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Increasing student performance by changing the assessment practices within an academic writing unit in an Enabling Program

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Abstract

The production of high quality academic writing often represents a challenge for students in bridging courses. Often, students lack frequently assumed background skills and knowledge, and may have completed secondary school subjects where extended writing tasks were less common. At the University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus, staff responded to concerns about student progress with academic writing within the Enabling Program. It was determined that a trial of scaffolded assessment may be of benefit to students in the acquisition of the necessary skills and knowledge. Scaffolded assessment intentionally breaks a single assessment task into sub-components and attempts to teach the students to replicate the same process on future tasks. Data tracking over three Semester 1 entry cohorts demonstrated the approach was of benefit in both the unit and the overall course when scaffolded assessment was utilised. The benefits and reservations regarding the use of scaffolded assessment are outlined.

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Preamble

First-year university students often underestimate the demands of writing an essay to the standard required by undergraduate students (Gross, 2004). Many are unaware of the concepts and skills required, such as academic integrity, the use of peer-reviewed publications as sources, and the use of standard referencing systems (e.g. APA, Chicago) (Briguglio & Howe, 2006). With instruction and feedback, most first-year students learn to master the necessary skills, and over time, become proficient and confident as writers of the required genres. Most entrants to Enabling Programs are students who have been unsuccessful in achieving the minimum entry requirements for direct entry into their chosen undergraduate course of study. Enabling Program students are in this position for a wide range of reasons. Many students enter Enabling Programs because subjects chosen in their final years of schooling were inappropriate for their final study destination; in some cases, students have been ill-advised on subject selections. Student maturity, a factor at the time of choosing upper school subjects, can impact on decisions which result in limited opportunities for direct undergraduate entry to university courses. At least some entrants to Enabling Programs have experienced significant educational, social, personal, health and financial disadvantage during their upper secondary years (Gale, 2009; James, 2002; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2004).

In some cases, students in Enabling Programs have attended schools with a non-aspirational culture (Thomson & Hillman, 2010). In some schools, as many as 90% of Year 12 students have chosen to complete courses which do not generate an Australian Tertiary Admittance Rank (ATAR) score. Those students in the minority 10% who have chosen to complete these courses, often face enormous peer pressure, limited options and fewer subject choices within their schools. Fewer subject options may necessitate students choosing alternatives which they would not normally have chosen, or commuting between other school campuses, as well as even completing some subjects by distance education, all of which are disadvantageous for the less academically capable students.

Some students specifically choose to enter university via an Enabling pathway to avoid rigorous subjects in Years 11 and 12. This can be a combination of school counsellor advice, parent advice, parent advocacy, or student self-selection. At times, this is well justified, for example, a student who is unlikely to be successful at that particular time in those ATAR bound courses may well be better to choose non-ATAR bound courses, and use an Enabling Program to enter university. However, it can also be disadvantageous if students are directed away from courses they have the capacity to complete, which would better prepare them for future undergraduate success (Goodrum, Druhan & Abbs, 2012).

Students who use bridging courses to progress to undergraduate studies may be particularly disadvantaged, often having less exposure to extended writing tasks in their final years of schooling, mainly due to their subject selections (Reed, Kennett, Lewis & Lund-Lucas, 2011). Likewise, in bridging courses many are "first-generation students" to university and may lack the family support structures to assist with the necessary skill development (Gofen, 2009, p. 3). Whilst bridging course students are eminently capable of mastering essay writing, they may benefit from an explicit approach. This research considered the use of *scaffolded assessment* with a core unit on

academic writing within a bridging course. The implementation of this was the result of staff dialogue around their perceptions and concerns, based on both their interactions with students and also detailed data tracking of student performance.

The Foundation Year as a Bridging or Enabling Program at The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus, Australia

The Foundation Year is an alternative entry enabling pathway (a bridging course) to undergraduate studies offered at The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus in Western Australia. Through successful completion of the Foundation Year, students may gain entry to undergraduate studies in the Schools of: Arts & Sciences, Business, Education, Health Sciences, and Nursing & Midwifery. The first semester of the Foundation Year (Part 1) is focused on academic reading, writing and research skills. This semester is common to all streams of the Foundation Year and involves the completion of four, 25 credit point units: EP001 *Learning skills*; EP002 *Literacy Competency;* EP003 *Academic Writing;* and EP004 *Information Literacy and Research Skills*. Whilst academically challenging and rigorous, these four units are not intended to be the academic equivalent of standard undergraduate units. EP001 is delivered in an intensive block prior to the start of semester and the remaining three units are completed as standard semester-long 13 week units.

In the second semester of the Foundation Year program (Part 2), students undertake four units in their chosen stream, with the units eligible for future advanced standing in an undergraduate degree. For example, Foundation Year (Education) students would complete four units from the School of Education, which include*: Introduction to Teaching the Curriculum Framework; English 1 – Functional Literacy; Introduction to Mathematics Teaching and Learning;* and *Aboriginal People*. Each stream has a discipline-specific set of three units and *Aboriginal People,* an interdisciplinary unit, is common to all streams.

The University requires, through approved *Course Regulations*, an institutional benchmark of 65% for the successful completion of the four EP coded units, undertaken in the first semester of studies. It is not uncommon for students to be required to repeat an EP unit, which they have passed (i.e. achieved equal to or greater than 50%) and yet not achieved the institutional benchmark of ≥65%. In the second semester of the Foundation Year, undergraduate units require the standard university benchmark of ≥50% in order to be considered satisfactorily completed.

The institutional benchmark (i.e. ≥65% in the four EP-coded units) has developed and been modified over the years, but is designed to ensure that students who are progressing through to undergraduate studies are well prepared for future success. The institutional benchmark was determined on the basis of detailed data tracking of student progress.

An Overview of EP003 *Academic Writing*

EP003, *Academic Writing*, is designed to provide the knowledge, concepts and skills needed to write effectively for academic purposes. That is, students who undertake an English for Academic Purposes (EAP), are very likely to benefit from their learning in EP003 and apply these skills equally well to other disciplines (James, 2010; Zarei & Rahimi, 2014). The emphasis is on skill

development in the areas of: analysing essay questions; strengthening the ability to collate ideas from a variety of sources; planning, drafting and writing essays and assignments; and, determining appropriate text types. Through *Academic Writing*, students should develop their capacity to write an academic essay appropriate to a university-level standard. Intentionally, a highly structured approach is employed with an essay structure, with students at least initially using a formulaic approach. Additionally, students should deeply understand the importance of academic integrity, and the related sub-skills (e.g. paraphrasing, use of direct quotations, referencing from a range of sources, using peer-reviewed publications).

The semester-long unit is delivered as a weekly, three hour workshop, in classes of 20, paired with EP002, also a three hour workshop, both delivered by the same staff member. Prior to Semester 1, 2013, *Academic Writing* required three assessment points; two essays and a final exam. Academic staff teaching the unit deemed that this was problematic for a wide range of reasons, but two key reasons emerged from the collegial discussions. Firstly, Enabling Program entrants are typically underprepared for the demands of academic writing tasks within the university environment. Secondly, it was deemed essential to break the tasks down to make them more manageable for students and to teach the specific skills within each task, in order to develop effective writing skills.

The value of feedback

Feedback provided to learners is designed to increase their awareness of the gap between their current knowledge and skills, and their goals (Boston, 2002). The more specific feedback is, the more it enables a learner to focus attention thoughtfully (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). Hattie (2003) demonstrated that feedback was one of the most significant factors likely to improve student achievement over time. Effective assessment practices can move average students to achieving in the top third of their cohort (Black & Wiliam, 1998). To achieve this, timely feedback on performance, and targeted follow-up, is essential. Scaife and Wellington's (2010) research demonstrates that students are vitally interested in specific feedback, not just a grade or mark. Lecturers have the opportunity to interact with students on a micro level and are able to encourage students to evaluate their own work (Wharton, 2013). Formative assessment is primarily assessment for learning purposes (Tierney, 2006). Colburn (2009) proposes that formative assessment is diagnostic, suggesting the metaphor of a medical test. He adds that it is designed to "understand what a student knows or can do in order to figure out what should come next" (p. 10). Yorke (2003) argues that assessment should have an impact on assessors so that they "learn about the extent to which students have developed expertise and can tailor their teaching strategies accordingly" (p. 482).

Embedded assessment refers to activities which are part of regular teaching and learning activities (Earl, 2003; Wilson & Scalise, 2006). Academic staff working in *Academic Writing* were keen to modify their immediate teaching and learning plans for the workshop based on embedded assessment. However, the highly-structured nature of higher education units (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), and the limited flexibility which is allowed both systemically and organisationally, made this complex. For example, unit outlines, which are institutionally required to be provided to students prior to the

commencement of teaching, are heavy with content and highly prescriptive. The use of this formative information both to learners and to teachers is of potential significant benefit (Irons, 2008). This is particularly true during the first year of higher education "when students are trying to adjust their behaviours to the new academic and social demands of college or university life" (Tinton, 2012, p. 5) Academic staff working in *Academic Writing* determined through collaborative consultation that adopting a scaffolded approach to assessment would possibly address the issue. The scaffolded assessment approach within *Academic Writing* was designed to connect assessments as routine teaching and learning activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Scaffolded assessment

Scaffolded assessment modularises components within an overall assessment, and overtly breaks a large task into smaller chunks (Gipps, 1994). Scaffolded assessment provides support to a novice learner by the experienced teacher breaking down a large task into manageable sub-parts (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Scaffolded assessment is designed as a temporary support mechanism ideally suited to Enabling Program units whilst skills are developed (Kozeracki, 2002). For learners, as their proficiency increases, support is systematically reduced; students accepts incrementally increased responsibility for their own learning. The "gradual release model" (Fisher & Frey, 2003, p. 396) is also an example of a process where the teacher scaffolds instructions to enable students to become successful independent learners. The gradual release model, with responsibility being increasingly undertaken by the learner, "may occur over a day, a week, or a term" (p. 396). For example, in *Academic Writing*, students submit an essay outline (plan) prior to commencing their essay work. The expectation is that they will develop the skills to produce an essay plan when working independently, namely, that this action will be normalised behaviour. Breaking tasks into smaller and more manageable chunks increases the likelihood of students engaging with the task (Leese, 2010). When the task appears daunting, for example, writing a whole essay, at least some students will procrastinate and lose valuable time. Other students will underestimate the time required and commence with insufficient time to complete the task to the required standard (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). Scaffolded assessment is potentially time efficient (Murtagh & Webster, 2010); it helps students to choose the most effective and efficient path in the beginning rather than losing time, particularly with a research cycle phase of writing and planning. In this model, the unit co-ordinator determines the specific elements of scaffolded assessment to ensure consistency (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

The strength of scaffolded assessment depends on timely and valuable feedback from academic staff to students (Lea & Street, 1998). Accordingly, it is essential that students receive detailed feedback (Biggs & Tang, 2011) on their essay outline prior to commencing writing the essay. This necessitates a timely return of assessments to students and therefore creates a significant impost for staff teaching in the units. Conversely, if scaffolded assessment is productive, the marking of the final product (an essay), should be less time-demanding. Scaffolded assessment is counterproductive if it results in students being rewarded for inappropriate or unscholarly behaviour. It is designed to assist hard-working and well-

intentioned students to develop and enhance their skill set. Staff need training to use scaffolded assessment (Murtagh & Webster, 2010) so that it will not inadvertently result in inaccurate or distorted student marks for a particular task.

From pedagogy to andragogy

The years of formal schooling are premised on pedagogy, whereas higher education utilises andragogy, the principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). For many students who transition directly from school to university, this is a challenging shift (Wright, 2010). They are often used to a highly-structured teacher-centric controlling focus, which is well aligned to pedagogical principles. At university level study, andragogical principles reposition students to be independent, self-directing, self-selecting and having the readiness to learn (Kozeracki, 2002; Roberson Jr, 2002). Most undergraduates warmly embrace the change and welcome being treated as adult learners (Noor, Harun & Aris, 2012). Although there are critics of andragogical principles, the principles are "timeless and appl[y] … to adult education in a multicultural world" (Roberson, 2002, p. 2). For some Enabling Program students, this transition can present a number of challenges as a highly-structured approach (Murtagh & Baker, 2009) can be of particular benefit to less academically able students (Ilich, Hagan & McCallister, 2004). On the basis of maturity levels within school leavers, this would appear to have more potential impact on some male learners, who can be less mature than their female counterparts of the same age at that particular time (Jackson & Hilliard, 2013; Liu & Nguyen, 2011). Helping students understand that universities focus on andragogical principles for teaching, learning and assessment, needs to be embedded into the early phases of instruction within Enabling Programs. The use of scaffolded assessment provides a bridge between pedagogy and andragogy principles (Delahaye, Limerick, & Hearn, 1994) for students as they transition between sectors.

Students' results for EP003 *Academic Writing*

Student results over three cohorts were compared to review the effectiveness of scaffolded assessment within the unit. Two cohorts, Semester 1, 2011 and Semester 1, 2012, had completed the unit without

Table 1: ***Academic Writing assessment outline in 2013***

	Assessment	
Item	**Type**	**Weighting (%)**
1	In-class paragraph	5
2	Essay 1: In-class essay	10
3	Essay outline for Essay 2	5
4	Essay 2	15
5	Essay outline for Essay 3	5
6	Essay 3	20
7	Final Exam - Essay	40

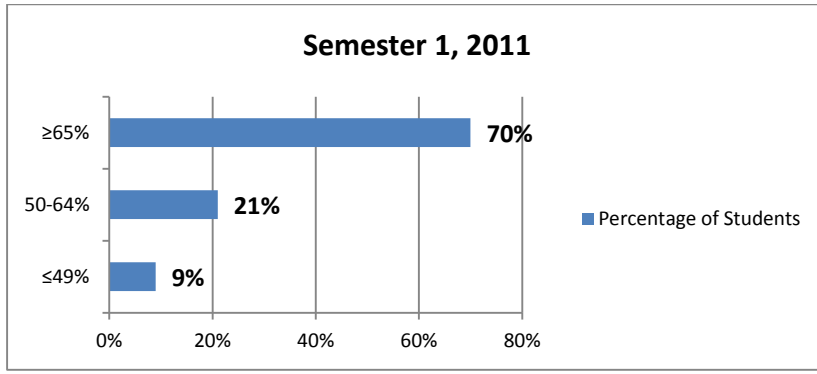

Figure 1*: Semester 1, 2011 students' results for *Academic Writing

scaffolded assessment, whereas Semester 1, 2013, had been taught with the new scaffolded assessment model in place.

In Semester 1 of 2011 and 2012, *Academic Writing* had three assessments – Assignment 1 (Essay 1) with a weighting 25%, Assignment 2 (Essay 2) with a weighting of 35%, and a final exam, with a 40% weighting. In Semester 1, 2013, the principle of scaffolded assessment was implemented with an increase from two assessments to six assessments. Table 1 details the structure of the assessment outline for *Academic Writing* in 2013.

Three categories were identified to record final unit results: less-than or equal to forty-nine per cent. (≤49%), fifty to sixty-four per cent. (50-64%), and greater-than or equal to sixty-five per cent. (≥65%). In Semester 1, 2011, 245 students completed *Academic Writing* (Figure 1). Enabling Program students are required to meet the university benchmark of 65% for successful completion, and for this unit, in Semester 1, 2011, 172 (70%) students reached the benchmark. Students who were unsuccessful in obtaining the benchmark,

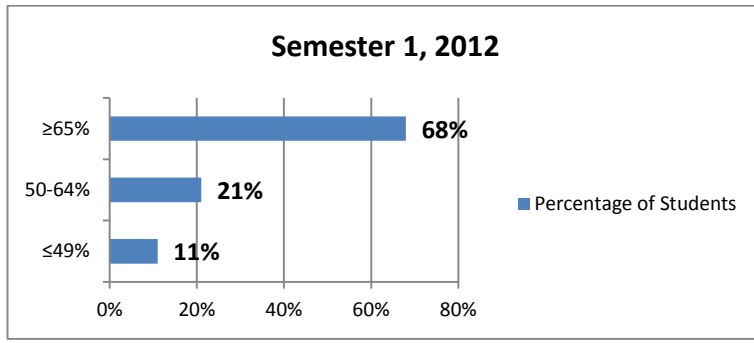

Figure 2:* Semester 1, 2012 students' results for *Academic Writing

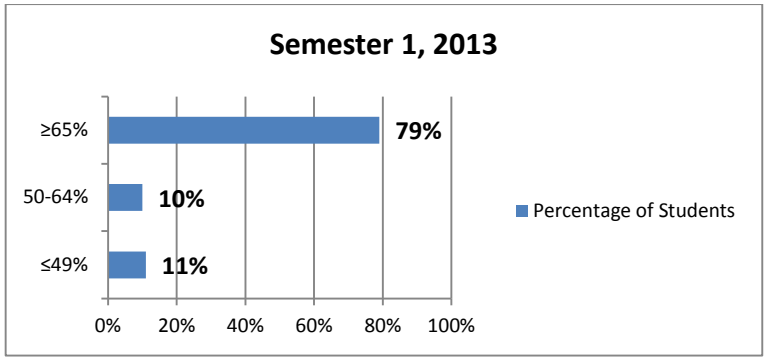

Figure 3: **Semester 1, 2013 students' results for *Academic Writing***

namely 30% (73 students), were required to repeat the unit the following semester.

In Semester 1, 2012, 298 students completed *Academic Writing (*Figure 2). The results for 2012 are similar to 2011, with 203 (68%) students successfully reaching the university benchmark and 95 (32%) students were recorded with unsatisfactory progress. The pedagogical approach and unit content remained unchanged in both 2011 and 2012.

Scaffolded assessment was implemented by the unit coordinator in Semester 1, 2013 and 318 students completed *Academic Writing* – refer to Figure 3. For that semester's cohort, 252 (79%) students reached the university benchmark and 66 (21%) students were recorded with unsatisfactory progress. There was a statistically significant shift of the number of students within the category of 50-64% to ≥65%, with an additional 11% (35

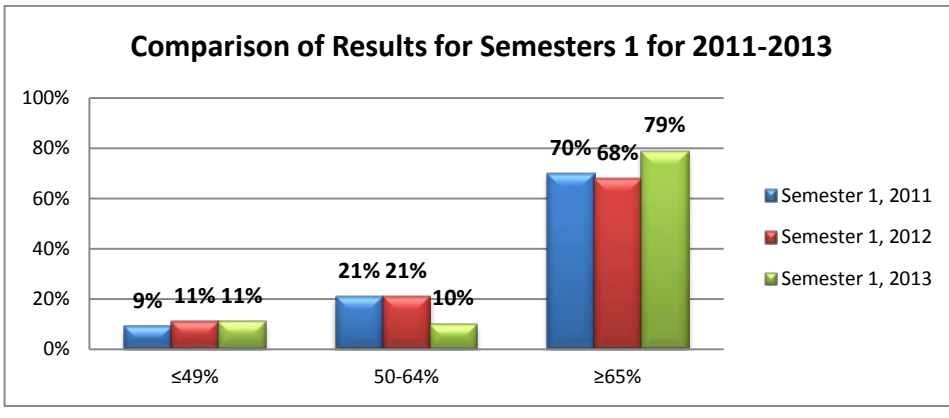

Figure 4: **Comparison of students' results for Semesters 1 for 2011-2013**

students) now meeting the university benchmark.

The student results for Semester 1, 2013, Figure 4, were in contrast to the previous two semesters, wherein there was a significant increase in successful completion of *Academic Writing.* In 2013, 79% of students achieved the benchmark (>65%) compared to 2011 – 70%, and 2012 – 68%; a 10-12% variation respectively. In the 50-64% range, 10 (31%) students did not meet the benchmark, an 11% variation for both 2011 and 2012. There was minimal/no change in data results across the three semesters for the category ≤49% (2011 – 9%, 2012 – 11% and 2013 – 11%).

A one-way ANOVA test was performed to determine whether the differences in mean *Academic Writing* scores were statistically significant (Table 2). The *p*-value produced was .04, which confirms that there is evidence to conclude that the mean *Academic Writing* score achieved by students was different for at least one group of students based on the semester in which they studied. Post-hoc testing showed that the most significant differences in *Academic Writing* scores were between Semester 1, 2013 and Semester 1 and Semester 2, 2012 respectively.

Students who obtained the institutional benchmark of ≥65% for *Academic Writing* from Semester 1, 2013, 88% (n=221), went on to complete Part 1 of the Foundation Year program satisfactorily. Students who achieved the benchmark in *Academic Writing* were able to meet the benchmark for the other three units, which then allowed them to transition successfully to Part 2 of the Foundation Year program.

Student Comments

Student feedback, via the University's Unit Content Evaluations, indicated that the majority found *Academic Writing* to be the most rigorous and academically challenging of the units within the first part of the Foundation Year program. Student feedback for the new model included:

- *The structure of the assessments were helpful in organising and assembling an academic essay;*
- *Receiving lecturer feedback in a timely manner assisted in the next assessment;*
- *The assessments are broken down and makes it easier to comprehend the information being taught; and,*
- *The unit was challenging at times, but overall it was beneficial to my learning.*

Table 2: ***ANOVA Test for Semesters 1 for 2011-2013***

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Between Groups	2147.165	2	1073.583	3.240	.040
Within Groups	283928.085	857	331.305		
Total	286075.250	859			

The feedback from students indicates the new scaffolded assessment was practical, improved learning outcomes and, indirectly, reinforced the benefits of scaffold assessment. Furthermore, Unit Content Evaluations for Item 5—*The content and instructional activities of the unit were interesting and stimulating*—revealed benefits of the new model. Item 5 scored 4.36 for the previous semester, and 4.45 for the semester with scaffolded assessment. The Unit Mean Rating also increased from 4.20 for the previous semester to 4.31 the following semester.

Lecturer Comments

A qualitative analysis of lecturer comments was conducted to provide another dimension for the use of scaffolded assessment. Lecturers noted that a number of students had used the same structural elements within the assessment task within the examination, for example, identifying their opening paragraph, thesis statement, essay structure, and prior planning to write the essay. One lecturer noted in the invigilated assessment of the examination of the unit, the preparation techniques used throughout *Academic Writing*, were apparent in the students' work (A. Scriva, Personal Communication, July 8, 2013). That students were able to transfer their knowledge and skills to an invigilated task is certainly a positive outcome of the process, albeit, it was not anticipated in the planning of the unit. It confirmed for the staff that at least some students were capable of transferring the knowledge of scaffolded assessment and applying it to their future work.

Discussion

Scaffolded assessment appears to have been central to changes to *Academic Writing* through introducing a lower-weighted (5%) assessment item before a higher-weighted (10-20%) assessment item. The rationale was to encompass both formative (feedback to improve future performance) and summative (marks and grades) assessment domains as feedback. One of the noted advantages of the use of scaffolded assessments in the early phases of *Academic Writing* is the capacity of a lecturer to provide students with feedback which will help them identify immediately the likelihood of them developing the necessary skills and abilities. Students would receive feedback from the lower-weighted assessment before progressing to the higher-weighted assessment item. This proved beneficial as students were guided to start the essay in advance and avoid any negative study strategies, such as procrastination and lack of time management skills for producing an academic essay. For these students, scaffolded assessments will assist them to realise the complexity of writing an academic essay and receive effective feedback for reflection and future growth. These support mechanisms will assist students for successful completion of the unit as well as effective strategies for undergraduate study.

Anecdotally, lecturers found this to be a powerful tool with students, many of whom had progressed through the formal years of schooling without the experience of failure, which is effectively denied by many of the reporting mechanisms that they have encountered. Failing an item has the potential to be of significant value to learning, and helps these incoming students to create a benchmark for themselves of where they need to be in comparison to where they are, and to realise the level of work effort and determination that will be required of them in order to achieve progress. Again, the results were only anecdotal, but in talking with students

throughout the semester, staff reported that those for whom they had used this strategy, reflected that it had been of great benefit to them, despite its apparent harshness.

The use of specific feedback also addressed the issue of a well-intentioned student spending time on work which was fundamentally flawed. For example, the feedback enabled students to respond to their opening paragraph or to their thesis statement and to address a fundamental issue in the very beginning of an essay. The incorrect use of a thesis statement or the absence of a thesis statement in an essay have previously been common issues for poor performers within the academic writing tasks. The timeliness of feedback takes on a whole new dimension when it serves to hold progress in order to address a problem, which will remain an inherent issue in an assignment.

Commonly, students had underestimated the time involved in writing an essay to the necessary academic standards. The due dates for the first assessment in *Academic Writing* correlated to a spike in students seeking to take a period of leave of absence from their course. Semester 1, 2013, had a higher rate of attendance than previous semesters with ≥90% on average within sampled groups. Students received individual and collective feedback on assessments in-class, which appears to have been linked to their increased participation. The previous spike of absences in weeks when *Academic Writing* assessments were due all but disappeared. It was also noted by staff that students participated more frequently with in-class discussions and were more engaged with the content material, which may be a by-product of simply increased attendance.

Academic Writing is deemed an essential unit in Part 1 of the Foundation Year program. The content in *Academic Writing* is structured so that students will be able to transfer these skills to the other two units completed at the same time. EP002 *Literacy Competency*, and EP004 *Information Literacy and Research Skills* depend on the knowledge and information that students gain in *Academic Writing* for success. Conversely, the sub-skills and micro skills within EP002 and EP004, help students to develop the necessary essay writing skills which are promoted though *Academic Writing*. Data have indicated students who achieve greater than 65% for *Academic Writing* also improved their performance in EP002 and EP004. Prior to the use of scaffolded assessment, the assessments in *Academic Writing* were far larger than the assessments in EP002 and EP004, and therefore, *Academic Writing* was more likely to be a unit linked to student attrition.

Scaffolded assessment appears to have an unintended and positive impact on student retention with the Enabling Program. Much of the feedback on the use of scaffolded assessment came through organic and spontaneous discussions with staff teaching this unit. Through that dialogue, one of the clearest benefits for both staff and students was the increased feedback being provided from lecturers on assessment items. Staff reported that students demonstrated a perception that this created a more open dialogue between themselves and their lecturer. Because the tasks were very specific within the scaffolded assessment, it allowed the feedback to be correspondingly specific and directive, which appeared to be of increased benefit to future student outputs. It was noted that students were willing to respond to the feedback, and the staff perception was that their students responded more than they had previously to all-encompassing feedback, which was more common prior to the use of scaffolded

assessment. That is, staff felt that students were able to embrace the smaller more specific feedback than the feedback that had been previously provided, when giving it on the whole essay. Pedagogically, staff understood the importance of high quality feedback for student improvement to occur, but many reported that the use of scaffolded assessment enabled them to see this in action. It may be that this approach has modified their teaching approach to student assessment in other units and other assessments. This topic warrants further investigation.

Students who have completed *Academic Writing* may well become reliant on scaffolded assessment and expect the same assessment strategy for undergraduate units. This may inadvertently affect students when they commence undergraduate study. If the use of scaffolded assessments results in students being dependent on the approach, rather than being up-skilled by its use, then it potentially has a negative long-term impact, albeit a very positive short-term impact. Lecturers at the end of the semester may need to inform students of the implementation of scaffold assessments and, more importantly, the proposed guidelines of assessments for undergraduate units in the following semester. The rationale for this strategy would be to alleviate the potential risk of students becoming dependent learners and reliant on low-weighted assessments.

In the context of the gradual release model (namely, independence) the scaffolding within this unit should reduce over time, and students should specifically understand the rationale for its use. The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus has begun a detailed long-term tracking process on Enabling Program students who completed the unit prior to scaffolded assessment being implemented and, then with scaffolded assessment implemented on later cohort groups, to determine whether this concern represents an issue that needs to be addressed.

In the 2013 iteration of *Academic Writing*, the assessment outline included a breakdown of the tasks and their weighting. With hindsight, the unit also needed a detailed rubric or marking guide, which would help the students explore each of the dimensions of the tasks quite specifically. This was provided on a lecture-by-lecture basis within the tutorial groups. However, having this clearly set out in the unit outline would have been advantageous for all students.

In terms of the lowest band of performance, namely students finishing the unit with a fail grade, there was minimal change in the data across the three semesters. As the data demonstrated, there is no upward trend across the whole group. The weakest students were not more likely to pass the unit through the addition of scaffolded assessment. The impacts were seen within the students who had the capacity to pass the unit, but had not previously met the institutional benchmark (equal to or greater than 65%). Students failing the unit were most often those who had a significant lack of skills, or failed to demonstrate the necessary academic self-discipline needed to be successful (e.g. having poor performance; less engagement in class). Whilst it is always desirable to see fewer students fail a unit, none-the-less, the contention remained that lecturers involved did not want implementation of scaffolded assessment to result in an inappropriate grade inflation across the unit. Potentially, such an approach may result in a short-term advantage, where the less able students were inadvertently set up to fail in subsequent undergraduate units

and would be less able to self-manage with independence.

Conclusion

The use of scaffolded assessment appears to have had a dramatic and positive impact on student engagement, retention, attendance and relationships with teaching staff. Staff concerns that the use of scaffolded assessment may result in student dependence on the strategy, and grade inflation, were not realised in this study, but warrant detailed student tracking which has been established. The implementation of scaffolded assessment resulted in significantly increased staff dialogue about teaching and learning, and appeared to be motivating for the staff concerned. This, and other positive yet unintended consequences, may have been significant factors in the improved student performance. Student receptivity to feedback resulted in staff providing notably high quality and specific feedback, and although staff noted the increased workload, none considered this a negative outcome. In future semesters, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus will continue to track closely the scaffolded assessment approach to student progress to ensure that grade inflation is not occurring in students progressing to undergraduate units.

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