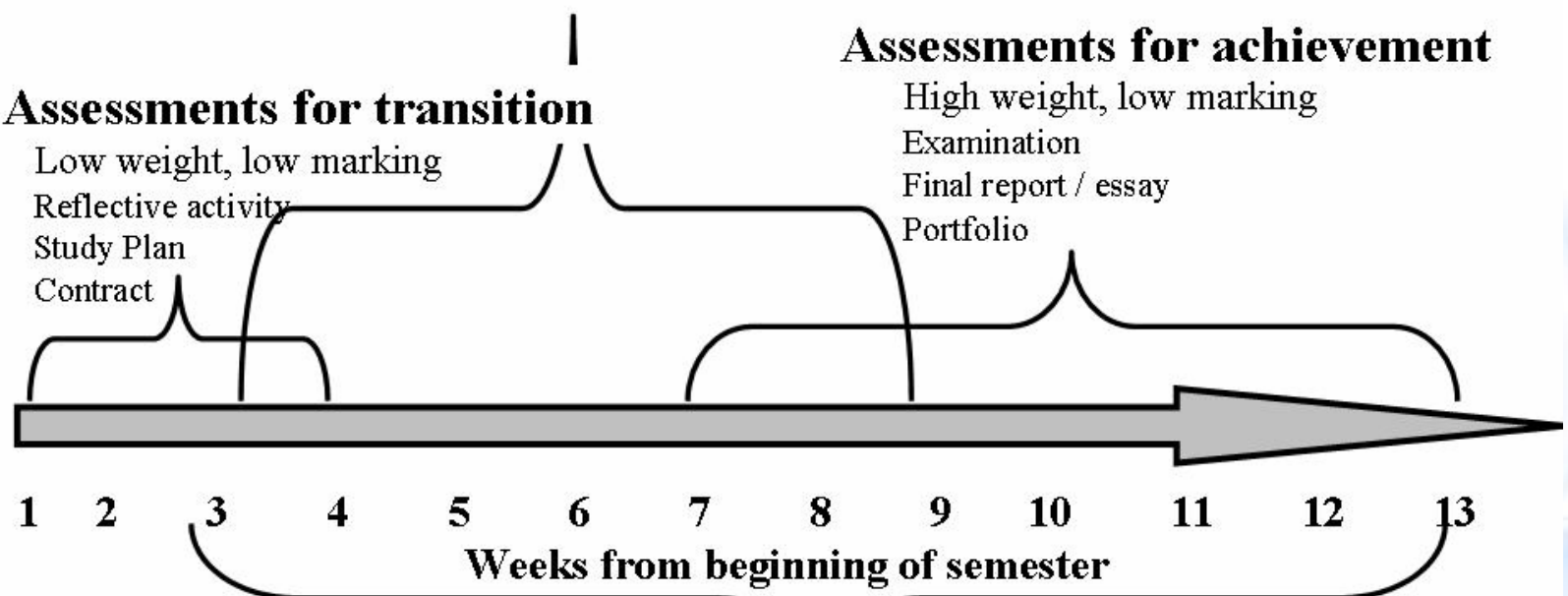
- Low weight, high marking
- Draft essay
- Reading log
- Notes on literature review
- Components of portfolio

## Assessments for achievement

- High weight, low marking
- Examination
- Final report / essay
- Portfolio

## Assessments for transition

- Low weight, low marking
- Reflective activity
- Study Plan
- Contract



Self assessment (formative or partially summative) – no or minimal marking time

# Early low stakes formative assessment eggs (1)

- **FY Maths** (n=800): Wk 2, students reflect on previous maths experiences, confirm vital course information, & develop a study plan. Taylor (2008)
- **FY Communication** (n=500): Preliminary Essay Plan (10% Wk 3) linked to later essay (35%). *Part A*: essay plan with thesis, main points & supporting points. *Part B*: introduction, first body para and bibliography of at least 5 sources. Taylor (2008)
- **FY Engineering & Surveying**: Individual skills audit/ portfolio & team report (20% Wk 3). Team report re agreed team goal; code of conduct & responsibility; guidelines for peer assessment; team meeting plans. Prepares for later, higher %, individual & team tasks. Taylor (2008)

## Early low stakes formative assessment eggs (2)

- **FY Law** (Uni of Melb): Two Wk 1 in-class tasks (returned Wk 2).
  - (1) Class reading & discussion on bullying law: write an opinion.
  - (2) Listen to short lecture on legal topic & write explanation of concept. Basis for development referral (Larcombe & Malkin, 2008)
- **FY Computing** (n=1000). Wk 3 assignment on bulletin board Qs:
  - What operating system are you using? Comfortable with it?
  - What email/ web browser/ WP/ spreadsheet/ etc application?
  - What do you expect to learn from this course?
  - Look at Study Schedule and suggest course aspects likely to benefit you the most.

Large nos, but allows students to reflect on course requirements, see other students' experiences, and give tutors' specific info if students later have technical difficulties (Taylor 2008)

## Early low stakes formative assessment eggs (3)

- **FY History** (Uni of Sydney): large essay assignment is split into three stages: (1) students discuss essay question in groups in tutorials; (2) 10% for prep of draft essay plan & bibliography, with feedback from both tutors and peers; (3) 35% submit final essay. Multiple sources of feedback in time to incorporate into next stage (McCreery, 2005)
- **FY Education** (QUT) Faculty has annotated assessment repository, available on Blackboard for students & staff (including sessional staff) to access examples of different assessment types of assessment and standards of work (i.e., poor, average, good). Links to relevant examples for individual subjects are embedded in subject VLE sites (Healy, 2008)

# A checklist



ALTC Kiri Senior Fellowship

First Year Curriculum Principles: Program Coordinator Checklist.

Articulating a Transition Pedagogy

## First Year Curriculum Principles Program Coordinator Checklist.

First Year Curriculum Principle	Checklist Question
<p><b>1. Transition</b> The curriculum and its delivery should be designed to be consistent and exploit in assisting students' transition from their previous educational experience to the nature of learning in higher education and learning in their discipline as part of their lifelong learning. The first year curriculum should be designed to mediate and support transition as a process that occurs over time. In this way, the first year curriculum will enable successful student transition into first year, through first year, into later years and ultimately out into the world of work, professional practice and career attainment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How are your cohort's orientation and transition needs coherently and relevantly mapped to crucial time periods (such as: immediately after the main offer round; during O Week; over the first weeks of semester, pre-census; over the course of first year)?</li> <li>What information is provided to your students during their Program Orientation? For coordination and consistency, is the extent and nature of this information communicated to first year subject coordinators?</li> <li>Are there any subject coordinators or other teachers in the first year this semester who are new to first year teaching? How are they to be supported?</li> <li>Are students provided with the opportunity to self-assess their entry knowledge, skills and attitudes against discipline expectations (e.g., via ePortfolio)?</li> <li>Is there clear and consistent communication to commencing students regarding expectations and responsibilities, including advice on 'how things work around here'?</li> <li>Is the information provision about programs, processes and procedures pre-enrolment clear, accurate, consistent, and sufficiently detailed to enable informed choice and effective action?</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Diversity</b> The first year curriculum should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students. First year curriculum design should recognise that students have special learning needs by reason of their social, cultural and academic transition. Diversity is often a factor that further exacerbates transition difficulties. The first year curriculum should take into account students' backgrounds, needs, experiences and patterns of study and few if any assumptions should be made about existing skills and knowledge. Diversity in this context includes, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>membership of at-risk or equity groups;</li> <li>widening participation (e.g. non-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the diversity characteristics of the entering cohort? Are there any noticeable attrition patterns amongst particular cohorts? Has this information been communicated to first year coordinators and teachers?</li> <li>Are students clear about where to go to access academic and other support assistance (physically and/or virtually)? Are support pathways clearly and consistently communicated, preferably in a 'just-in-time' and 'just-for-me' way?</li> <li>Are students provided with the opportunity to self-assess and reflect on the diversity of (for example) their learning preference (e.g. VARK's) personality type (e.g. Myers-Briggs) preferred team role (e.g. Belbin's) own cultural 'grab bag' (e.g. cultural competence self-assessment)?</li> <li>Are program documentation and other student communications written in plain English and without the inclusion of administrative and/or discipline jargon?</li> </ul>

QUT

Queensland University  
of Technology

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## Some ideas in closing ...

- Much of what we know and practice for improving the experience of first year students is immediately transferable to later years and contexts.
- Real impact requires institutional level commitment and institution-wide academic and professional partnerships.
- Good practice in the classroom will enhance the learning experience of all students.

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