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FYE Showcase Abstracts
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But I used to be good at biology!

Dr Elisa Bone
School of Earth and Environmental Science
University of Adelaide
Adelaide
elisa.bone@adelaide.edu.au

Keywords
high school transition, large classes, Biology 1

Introduction
The purpose of this study was to try to understand why students prosper or perish in their first semester of learning at university. Our investigation centred on the background and performance of students in a typical large first year basic biology subject. The data include an analysis of their subject choice at high school, age when entering university, and whether they were local or international students. Further, the learning styles of a subsample of students, and a potential method to increase their independent learning, are evaluated.

Context
The transition from high school to university encompasses a wide range of issues for students, including but not limited to: lecturing rather than classroom teaching, a need to be more self-motivating and self-reliant, differences in assessment, large class sizes and often impersonal teaching styles, uncertainties about how to obtain help, and juggling of university and part-time employment. The students in this study were all doing Biology 1: Molecules, Genes and Cells (MGC), a first semester subject at the University of Adelaide. MGC is a subject which attracts a broad enrolment from a diverse range of academic programs and in 2008 comprised over 700 students.

Action taken
We extracted data from files containing the Year 12 subject choices and results for a subsample of students completing MGC in 2008. These data included whether the student had done biology and/or chemistry previously, what mark they received in biology, if they were local or international students, and their age at commencing the subject. During semester, a survey was issued to a subsample of students, evaluating their learning styles. In addition, an attempt was made at the end of the subject to interview students from different backgrounds and from different academic programs to gauge their experiences. Unfortunately, such focus groups were very hard to organise and therefore the responses obtained may not be representative of the cohort. An assessment was also made about the efficacy of providing comprehensive lecture notes to students before lectures as opposed to making them available only after the lecture was presented.
Tips and tricks

Perhaps the most obvious outcome from the study was the improvement in engagement in lectures when students were not provided with full lecture notes prior to lectures. Instead a ‘lecture preparation guide’ was made available online several days beforehand. This guide suggested which parts of the textbook should be read, posed questions, and provided a basic framework of the lecture for students to complete, either before or during the lecture. The full PowerPoint file was made available online after the lecture. Some lecturers adopted this approach while others provided varying degrees of lecture material up to a full printout prior to the lecture. Analysis of the results for the different sections of the exam showed that the less provided before the lecture, the higher the score. This was consistent with the subjective observations, from focus groups, that some students found the guides useful, but an equal number resented the additional work.

Results, evaluation, impact

Poor correlation between MGC score and mark in Year 12 Biology

There was a surprisingly poor correlation between marks obtained in biology at Year 12 and those obtained in MGC (Figure 1). A significant number of students who had obtained between 60 and 90% at Year 12 failed MGC. This anomaly is worrying and the purpose of our current study is to try to understand the reasons behind the poor performances.

![Figure 1: Final scores in MGC compared with scores in Year 12 Biology](image-url)
Chemistry is more useful than Biology at Year 12 level

MGC introduces students to the chemistry of basic biomolecules and to chemical interactions involved in protein structure, enzyme action and genes. Students who completed only Chemistry at Year 12 level performed better than students who only completed Biology, but the best performers were students that completed both subjects at Year 12 level (Figure 2). The results suggest that prior learning, but not necessarily in Biology, is advantageous to performance in Biology at the tertiary level. Indeed, in our subsample of students who only completed Biology at Year 12 level, the average mark was a fail.

International students perform better than local students

The University of Adelaide attracts large numbers of students from overseas, particularly Asia. Many of these students struggle with English and experience problems adjusting to the culture. Despite this, international students performed slightly better than local students, as did students from overseas who are now permanent residents in Australia (Figure 3). It is probable that because many of the international students are full fee paying, they have a greater incentive to succeed and therefore work harder and seek help more often, but further investigation is needed.
Mature age students are average performers

The variation in marks for students coming directly from high school was large, but for mature age students, the variation decreased with increasing age at commencement. Few of these students did well, but equally few did very badly. For these students, the greater need to balance work and family may prevent them from spending more time than is necessary to achieve a passing grade. Alternatively, the lack of recent learning may have been a factor.

Students retain shallow learning styles

Of 121 students whose learning styles were evaluated, most (n = 67; 55%) showed a dominant reproducing orientation (for example, rote learning), with 23% showing an achievement orientation (for example, strategic learning), and only 19% a dominant meaning orientation (for example, interest in the material, application of information). Retaining a reproducing learning style will reduce a student’s overall understanding and performance throughout university studies.

Reduced lecture notes improve performance

Replacing full lecture notes with lecture preparation guides improved student performance, with final exam marks for subject sections using only lecture preparation guides being significantly higher than marks in sections where full lecture notes were given (67.11 ± 0.77% versus 49.04 ± 0.87%; P < 0.001). Further evaluation of these measures will be undertaken.

Further resources

Nil.

Contact details
Postal address (work): Elisa Bone
School of Earth and Environmental Sciences
DX650 418
University of Adelaide
Adelaide SA 5005

Email: elisa.bone@adelaide.edu.au; Phone: (08) 830 36127; Fax: (08) 830 36222
An institution-wide approach to retaining and supporting first year students

Dr Lynn Burnett
Griffith Institute for Higher Education
Griffith University
l.burnett@griffith.edu.au

Keywords:
design; engagement; institution-wide cultural change process; leadership; professional development and support for academic staff supporting first year students

Context
The Higher Education sector in Australia has experienced spiralling attrition rates, major changes to Government funding and unprecedented massification (Krause, 2006; 2005; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Australian-based research in particular has been influential in shaping ways in which the sector has responded to student needs, especially first year students, in the context of these changes (Burnett, 2006; Krause, 2006; 2005; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Lizzio, 2006¹; 2006²; Lizzio & Peters, 2004; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). This showcase briefly outlines an institution-wide initiative to address some of these challenges.

Griffith University is a multi-campus public university in south-east Queensland, Australia. There are approximately 30,000 students enrolled across five campuses. Each campus is diverse in relation to its location, programs offered, and student cohort. The university offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs across a range of disciplines. Given the changes in the Australian Higher Education sector, Griffith University has taken a pro-active stance and embarked upon cultural change designed to enhance the quality of first year students’ experience and improve learning and teaching within the institution. These initiatives have top-down support in the form of long-term personal and financial commitment from senior administration (Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality and Student Outcomes)), as well as bottom-up schemes that recognise, develop, and support the local capacity to work towards effective and collective institution-wide cultural shifts.

Action taken
Early work began with the Griffith Retention Project (Lizzio & Peters, 2004) and the instigation of multiple First Year Advisor (FYA) roles held by academic members of staff within each of the university’s four organisational groups in 2006 (Lizzio, 2006¹; 2006²). Each of the FYAs is supported by their group Dean/Deputy Dean (Learning and Teaching). A framework was developed by Lizzio (2006¹) which investigates the five senses of success for students, staff and the institution. Each of the three areas of student, staff, and institutional activity and experience can be unpacked and understood in terms of the five senses of success and reflection. The framework connects complex bottom-up and top-down activity and allows for multiple data points and inputs.

The FYAs are academic members of staff who understand, and are interested in, first year students, their issues and experiences.
First Year Advisors:

- help students settle into their first year of university study
- assist students to become self-managed learners and take responsibility for their studies and career
- facilitate orientation and on-going activities to support students at the local level
- engage in the scholarship of learning and teaching, focusing particularly on the first year
- provide leadership in enhancing the first year experience.

Midway through 2007 the appointment of an FYA University-wide Coordinator was made within the university’s Institute for Higher Education (GIHE). Previously, the position was a fixed term seconded position facilitated by the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). The creation of a continuing FYA Coordinator position within the GIHE signalled a commitment by the university’s senior management for ongoing support and growth of the FYA role within the University. The focus of this new role from the later part of 2007 onwards has been on developing appropriate structures, resources, and supports for greater impact of the FYA role within the university and ongoing practical planning and resource development. This multi-dimensional approach continues to inform work, both locally and institutionally.

Activities, resource development and support for FYAs in relation enhancing the first year student experience, and ultimately improvement in institution-wide retention rates, is informed and supported by:

- the University’s Planning and Quality Framework Assurance System (PIRI Model which is a systematic planning (P), implementation (I), review (R), and improvement (I) cycle)
- the University’s Strategic Academic Plan 3: Learning for Success
- a Student Experience Model (Burnett, 2007)
- a large scale, systematic, institution-wide commencing students’ survey (Student Orientation and Engagement Committee, 2005; 2006; 2007, 2008)
- additional discretionary funds at the end of 2007/beginning of 2008 for those FYAs wishing to access a 50% workload allocation in their overall workload (40/40/20 — teaching/research/service)
- the development of a document which provides exemplars of activities for those seeking a 50% workload allocation (Wilson, 2008)
- funding for up to 20 FYAs to attend the Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education conferences in 2008 and 2009 were provided by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Student Outcomes) to support FYA professional development and encourage networking within the wider Australian first year experience arena.

Strategies

There are many strategies one can use to bring about strategic enhancement of first year student experience at an institution-wide level. Eight of the most important are:

**Coordinated activity and communication:**

- to gather and disseminate information in ways which facilitate, support, and sustain both local level activity and institution-wide change;
- to encourage and support people involved in local level activity to record their actions and reflections (for example, development of evidence-based practice);
• to develop communication structures which work at different levels; for example, a website to share information and resources, regular meetings with a variety of key stakeholders, and regular official events to share and celebrate at both a local and whole of institution level;
• to identify the voice of key stakeholders (this includes the student voice) and ensure the feedback loop is closed; and
• to establish clear role statements, expectations, and guidelines for staff and students.

An evidence-based approach is essential for monitoring, recording, reflecting and evaluating activity and ongoing cultural change processes.

Recognition and visibility of people working at the coal face. This can be done through the hosting of events, funding, awards, or personalised letters from senior administration.

Funding is essential for supporting and growing local level activity.

Systematic recognition and measurement of the impact of local and institution-wide initiatives (for instance, solely focusing on attrition rates as a means of gauging success in retaining and meeting the needs of undergraduate students is hazardous).

Authentic encouragement, recognition and support from the highest levels and a visible champion in a position of power and authority.

Recognition of advance standing/transfer students (for example, QIBT and TAFE) and postgraduate students as first year or new to the university. There is a need to develop strategies and resources for this cohort of students.

Student experience model (Burnett, 2007) — need to engage in learner-centred, proactive initiatives and activities, rather than activity that is reactive.

Results, evaluation, and impact

Griffith’s four organisational groups (Arts, Education and Law (includes the Queensland College of Arts and Queensland Conservatorium of Music); Business; Health; and Science, Environment, Engineering and Technology) have established the FYA role within different timeframes. Each of the groups has identified varying needs, issues and student cohorts that have informed and shaped work at the local level. Given this, the FYA role is uniquely outworked within each group context and not surprisingly has varying levels of integration and acceptance. However, increased recognition, acceptance, and appreciation of the role from the student perspective is clearly reflected in the Starting@Griffith survey data at an institution-wide level (Student Orientation and Engagement Committee, 2006; 2007, 2008) (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Sense of resourcefulness — awareness of staff in key roles, university-wide:
I know the First Year Advisor for my degree program
Griffith University’s long-term strategic engagement of improving first year student experience and retention at the macro, meso, and local levels is through a student-centred approach. The implementation of the FYA role at program level has been pivotal in this endeavour of engaging in an institution-wide change capable culture (Scott, 2007; Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). Research by Zepke, Leach, and Prebble (2006), like research conducted by Yorke and Thomas (2003), suggests that a student-centredness approach, ‘improves retention where students feel they belong in an institutional culture, where they experience good quality teaching and support for their learning and where their diverse learning preferences are catered for’ (598).

Further resources
Nil.

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Ready Set Go! A partnership approach to developing academic skills for first year students

Ms Margaret Carmody
Academic Skills Unit Australian Catholic University
Canberra Campus
Margaret.Carmody@acu.edu.au

Keywords
transition, design, involvement

Context
The Ready Set Go! Program is offered jointly by the Academic Skills Unit and the Lewins Library on the Canberra Campus of Australian Catholic University. It is an example of Academic Skills involvement in students’ transition to university and is intended to enable students to learn how to study effectively, to use the resources of the Library and draft an assignment. It is part of the First Year Experience Program and it was designed by Margaret Carmody, Academic Skills Adviser and Kate Bunker, Librarian, as a project for the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. It has been running for three semesters and has been evaluated in the Englishelp Project (Carmody, 2008). The Ready Set Go! Program is the result of extensive liaison with the academics on campus and it ties in with the assignments that the students will have to complete.

Action taken
Students can complete the program entirely online or they can attend face-to-face group sessions. There are one hour sessions offered each week for the first four weeks of both semesters. That is, four contact hours to complete the program face-to-face. Students receive a certificate on completion which is an important opportunity for acknowledging student achievement (Brady and Kennedy, 2005).

The Ready Set Go! Program covers a range of study skills such as:
- Tips for study
- Exploring the ACU website, particularly the Academic Skills and Library pages
- Understanding referencing
- Using library resources
- Finding suitable materials on databases
- Drafting an assignment
- Everything you need to know to use the Library confidently.

How it relates to other student activities
The Ready Set Go! Program is closely related to the subject Introduction to Writing offered by the Academic Skills Unit during the week before Orientation Week, and repeated during semester. It is also closely related to the writing requirements for first year subjects of the programs offered by the Schools of Education, Nursing, Theology and Social Work.
At completion of this subject, students will know how to:

- Experience learning through audio and visual multimodal texts
- Express themselves clearly and succinctly in writing
- Reference accurately
- Use the Library webpage
- Find resources, both print and electronic
- Access the Library from off campus
- Define their research strategy
- Evaluate research materials.

**Here’s the program**

The four weekly topics are:

2. Referencing and understanding reading lists. What’s a journal, a book, an electronic source? Does it matter?
4. Getting trickier — tips and tricks for using the library. From thoughts to words: drafting your assignments.

The Ready Set Go! Program is team taught by staff from the Academic Skills Unit and the Lewins Library. This approach ensures that students understand the different resources offered by each area and that they feel confident to use both the Academic Skills Unit and the Library.

**Results, evaluation, impact**

In the Englishelp Project (Carmody, 2008), the Ready Set Go! Program was identified as a contributor to student success in the first semester of first year. In the Englishelp Project, students undertook a literacy test during Orientation Week and the results of this test were compared with the results from the examination in the subject EDLA108 Children’s Literature for Literacy. The literacy test was designed with Frager’s (1991) considerations in mind. It is an essay style test, which avoids the pitfalls of standardised testing (Wiggins, 1989; Williams, 2005; Haney and Masaus, 1989). The Children’s Literature subject itself is a particularly suitable vehicle for teaching literacy skills to tertiary students (Tan, 2001; Nixon-Ponder and Marshall, 1996; Heydon, Hibbert and Iannacci, 2004).

There was marked improvement in the results: this finding was made in the light of the writing of Lien (1967), Lyman (1991) and Masters and Keeves (1999). As the skills tested in both examinations were being taught in the Ready Set Go! Program, participation in that Program could have influenced the results. Over 40% of first year students participated in the Ready Set Go! Program in Semester 1 2008, with the highest proportion being Bachelor of Nursing students, followed by Bachelor of Education (Primary & Early Childhood). One possible explanation for this is that the nursing students were all in second year, having completed the Enrolled Nurse course at TAFE. This points to the need to be aware in designing a Program such as Ready Set Go! of the particular problems associated with younger students (Choy and Delahaye, 2007).
Online features

Nearly twice as many students participated online as those who attended the sessions. One of the features of the online version is that students can dip in and out of it and just do the parts that they need. Another feature of the online version is that students with disabilities such as vision impairment and language learning disability can fully access the program. This is similar to the Introduction to Writing which, while only offered in classes, is also available electronically in a format that has enabled a student with vision impairment to fully participate in the classes.

Further resources

It is important in the 21st century that Academic Skills moves away from a model of intervention for students identified as being at-risk and moves into a model of involvement. That is, Academic Skills is involved in the students’ study program from the first time the students visit on Open Day, right to the end of their studies. The reason this is important is that identifying students as being at-risk has inherent social justice implications of limiting the service to only those students. It is clear from the huge proportion of students who participated in Ready Set Go! That it was not just the traditional at-risk students who participated. Students who do well are also entitled to the benefits of the Academic Skills Unit’s various offerings.

The Academic Skills Unit is involved in three major ways in the students’ first year experience.

1. **Preparation for study.** In this area, the ASU plays a prominent role in Open Day and Orientation. Students are welcomed, the Introduction to Writing is provided in the week before Orientation Week, and then repeated on a weekly basis during semester.

2. **Side by side teaching.** The Ready Set Go! Program is timed to line up with the skills in writing and research that are required of students as they progress through their first semester. As an example, the first assignment for the subject Children’s Literature for Literacy is a short book review due in Week 2. The skills of researching for this review are covered in the first two sessions of the Ready Set Go! Program. In this side by side approach, the Academic Skills Adviser is available to assist academics with their preparation for teaching (Forsythe, Jolliffe and Stevens, 1999) and in ensuring that the assessment will provoke learning (Earl, 2003). The Academic Skills Adviser can also assist the academics with choice of methods of assessment, ensuring they are comprehensible and appropriate (Athanasou, 1997).

3. **Enhancement of skills.** As students are doing assignments and they start to get work returned, they become aware of skills they need to develop. The Ready Set Go! Program enhances these skills, so they can confidently continue their studies.

In this conceptualisation of Academic Skills, the Academic Skills Adviser is involved with the student throughout their degree. They are directly involved by providing programs such as the Introduction to Writing and the Ready Set Go! Program. They are also directly involved by running lunchtime Study Skills Workshops and providing individual consultations during semester. But the Academic Skills Adviser is involved on a more subtle level through liaison with the academics who are teaching the subjects and the providers of other services such as the Library, the First Year Experience Committee and the Orientation Committee.
Success for all students

This combination of direct and subtle involvement has as its aim to ensure that the needs of all students are met, that the most ill prepared right up to the exceptionally gifted student will be successful as they tackle their assignments. It also ensures that there is full participation of all students, including those with disabilities and those from other equity groups. In this model, Academic Skills becomes a major participant in the lives of all students. It is a parallel universe, running alongside the student, there to assist as and when required. The Ready Set Go! Program is an example of successful involvement of the Academic Skills Unit in the lives of first year students.

References


Collaborative student marking of weekly assessment in first year physiology

Dr Lisa Chopin  
School of Life Sciences  
Queensland University of Technology  
l.chopin@qut.edu.au

Keywords  
assessment, engagement, peer assessment, discussion

Context
First year physiology students, particularly in professional courses (including optometry, podiatry and medical science), are required to learn a large amount of content and many new concepts in a single semester of physiology. Weekly formative/summative assessment during practical classes encourages students to study and learn throughout the semester. Traditionally, test answers are not discussed — the tests are collected, marked by the teachers and returned to the students the following week. In order to give the students rapid feedback, the students were asked to mark each other's assessments, while the lecturer sought answers from the class. Few students appeared engaged in this process however, with many students being reluctant to participate and voice their opinions in front of the whole class. A more student-centred approach was applied which greatly improved engagement, discussion and social interactions in the class.

Action taken
First year physiology students undertake weekly formative/summative assessment during their practicals. Their study is guided by clear and detailed learning objectives that they need to meet every week. At the beginning of each practical, students select a seat number randomly from a bucket, as they enter the room. The students perform their tests individually under strict exam conditions. After completing the exam, students swap their papers with neighbouring students and work together in small groups (3–6 students) to come to a consensus about their answers and to mark their papers together. Students are given ample time to complete this task. While the students are marking their work, the teaching staff circulate throughout the class to ensure that students are reaching the correct conclusions and to help to resolve any disagreements or uncertainty. This is important to prevent misconceptions from being reinforced. The papers are then handed back to the staff, remarked and additional feedback is provided. The papers are returned to the students the following week, when they are given the opportunity to ask further questions about their answers.

Tips and tricks
- Randomised seating limits collusive marking and reduces the effects of friendships on the mark obtained.
- Coloured felt pens are handed out for marking, so that there is a clear distinction between the students test responses and the feedback that is given.
• This method promotes greater mixing of international students and students of diverse cultural backgrounds and increases social interactions.
• Assuring the students that the tests marks will be thoroughly checked by the lecturer increases the students’ confidence in this method of marking.

Results, evaluation, impact

Discussion has a recognised role in learning, as it promotes deeper learning, the construction and expression of abstract concepts and the use and practice of the language specific to the discipline (McKendree, 2002). First year physiology students are a heterogenous group with highly variable levels of background knowledge in the discipline. By providing learning objectives and encouraging study prior to the discussion, students with less prior knowledge were able to participate fully and confidently. It has been extremely rewarding to see the whole class animatedly discussing their answers and physiological concepts in class every week. The introduction of this method in the middle of semester (in 2007) led to an improvement in the average marks obtained in these tests from 79% to 82% (n=162). Students were surveyed in 2007 and 2008 (n=220; 75% response rate). When the students were asked Were the weekly tests helpful for your study and did they motivate you to study? 99.5% of respondents indicated that the tests were useful and motivating:
  • Yes – gave purpose + direction for study as well as motivation – as weekly marks very clearly reflected the amount of study done
  • Very helpful & I had to study. I’m more confident in this subject (before finals) than others because of prac tests

Students were clearly engaged and involved in the marking process and all of the students present participated every week. At the end of semester students were asked What did you think of the group marking system for the prac tests compared to being told the answers? Many students felt that discussing the answers to the weekly tests, rather than being told the answers, helped their learning and motivated them to study more. 70% of students felt that this marking method had a positive effect on their learning:
  • I enjoyed it, I learned more when discussing the answers
  • It’s better because you’ll learn from each other. It made me study a bit more
  • We could discuss them first and become involved. Made me learn more saying the answers out loud.
  • I liked being able to debate & explain my answers
  • Gave rise to discussion + motivation for individual input
  • It made me rely on myself rather than the teacher
  • They were better because we were made to think
  • We could compare the answers with others and improve the way of answering questions
  • Was good because we got to problem solve; made me study more
  • More interactive, helps you to appreciate why a person might see answers as being appropriate through discussion

This method allowed the students to receive rapid feedback and misconceptions were identified rapidly. Students commented that this method was:
  • better - you could discuss the answer and understand where you went wrong

Some students (~10%) would have preferred being given the answers to the tests by the teachers immediately after the test, however, with students stating ‘being told the answers would have been easier’, for example.
Randomising student seating has had a number of advantages. We observed a decrease in the amount of collusion during the exams when students were seated separately from their friends. Students who might not usually interact with each other, including students from different programs, and international students, met each other through this process. By encouraging peer discussion in randomised groups, the integration of different cultural groups, including international students was increased.

In 2008, when asked Did you get to know more people through marking the prac tests together and was this good? 70% of students agreed that they did meet more people and that this had a positive effect (n=108). While 12% expressed that they did not meet more people through the practical marking (n=108), many of them still found this method helpful in their learning. Students’ comments included:

- I met a lot of new friends through it
- I like the social aspect of it
- Great way to meet new people
- Actually started to know the other people in my course and others
- Made me a lot more comfortable within the class

Peer collaboration has a recognised role in improving student engagement and enhancing the first year experience (Krause, 2006). Peer assessment can be a useful tool for promoting student-centred learning, independence and for increasing engagement and motivation (Zwyno, 2003). There can be some disadvantages to peer assessment, however, including students’ concerns regarding the fairness of marks assigned. In this case, this application of peer assessment led to very accurate marking however, and marks were more accurately assigned than when students were given the answers and marked each others’ exams.

No concerns were expressed about the fairness of this marking method, but some students recognised the importance of the marks ‘being double checked by the demonstrators’:

- I think most of us were interested in the immediate feedback, but happy to let it go through for proper marking

The development of generic skills, including discussion skills, is important for university students (McKendree, 2002) and their future careers. This process enables students to use and practice the 'new language' of the discipline (McKendree, 2002), helps to increase their confidence, improve their communication and teamwork skills and promotes deeper learning. By applying a student-centred approach, which encourages interactions with a range of other students, this simple assessment method enhances the first year experience.

Further resources
Nil.

References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Dr Lisa Chopin
IHBI
60 Musk Avenue
Kelvin Grove Qld 4059

Email: l.chopin@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 6189; Fax: (07) 3138 1534
Designing for engagement: Building IT systems

Mr Malcolm Corney
Faculty of Science and Technology
Queensland University of Technology
m.corney@qut.edu.au

Keywords

*design, introductory computer programming, information technology systems*

Context

The School of Information Technology at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has recently undertaken a major restructuring of their Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) program. Some of the aims of this restructuring include a reduction in first year attrition and to provide an attractive degree program that meets both student and industry expectations. Emphasis has been placed on the first semester in the context of retaining students by introducing a set of four units (subjects) that complement one another and provide introductory material on technology, programming and related skills, and generic skills that will aid the students throughout their undergraduate program and in their careers.

This discussion relates to one of these four first semester subjects, namely Building IT Systems. The aim of this subject is to create small Information Technology (IT) systems that use programming or scripting databases as either standalone applications or web applications. In the prior history of teaching introductory computer programming at QUT, programming has been taught as a stand alone subject and integration of computer applications with other systems such as databases and networks was not undertaken until students had been given a thorough grounding in those topics as well. Feedback has indicated that students do not believe that working with a database requires programming skills. In fact, the teaching of the building blocks of computer applications have been compartmentalised and taught in isolation from each other.

The teaching of introductory computer programming has been an industry requirement of IT degree programs as many jobs require at least some knowledge of the topic. Yet, computer programming is not a skill that all students have equal capabilities of learning (Bruce et al., 2004) and this is clearly shown by the volume of publications dedicated to this topic in the literature over a broad period of time (Eckerdal & Berglund, 2005; Mayer, 1981; Winslow, 1996)

The teaching of this introductory material has been done pretty much the same way over the past thirty years. During this period of time that introductory computer programming subjects have been taught at QUT, a number of different programming languages and programming paradigms have been used and different approaches to teaching and learning have been attempted in an effort to find the golden thread that would allow students to learn this complex topic. Unfortunately, computer programming is not a skill that can be learnt in one semester. Some basics can be learnt but it can take many years to master (Norvig, 2001).
Faculty data typically have shown a bimodal distribution of results for students undertaking introductory programming subjects with a high proportion of students receiving a high mark and a high proportion of students receiving a low or failing mark. This indicates that there are students who understand and excel with the introductory material while there is another group who struggle to understand the concepts and practices required to be able to translate a specification or problem statement into a computer program that achieves what is being requested.

The consequence of a large group of students failing the introductory programming subject has been a high level of attrition amongst first year students. This attrition level does not provide good continuity in student numbers in later years of the degree program and the current approach is not seen as sustainable.

**Action taken**

The design goal for the core of the new BIT degree is to improve student engagement, and consequently progression, while maintaining the quality of graduates. The core subjects provide a common set of skills and knowledge for graduates from the degree.

The Building IT Systems subject has been designed to be an interactive, interesting and inspirational introduction to how IT applications and systems work. While there is a need for formal lecture material on the main topics, the majority of the learning will be accomplished with a hands-on approach in laboratory sessions. The students will be introduced to the building blocks of larger systems including programming and scripting, database creation and use, and World Wide Web development.

Combining programming, database and web development into one first year subject should allow the students to gain an earlier understanding of these basic concepts albeit at a more general level. This is intended to engage the students in these building blocks so that they can learn the basics by being involved with a variety of interesting practical tasks that will use one, two or all three of the technologies.

Tasks will be developed by groups but group work per se will not be assessed. Tasks will be worked on in practical sessions and the students will use a problem solving framework to provide a scaffold for the learning in the subject. Students will be expected to take an inventory of their current skills at the beginning of the task and to determine an approach that will complete the task.

The tasks will be somewhat open-ended in their definition, allowing those students who have pre-existing skills to use those skills, while students who have do not have prior knowledge can benefit from supporting material that will be given in lectures and readings and by doing example activities. After a task has been completed, students will be required to reflect on their learning and performance.

The assessment for this subject will be an individual portfolio of the activities that each student has carried out during the semester, along with reflections on the learning that they have achieved from each of those activities. The portfolio will be submitted twice, allowing the students to receive feedback on their submission before finally being graded at the end of semester.
Tips and tricks
What is seen as essential in achieving success in this subject, and the other first semester subjects, is for all subjects in the semester to have a common philosophy of providing the best outcomes for the students involved. This will require a great deal of dedication to these subjects from the academic coordinators and from all teaching staff involved.

Because the subjects are quite large, more than half of the tutorials and practicals will be led by sessional academics. There are plans in place to provide these vital frontline teachers with training and support to be able to deliver the common philosophy of the program.

Results, evaluation, impact
The subject discussed here and the other subjects in the first semester of the new Bachelor of IT degree will be delivered for the first time in 2009, so there are currently no results or evaluation of how the approach has fared.

The Building IT Systems subject will by default be evaluated by the university’s normal subject evaluation instrument, the Learning Experience Survey. It is also planned to engage a focus group at the end of semester to gain more meaningful and direct feedback.

Further resources
Nil.

References


Contact details
Mr Malcolm Corney
Email: m.corney@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 1923; Fax: (07) 3138 1801
COAST Maps: A simple visual tool for integrated development of program curricula, objectives, assessment, student experience and teaching

Ms Patricia Cretchley  
Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering  
Queensland University of Technology  
patricia.cretchley@qut.edu.au

Dr Ramasamy-Iyer Mahalinga-Iyer  
Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering  
Queensland University of Technology  
m.iyer@qut.edu.au

Keywords  
_curriculum design, assessment, alignment_

Context  
The great volume of educational evidence (see Kift & Nelson, 2004, for example) points to the fact that to effectively engage incoming students, and to support their learning, course objectives, curriculum development and assessment need to be closely aligned with highly stimulating learning activities and student management.

Action taken: COAST Maps for integrated curriculum development  
With this end in mind, we introduced COAST Concept Maps as a visual tool for coordinated development of the vital elements of curriculum design: curriculum content, objectives, assessment, student learning activities and teaching, for example. By offering a coherent summary of these and/or other vital elements of a particular degree program or semester or year (First Year, for example), this kind of tool provides a valuable visual aid for assessing the student experience and for integrated curriculum development.

A COAST Map is easy to develop, and easy to use. It comprises a number of layers (or pages), consisting of a repeated table or matrix, within which each cell represents a particular subject of a degree program (or a semester or a year). Each layer of the Map is:

- dedicated to one of the desired elements of the curriculum or student experience (for example, one layer for objectives, one for assessment, one for classroom experience, etcetera, and more than one layer for a particular element, if helpful)
- a summary of the key aspects of that element
- colour coded or text-styled to facilitate the tracking of pertinent types of objective, themes in assessment, et cetera.
While core features may be common to a series of Maps, and across the layers of a particular Map, the nature of a Map can and should vary with context. Consultation with the range of stakeholders during its development is invaluable because the elements displayed for a particular context, and the level of detail offered for each, determines the nature and number of layers. For example, to facilitate tracking and scrutiny of the development of graduate outcomes, subject and program objectives might be offered on separate layers.

COAST Maps are best illustrated by example. Since a full Map exceeds the space permitted here, only a brief snapshot is offered below. Two full examples are displayed on our poster: a COAST Map for a particular major program, and an enhanced COAST Map portraying some vital aspects of the First Year Experience within a discipline.

**Example of a COAST Map**

This Map shows vital elements of the four-year Mechanical Engineering major at QUT. In this instance, the academic stakeholders chose six layers that track vital elements of the program as follows:

Layer 1: **Course pathway:** the suggested sequence of subjects, each hyperlinked to its Subject Outline.

Layer 2: **Objectives:** subject and degree objectives could be displayed on separate layers.

Layer 3: **Assessment profile of timing and colour-coded type:** assignments, projects, exams, groupwork.

Layer 4: **Student learning experiences:** the nature of classes and study activities, colour coded.

Layer 5: **Teacher:** Coordinator and/or teaching approaches.

Layer 6: **Nature/type of subject:** colour coded classification for program accreditation purposes.

Three of the six partially completed layers of this Map are displayed below, with no order intended. Each column displays one semester of the four-year program, progressing from left to right. Text and fill colour (and/or style) are used to link related aspects appropriately.

*Figure 1: Using COAST Maps to summarise and advance the first year experience*
For assessing or designing aspects of the First Year Experience (FYE) for students within a particular academic program, a COAST or similar Map can be used for a clear visual summary of current or intended practice.

A FYE Map would include layers that detail the orientation activities and special support provided for first year students, within each subject, to enhance the elements already suggested (that is, the nature and sequence of program subjects objectives, assessment, student learning experiences, and teaching approaches).

Where this kind of COAST Map already exists, the information in the first two columns is readily extracted. Clearly, information for any particular semester or period can be summarised or obtained similarly.

**Results, evaluation, impact: Strong positive response from academics and administrators**

Because they facilitate a clear summary of learning objectives integrated with assessment and teaching practices, it has become clear that COAST program concept maps offer benefits for educational stakeholders at many levels, not only for administrators and staff, but for students too.

Introduced to academics and administrators in QUT’s Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering (BEE) late in 2008 as a visual tool and aid for design, COAST Maps have been welcomed by academic leaders, discipline teams, and curriculum developers in BEE at QUT, and are already proving valuable at all levels. For example:

- Learning and Teaching portfolio managers are using them to assess current practices and to track the development of graduate outcomes.
- Program Coordinators in the School of Engineering Systems are using them to advance program development, with emphasis on aligning learning activities and assessment portfolios with the desired educational objectives of each program.
- Discipline Leaders are using them to track progression across sequences of subjects within their disciplines, designing content and practices appropriately for maturing students.
- Subject Coordinators are using them to align the particular learning objectives, activities and assessment practices of their subjects with program objectives and progression.

**Potential impact on student experience and motivation**

Lastly, and importantly, COAST Maps provide a tool for motivating and engaging students in a particular program because they offer a clear visual picture of how subjects fit together to build desired graduate outcomes, and how the range of classroom and assessment experiences support learning and build graduate capacity. Our academics are requesting that COAST Maps prepared for particular majors be accessible to their students in class and on their Blackboard websites, with their own enhancements for the context of use. Further results will be reported later in 2009.

**Further resources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact details</th>
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| Postal address (work): Patricia Cretchley  
  School of Engineering Systems  
  Gardens Point Campus  
  QUT, Brisbane Qld 4000 |
| Email: patricia.cretchley@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 7646; Fax: (07) 3138 1469 |
‘Knowing and Knowledge’, the FYE transition subject of study in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development at Victoria University, Melbourne

Mr Andrew Funston
School of Communication and the Arts
Victoria University
Andrew.Funston@vu.edu.au

Associate Professor Katie Hughes
Associate Dean, Teaching and Learning
Victoria University
Katie.Hughes@vu.edu.au

Dr Brian Zammit
Transition Co-ordinator
Victoria University
Brian.Zammit@vu.edu.au

Keywords
transition, retention, engagement, cohorts

Context
Victoria University (VU) is a multi-sector, multi-campus institution with an explicit mission:

Victoria University seeks to positively transform lives through the power of further education, vocational and higher education, and research. We work collaboratively to develop the capabilities of individuals, enterprises and communities within the western Melbourne region and beyond to build sustainable futures for ourselves and our stakeholders.

From MAKING VU 2016: A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The Bachelor of Arts (BA) is a popular program at VU (typically attracting over 200 first year students). The majority arrive fresh from Year 12 at school (the Tertiary Entrance Score of around 55-60 makes this one of the more accessible BAs in Victoria), and a significant minority are on a pathway from Vocational Education (VE). We also select students through a partnership arrangement with schools in the Western metropolitan region. We have a very high number of students who are the first of their family to attend university.

Many of our BA students commence their degree with quite low levels of academic literacy.

BA students are required to successfully complete the equivalent of 24 subjects of study to take out their degree. Typically, they undertake two major sequences of subjects (each of 6 or 8 subjects) plus electives. Various strategies are employed to ensure that students benefit from a scaffolded approach to learning. Emphasis is placed on independent and collaborative learning, and on career planning.
Action taken

In keeping with the ALTC Fellowship goal that ‘the first year curriculum explicitly assists transition academically and socially into learning in higher education’ (see Kift, 2008), ‘Knowing and Knowledge’ (popularly referred to as ‘K&K’) is a 24-week foundation program (two 12-week subjects) which is compulsory for first year BA students (and those on pathways into post-first year study in the BA). The explicit aim of the program is to enhance academic transition, and to make transparent the institutional habitus described by Thomas (2002).

The classroom teaching is done by two full time academic staff, and tutors who have extensive expertise teaching first years and who are given professional development to enhance their skills.

There are weekly one hour lectures (including some screenings), and weekly two hour tutorials.

Academic skills and contemporary themes and issues

K&K (1) focuses on academic skills. These skills include:

• active listening to complex arguments, and clear note taking
• discussion of multifaceted issues in small and large groups
• reading and summarising academic articles
• writing an academic essay, using both set readings and articles sourced by the student through online search of relevant peer reviewed periodicals
• test preparation.

We work on these academic skills while looking at foundational themes and issues:

• paradigm shifts in philosophical and scientific thinking
• the rocky path of modernity, including The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, colonialism
• the spread of Liberal Democracy and consumer capitalism (and the demise of Eastern Bloc Communism)
• the contemporary role of religion
• the treatment of Indigenous Australians
• the plight of humanitarian refugees.

K&K (2) helps students consolidate these skills and deepen their knowledge; while working on some new skills related to spoken communication in an academic and working-life context, including an introduction to use of online social networking tools.

K&K (2) focuses on these academic and working-life skills, while looking at some complex and recent public conversations surrounding:

• media ownership and so-called ‘media flows’
• censorship and academic freedom
• our use of animals
• our use of machines, including biological technologies.

Tips and tricks

We highlight here various strategies for engaging our diverse student cohorts.
Clear and very detailed subject guides

The guides, given out in hard-copy in the first lecture, but also available online, give a subject overview, give weekly questions and references, and give full descriptions of assessed work with detailed assessment criteria. Students also receive a free USB with a ‘Toolkit’ which assists them to use the university website and highlights all the services available, including discussion boards for first year students moderated by a K&K staff member (see ‘Further resources’ below).

Books of readings with plenty of variation

We produce books of collected readings which are a purposefully mixed bag for each week’s topic; ranging from press-clip material (usually from the Australian broadsheets, but also from overseas papers), through non-academic but specialist magazines and journal articles, through academic journal articles and book extracts, and website downloads. Students bring their book to tutorials (see below).

Entertaining lectures and screenings

We recognise that students’ tolerance for lectures is limited, so we seek to keep the lectures as dynamic and interactive as possible. All lectures are fully scripted, presented on PowerPoint, are available online, and typically embed short video clips and excursions to multiple websites. The lecture program gives over around one third of the allocated time to screenings. In 2009 we will pilot the use of Lectopia.

Tutorials are relaxed, informal and enquiry-based

Tutorials have around 20–25 members. All tutorial rooms are internet-connected and the rooms are large enough for horseshoe seating which promotes a culture of parity and eye contact. We recognise that many first year students do not read outside of the tutorial, so the readings are selected and presented in a way which allows for some quick review or reading (of sections) in the tutorial.

There are prompts or questions to be considered each week, although a fairly loose and conversational approach is taken. Great importance is placed by the tutors on shared speaking time for all members of the group, and on the appropriate interpersonal speaking behaviours (students are encouraged to be supportive active listeners of one another and the tutor).

The early weeks include a range of socialisation and ice-breaker activities. Most tutorials entail some small-group work where students then elect a spokesperson to present back to the larger group. And the tutorial dynamic is shaped across the semester to ensure that, by the end, all students will feel supported and confident as they give formal presentations (see below).
The Learning Commons and ICTs

We recognise that students need to feel comfortable and skilled in their use of the library. K&K entails two dedicated library based tutorials each semester, where the librarians explain the services of VU’s Learning Commons, and students are taught to search online for peer-reviewed academic articles from scholarly journals (we aim to build students’ skills at both finding and assessing the value or authority of source material). Issues of intellectual property and plagiarism are also explored. Students are also shown how to use collaborative tools (such as Zoho Show) and how to create good PowerPoint presentations which embed video and hyperlinks to websites.

Assessment

Here we take a careful, scaffolded approach. We start with a diagnostic tool (based on listening, note-taking and summarising) in Week Five which allows the tutor to identify those who are vulnerable and to offer assistance. Following this is a graded academic article(s) summary exercise, followed by a more extensive essay (with arguments, references, etc.) using a mix of sources including peer-reviewed articles, followed by formal presentations using PowerPoint (or Zoho Show), entailing embedded video and web links. Here students must draw on a minimum number of sources to support an argument about a controversial issue. (For example, last year many students presented on the Bill Henson controversy, the Victorian Euthanasia legislation, or the animal live-export debate).

The assessment is geared to building (and testing) students’ capacity to deal with complexity, and to feel confident using various academic research skills and academic writing styles and formats (including essay writing and presentations), and with group discussion skills (and collaborative work).

There is a two-hour test at the end of each semester (multiple choice and short essay), focussing on the lecture content. The essay questions are given in advance of this closed-book test, encouraging students to prepare their main ideas. In the second test students are given the opportunity to write an essay reflecting on their first year learning experience, and what they think ‘university learning’ is or should be about.

Results, evaluation, impact

We draw attention here to one particularly interesting measure of impact. VU has a comprehensive and growing network of articulation pathways and a number of these lead into the BAs. Students taking a pathway from VE who complete at least one K&K have a much higher retention rate than those given exemption for these subjects. They also achieve more highly throughout their degrees.

Retention in K&K is high each semester, tutorial attendance is good and formal student evaluations are either at, or above, the faculty average which is particularly notable given the subjects are compulsory.

Further resources

See the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development website for transitioning students: http://firstclasstalk.com.au
References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Mr Andrew Funston
BA Coordinator St Albans Campus
School of Communication and the Arts
Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development
Victoria University
PO Box 14428
Melbourne, Vic 8001

Email: Andrew.Funston@vu.edu.au
Anatomy is a language: Exploring audience-specific terminology

Dr Laura Gregory
School of Life Sciences
Queensland University of Technology
l.gregory@qut.edu.au

Keywords
transition, engagement, anatomical terminology, layperson, medical professional

Context
Anatomy is a challenging subject for any student, let alone a first year student. Human anatomy is a foundation science; students gain an understanding of the ‘building blocks’ of the human body that are essential for study in many other biology-based disciplines. It is commonly preconceived that the study of anatomy will entail an excessive amount of rote learning or memorisation; but is anatomy just facts? For some Universities and some subjects, perhaps; but in LSB145 (Anatomy 1 for students studying applied science, majoring in medical imaging or radiotherapy at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT); PH38 degree; first year, Semester 1), a new outlook and learning strategy has been developed and implemented to deliver anatomy in a new light. Students are introduced to anatomy as a language: a language used by biologists and medical professionals to communicate with each other in a scientific forum. As part of their training to become medical professionals, anatomy students need to understand the importance of audience-specific terminology when communicating medical cases.

Action taken
Two assessment items have been implemented across two student cohorts (2007–2008; average class size, 130 students): ‘Creating an anatomical dialogue’ and ‘Anatomy in the media’. The main objective of these assessments is to create awareness and develop competency in the use of audience-specific medical terminology.

Creating an anatomical dialogue
Students are asked to synthesise a personal account of an injury or medical condition that was experienced by the student, a family member or friend of the student. The students are to complete two versions of this account: the first using language suitable for a layperson; the second using language suitable for a medical professional (word limit 1500–2000 words).
The average student starting a subject in anatomy for the first time is an anatomical layperson, having no or minimal experience in anatomical terminology with on average 25% of students having no prior biology experience (2007 and 2008 student self-reflection survey). In the first week of semester students are asked to start writing their ‘story’. In Week 3 students read out their story to a group of 4 or 5 students to receive feedback specifically on their use of terminology to describe their medical event. The first version of their story must use only layperson terminology; students receive peer feedback to ensure only simple terms are used in this first version. In some cases this may require students to consider alternative ways of communicating the same message using simpler terms that a greater proportion of the general population will understand.

Later in the semester in Week 10, students are asked to ‘reconstruct’ their story to produce a second version suitable for a different audience: the medical professional. Now the most accurate anatomical terminology must be employed to communicate the medical event; students are able to draw on content covered in lectures and practicals throughout the semester to fulfil this objective.

Student examples

1. Layperson: ‘major swelling in her ankle’; reconstructed for medical professional: ‘oedema extends along both of the peroneal tendon sheaths from the distal crural region, around the lateral malleolus of the fibula, to the trochlear process of the calcaneus’. 2008 LSB145 student

2. Layperson: ‘a small hole made on the left hip region’; reconstructed for medical professional: ‘an incision was made at the left inguinal region, in the femoral triangle just inferior to the inguinal ligament’. 2007 LSB145 student

For each audience-specific version of their story, students write a learning reflection. As part of this, students provide examples of terminology that were changed from the layperson to medical professional version of their story and comment on the implications of these different ways of describing the same medical event in the community.

Anatomy in the media

This second task provides an opportunity for students to explore different communication styles used in describing medical ‘news’. Often when complicated medical issues have been attempted to be simplified for a lay-reader/listener, inaccuracies are introduced and/or statements are so general that the intended meaning is lost or not clear.

Two readings on events involving the human body that have appeared in the media (online news, newspaper, television) in the last 6 months are chosen by the subject coordinator and distributed to students to study. Students then discuss the anatomical terminology used in the articles in small groups in a 1-hour tutorial session. Students are required to write a critique of the use of anatomical terminology in the two articles (word limit 1200 words). This assessment piece requires students to develop deep analysis skills, important in critical thinking. The following questions are used to direct the construction of this critique:

- What was the intended audience? Are they anatomical laypersons? What clues in the article suggest the intended audience?
- Were there any terms that were not appropriate for the target audience? Explain.
• Did you find any inaccuracies or statements that didn’t make sense, or were too vague or general based on the terminology they chose? Explain.
• How could you improve language use in this article to increase understanding for the target audience and/or anatomical accuracy?

The ‘Anatomy in the media’ task precedes the final reconstruction of the student’s personal anatomical dialogue. In this way, the critique is instructive in how best to reconstruct their personal anatomical dialogue for an audience of medical professionals, providing links between the two assessment tasks.

Tips and tricks

Students are encouraged to be creative with the writing of the anatomical dialogue; examples of students’ work have included ‘dear diary’ entries, children’s stories, letters to the editor, phone conversations, doctor patient dialogue, medical case study and incident injury report forms.

Tutorials are organised to promote small group discussion for each task. Peer sessions were found to be highly valuable in engaging students; it promoted creativity by encouraging students to make their story ‘interesting’ to their peers. Furthermore students were able to gain constructive criticism from their peers to improve the appropriateness of terminology before submission and collaborate with peers in addressing the assessment questions.

Results, evaluation and impact

According to the 2007 and 2008 LSB145 QUT Learning Experience Survey (LEX) data, 91.7% and 94.4% of students who participated were satisfied with the assessment’s relevance to topic, respectively. LEX data is not available for cohorts prior to implementation of these assessment tasks; QUT Student Evaluations of Unit (Subject) (SEUs) for 2005 and 2006 were conducted, but there is no clear questionnaire item for direct comparison pre- and post-implementation.

These novel assessment items have allowed students to make direct connections between their study of anatomy and the communication skills essential for job placement in the health sector.

This task was very valuable to me as it demonstrated the significance of having extensive anatomical knowledge within the medical profession in order to communicate accurately with other professionals, but also the significance of being able to simplify this anatomical knowledge without introducing excessive oversimplifications and inaccuracies when communicating with patients.

2008 LSB145 student

At the start of the semester, I would have struggled with both reading and writing a recount under the conditions for Part B [reconstruction for anatomical professionals] of this assignment. However, across the semester my growth in anatomical terminology usage and understanding of anatomical terminology has allowed me to write a detailed medical description of a medical event, and I no longer consider myself a layperson. Hopefully, as I continue to study anatomy for another three semesters, I will confidently consider myself an anatomist.

2008 LSB145 student

Student outcomes

The implementation of language-focused assessment tasks enables students to:
• apply and practise their anatomical terminology using real world examples
• make direct links between their professional degree and the need to learn anatomical terminology, providing relevance to the study of anatomy
• track and reflect on their progress in LSB145 giving students a sense of achievement in a challenging subject.

Peer adoption

Feedback from colleagues in the areas of Anatomy and Physiology, School of Life Sciences, QUT, has been highly positive; peers recognise the need to improve students’ perceptions of anatomy and have commended this approach to view anatomy as a language. These specific tasks described do entail a significant marking component, and therefore are recognised as not being suitable for large class sizes (>200 students). In these cases alternative assessment in the form of examination questions has been discussed as an option, where students are asked to reconstruct a given layperson sentence into anatomically correct terminology or find inaccuracies in a sentence that attempts to use anatomical terminology. This novel questioning tool will be incorporated into the 2009 examination papers for a number of Life Sciences Anatomy and Physiology subjects at QUT.

Further resources

Nil.

Contact details

Postal address (work): Dr Laura Gregory
Faculty of Science and Technology
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
GPO Box 2434
Brisbane Qld 4001

Email: l.gregory@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 1281; Fax: (07) 3138 1534
Enhancing FYE using system-generated student study plans that adhere to a university-wide curriculum model

Dr Al Grenfell
Student Business Services
Division of Administrative Services
Queensland University of Technology
a.grenfell@qut.edu.au

Keywords
Design, transition, student study plan, curriculum model, course (program) structural model

Note: In this abstract, ‘course’ refers to a whole program or degree structure, while ‘unit’ refers to individual ‘subjects of study’ that constitute courses (or degrees or programs).

Context
The implementation of a new student management system, scheduled to Go Live late in 2009, provided Queensland University of Technology (QUT) with the opportunity to select a software system that would support its clients throughout the full student life cycle. In addition to the student administrative functionality requirements, an emphasis in the software selection process was placed on a capacity to provide curriculum and academic support for students. An important strength of the product chosen (TechnologyOne Student Management) was its ability to generate student study plans in accordance with course requirements. In its QUT implementation, Student Management is referred to as SAMS (Student and Academic Management System), in which the term Academic is incorporated to reflect a clear focus on curriculum and student study plans.

Figure 1: Academic components central to the student life cycle in the context of SAMS
Although SAMS from Go Live in 2009 will support student self-management of activities such as class allocation and will manage course completions in an automated manner, this paper focuses on its support in the context of FYE students, particularly in respect to assistance and guidance with enrolment and unit selection for a course of study. Extensive surveys of first year QUT students as recently as 2008 have shown that enrolment can be a highly challenging process for students in transition from secondary school, especially where the courses the students are entering have complex structures and/or extensive unit choices.

Enrolment represents the first major engagement FYE students typically have with the University; this challenges SAMS to capture course requirements and related information in a manner that not only improves this experience but also enables the system to deliver to each student a study plan as a meaningful road map through each course of study.

**Action taken**

The curriculum work undertaken in SAMS reflects the following objectives:

- To develop a model that takes into account the full suite of existing University courses.
- To gain approval where necessary for refinement to existing academic policy to support the wide applicability of the model.
- To use the model as a basis for efficiently capturing the structural details and course completion rules of every QUT award course into SAMS.
- To employ system functionality to generate student study plans from course structural details and populate these study plans by capturing each student’s choices.
- To ensure the model and associated business processes maintain the integrity of study plans and thereby facilitate automated course completion while permitting student self management of enrolment.

![Figure 2: SAMS Curriculum Model underpins the generation of student study plans](image-url)
Figure 2 summarises the work in a schematic manner. In the context of SAMS, curriculum design matters are chiefly at a comparatively high level, specifically course structural design. Nevertheless, sound principles in curriculum design such as delayed choice of specialisation are embodied in the model. Although the necessity to develop a single model that recognised the full suite of University courses already in existence constrained the model somewhat, useful characteristics of the QUT academic environment offset this challenge, e.g. a well-established requirement of 12 credit points for all units at undergraduate level; the policy that double degree students be able to meet the completion requirements for each of the component degrees; nesting of postgraduate coursework courses.

The constraint of developing a course structural model to retrofit all existing courses has been pointed out. However, gaining approval during the development process for refinement to existing University academic policy assisted the development. One important change that was achieved stipulates that future course developments involving the offering of multiple majors must have a consistent credit point value for the majors concerned. Further, as indicated by the dashed arrow in Figure 2, the SAMS Curriculum Model potentially influences future curriculum design by conveying a building block model for courses that not only incorporates sound design principles but also reflects and maintains the characteristics and strengths of QUT’s current academic program.

The SAMS Curriculum Model (= QUT course structural model)

During consultation and development, the model was referred to as the SAMS Curriculum Model. Following approval by the University it has been accepted as the QUT course structural model.

Study package is a generic term applied to the building blocks involved in the design of QUT course structures. It defines what the University teaches; examples include courses, units, majors, and minors. The highest level of study package is a course (parent study package) while the lowest level of study package is a unit. Units are enrollable study packages, i.e. the study packages in which students enrol on admission to a course. Additional intermediate study packages (e.g. majors; minors; complementary studies) enable courses to be structured into SAMS in a manner that facilitates the delivery of study plans to students. In this model, a course structure is the arrangement and composition of the various study packages that capture all course completion requirements in a precise but comprehensive manner.

The general form of the SAMS Curriculum Model is:

\[ \pm \text{course core} \pm \text{Study Area A} \pm \text{complementary studies} \]

[where the symbol \( \pm \) indicates that the component may or may not be present]

Course core refers to core units specified for the course itself, rather than those that might be prescribed as being mandatory within a study area. Study Area A corresponds to major. The term complementary studies refers to options that are available to students in some courses to enable them to round out completion of the award and meet credit point requirements, i.e. the options comprise those studies that are complementary to \( \pm \) core \( \pm \) Study Area A. In some cases, the complementary studies package incorporates minors.
Supporting FYE student enrolment: Study plans for fixed versus flexible courses

Attention has been drawn already to the challenges faced by FYE students during online enrolment. Courses with fixed curricula present the least challenge because choice of units is either unavailable or restricted. In essence, the course structural model above reduces to: course core. Student study plans generated by SAMS correspond to that indicated schematically (for a 3-year course of full time study or equivalent) in Figure 3a. Organising the student study plan to list the unit requirements on a level (year) by level basis provides the most straightforward enrolment guidance for students.

Flexible courses commonly offer extensive choice, e.g. in the major itself; in units that comprise specific majors; in the complementary studies that can be undertaken to round out the course after any core and major have been selected. Figure 3b illustrates the general approach in generating study plans that support and guide students during enrolment. Core units typically undertaken during the first year of full-time study are explicit in the study plan initially presented to FYE students whereas the specialisations that build on these, together with any complementary studies (including minors), are initially unexpanded. As students progress through units that underpin more specialised study, their study plans expand in SAMS to reflect their particular selections and accordingly are tailored on the basis of these choices. At the same time, the SAMS Curriculum Model in conjunction with SAMS functionality ensures study plan integrity is constantly maintained to enable automated course completion at a time when all requirements on the study plan have been met.

Students in flexible courses will generally need to complete at least the majority of core units before progressing to higher level units. However, the sequence in which they complete these advanced units can vary significantly from student to student. Organising study plans on a structural rather than year level basis is therefore the most effective approach (Figure 3b).

Figure 3a: Study plans generated for fixed courses — organised by (year) level
Tips and tricks

Developing a University-wide course structural model in the context of a student management system that incorporates a high level of curriculum functionality has the potential to strongly support students during online enrolment, particularly those in their first year of tertiary study. However, study plans alone cannot be expected to provide a complete solution; while they indicate a detailed map for course completion, the sequences in which students undertake the units required for course completion can vary substantially, particularly with flexible curricula and variations in full- and part-time study. Complementary processes and activities that enhance the support study plans provide for FYE students are as follows.

Studyfinder

*Studyfinder* is QUT’s course database for students. Unit codes within student study plans in SAMS are dynamically linked to unit synopses and unit outlines, facilitating ready access by students to information assisting them in selecting units for enrolment. *Studyfinder* also provides course descriptive information that includes standard progressions through courses as guidance to especially FYE students in flexible courses offering multiple majors.
Academic policy improvements

Curriculum guidance provided through SAMS system functionality has been complemented by academic policy improvements that recognise the special challenges FYE students face with transition. Policy changes that have been proposed and approved include: sanctioning students from exclusion in their first 96 credit points (full year) of study; making supplementary assessment available to FYE students who fail one core/mandatory unit.

SAMS system functionality

In the SAMS study plan environment, student self enrolment in any unit is permitted by the system only where (a) the unit is offered within the course of study, (b) the student has met any requisites specified, and (c) the unit is available during the semester of enrolment. This system functionality assists students by preventing incorrect enrolment.

Results, evaluation, impact

Developing the process by which SAMS generates student study plans, together with the SAMS Curriculum Model that underpins it, has involved QUT-wide consultation and collaboration. User acceptance testing has commenced within a timeframe of the system going live later in 2009. Evaluation of SAMS by students, particularly those who engage with it in their first year of study, will be undertaken as an integral part of the implementation.

Further resources

Details of the SAMS implementation program are provided at http://www.sams.qut.edu.au/ (QUT access). Matters of an academic nature (SAMS functionality; QUT Course Structural Model; SAMS and Studyfinder; Academic Policy Developments) are indicated at http://www.sams.qut.edu.au/newhorizons/academicmatters/index.jsp.

Contact details

Postal address (work): Dr Al Grenfell
Senior Project Manager (Curriculum and Academic Policy)
SAMS Program Student Business Services
Division of Administrative Services
QUT, Gardens Point Campus
2 George St
Brisbane Qld 4000

Email: a.grenfell@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 2968
First Year Infusion: Development of agency of first year education students

Dr Robyn Henderson
Faculty of Education
University of Southern Queensland
robyn.henderson@usq.edu.au

Dr Karen Noble
Faculty of Education
University of Southern Queensland
noblek@usq.edu.au

Keywords
transition, diversity, social support, academic support

Context
The First Year Infusion Program (also known as ‘FYI’) was commenced in the Faculty of Education at University of Southern Queensland to provide support for first year students as they make the transition into university study. The program, which was set up to address issues of retention and student progression, is open to all first year Education students at the Toowoomba Campus. Attendance is voluntary. Since the program began in 2007, the students who have participated have included school leavers as well as mature-aged students who had decided to try university study as ‘second chance learners’. The students have fitted the university’s demographic profile, with many from rural and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds and, in many cases, they were the first in their families to undertake higher education.

Action taken
The program sets out to enable students to engage actively in a cycle of learning and critical reflection. It fosters an explicit exploration of interpersonal skills and ‘groupness’ that relate to the issues that students identify each week as important in their lives as students. It is believed that this focus on the interpersonal can support students’ academic achievement and help them to develop the values, attitudes, dispositions, qualities and skills that are essential if they are going to be successful with their university study.

The FYI Program privileges the importance of a decanting space or commons, where undergraduate Education students, academics and faculty support staff meet on a regular basis. The program offers a space and place (a teaching room) for a particular 2-hour time-slot each week. First year Education students know that they can turn up at that time and place and that a group of academic and support staff will also be there. Within this learning space, students are able to ‘plug in’ to sustainable social networks for working together beyond the boundaries generated by enrolment in particular subjects. In other words, the FYI Program focuses on the ‘spaces’ between subjects and brings first year students together, regardless of the subjects they are enrolled in.
Students reflect on their week in the supportive environment of the Learning Circle (Aksim, 1998; Noble & Henderson, 2008; Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2005; Riel, 2006). They talk about their experiences. The supportive environment offers a space within which they can confront and deconstruct the difficulties they have had. Problems become shared problems, regardless of whether they are personal problems that the students are trying to deal with or whether they are academic issues that are directly related to university study. Students are encouraged to use their strengths — their personal resources — to problem-solve any difficulties or issues that they are experiencing. To assist that process, the academic and support staff who attend have expertise in a range of areas. They can assist students with ‘just-in-time’ information about academic issues, subject-specific knowledges and skills, information literacies, study skills and so on. At the same time, they also offer empathetic and supportive responses to whatever the students decide to discuss.

The Learning Circle thus uses pedagogical approaches that build on students’ strengths and provide opportunities for students to develop connections between their outside-of-university lives and their lives as university students. In other words, the students learn to develop a connectedness between the multiple contexts of their lives. Through the supportive environment that is provided (including the support of academic and support staff), this approach helps students to develop strong social networks, as well as academic literacies, information literacies and subject-specific knowledges. Students leave the program better able to think critically, to analyse information and to construct knowledge that is professionally informative as well as personally relevant. Student agency is paramount.

The program draws on Gee’s (1996) notion of Discourses as ‘ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing’ (p. viii), arguing that ‘new’ university students (first year students) need to become familiar with a ‘new’ Discourse, that of being a ‘university student’. To be successful, students need explicit knowledge of what this means and what it might entail.

**Tips and tricks**

A distinctive feature of this successful initiative is that it operates in the spaces between subjects, rather than being part of traditional subject structure. This approach provides opportunities for students to connect and integrate learning within and between subjects. Additionally, one of the key tenets of the program is that issues discussed in the Learning Circle are based on students’ needs at that particular point in time. This means that the approach is both responsive and timely.

Another key characteristic is that students are not viewed as ‘empty vessels’, because such a view promotes dependence and passivity. Rather, students are viewed in terms of their strengths. They are seen as being on a journey that is carrying them to a place not yet navigated.Whilst they may already have many of the skills and abilities necessary for the transition into university study, the academics working within the program aim to enhance the students’ existing skills, as well as equipping them with the knowledges, skills and abilities that will allow them to approach all situations — new or familiar — with a cultivated critical awareness. Therefore, the goals of the transition (retention and progression) are achieved when students perceive themselves as prepared for challenging and satisfying personal and professional contexts and when they see themselves as successful lifelong learners.
Results, evaluation, impact

While the First Year Infusion Program has attracted reasonably small numbers of first year students who have continued to attend across the whole of their initial year at university, it has served as a ‘drop-in’ location for students who have specific needs at particular times. Data have been collected only about those who have attended regularly. As shown in Figure 1, students who attended regularly were overwhelmingly successful across all subjects in their first year of university study. Specifically, no student failed in any subject of study and the majority of results were high distinctions, As and Bs (n = 101).

![FYI students' first year results](image)

**Figure 1**: FYI student results 2007–2008

Anecdotal evidence indicates that students who attended on a regular basis attribute their successful progression to participation in the program. Several students used metaphor to explain the positive effects of engagement, with four students describing their experience of the program as ‘a lifesaver’, ‘a space ... a breather’, you were ‘my rope’, and ‘a sanctuary’.

Further resources

Nil.

References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Faculty of Education
USQ
West Street
Toowoomba Qld 4350

Email: robyn.henderson@usq.edu.au, Phone: (07) 4631 2692; Fax: (07) 4631 2828
A framework for the design and analysis of assessment tasks

Dr Clair Hughes
Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI)
The University of Queensland
clair.hughes@uq.edu.au

Keywords
assessment, design, assessment tasks

Context
As an educational developer I draw on a core group of valued resources when working with coordinators and teachers across my institution’s various disciplines and faculties. However, while many of these are useful in planning various aspects of assessment tasks and plans, the literature is surprisingly light on material to support the analysis and purposeful design of individual assessment tasks.

This gap is a particular issue for the design of assessment tasks for first year students as a thorough understanding of the demands of assessment tasks is an essential basis for:

- the critique and revision of existing tasks
- the planning of appropriate teaching and learning activities that support students in undertaking assessment.

Action taken
I undertook a literature search to locate a framework that explicated the distinctive elements or components of assessment tasks and found a resource suitable for adaptation in the field of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). The application of the framework that was developed requires acceptance of the proposition that engagement in an assessment task typically involves students in the production of a particular conception of ‘text’.

The meaning of ‘text’
‘Text’ is defined as ‘any meaning-producing event, be it a book, a film, an advertisement, a phone conversation and so on’ (Knapp and Watkins 2005, 13), a definition that is broader than common conceptions of written forms of communication such as books or other paper-based artefacts. Therefore the essays, reports, oral presentations, interviews, posters or blogs that students produce when engaging in assessment tasks are all accepted as lying within this definition of ‘text’. A text can incorporate written, spoken and non-verbal or visual elements referred to as ‘modes’ (diagrams, figures, gestures, photographs etc.).
The shaping of texts

Texts are shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they are produced. In their selection and organisation of textual elements (words, punctuation, pauses, gestures, sound effects, drawings, figures, flow charts etc.) text producers are influenced by a number of inter-related variables that define or characterise these contexts:

- purpose — e.g. to inform, to entertain, to argue, to reflect etc.
- text type — essay, poster, model etc.
- subject matter or topic
- role or perspective taken by the text producer
- relationship with an intended audience
- intended impact on this audience
- mode of communication
- medium through which the communication is undertaken.

Designing assessment tasks

When students complete an assessment task, they engage in the production of a ‘text’ — be it an essay, debate, report, poster, performance, email exchange, web page, model etc. — in order to demonstrate course learning outcomes. Therefore, the design of assessment tasks requires assessors, usually coordinators, to make the text-specification decisions that will guide students in producing the texts that are required. The Assessment Task Design (ATD) framework below (adapted from Derewianka 1990, 19) illustrates the decisions involved.

![Figure 1: An assessment task design (ATD) framework (adapted from Derewianka 1990, 19)](image)

Text production specifications may be quite explicit (e.g. *Write an essay to discuss media representations of ‘success’*) or indicate where some context variables may be determined by students, sometimes in negotiation with assessors (e.g. *Select a paper published in the last two years in a peer-reviewed journal and present the information contained in the paper in a form suited to a group of high school science students*).
While many aspects of assessment task design are usually quite explicit and the result of conscious decision-making (Write [mode] an essay [text type] to discuss [purpose] media representations of success [subject matter]), some task–text parameters are more often implicit. In this example, role (academic expert), audience (assessor), relationship with audience (compliant?) and medium (paper) are not specified because of their taken-for-grantedness in traditional assessment settings. The problem with implicit text specifications is not that they are unclear — most students will know what is required in tasks such as this — but rather that they are unexamined and consequently unchallenged when assessment tasks are designed or evaluated.

**Tips and tricks**

The ATD framework has proved useful as a resource that I can draw on when supporting coordinators in the enhancement of aspects of their assessment practice.

1. **Enhancing communication**

The framework lends itself to simple visual representation which is useful to include in program information materials as a way of describing assessment tasks. This is especially applicable in clarifying expectations and providing other forms of scaffolding for first year students.

The framework can also be used for sharing and reporting changes in assessment tasks either among program colleagues (lecturers, tutors, sessional teachers as well as students) or for conveying the outcomes of assessment projects or innovations. Figure 2 illustrates how the assessment innovation of a lecturer in veterinary science was communicated in an invited presentation to report on one of the outcomes of an assessment project funded through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Fellowship Scheme.

![Figure 2: Using the ATD framework to report an assessment innovation](image)

2. **Introduction to additional resources**

Familiarity with this framework can ‘open the door’ to a range of guidelines, workbooks and other practical resources for assisting first year and other students develop their expertise in academic writing and reading (see Knapp and Watkins, 2005; Swales and Peak, 2004).
3. Deterring plagiarism

The framework has allowed academics to expand their options for changing one or more task parameters to discourage the ‘recycling’ of student work from year to year (for examples of this see Hughes, 2007). A significant insight for many academics has been the realisation that there are viable alternatives to changing the subject matter when altering tasks to minimise opportunities for plagiarism.

4. Promoting reflection

The ways in which academics have engaged with the resource indicates its capacity to prompt thoughtful discussion around broader and more evaluative aspects of assessment task design and to raise questions about some traditional assessment practices. When used in assessment workshops, one of the most useful applications of the ATD framework has therefore been its capacity to encourage thought and discussion around previously overlooked aspects of assessment task design and related demands on students. This is particularly important in anticipating the experience of first year students during their induction into the assessment culture of higher education.

Results, evaluation, impact

Evidence from a range of sources has demonstrated the value of this framework. When used in assessment workshops, the framework is readily and quickly understood by participants and easily able to be applied to the assessment tasks used in their own contexts. Application is not limited to Australia as the feedback from a colleague who has used it in workshops in other countries and also from attendees at international conference presentations indicates similar acceptance. The framework is therefore a useful tool to include in the pedagogical repertoire of those responsible for the assessment of students in their first year of higher education.

Further resources

This paper is an edited version of the publications below, both of which provide additional detail on applications of the model.


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Contact details

Postal address (work): Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI)
The University of Queensland
St Lucia
Brisbane Qld 4072
Australia

Email: clair.hughes@uq.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3365 2456; Fax: (07) 3365 1966
Designing learning objects for generic websites

Dr Henk Huijser
Learning & Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
huijser@usq.edu.au

Keywords
learning design, Net Generation, generic academic skills, generic websites

Context
This Showcase reports on issues involved in integrating learning design and learning objects into generic websites. It consists of two parts: the first part outlines and critiques the notion of the net generation, which has gained considerable currency, while the second part is based on a case study of a generic academic learning support website and allows for the testing of some of the theoretical assumptions about the Net Generation.

This Showcase is concerned with working towards a tighter fit between the possibilities that new technologies provide for learning design and learning objects on the one hand, and an increasingly diverse student body on the other. When it comes to applying new technologies in an educational context, the emphasis tends to be on the potential that these technologies offer, often accompanied by a brief disclaimer that these technologies also facilitate fragmentations with greater disparities between the information-haves and have-nots. Not surprisingly, this simultaneous movement between possibilities and the skills/knowledge required to capitalise on those possibilities, presents the biggest challenge for an e-learning environment.

The notion of Generation Y or the Net Generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) attempts to capture the apparently fast changing skills/knowledge sets of a ‘new generation’, and ascribe specific characteristics to that generation such as ability to read visual images, visual-spatial skills, digital literacy and connectedness, amongst others. These kinds of characteristics could have major implications for the area of learning design and learning objects, particularly in terms of their applications. But just as with earlier attempts to define generations, the boundaries between them are porous, and the concept should thus be approached with appropriate caution. This applies in particular to a tertiary e-education environment which is increasingly characterised by a highly diverse student population, not only culturally, but also in terms of ‘techno literacy’. In this context, the challenge for e-education becomes one of balancing convergent possibilities with divergent capabilities. In other words, the challenge is one of designing effective and engaging learning experiences in an increasingly diverse tertiary education context. This is especially important in a first year context.
Action taken

This Showcase reports on an empirical case study of an academic learning support site at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), to forge links between theory and practice. USQ is well placed for such a study because, as a regional Australian university, it has both a highly diverse and geographically dispersed student population, with more than 75% of its students studying in distance education mode. The case study involved a website (The Learning Centre), which contains a suite of online academic learning skills resources for students, and which is currently in the process of being re-developed. The study was designed to provide insights into what would make it more ‘user friendly’, both with regards to learning objects and the convergent possibilities of presenting and designing those objects. The study consisted of a survey of first year students from five large first year subjects in five different faculties, and a follow-up series of in-depth interviews, conducted through MSN Messenger. The online survey asked questions about learning objects, accessibility, navigation, and organisation of content.

The interviews painted a more in-depth picture of learner needs and capabilities and, in particular, the needs and capabilities of a diverse student population. This, in turn, raises questions about how to (re-)design online academic skills resources. For example, to what extent do we incorporate multi-modal design? This would take advantage of convergent possibilities by incorporating and combining a variety of different media, which the internet is ideally placed to accommodate. In addition, it would be tailored to the Net Generation with its ‘visual-spatial’ skills, its ‘attentional deployment (ability to shift attention rapidly from one task to another) and its ‘experiential preference’ (prefer to learn by doing rather than by being told what to do). At the same time, however, it raises questions about internet access, and about the assumptions of the Net Generation’s skills themselves.

Tips and tricks

This study aimed to evaluate online academic skills resources in some depth and develop an informed foundation for the impending redevelopment of the academic skills resources site referred to above. The overall project used a two-step process, which consisted firstly of a theoretical discussion about the Net Generation and its identified characteristics, subsequently followed by a case study to empirically test some of the theoretical assumptions about the Net Generation, and the associated implications for the first year experience.

The main lesson learnt is that first year students in an Australian higher education context are increasingly diverse, which applies to a wide variety of indicators such as age, family background, immersion in technology, usage of technology, work-study balance, English language proficiency, and so on. This is a crucial starting point for effective learning design.

Results, evaluation, impact

On a good week I put in about 16 hours. Closer to exams I have a strict discipline with study and a chaotic household — 4am study till 6, work and then 2 hours at night. I study on Friday and part time Saturday, usually early in the day with the rest of the household asleep.

A large percentage of students had never accessed the online academic skills resources, of which 91.1% were unaware of their existence. Other reasons for not accessing the site were: ‘didn’t think it would be useful’ and ‘wouldn’t have considered looking for academic learning support on the web’.
When asked about expectations of what should be found on an academic skills website, there was a wide range of responses from grammar and punctuation to study skills, time management, referencing and integrated maths support. Interestingly, all of these can be found on the website already. This relates to the overall finding that students find it difficult to identify relevant online material amongst all the available material. A common response appears to be to give up looking altogether. A targeted ‘marketing’ strategy is needed to create awareness of these resources at a time when they would be most useful.

The following suggestions were offered in relation to the ways in which the material could or should be organised on the website:

- The preference for either scrolling down the page or using internal links on web pages was evenly distributed.
- There was a strong expression of the need for clear headings.
- Step-by-step pages (scaffolding).
- Videotaped lectures (‘video lectures please, please, please, I’m begging’), but server size and transfer rates are an issue.
- PowerPoint and Adobe Presenter presentations: ‘no blue background which makes reading data difficult, especially late at night’.
- Discussion forums (both synchronous and asynchronous); an ESL (English as a second language) student mentioned that discussing concepts with peers helps her understanding.

Final quotes

I love studying externally. I get a great deal of satisfaction out of it. But sometimes it really is like being on your own.

Interactive sessions, maybe a bit like this one; gives us distance bods a feeling of actually being involved in Uni life.

Despite being small in scale, the main insight gained from this study is that the current student populations can be characterised by one word: diversity. The relatively small sample for this particular study, and its limitation to a single institution, means that caution needs to be exercised in terms of the conclusions drawn. So while the results in many ways confirm questions about the Net Generation, particularly the problematic notion that this is a generation which can be defined by relatively uniform characteristics, a larger cross-institutional study would allow for firmer conclusions in this regard.

However, the results of this study do show similarities to other research conducted at single institutions. As Kennedy et al. (2006, p. 13) note for example, there is ‘little empirical support for the stereotypical depiction of the digital native-wired and wireless 24/7’. They conclude that ‘the critical point is that while first year students might use technology in a range of ways and may, apparently, be digitally literate, we cannot assume that being a member of the net generation is synonymous with knowing how to employ technology-based tools strategically to optimise learning experiences and outcomes in university setting’ (Kennedy, et al., 2006, p. 16). They come to this conclusion via their study of first year students at the University of Melbourne, who according to their age should be closely aligned with Net Generation characteristics.

The study discussed in this presentation provides some useful initial insights, but it needs to be followed up by a more detailed and larger scale study and rigorous evaluation once recommendations have been implemented, that can then inform learning design and learning objects in more meaningful ways.
Further resources
Online resources, The Learning Centre, USQ:

References


The Learning Centre, USQ
<http://www.usq.edu.au/learningcentre/default.htm>


Contact details
Postal address (work): Learning & Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
West Street, Toowoomba
Qld 4350

Email: huijser@usq.edu.au; Phone: (07) 4631 2236; Fax: (07) 4631 2407
Assessment, graduate attributes and online feedback: 
A business faculty approach

Ms Patty Kamvounias  
Discipline of Business Law  
Faculty of Economics and Business  
University of Sydney  

p.kamvounias@econ.usyd.edu.au

Dr Lesley Treleaven  
Office of Learning and Teaching in Economics and Business  
Faculty of Economics and Business  
University of Sydney  

l.treleaven@econ.usyd.edu.au

Keywords 
assessment, graduate attributes, online feedback, assessment criteria

Context
The majority of Australian universities have engaged with the processes of 
graduate attribute development recognising their responsibility to equip graduates 
with the attributes needed for lifelong learning in a rapidly changing world and 
workplace. There is clearly an ongoing need in business education to develop 
students’ employability (BIHECC, 2007), and, in particular, their awareness of 
ethical considerations, global sustainability and equity issues including 

Educational research supports the integration of these attribute developments 
with existing curricula rather than a ‘bolt-on’ approach through the addition of 
extra units of study (Barrie, 2004).

The University of Sydney has identified five graduate attributes and the Faculty of 
Economics and Business has integrated these into the discipline-specific learning 
goals: http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/grad_attributes/. The faculty is also 
committed to providing assessment criteria by which the standard of student work 
will be assessed and which can also be used as guidance to assist students to 
complete each assessment, for checking consistency across markers and for 
feedback subsequently to students. Feedback from students in formal subject 
evaluations and course experience questionnaires also tells us that students want 
more feedback on their assessments.

Action: An iterative approach
Institutional support for the integration of graduate attributes into teaching, 
learning and assessment processes has been patchy and not without problems 
(Hoban, et al., 2004). However, the Office of Learning and Teaching in Economics 
and Business (OLTEB) was established to provide learning and teaching support 
and resources for both students and academics in the faculty: 
http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/13713.html. Reflection on the faculty’s initial top-
down approach and its limited success in integrating graduate attributes into 
extisting curricula (Harvey & Kamvounias, 2008) led to OLTEB adopting 
collaborative, reflexive cycles of continuous improvement in assessment practice 
and change processes with academics.
The approach to integrating graduate attributes into assessment is now strategically linked into high priority faculty initiatives, for example, degree/program reviews and accreditations by external bodies. A priority area for improving learning and teaching in the faculty is reviewing curriculum alignment of learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities, graduate attributes with relevant assessments tasks and appropriate criteria (http://teaching.econ.usyd.edu.au/UoS/2_0_home.html). Consultancy support and online resources are available to guide staff in these processes of aligning graduate attributes with their unit’s assessment criteria http://teaching.econ.usyd.edu.au/UoS/2_1_outcomes.html).

Further, an online feedback tool (ReView) has been introduced in the faculty to link assessment with the development of graduate attributes. ReView was first piloted across the faculty in 2006 and now forms part of an ALTC project on facilitating engagement with graduate attributed development in business faculties: http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/go/home/grants/pid/669.

So far, over 2000 of the faculty’s students in eight different subjects of study across six discipline areas have used ReView. Given the large first year cohorts, it has been piloted in the faculty initially within the relatively smaller units of second and third year. Nevertheless, this approach is highly applicable to first year subjects and students, both to signal the importance of developing graduate attributes and to develop students’ self-assessment capabilities from the commencement of their studies. ReView is essentially a web-based automated marking sheet for the criteria-based assessment of student work (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Screenshot of online marking sheet](image-url)
Graduate attribute categories are entered on ReView and teachers then enter their assessment criteria, taking care to match each criterion for each assessment task with the relevant attribute. Staff use vertical bars on ‘data-sliders’ to assess each criterion relating to each assessment task. When marking is finished and assessments are released to students, they see a screen (Figure 2) that does not show actual marks but rather only broad grey sliders to indicate their performance against the criteria in terms of grades. Students also see their own self-assessment indicated by the light blue triangles at the top of each data slider.

![Figure 2: Screenshot of student feedback and self-assessment](image)

When criteria for all assessments are entered, a pie chart and bar chart are generated showing the aggregated attributes developed and assessed in the particular unit of study (Figure 3).

![Figure 3: Screenshot of criteria weighting for graduate attribute categories](image)

ReView uses graduate attributes to provide students with information about the criteria on which they will be assessed. Students can then use these criteria to check their work before submission, by self-assessing in the online feedback tool as against each of the criteria. Giving students a visual, interactive tool with which to engage fosters their reflection on both assessment criteria and graduate attributes.
While self-assessment is a feature that does not need to be used with the online feedback tool, research in our faculty and elsewhere suggests that students’ learning outcomes for those who engage with self-assessment are improved.

**Results, evaluation, impact**

Once markers in a unit of study have finished reviewing assessments, they are able to provide students with detailed comments as well as visual representations of student performance against assessment criteria aligned with graduate attributes. Students are also able to reflect on how their expectations and self-assessment correspond with the marker’s feedback. In this way, online feedback helps students to understand what they did well, what the weaknesses in their work were and how they can improve. End of semester surveys in 2008 in the subject CISS2001, Business in the Global Environment, and CLAW2205, Trade Practices and Consumer Law, for example, show over 70% agreement that students feel this tool has improved their learning. The same percentage of students said they would like online feedback in other units across their degree program.

Staff who have used the online feedback tool say: ‘It really made me re-think my assessments when I started to use ReView and to ask how on earth a mid-semester test helped. I also realised that I only taught concepts and no application’. Students have also given positive feedback about the online feedback tool:

> It’s a great system, it’s interactive and clearly shows where I went wrong. Having an option to self-assess is also great – at least I now I see how my expectations differ from the lecturer’s.

ReView has not yet been used in any of the faculty’s first year units but academics teaching first year students have expressed interest in participating in this initiative. The use of ReView in first year would support the transition to university assessment and alert students to the broad range of attributes they should develop as they acquire knowledge in new discipline areas. Encouraging self-assessment in first year would also assist students engage with their learning and so improve their learning outcomes.

**Ongoing outcomes**

Some of the outcomes from the faculty initiative to date are:

- Improvement in aligning assessment processes and provision of evidence for faculty’s assurance of learning and accreditation.
- Successful building of a community of practice leading the faculty’s initiative collaboratively within disciplines and through knowledge sharing across programs.
- Increased embedding of graduate attributes in disciplinary contexts within specific programs/units.
- Opportunities to provide students with feedback on their graduate attribute development.
- Increasingly engaging students in self-assessment.

**Further resources**

Nil.
References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Dr Lesley Treleaven
Room 336
Merewether Building (H04)
The University of Sydney
NSW, 2006

Email: l.treleaven@econ.usyd.edu.au; Phone: (02) 9036 7159; Fax: (02) 9351 6620
What makes students happy? Factors influencing student engagement using student evaluation data

Dr Megan Kek
Learning and Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
kek@usq.edu.au

Dr Sarah Stow
Academic Development Group, Science, Engineering & Technology Portfolio
RMIT University
sarah.stow@rmit.edu.au

Keywords
engagement, student experience

Context
This project began as a simple question to do with class size: *Is class size related to teaching?*

15,851 responses to a student evaluation survey form called the Course Experience Survey from Semester 2, 2006 in RMIT University were analysed. The sample contained 84% undergraduate and 13% postgraduate science, engineering and technology students. In addition to the information about study hours, age, whether students were part time or full time, we also included information about class size and delivery mode.

It was found that class size was negatively related to good teaching \([r=-0.25, n=14,280, p=0.000]\). That is, students in large classes perceived the quality of teaching as poor. However, the effect of class size on teaching is considered small (Cohen, 1992), which then prompted us to investigate further to see if there were other factors which may influence students’ satisfaction with the course. That is, we tried to tease out the relationship between the various factors associated with student experiences in their courses.

Actions taken
We asked if the students’ course satisfaction could be affected by factors such as personal characteristics, motivation, structural and learning environments. We believe that learning environment is one factor that could fall directly under a lecturer’s control to influence a student’s perception of the course in general. We would expect that the more effective the learning environment is, the better student perceptions of the course would be or the better engagement with courses would be.

Action 1
Before we examined the way in which these factors were related to course satisfaction, we performed a factor analysis on the student evaluation survey items. The factor analysis revealed three clusters of items:
Factor 1: Quality of curriculum (11 items)

These items appeared to reflect students’ perceptions of the curricular aspects of the course such as the learning objectives of the course, the course/program outcomes (including the graduate qualities or skills to be developed in the course), the assessment methods, and format of delivery (e.g. lecture or studio or lab).

Factor 2: Quality of teaching (6 items)

These items were similar to the good teaching items which made up the good teaching scale of the national Course Experience Questionnaire. This scale reflects students’ perceptions of teaching effectiveness.

Factor 3: Quality of learning materials (or support materials) (3 items)

These items appeared to reflect students’ perceptions of the relevance/usefulness of the learning materials/or support materials (including online and web-based learning).

Action 2

Using a combination of Biggs’ 3P model of teaching and learning (2003) and Biggs’ ecosystem in higher education (1993), a hierarchical regression was performed to find the links between personal factors, motivation, structural (class size, delivery mode) and learning environment (learning resources, curriculum, teaching) factors.

The factors were entered in blocks starting with the personal factors (age, study mode, sector), motivation (hours of study), class size, delivery mode, quality of learning resources, quality of curriculum, and quality of teaching.

![Hierarchical Regression Model entry order derived from Biggs (2003; 1993)](image)

**Effect size results**

The data shows effect size for successive models (Effect size = $R^2 / (1 - R^2)$) (Cohen, 1992). Large effect sizes were noticed for models with:

- Quality of learning resources
- Quality of curriculum
- Quality of teaching.

1. Small effects: 0.2 to 0.15, Medium effects: 0.15 to 0.35, Large effects: Above 0.35
**Figure 2: Effect size results**

**Variance explained**

The data shows change in amount of variance explained by successive models. Large increases in amount of variance are explained by models with:

- Quality of learning resources
- Quality of curriculum.

**Figure 3: Increase in % of variance explained**

**Tips and tricks**

Student achievement (e.g. grades) and other intermediary factors such as student learning processes (not obtained and examined in this project) may have accounted for the unexplained variance of CES; however, the effect of achievement on students’ satisfaction is a hotly contested issue (see Aitken, 1982; Bean & Bradley, 1986; Pike, 1993).
The student learning factors were not examined. In a ‘learning and teaching’ context that is student-centred, the investigation also needs to examine the student learning factors, conjoined, with the teaching and organisational factors. Current theories in learning have indicated that student learning factors (such as learning processes, approaches to learning, study strategies and behaviours) are strongly associated with both qualitative and quantitative student outcomes such as student satisfaction, graduate qualities, mental health and general wellbeing, generic skills, and academic performance.

**Results, evaluation, impact**

**Interesting points**

1. Our findings are consistent with Biggs’ models of student learning and support his theory of constructive alignment, that is, learning objectives, assessment tasks and teaching methods/strategies should be aligned with one another to effectively impact on student outcomes (in this case, satisfaction with a course/program).

2. Our model (curriculum, teaching and learning resources) accounts for 70% of the variance of course student satisfaction outcomes.

3. Curriculum and learning resources were shown to be very important to overall student course satisfaction.

4. Teaching scores alone do not provide a total picture of student course satisfaction. They must be read in conjunction with the scores for curriculum and learning resources when discussing student satisfaction.

**Implications**

1. Lecturers can positively influence student engagement with the course through the careful development of their own curriculum and learning resources. This project’s findings suggest that time spent developing learning resources could predict increases in overall student satisfaction. The value of an aligned curriculum (learning objectives, assessment tasks and teaching activities), in particular, should not be under-estimated. Even though the project does not specifically address first year students, the result supports the first year curriculum principle of engagement, where first year curricula are advised to incorporate pedagogies, teaching approaches and materials that engage students in their learning.

2. Teaching scores must be read together with the curriculum and learning resources scores. In order to predict students’ experiences, all three areas — teaching, learning resources and curricula — must be aligned. Reading the teaching scores in isolation does not give a clear or accurate picture of students’ course satisfaction.

3. The curriculum is found to be a critical learning and teaching predictor in effecting positive student experiences — one of which is to engage students in classrooms. The curriculum is a factor that can be controlled by lecturers.
4. Broadly, the results indicate the importance of lecturers as the designers of learning and teaching environments. Empirical studies of student approaches to learning have consistently shown that student learning is influenced by variables embedded in the social, psychological and physical learning and teaching contexts. Student approaches to learning are variable: students learn to switch their learning strategies and behaviours (approaches to learning) according to the demands of the learning and teaching environments. Biggs (2003) posited that if a student is embedded in ‘a learning and teaching environment X’, s/he will be ‘entrapped’ to meet the demands of X. What this implies is that to develop and achieve stated student outcomes intended by the organisation, the learning and teaching environments must be designed so that the design (physical space, learning objectives, assessment, teaching approach) is aligned with the stated outcomes. That is, if your learning and teaching context (examination question types, assessment types, learning objectives) demands a rote learner, students will use rote learning strategies and behaviours. As such, we cannot blame students if they fail to think critically, problem-solve or fail to use other higher order learning skills.

5. The educational point about the lecturer having control over the learning environment needs to be illuminated, particularly in a context where there is an emerging focus on having a high teaching score on student evaluation forms about teaching and learning. For some teaching staff, the teaching score emphasis appears to mean ‘meet the needs of the customers (students)’ and looking at the business of teaching and learning from a business point of view rather than an educational perspective. That is, to teach well (service provider) is to teach according to what students (customers) want. This study has shown that this is a dangerous path.

Further resources

Nil.

References


Peer assisted learning in fleximode: Developing an online learning community

Dr Henk Huijser
Learning and Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
huijser@usq.edu.au

Ms Lindy Kimmins
Learning and Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
kimminsl@usq.edu.au

Dr Peter Evans
Learning and Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
evansp@usq.edu.au

Keywords
peer assisted learning, Meet-Up, Wimba

Context
Evidence suggests that peer assisted learning schemes on campus help students establish social networks which can have a positive influence on their learning achievements. At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), the majority of students are off-campus, which raises the urgent question: how to harness the advantages of Meet-Up (formerly called PALS: Peer Assisted Learning Strategy) in an online environment? Given that the potential problem of social isolation is even more acute in distance education, how do we develop a peer assisted learning program online that creates a sense of community for its participants? Since 2006, MSN Messenger has been used on a relatively small scale to facilitate this at USQ, with positive initial results.

Peer led programs
The first year experience has become increasingly important to universities as a result of two major challenges that are perceived to have transformed the tertiary education environment over the last decade: student diversity and new technologies (Taylor, 2002). These challenges, in combination with severe financial pressures on universities, have resulted in various strategies and initiatives to provide a high quality service to ‘clients’ on the one hand, and to combat attrition rates on the other (McInnis 2001). Structured peer assisted learning is one initiative that is increasingly used to address first year transition issues, variously called PASS (Peer Assisted Support Scheme), SI (Supplemental Instruction) or in USQ’s case Meet-Up (formerly PALS: Peer Assisted Learning Strategy). These schemes are constructed around three elements of student need: engaging learning experiences, practical and timely support services, and a sense of belonging.
Benefits of peer assisted learning

Peer assisted learning schemes create an informal environment where potential intimidatory factors, such as highly structured lectures and tutorials, run by perceived ‘authority figures’, are minimised because peer leaders are students themselves. In addition, the emphasis is on student-centred learning where students not only set the agenda, but also decide whether they want to participate, and how often. Within this context, peer assisted learning has the broad potential to firstly play a positive part in addressing the difficulties students face in adjusting to university in first year, and secondly to enhance what Watson (2000, p. 1) calls the ‘college socialisation process, with peers providing role models and instilling enthusiasm for learning’. Students who study in a ‘social vacuum’ are less likely to have a positive view of university or to be successful learners (McInnes & James 1994; Tan & McWilliam 2008). Watson (2000, p. 1) further notes that peer assisted learning can be particularly beneficial where first year students come from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds: ‘a peer assisted learning scheme can be valuable in supporting a multicultural student group while outwardly providing academic assistance’.

At the same time however, it is important to be cautious about the benefits, as these are in most studies potential benefits, and they are not always supported by hard data. However, for our purposes here, we start from the assumption that peer assisted learning schemes have major benefits, particularly social benefits, which may have a trickle down effect on academic results and which are supported by University of Wollongong research (Lewis et al., 2005). These social benefits are traditionally nurtured in a non-threatening context of face-to-face peer interaction. The next question then becomes: in a context where students spend less time on campus (which particularly applies to USQ), how can technology assist us in harnessing the potential benefits of peer assisted learning schemes?

Action taken: Wimba as a vehicle for peer assisted learning

In early 2008, USQ adopted an institution-wide solution to online collaboration tools from the Wimba Collaboration Suite (Wimba Collaboration Suite, 2008), which offers tools that are potentially highly suited to a peer assisted learning context. Such a context should provide a framework or scaffold for supporting interactions between students. Wimba classroom firstly allows for the establishment of ‘breakout rooms’ and flexibly moving people between these rooms. It also provides tools for managing larger sessions including hand raising, private messaging, and shared whiteboard.

Social capital and trust are fundamental to successful online communities, and especially peer managed communities; building trust and confidence can best be achieved through the use of both ‘hard security’, in the form of passwords and access controls, as well as ‘soft security’, in the form of online profiles and the establishment of group norms. In the online world this trust is based on building an online persona in which people can be confident of your identity and your place within the community.
Finally, any environment that aims to increase participation and social networking needs to be easily accessible in the broadest sense. This includes reducing barriers faced by people with different physical abilities as well technical barriers related to access to computers and broadband connections. Wimba Classroom and Wimba Pronto have clearly defined accessibility features such as keyboard equivalents for control and navigation, voice activated video switching, and supporting accessibility devices such as screen magnification or screen readers. Wimba Classroom also allows people who do not have an internet connection or a computer that supports audio, to participate via a phone connection.

**Conclusion**

In a general sense, peer interaction is pivotal to student success and retention, and both the benefits of peer interaction and the feasibility of supporting such interaction have not diminished in the digital age, but have more likely increased. In response to increasing student diversity and large off-campus student cohorts, the PALS program at USQ has endeavoured to capitalise on new tools that allow for flexible ways to build peer assisted learning communities. Because of this, it has as much relevance now and in the future as it did in the past. Stokes, Garrett-Harris and Hunt (2003, p. 2) argue that ‘e-mentoring merges the approach of the traditional mentoring relationship with technology’. And so the challenge from our point of view becomes one of making this merger as tight as possible, while not discounting any application of the available technology if it can provide us with the benefits we are seeking, particularly the important benefit of a sense of belonging.

With Stokes et al. (2003, p. 4) we can even ask an additional question: ‘can e-mentoring offer additional benefits which go beyond those offered by traditional mentoring?’ As technology develops at an ever-increasing pace, new opportunities will keep presenting themselves to develop approaches to peer assisted learning schemes that take this sense of belonging seriously, whether through virtual classrooms and chat rooms such as Wimba, or perhaps through wireless mobile technology in the near future.

Peer assisted learning online has the potential to significantly enhance the learning experience for an increasingly diverse student population, especially as part of the first year experience.

**Further resources**

Nil.

**References**


**Contact details**

*Postal address (work):* Learning & Teaching Support Unit  
University of Southern Queensland  
West Street, Toowoomba  
Qld 4350

*Email:* kimmins1@usq.edu.au; *Phone:* (07) 4631 1682; *Fax:* (07) 4631 2407
You’re not in Kansas anymore: Following the Yellow Brick Road

Mrs Katherine Lindsay
Newcastle Law School
The University of Newcastle, NSW
Katherine.Lindsay@newcastle.edu.au

Keywords
transition, diversity, learning community, peer support, pastoral concern

Context
The Newcastle Law School is a small, regional school established in 1992. Since its foundation, it has had a strong commitment to high quality learning outcomes for students within a context of professional engagement. This has been reflected, in particular, in the mission of the first year teaching team to seek out and employ effective and holistic means of supporting students’ transition to university and to the law school environment.

The transition to law school is routinely a challenging time for school leavers, transferees from other programs and graduate entry law students alike. To provide a seamless, effective and humane network of support during the whole of the first year, which addresses the ongoing needs of individuals and groups, has been our continuing challenge. We meet the challenge with action, but with action based upon an abiding and synergistic philosophy: At Newcastle Law School we educate the whole person and legal education engages the whole educator. This philosophy has been distilled into three ‘watchwords’ which underpin our transition strategies: support, nurture and community.

Action taken: Support, nurture, community

Dorothy: [has just arrived in Oz, looking around and awed at the beauty and splendour] Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas any more.

Dorothy: [after a pause] We must be over the rainbow!

[a bubble appears in the sky and gets closer and closer. It finally lands, then turns into Glinda the Good Witch wearing a spectacular white dress and crown, holding a wand]

Dorothy: [to Toto] Now I... I know we’re not in Kansas! ...

The Wizard of Oz (motion picture) (1939)
from the book by L. Frank Baum (1900)

If we were to compare the experience of transition for the first year law student with Dorothy’s adventure in the land of Oz, it would be possible to identify some of the key strategies and challenges for teachers supporting students in transition. The threshold issues are those of excitement, awe and just a bit of fear as the student enters the unfamiliar environment. These are addressed through welcoming and informative orientation sessions, which involve both staff and student peers. At Newcastle Law School we offer a discipline-specific orientation program, which includes participation from student peers (including a student experience forum), staff (especially for social events, for example, BBQs) and offers special welcome and information sessions for identified groups with specific needs (for example, graduate entry students, Indigenous students, International students).
Dorothy: But, how do I start for Emerald City?

Glinda: It's always best to start at the beginning -- and all you do is follow the Yellow Brick Road.

Dorothy: But -- what happens if I --

Glinda: Just follow the Yellow Brick Road.

[Glinda vanishes. Dorothy looks up, open-mouthed with astonishment, as she starts to follow the Yellow Brick Road]

Dorothy: My -- ! People come and go so quickly here! Follow the Yellow Brick Road.
Follow the Yellow Brick Road? [singing] Follow the Yellow Brick Road. Follow the Yellow Brick Road. Follow, follow, follow, follow, Follow the Yellow Brick Road ...

Having entered this new and unfamiliar environment, the student naturally asks (or wants to ask) for advice for success, and the numerous ‘how tos’ of every day law school existence. If success at law school can equate broadly to the notion of reaching the Emerald City, the student needs intelligible and realistic advice (‘Just follow the Yellow Brick Road.’) from humane and nurturing authority figures (such as Glinda the Good Witch, rather than the Wicked Witch of the West). This is where the creation of a cohesive, friendly first year teaching team is indispensable. Schools and faculties must make a commitment to allocating the appropriate staffing resources and leadership to bring this to fruition. At Newcastle, we have been fortunate to have ongoing support from the highest levels of law school leadership for this goal.

Students also need friends for the journey. Some will have the support of existing school peers who have also made the journey to law school (like Toto), but comprehensive support requires the presence of companions on the way (for example, the scarecrow, tin man, and even the (cowardly) lion). In this respect, peer mentors and student leaders of peer-assisted study support programs in difficult subjects are essential. At Newcastle, senior students in law are enthusiastic supporters of mentoring and study support, with over 35 new volunteers for 2009 and a majority of existing mentors continuing. In addition to the practical benefits and immediacy of peer support, students need and appreciate encouragement and support from their teachers when things get tough. At Newcastle, the regular emails called Law School Notes, sent 2–3 times per semester, help students to realize that the School is in touch with how they are feeling and encourage students to seek assistance when necessary. The first year team operates a healthy and regular referral practice to other university services (for example, University Health service, University Counselling service, Student Academic Support program). For success, this requires the development of strong collegial relations with the staff in these services in recognition of their complementary skills.

Finally, and of no small importance to a holistic support program, is practical academic assistance and regular reminders of the goal in sight (that is, reaching the Emerald City). At Newcastle, this is done in four distinct and complementary ways. Firstly, the curriculum in the foundation subject is designed to be accessible and engaging. It is based around core skills and is aligned directly with other first year ‘content’ subjects. Graduate entry students are streamed in order to provide ‘front-end’ support for those who are grappling with four law subjects simultaneously. The modules of the foundation subject are rearranged to provide instruction in some skills earlier for graduate students. The school also provides academic enrichment opportunities, in addition to peer supported learning. The first year team provides additional (voluntary) classes for graduate entry and international students to facilitate accelerated skills development in case reading, legal analysis and problem solving. More general voluntary classes in legal writing are available to all students, and individual enrichment session are offered to particular students at risk.
Tips and tricks

There are no tricks to good support in transition. More than anything, it requires the will to succeed, the courage to take risks and the energy to take others of goodwill (both staff and students) with you on the journey. It also requires a strong commitment to communication among and across groups (staff, student peers and first year students). At Newcastle, it is the journey, and not just the arrival that counts.

Results, evaluation and impact: The ‘proof of our pudding’

What our students say about peer mentoring

- I had a really positive experience from the mentoring programme in my first year. The ongoing support was just what I needed to ‘survive’.
- I found the program really helpful.
- I really appreciated having access to a mentor in my first year.
- My mentor saved my life.

What our students say about wanting to be a peer mentor

My reasons for becoming a mentor are founded from my personal experiences studying law. I’d like to share these experiences with students beginning their studies in law and feel that I will be able to help them make the most of their studies and social life. I think that the proper advice can be vital to a student’s success in Law and for some, may even save them from dropping out. My second reason is that having completed my first year in law, I’d love to get more involved with the school. The support has been tremendous and I’d love to give something back to the University and feel that becoming a mentor is a great first step in achieving that!

(These comments have been replicated by a majority of students seeking to become peer mentors in 2009.)

What our students say about peer-assisted study support

- Without it I would not have done so well...
- Made me realize I was not the only one having difficulties... helped minimize stress.
- I felt comfortable being in a place where others were wanting to learn.
- [The peer support leader] was able to explain things in a way I could understand.

What our students say about being a student leader of peer-assisted study support

- It is a real privilege.
- It was the best thing I did at law school.
- I didn’t realize how much I would enjoy it. My students were great!
What our students say about Law School Notes

I just wanted to say thanks for sending that message* to all us law students. It’s something that each and every one of us appreciates - I certainly did. It gives you confidence and makes you feel good when you read things like that, and inspiration is the source of motivation, and in saying that we students could not achieve what we do without the hardworking, dedicated and positive input from the Law School. Personally, I would like to thank you and the Law School for giving me the stepping stones that will push me toward the quarry that is a legal career.

*That message Law School Notes 13 November 2008:

Dear Students

Yes, it IS that time of the year again when we all need to ACCENTUATE the POSITIVE and limit the negative. Don’t listen so hard to the internal critic! Success in exams is ultimately about HOW you use what you know.

For those who are facing their first end of year law exams: congratulations for making it this far.

For those who are facing their final law exams ever: congratulations for winning the marathon!

For those who are in between, think how far you have come and how much you have achieved so far: you deserve a medal already!

Everyone in the law school is thinking of you as you face the exam period.

A few reminders:

No one can live on adrenaline alone!

Eat sensibly and get lots of sleep in between exams. V and coffee are not essential food groups.

You only need to survive your exams, you need to LIVE the rest of your life:)

Every good wish for the exams, the festive season and we look forward to seeing you refreshed in 2009 (Even the summer clerks:))

Further resources

Developing graduate attributes as a framework for a first year Bachelor of Education twinning program assessment criteria

Ms Joanna Logan
Library
Queensland University of Technology
j2.logan@qut.edu.au

Ms Donna Tangen
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology
d.tangen@qut.edu.au

Ms Jan Harvey
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology
j.harvey@qut.edu.au

Ms Erika Hepple
Faculty of Education
Queensland University of Technology
e.hepple@qut.edu.au

Keywords
design, assessment, graduate attributes, transnational

Context

This showcase tracks the development of a set of Graduate Attributes (GAs) for a four year Bachelor of Education degree, developed by staff both in Australia and in Malaysia. The GAs were designed as teaching and learning standards to provide a framework for assessment criteria for four first semester units of study (subjects) in a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) QUT/Malaysian twinning program. A twinning program is a kind of transnational education program in which students complete one component of their degree in their home country (in the current project, Malaysia, at Institut Perguruan Ilmu Khas (IPIK)) and the other component at the awarding university (in the current project, QUT). As this twinning program commenced in January 2009, the focus of this showcase is on the positioning of the GAs in the development of four first year subjects, and on the mapping of assessment and resource requirements for these units.

Action taken

In the twinning program, Malaysian students will complete Years One and Four in their home institute and Years Two and Three at QUT. Before beginning their Bachelor of Education program, students were required to complete a Foundation Course at their home institute (Malaysia). The Foundation program was a transition-into-university-studies program, designed in Malaysia, and completed over 18 months. The Foundation Course was designed to build students’ capacity to undertake an academic workload at a standard expected by QUT. Six months before the conclusion of the Foundation Course, three staff members from the
Malaysian institute visited QUT to begin developing units for first year course work: one school manager, one senior lecturer and the Library Director. The manager and senior lecturer worked with QUT staff to develop first year subject outlines that were compatible with subject outlines of similar subjects offered at QUT but that would also align with the Malaysian Ministry of Education ProForma subject outlines. QUT staff included one senior lecturer, two lecturers (subject coordinators), one liaison librarian and one academic advisor/tutor. Prior to this meeting, the course work in Malaysia did not have graduate attributes attached to their BEd subjects.

To develop the GAs, the QUT Faculty of Education Development Office academic skills advisor and an education liaison librarian identified the whole-of-course (program) graduate attributes which related to academic and information literacy skills and knowledge. In consultation, the QUT staff members identified the then current QUT teaching attributes and the Queensland College of Teachers standards for teaching as guides to frame the development of the GAs. Malaysian staff then identified six key areas relevant for inclusion as appropriate graduate attributes for the Malaysian cohort of students. These six GAs include: discipline knowledge and skills pertinent to the professional area; effective communication skills in a variety of contexts and modes; capacity for critical, creative and analytical thinking and effective problem solving; ability to work both independently and collaboratively; capacity to foster inclusive and equitable educational environments; and ability to reflect and to connect with broader social and ethical community values. These six attributes received approval from the Malaysian Ministry of Education for inclusion as a fundamental framework for developing subjects and assessment.

The GAs relating to information literacy and academic skills and related areas were mapped in detail across the four years of the program, in a document titled ‘Graduate Attributes: A student’s journey through information literacy and academic skills (developmental skills)’. Levels of scaffolded support for students were designed with the aim of producing graduates who could successfully transition into professional practice at the end of program. The level of support for students in Year One was designed to provide ‘foundational, comprehensive support’. As students progress through each of the other three years of the degree, the level of scaffolded support will decrease as expectations of their self directed learning increase. By Year Four, the aim is that students will be self directed learners who can transition into professional practice.

Year 1 of the course was based on the theme of building students’ academic and information literacy skills and knowledge, in which concepts will be introduced and exemplars provided. Intensive academic support is intended to be provided by academic and professional staff in the forms of both face-to-face sessions and print and online learning resources. In Year 2, students will be expected to expand upon the knowledge and skills developed in Year One, with less scaffolding provided. In Year 3, students will be expected to reflect on their academic and information literacy skills and knowledge and in Year 4, the theme will be bridging to professional work. The framework was shared with the Malaysian staff, who provided feedback. Below is an example of a GA mapped across the four years of the degree (Table 1).
Table 1: Graduate Attribute 1.4 ‘Appropriate technology information skills’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yr 1. Build Intensive academic support</th>
<th>Yr 2. Expand Increasing student independence</th>
<th>Yr 3. Reflect</th>
<th>Yr 4. Transition Bridging to professional work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use appropriate information technology e.g. develop a group presentation using PowerPoint</td>
<td>Identify gaps in understanding and use of information technology, and develop new skills and understanding e.g. undertake an online tutorial in using Excel</td>
<td>Apply information technology skills to professional practise e.g. develop a lesson plan for using information technology in a classroom</td>
<td>Reflect on the use of information technology in professional practise and develop resources e.g. include lesson plans and professional development activity plans into a portfolio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following on from the GA mapping exercise, in preparation for the commencement of the course in Malaysia in 2009, the assessment for the Semester 1 subjects were mapped in detail. This assessment mapping exercise detailed the knowledge and skills, learning support and resources identified from program documentation for Semester 1 of Year 1. The purpose of the document was as a guide for staff to scaffold student learning based on the need for intensive academic support in the students’ formative year of the twinning program. The assessment map listed each assessment task, required knowledge and skills, learning support and resources. Below is an example of assessment mapping for two of the subjects (Table 2).

Table 2: Example of assessment map for two first year units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HD3101: Human Development</th>
<th>LG3101: Linguistics for Language Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment task</td>
<td>Written assign — group work &amp; report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Research article review</td>
<td>• Oral presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tutorial presentation (group)</td>
<td>• Report writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exam</td>
<td>• Referencing &amp; paraphrasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge &amp; skills</td>
<td>Oral presentation skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Critical analysis</td>
<td>Team-building skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Find information</td>
<td>Report writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Referencing &amp; paraphrasing</td>
<td>Referencing &amp; paraphrasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Team-building skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Oral presentation skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• PowerPoint skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning support</td>
<td>Embedded within the unit (subject)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Face-to-face session(s) with librarian &amp; academic (tutors) support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exercise using exemplar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Library research skills &amp; referencing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consultation time given for tutors to meet with individual groups for tutorial presentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>APA referencing guide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Research article &amp; template for critical review</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• APA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Referencing guide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Online learning objects from the QUT library</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tips and tricks

The establishment of a representative and collaborative program coordination team before the commencement of the program has been a key factor in the design of teaching and learning support and assessment for the program. The inclusion in the program coordination team of the academic skills advisor and the liaison librarian was instrumental in providing expertise and a focus on academic and information literacy skills. The visits to QUT by the Malaysian staff and by QUT staff to Malaysia have been essential in establishing and building upon a professional relationship and a shared understanding of the teaching and learning requirements and issues associated with the program.

The next steps are to continue the ongoing communication between QUT and Malaysian staff concerning teaching and learning issues for the first year students in this program. Particular focus will be on designing and evaluating resources and activities to support students' information literacy and academic skills development. The establishment of a new Student Learning Centre for students enrolled in the program at IPIK will provide a valuable learning environment.

Results, evaluation, impact

An application for QUT ethics approval for research, titled ‘Teacher educator capacity building in an Australian/Malaysian twinning program’ has been submitted. The purpose of the proposed research is to explore the capacity building of teacher education staff engaged in an Australian/Malaysian twinning program. The research will explore what effects transnational teaching networks, created through a twinning program, have in aiding profession development of teacher educators in both teaching locations. Participants will engage in a questionnaire and participate in an online wiki containing views/reflections on their participation in the twinning program with regards to how such participation has lead to changes to their professional practices. It is intended that the benefits of the study will assist staff in the twinning program in providing Malaysian pre-service teachers with improved and or enhanced tutorial lessons, activities and learning support resources thus, providing them with deeper learning opportunities.

Further resources

MOEM3 wiki has been designed for staff to share information and resources and to work collaboratively on the MOEM3 program. http://moem3.pbwiki.com

Contact details

Postal address (work): QUT Library
Victoria Park Rd
Kelvin Grove Qld 4059

Email: j2.logan@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 3444; Fax: (07) 3138 5890
Inspiring achievement in first year university students: A website of diverse resources to support the disparate needs of first year university students

Ms Ann Luzeckyj
Academic Development Team
Staff Development and Training Unit
Flinders University
ann.luzeckyj@flinders.edu.au

Keywords
diversity, academic support, website

Context
This Showcase provides a representation of a website that was designed to support staff in their endeavours to inspire achievement in first year university students. The website was developed by Academic Developers at Flinders University and brings together a range of resources, practical ideas and research that staff may wish to consider utilising with their first year students.

The poster fits within the symposium’s organising principle of ‘diversity’. The Inspiring Achievement in First Year University Students website provides access to information about the range of initiatives that are employed by staff to meet the diverse needs of first year students at Flinders University.

First year students come from a range of backgrounds and enrol at university with a wide variety of both needs and expectations. They may include:

- students who are the first in their family to attend university
- mature age students
- returning to study students
- international students
- Indigenous students
- low socio-economic status students
- wealthy students participating in a degree to meet family expectations
- students with disabilities
- students who are entering directly from high school and have the required higher education ranking to enter their chosen course (Krause, 2006; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

This range of students need to adjust to the university environment because, as discussed by Krause (2001, p. 149), it is:

> unlike any other formal educational setting and each university has its own distinct social, historical and cultural context into which students must be integrated if they are to obtain maximum benefit from the learning experience

Students need to adjust to these unique contexts, gain new academic skills, conform to new forms of assessment, deal with being in much larger classes and come to terms with feelings of isolation (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Many first year students also require:
support in developing academic literacies (including support in improving their English language, numeracy, research and information technology skills)
• confidence building
• career advice
• time management skills.

Many of the resources that address these skills are developed by members of the university community who do not necessarily teach the students. These include the online resources and face-to-face initiatives developed by student learning services, libraries and counselling services. The resources and initiatives assist academic literacy development, provide career advice and build student confidence while supporting and inspiring learning. Clerehan (2003) discusses the importance of ensuring the skills required by students are not provided in the form of ‘disembodied “skill” programs that claim to teach the kinds of skills which students can simply transfer from one subject or discipline to another’ (p. 77). Therefore, academic staff would ideally utilise the support provided and adapt resources so that the skills students require to ensure academic success are incorporated into the curriculum.

Academic staff are also involved in developing a range of innovative practices that help engage students and support their adjustment to university life and these also need adaptation into specific discipline and teaching environments. Knowing the strategies that have worked, what problems were encountered and strategies used to address them by academic colleagues can help encourage staff to attempt different approaches in their teaching with first year students.

Staff also need to be aware of what is possible and have easy access to both ideas and resources that can be adapted to suit the requirements of the subject and its assignments. Clerehan states that one of the problems with many endeavours is that ‘they are often personality-dependent, rising and glittering brightly for a moment — perhaps immortalised in a conference paper — only to sink when the personnel move on’ (pp. 77–78). She suggests that the web offers a potential solution because it ‘can provide a stable, capacious and accessible home for material, which can be altered as subjects and assignments alter’ (p. 78).

**Action taken**

The *Inspiring Achievement in First Year University Students* website at Flinders University brings together information about the activities undertaken by academic and professional staff to support the needs of first year students. As the poster reflects, the website currently provides access to:

• Information on why the first year is important and the focus of the site
• Access to papers presented at the regular discussion fora
• Details of good practice that takes place at Flinders University and access to resources related to the good practice
• Information about support services for students and staff at Flinders University with links to relevant sites and resources
• Access to research and projects occurring across Australia
• Information about what other Universities are doing and links to their pages
• Links to further resources and reading.
All staff interested in helping to inspire the academic achievement of first year students are encouraged to access the website. This is done via emails, posters distributed to faculties and at faculty meetings attended by the Academic Development team. The team regularly hold meetings and host fora for first year topic coordinators and staff who work with them so that cross-institutional practice may begin to develop as ideas are exchanged, solutions to particular issues are identified and insight is gained into the resources being developed and how they are used. Staff from other universities are also invited to present at these events so that Flinders University academic staff gain insight into good practice both at Flinders and across Australia. The Microsoft PowerPoint™ slides and other resources from the fora presentations are included on the website so they can be accessed after the event.

The poster consists of a series of screen captures from the website, including captures of PowerPoint slides used during the fora and screen captures from other websites that are accessible via links from the Inspiring Achievement in First Year University Students website. Graphical images which reflect the activities of particular areas of the university who actively support first year students (for example, the Library) have been included where possible. Explanations of the various pictures and graphics have been kept to a minimum so that the information from the website ‘speaks for itself’.

The poster described in this Showcase abstract frames the Flinders University Inspiring Achievement in First Year University Students website as a repository of a diverse range of resources that academic staff can use to support the many and varied needs of their first year students. Staff are also encouraged to add their own innovative ideas to the website so that it builds and becomes a durable, large and accessible home for resources and ideas that may be redeveloped for use across a range of subjects and assignments. The poster therefore provides a representation of how a website can provide support to the diverse needs of staff in their endeavours to inspire achievement in first year university students.

Further resources

Inspiring Achievement in First Year University Students website at: http://www.flinders.edu.au/teaching/teaching-strategies/first-year-students/first-year-students_home.cfm

References


**Contact details**

*Postal address (work):* GPO Box 2100  
Adelaide SA 5001  

*Email:* ann.luzeckyj@flinders.edu.au; *Phone:* (08) 8201 3844; *Fax:* (08) 8201 5169
Pocket books of engagement: Pedagogies, teaching approaches and materials that engage students in their learning

Mrs Claire Macken
School of Law
Deakin University
claire.macken@deakin.edu.au

Keywords
engagement, monitoring and evaluation, innovative teaching, transition

Context
In 2008, I took on the task of lecturing a foundational, compulsory, introductory first year law unit (subject) MLL 110 Law Society and Civil Rights. There were approximately 180 in face-to-face lectures in this subject, predominately school-leaver domestic students. Lectures were 4 hours a week, including Friday 4–6pm. Yes, 4–6pm, Friday.

Student evaluations in this subject were dismal. In answer to the Question ‘Was this [subject] Well Taught’, the following evaluations were received. The score is a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 5:

2005 — 1.88
2006 — 2.76 (different lecturer)
2007 — 2.80 (different lecturer)

‘This has been the worst teaching experience of my entire life. I dreaded Fridays.’ — former MLL 110 lecturer

In 2006, the lecturer in this subject resigned, to a large part because of the teaching in MLL 110.

When I was asked to lecture this subject, the exchange with my Head of School reminded me something of the following from The Sound of Music:

**Captain Von Trapp**: I don’t know how much the abbess told you. You are the twelfth governess. I trust you will be an improvement on the last one. She stayed only two hours.

**Maria**: What’s wrong with the children, sir?

**Captain Von Trapp**: Nothing is wrong with the children, only the governesses …

The Sound of Music

On the basis that it was not a ‘Generation Y’ problem or indeed a futile pursuit, a new approach was taken: The background for this presented work.

Action taken
This section sets out the overall approach I took to MLL 110 as the Melbourne (campus) coordinator. Some particular innovations are set out in the ‘Tips and tricks’ section.
The battle plan for this subject was one of student engagement by applying the five common attributes of excellent university lecturers from Kane et al:

- Subject knowledge
- Teaching skills
- Personality
- Interpersonal relationships
- Research/teaching nexus.

**The objective: Enhanced student learning**

**The means?**

1. Planned teaching strategies, methods and initiatives to enhance student engagement and learning. Inspiration was from Ramsden, the AUTC Large Classes Principles of Effective Teaching and literature on the First Year Experience.

2. Coordination of lecture and tutorial program and placement of this subject within the ‘big picture’ of the entire law degree, from Orientation Week to after conclusion of the Semester.

3. Implementing a skills approach to studying law, including setting up a highly-successful supportive informal environment called ‘De-Stressed’ outside of formal lecture times and creation of a ‘Law Essentials’ website. (www.deakin.edu.au/buslaw/lawessentials)

4. Facilitating student connection with the student societies, and providing formal and informal opportunities for student interaction both in and outside of lecture times, encouraging participation in BBQs, optional mooting competitions and University life generally.

5. Implementation of reflective teaching practice and ‘team reflective sessions’ for the Melbourne teaching team — ‘Reflection is a form of inquiry through which teachers can question their actions, the contexts in which they teach, and all the influences on those actions and contexts’ (Killeen, 2007). Osterman (1990) characterised reflective practice as ‘mindful consideration of one’s actions, specifically, one’s professional actions — a challenging, focused and critical assessment of one’s own behaviour as a means towards developing one’s own craftsmanship’.

These strategies were within my control. Other aspects of the first year curriculum at this point in time were outside my control: for example, all aspects of assessment other than feedback (set at a 70% examination, essay and legal research module), timetabling and subject content.

**Tips and tricks**

**What worked!**

- Entirely optional ‘Destressed ‘How to Study Law’ Groups — 1 hour ‘bring your lunch and coffee’ fun, chatty groups on ‘hot issues’ in first year law. The topic was up for consideration a few days before; whether ‘How do I get started?’, ‘What is a case anyway’? or ‘Where do I go for the best coffee’? It was facilitated by myself and one of the first year tutors. Each week I would prepare a worksheet to take away on a particular skill development (for example, reading cases in law, managing your time).

- An optional field trip to the Victorian Parliament in the week we teach students ‘how laws are made’. It was easy to organise, we asked a few older students on board, and it was a great day.
• Writing a story on Lady Justice, including some students and lecturers names and ‘in’ class jokes, as a review of topics 1-4. Students completed this task in groups and had to report back from the lectern to the entire lecture. It was fantastic fun, and received an enormously positive response.

• Inviting a retired Supreme Court Judge to guest lecture. The highlight was just asking him to tell his stories — he was a hit, particularly at answering questions.

• Painting the ‘big picture’ for the entire subject, for each part of the subject, for each lecture.

• Interesting, engaging lectures through PowerPoints, videos, sounds, pictures and very little text! Easy ‘take-home’ points, summaries, outlines and ‘big picture’ views.

• Successful to an extent, dealing with class disruptions (talking, phones, laptops) by stopping and deal with disruptions every time, consistently; physically walking over to the part of the room where the disruption is; learning student names, speaking to students personally and privately after or out of class, but by 5pm on a Friday I learnt there is sometimes little that you can do!

• Organising lectures at an even more micro- level: diagrams, tables, lists, checklists, dot points and step-by-step approaches; starting lectures with a light issue, easy concept, an interest point; giving more complicated ideas the time they needed, easy concepts less time; just looking around to see if students were engaged!

• Relating the lecture to the newspaper of the day, interesting stories or current affairs.

• An innovative approach to online subject design, entirely ‘student-friendly’, easy to navigate and non-intimidating.

• Facebook First Year Law groups I set up — many students preferred the informal means of communication rather than the formal online University system and developing interpersonal relationships with students. ‘Truly awful university teaching is most often revealed by a sheer lack of interest in and compassion for students and student learning’ (Ramsden, p. 95).

• Ties with the Deakin Law Students’ Society — social functions (BBQs, First Year Camp, Intro Night).

• Duty ‘drop in’ tutor — past student was a popular choice.

• Learning student names! By trawling through almost 200 photos, speaking to students outside of formal lecture times.

**What I will do differently next time!**

• Create ‘law firms’ with a mentor from a later year — ask students to complete interactive work in lecture time in set firms, from time to time calling a ‘merger’ to allow swapping of ideas.

• Students find attending a 2-hour lecture on Friday 4–6pm to be very challenging — even with my best efforts at times they would be talkative, disruptive, disinterested. So further adopt more learner-centred approaches to learning: for example, introduce ‘Fun Friday’ — fun, interactive, novel learning methods every Friday; apply teaching strategies of McKeachie and AUTC Project.

• Further mediating of student expectations and less assumptions as to skill levels from secondary school.

• Create ‘self-checklists’ and quizzes to allow students to monitor their own learning.
• Clearer assessment is needed in marking criteria and feedback (Ramsden p. 96 2007), including the development of criterion referenced assessment. Creating further connections between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

• Earlier feedback on assignments by changing the submission dates (Kift, 2003).

Results, evaluation, impact

This section details student evaluations and self-evaluation of teaching practice, as well as a report on this program in the Financial Review.

The First Year Transition Program at Deakin was reported as a new initiative in an article in the Financial Review on the 18 August 2008.

• ‘Help for those in a state of shock’ The Financial Review with a special leader section to the article entitled ‘Deakin takes the stress out of first-year law’.

Student evaluations in this subject increased dramatically in 2008 from previous years. In answer to the Question ‘Was this [subject] Well Taught’, the evaluation was 4.50 / 5.00. This was an increase from 2.80 / 5.00 the previous year.

• 94.6% of respondents answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘I was satisfied with the quality of the teaching in this Unit’.
  - In 2006 29.6% of respondents answered ‘yes’ to this same question.

Student comments

• ‘Absolutely loved Law Society and Civil Rights. Great lectures and tutorials. Very happy with the standard of this unit.’

• ‘This is an essential introduction to a daunting new environment and is handled very well by all the staff, who are approachable and friendly...the atmosphere and the support were the best aspects by far.’

• ‘Law, Society and Civil Rights is always the highlight of my week. Thankyou!’

• ‘Claire’s enthusiasm and passion for the law really shone through in her translation of the materials. Claire’s use of videos, songs and other visual materials was a fantastic way to teach the material required. Not only did she provide exceptional insight, but always did so with a smile!’

• ‘Claire is the best lecturer ever! She was highly entertaining, whilst still covering course material in detail. The lecture slides were engaging and the additional videos she created were good summaries of topics we had covered.’

But this!

• ‘Claire’s teaching was very interesting and easy to listen to, but I would have preferred more emphasis on the actual course material. Claire’s videos, while very funny and enjoyable, won’t help when we come to the exam! However, it was an enjoyable semester with Claire.’

A fair comment?

The characteristics of an excellent educator include the ‘ability to stimulate interest and thinking about the subject matter’ (Feldman 1988, 1996, 1997) and ‘... Engagement, motivation — through enthusiasm/expressiveness’ (Hativa et al. 2001).

According to Ramsden, ‘there are numerous accounts in the literature of higher education of the way in which enthusiastic teaching may lead to greater student involvement and commitment to the subject, while its lacklustre and rambling counterpart results in negative attitudes and a sense of futility’ (Ramsden, 2007, p. 72).
A criticism that engaging lecturing, through videos, interaction and new approaches requiring thought as to the course material should be abandoned in favour of ‘straight course lecturing’ reminds me of a quote from Ramsden:

‘To master anything ... Requires effort. But it does not require unpleasant effort, drudgery. The main task of any teacher is to make a subject interesting.’ (Ramsden, page 94 quoting Sayer 1943: 9).

Learning law does not necessarily have to be boring drudgery.

Further resources

**Law essentials:** www.deakin.edu.au/buslaw/lawessentials — a one-stop reference point for all law students on everything they need to know about studying and learning law and entering the legal profession.

References


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Contact details

Postal address (work): Claire Macken
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood, Victoria 3125

Email: claire.macken@deakin.edu.au; Phone: (03) 9244 6184; Fax: (03) 9244 6063
Orientation and induction: An academic and social transition into the first year

Mrs Janet Malcolm
First year Co-ordinator Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching)
Faculty of Education and Social Sciences
Manukau Institute of Technology
Janet.malcolm@manukau.ac.nz

Mrs Lin Howie
Principal Lecturer School of Education
Faculty of Education and Social Sciences
Manukau Institute of Technology
Lin.howie@manukau.ac.nz

Keywords
transition, orientation, induction, retention and success

Context

E tu Kahikatea
hei whakapae ururoa
awhi mai awhi atu
tatau tatau e
tatau tatau e

Stand like the Kahikatea
stand against the storm
together, united
we will survive
(Melbourne, 2005)

The kahikatea is the New Zealand white pine. This is a shallow rooted tree, which on its own is easily damaged by strong winds, yet in a group can weather the worst of storms as the roots interlock and provide mutual support.

This song is taught to all students in the Manukau Institute of Technology Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching) (BEd (ECT)) at orientation to symbolise that within the School of Education there is a holistic approach to learning. Success is viewed as a collaborative effort. Students are encouraged to work together to support one another with help from their lecturers and the wider institute who stand with them.

Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) is situated in Manukau City, with a population of approximately 335,000. Manukau is New Zealand’s third largest city, and the fastest growing. It is home to more than 165 different ethnic groups, with the largest Māori and Pacific communities in New Zealand (Manukau City Council, n.d.).

This showcase focuses specifically on first year students in the BEd (ECT) program at Manukau Institute of Technology. This program has been in place for the last two years and was specifically designed to support student retention and success. High levels of support are available in year one and then tapered off. The program aims to develop independent, self motivated, and successful students, and to avoid a culture of dependency. This can be a challenge.
In 2008, 230 students were enrolled in this program, all were female. They ranged in age from 17–60. 31% were under the age of 25, 37% were 25–39, and 32% were 40 and over. The student body is ethnically diverse, and for this showcase ethnicity is represented under five groups; European/Pakeha — New Zealand 37%, Māori 9%, Pacific Peoples 15%, Asian 33% and other 6%.

There are three particular groups of students who are potentially at increased risk of failure. These include mature women from non-traditional academic backgrounds (66% of all students); Pasifika and Maori students who have been identified from program retention and success statistics as sometimes needing increased academic support; and thirdly school leavers who may need induction into tertiary learning styles.

This showcase highlights some of the academic and social transition initiatives and strategies that have been implemented to support students in their first year. The aim is to help students develop a sense of belonging in the program as well as induct them into academic learning. Institute level strategies and support systems are not discussed; however, program systems are consistent with overall retention and success strategies.

**Actions taken**

**Year one coordinator**

The year one coordinator is responsible for the support of year one students, including but not limited to organising and leading orientation and induction, monitoring student achievement and progress.

**School partnerships**

Strong connections between schools and MIT promote ease of transition for school leavers. Two initiatives are in place: an MIT early childhood program (delivered in 24 schools in 2008), and school ‘experience’ days — students considering a career in early childhood education are encouraged to become ‘students for a day’ and participate in classes with current student teachers.

**Interview and selection**

Interview and selection processes are designed to ensure accepted students are likely to be successful and are provided with targeted concurrent support for academic writing and/or maths. Unsuccessful applicants are referred to one of two preparation programs as necessary; progress followed, and then invited to reapply on completion.

**Cohort system**

All students are placed in a class group/cohort of approximately 35 that stays together for the duration of the degree enabling supportive academic and social relationships to develop. An online program component is used to encourage peer communication and support.

**Free computer skills courses**

All interviewed applicants complete an IT skills survey which is reviewed by the Year one coordinator to refer students to free computer courses as necessary (if more than usual induction program is necessary).
Orientation

Students are expected to attend an orientation program which helps them to get to know the institute; the program and program regulations; student facilities, services, and support; Program Head, lecturers, support and administration staff; study requirements outside of classroom time; textbooks, electronic learning system, ICT and other resource needs. Current students six months into the program and graduating students are invited to share their experiences with new students in small groups.

Induction

Specific induction strategies are timetabled for the first semester of study.

Week one

Group building activities in each class help students to get to know each other and facilitate the formation of a buddy system. All students attend a Powhiri, a Māori welcome ceremony, where program lecturers and current students welcome students onto the marae and the campus.

Weeks two to six

In the initial weeks of the program, students are provided with hands-on opportunities to learn how to use the electronic learning system, email, the library catalogue, and other academic skills and research skills relevant to particular courses.

Week three

Three week registers are completed and absent students followed up, support offered as necessary.

Week four

The Program Head visits each cohort of students to get to know them, remind them about institute, department and section support available and follow up any issues.

Weeks four to six

Small formative assessments are used to provide early feedback on progress. Students elect a class representative who meets regularly with the coordinator.

Weeks seven to eight

A shared lunch is organised to celebrate the end of the first term.

Weeks twelve to fourteen

Year one coordinator discusses and records plus, minus, interesting points about the institute and the program with each cohort. Report is tabled at a program committee meeting and any concerns addressed as appropriate.

Week seventeen

A shared lunch organised to celebrate the end of the first semester.
**Academic literacy development**

The key academic literacies needed in this program include note taking, summarising, academic reading, writing essays, reports and other assignments, test taking, referencing (APA current edition) and avoiding plagiarism, library research (use of catalogue, databases, internet), critiquing, and research analysis. These are taught in specific courses when they are needed for assessments. Assessments are introduced in ways that scaffold students’ development of academic and research skills, ICT skills, and the progression of applied learning that occurs over the program.

**Formative assessment opportunities**

Opportunities for formative feedback are timetabled for assignments in year one and Individual learning plans/contracts set up for student teachers who fail one or more courses at the end of the first semester.

**Degree mentors**

Two BEd (ECT) lecturers, one Pasifika and one Māori, are allocated time to provide social and academic support and guidance to these specific groups of students.

**Faculty mentor**

The faculty mentor follows up lecturer referrals regarding student absences and non academic concerns so that challenges/barriers to success are identified early and students referred to appropriate support.

**Faculty academic advisor**

The faculty employs an academic advisor who provides one-on-one academic advice and workshops on specific academic skills and/or refers students on to MIT support services. Her research (Dickey, 2008) indicates the type of support students value and require.

**Evaluation**

Retention and success rates since the BEd (ECT) started in 2007 have been positive. In 2007 the retention rate (including withdrawals and dropouts) was 91% and the completed pass rate of those retained was 95.88%.

The program committee has identified challenges with providing high levels of support and the program is currently being reviewed to ensure the focus is on providing academic support which leads to independence rather than dependence — for example, the amount of formative feedback is being monitored and program regulations changed so that students do not have to pass every assessment, but can aggregate marks. This allows short, low stakes assessment at the beginning of courses with feedback that students can use to improve scores on later assessments.

**Further resources**

Nil.
References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Gate 11, North Campus
Otara Road
Private Bag 94006
Manukau City
Auckland, New Zealand

Email: janet.malcolm@manukau.ac.nz; Phone: (09) 968 8000 x 7153; Fax: (09) 968 7714
Expectations, experiences and evaluations: 
A student perspective on the first year experience

Miss Rikki Mawad
Former TUU President
Communications Officer, CALT
University of Tasmania
rjmawad@utas.edu.au

Keywords
student experience, student perspective, expectations, evaluations

Context
I am a student at UTAS undertaking my Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice after graduating from a BA/LLB (Hons) (UTAS) in December 2008. I held the position of the President of the Tasmania University Union Inc. (TUU) from November 2005 to May 2008, and I am currently working as the Communications Officer in the UTAS Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT).

The TUU is the peak student representative body for all UTAS students, across all UTAS campuses and is responsible for all commercial operations as well as for representation, welfare, advocacy and support services for all students. As TUU President, in addition to having responsibilities for the TUU operations and services, I was an active participant in over 25 established University Committees and in well over 20 ad-hoc Working Parties and Taskforces, several of which were focused on first year student transition and retention. My representative and committee experience ranged from University Council, Academic Senate, and University Teaching and Learning Committees, to the First Year Issues Working Party. I was also the President of the Tasmanian State Branch of the National Union of Students (NUS) from 2006–2008 and involved in the Australian Law Students Association (ALSA).

I have developed a broad perspective on first year through my own experiences as a student, as a student representative and also as a professional staff member at UTAS. I am also a Director on the Tasmanian Department of Education Board for the new Tasmanian Academy through which I will be involved in research on the student experience and student voice in pre-tertiary education. In 2008, I received an ALTC Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning for ‘commitment in ensuring student-centred and well informed contributions in university decision making and for dedication in seeking to enhance the overall student experience’.

I collaborated in Professor Kift’s ALTC Fellowship on First Year Curriculum Design to provide a student perspective on the first year experience (FYE) in higher education and to comment on a selection of first year programs in place at various institutions. This showcase presentation focuses on my Fellowship commentary and is structured around student expectations, experiences and evaluations of first year.

The aim of this showcase is to offer some support and encouragement to those leading the sector in first year curriculum design and to provide some insight from a student perspective.
Action taken

Whilst acknowledging the wealth of valuable research that has been conducted in Australia and internationally on the FYE, my commentary was based on my own knowledge and perspectives as a student who is currently engaged in the tertiary experience, and as someone who has worked and interacted with fellow students and staff in a variety of capacities. Though the majority of my experience, both personal and representative, has been influenced by my institutional context, I am able to speak for students across disciplines (as former President, Tasmania University Union Inc.) and from a national student perspective (through my involvement in ALSA and NUS). I have also gained feedback from a diverse cross-section of UTAS students about their expectations, experiences, and overall reflections on their FYE. This feedback has been both formal and informal, ranging from face-to-face conversations with students to emailed personal reflections. Much of the feedback I obtained was from student mentors, student representatives and from the UTAS Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) Leaders. Comments have also been sourced from a diverse range of University entrants and all students who provided comments and feedback have consented to having their reflections included in this showcase.

After compiling all the student feedback and my own personal reflections I was able to provide more insightful and informed comments for the ALTC Fellowship. I have been able to identify common issues faced by students and staff in first year and offer new insights as to how the FYE can be improved for all stakeholders.

Tips and tricks

The breadth of my experience at UTAS has given me a unique FYE perspective for both staff and students. Where there is institutional leadership for first year teaching and professional staff, and well resourced programs, there is arguably more collaboration and a more effective and positive FYE for all stakeholders. Adopting a broad perspective on first year and working together with colleagues within and beyond your discipline is vital for a successful first year across the institution. Interacting with students to ensure that there is an alignment of expectations and experiences also provides an opportunity to forge links between students and staff that extend into future years of study.

Having a dialogue with colleagues in other disciplines is also important to enhance the experience of first year combined degree students. It is often the pressures of assignments, for instance, in both degree programs, and students’ classes in those two disciplines, that will clash as much as assessment clashing in subjects in the same program. There are also different expectations on students in different disciplines and this can often be confusing for first year students. Other tips and tricks include introducing partnerships with industry as part of first year programs to help students to visualise pathways beyond their study.

Finally, whilst it is important to identify and support those students who are struggling in first year, it is equally important to continue to encourage and challenge high achieving students and to support those middle achievers to excel.
Results, evaluation, impact

Student expectations of first year

Before commencing university, students have incredibly varied expectations. Their expectations differ depending on their background and educational experience. However, despite differing backgrounds, students anticipate their first year will present:

- Challenges at an academic level.
- A stimulating, diverse community that is less formal than school or the workplace, but which has higher standards and encourages broader thinking.
- Difficulties in regard to social engagement and managing their finances.

They expect their university experience to:

- Be formative, career-focused, and fun.
- Involve social interaction and an experience beyond the lecture theatre.
- Allow them to not only to extend their learning, but provide an environment in which they can develop as individuals, forge lifelong connections with their peers, and move into the professional world.

Many students have high expectations of and have some knowledge of what university will be like from talking to peers about their experiences and are positive about starting university but also incredibly intimidated.

Student experiences in first year

Whilst most student experiences in first year are somewhat aligned to their expectations, many students are not adequately prepared to adjust to the work/study/life balance and an element of ‘culture shock’ is felt by all students.

Student feedback indicated:

- Different levels of support and/or services available at different campuses of the same institution.
- Some schools and faculties are heavily involved in orientation whilst others are not.
- The content in some first year subjects was repetitive, boring and too closely aligned to what they had learnt in their pre-tertiary schooling: they find that their learning in first year is not extended at all.
- Experiences with assessment vary greatly, and whilst many students are supportive of early, low stakes formative assessment tasks but this is not something that was necessarily a part of their FYE.
- A lack of opportunity for social interaction within and outside the classroom.
- A decline in student-coordinated activities.
- Few (if any) whole of campus events that encouraged interactions between students and staff beyond the disciplines.
- Different experiences for different subjects even taught within the same school and/or faculty.
- Receiving conflicting information about support services and administrative information.
• Combined degree students in particular struggle to adjust to the different expectations placed on them by each discipline.

• Some university staff were unfriendly and unhelpful when approached for advice.

Overwhelmingly, feedback indicates students are more inclined to stay in subjects where the lecturers are friendly and engaging rather than intimidating and sterile. Students generally also really enjoy the opportunities for informal interactions with teaching staff, during either orientation activities or events throughout the semester. Having approachable, friendly academic and general staff makes the world of difference in first year. Many students also appreciate just having someone to talk to, who isn't going to patronise them. For a lot of students, having Student Support Officers or Student Advisors who are not necessarily teaching staff encourages them to ask for help, without a fear of being perceived as incapable by lecturers or tutors.

Peer mentoring is universally accepted as a fantastic way to break down social barriers, and also assist in referring students to available learning support or student support services. Whilst not all students report ever contacting their mentor, they state that it is still nice to know that there is someone they could contact if they needed to.

Whilst some students feel that they could have been better supported, many have really positive experiences.

**Students wished they had known**

• Their way around the university and on-campus facilities.

• What the whole of campus experience and the teaching and learning experience would be like.

• The free support services available to them both on and off campus.

• How to forge new friendships.

• How to prepare for classes, build academic literacy and become ‘independent learners’, and most significantly.

• How to find the work/life/study balance.

**Improving the first year experience for staff and students**

Notwithstanding the efforts that are being made across the sector to improve first year, some of the continued challenges spanning across all programs, subjects and institutions include:

• An under-resourcing or ad hoc resourcing of first year support.

• First year programs tend to be discipline-centred and are often not rolled-out across all disciplines or more broadly across the institution.

• Diversity and inclusivity remain important aspects of first year teaching and social engagement activities.

• There are ongoing issues with an over-representation of sessional staff and late appointments to first year positions which can have implications for the effective delivery of first year programs.

• At some institutions there is no leadership for first year staff.

**Further resources**

Nil.
Contact details

Postal address (work): UTAS Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching
Private Bag 133
Hobart, TAS 7001

Email: rjmawad@utas.edu.au; Phone: (03) 6226 1893; Fax: (03) 6226 1881
Designing career development modules into the first year curriculum

Dr Alan McAlpine
Careers & Employment
Queensland University of Technology
a.mcalpine@qut.edu.au

Ms Alison Thomson
Careers & Employment
Queensland University of Technology
alison.thomson@qut.edu.au

Ms Georgia Ridler
Careers & Employment
Queensland University of Technology
georgia.ridler@qut.edu.au

Ms Janice White
Teaching and Learning Support Services
Queensland University of Technology
janice.white@qut.edu.au

Mr Tim Plaisted
Teaching and Learning Support Services
Queensland University of Technology
t.plaisted@qut.edu.au

Keywords
Career Development Programs, university preparation, career planning

Context
Six Career Development Programs are being developed at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) to underpin current curriculum and assist students to:

- make sound course and career choices
- make successful transitions to life as a student; life at university and post university
- make connections between their course of study and where it might lead
- further develop career pathways.

The content of the individual modules aims to develop students’ specific career skills and support transition in and out of university, along with any work integrated learning experience, in order to improve students’ employability progressively throughout their degree.
The suite comprises six programs. The first two, University Preparation and Career Preparation, are of particular interest to this audience and include the following modules:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University Preparation (for students prior to coming to QUT)</th>
<th>Career Preparation (for first year students)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining Myself (Self Understanding 1)</td>
<td>Defining Myself (Self Understanding 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Exploration &amp; Decision Making</td>
<td>Thriving at University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Influences</td>
<td>Choosing Majors/Electives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing Readiness for Study</td>
<td>Defining My Opportunities (Career Research &amp; World of Work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing the Student ePortfolio</td>
<td>Using the Student ePortfolio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The suite of 30 online modules is being developed to complement students’ knowledge and preparation for university and for the world of work. A program is completed by undertaking the five core modules plus one elective from a set choice. Each program is designed to strategically address the graduate attributes of career management and resilience using the QUT Career Planning Model (Figure 2).
Action taken

The programs are offered as online co-curricular activities alongside formal curriculum. The content in each program is designed to help students at different stages within the student lifecycle and aids lifelong career learning as well as development of the graduate attributes (Barrie, 2007).

The Career Development project represents a collaborative commitment between QUT’s Teaching & Learning Support Services (TALSS) and Careers & Employment (C&E) to design and develop co-curricular learning activities that enhance students’ career choices, progression and transitions into and throughout university, and into industry. It aligns closely to three major strategic QUT projects on first year experience, work integrated learning, and transitions out of university. This showcase presents a broad-brushed description of particular focus areas including embedding the student ePortfolio and integrating other career development modules into the curriculum. It includes learning design perspectives, reusable and scalable resource development, and a university-wide approach that aims at reaching a broader student audience.

The modules are housed on the university’s online teaching environment (Blackboard), allowing ease of embedding in current subject curriculum. Academics and co-curricular staff wishing to enhance student career learning (especially in the early part of their student life), as well as preparation for entering the workplace and graduate careers, can develop their own assessment or can choose to have students complete the module using the module’s quiz. Successful completion results in a Certificate of Completion. Current modules are available for trial to enable decisions on how they will complement existing academic subjects.

Tips and tricks

The modules have been developed in close consultation with the three major projects mentioned earlier. The success of the project thus far can be attributed to this close consultation and project planning. The first two phases of the project involved design and development of an overall framework, module templates, and approaches for assessment, tracking, communication, and evaluation. At least two of the modules were trialled within curriculum in semester two 2008 and in 2009 the launch of the Workplace Preparation program will occur. Phase 3 is now underway to complete the development of the remaining programs and associated modules, around 36 Blackboard community sites in all.

Students will receive certificates upon successful completion of the modules, and upon completion of each program, for inclusion on their University Graduation Parchment.

Results, evaluation, impact

Participants in the pilot were asked to complete an online survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the modules’ content and activities. The consensus of feedback shows the modules are valuable resources and a welcome addition to the student learning experience.

Pilot evaluation survey results extracts (January 2009)

- 161 users (around 40 are staff or testers involved in the pilot).
- 50% Strongly Agreed and 50% Agreed that ‘I now feel confident that I can understand and apply the material covered in this module.’
Pilot participant academic feedback extracts

‘[T]hose modules will be fantastic resources for the students. Please let me know when there are others available to include.’

‘I just went through the Branding [Myself] module and it looks great. I think it will be very useful for students.’

‘I am looking forward to embedding the whole program throughout Semester One.’

Pilot participant student feedback extracts

‘It was fun to do, it kept me interested.’

‘I just wanted to recommend the Online interview module. I found the most helpful part was Topic 2: The Interview. Having just done my first interview. I felt that it would have been really beneficial to have done this module beforehand.’

Further resources

Nil.

References


Contact details

Postal address (work): GPO Box 2434
   Brisbane Qld 4001

Email: a.mcalpine@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 2572; Fax: (07) 3138 7628
**Ready, Set, Go … : A flexible study package supporting the biophysical sciences in first year nursing**

Dr Bernadette McCabe  
Department of Biological and Physical Sciences  
Faculty of Sciences  
University of Southern Queensland  
mccabe@usq.edu.au

**Keywords**

diversity, transition, nursing bioscience education, student confidence, anxiety

**Context**

The learning and teaching of science subjects in undergraduate nursing programs can be difficult and a number of issues which contribute to this have been documented (McVicar & Clancy, 2001). The biological and physical sciences are an important component of the University of Southern Queensland’s (USQ’s) Bachelor of Nursing (Pre-Registration) (BNUR (Pre-Reg)) program, the delivery of which has proven challenging. In 2007, this program underwent a major revision of its curriculum. One consequence of this change, among many, involved the development of a new subject, NSC1500 Biophysical Sciences in Nursing, which comprises four distinct disciplines, namely physics, chemistry, biochemistry and microbiology/immunology. In a survey given to students prior to their commencement in this subject, 40% of respondents felt they were not confident in studying science, while 20% felt they were not prepared for the subject (n=56). Students generally felt that all science disciplines in NSC1500 were important to their nursing profession; however, high workload was the major concern in the student evaluation of subject questionnaire.

An obvious disparity in science background exists amongst this cohort. Whilst it appears that this does not affect student performance directly, it can have a negative impact with respect to high workload. Anecdotal evidence has shown that there is a close relationship between previous science study and level of workload required to adapt to an unfamiliar discipline. McKee (2002) argues one way to achieve a suitable standard in these disciplines while not overloading is to establish a base knowledge required before starting the program. An intensive chemistry bridging subject is available to NSC1500 students prior to commencing their studies and has shown to be very beneficial in their studies. However, this is costly and is not accessible to all students, many of whom are in full time work prior to taking up their places in the program. Online resources are one way of providing flexible additional support to the teaching and learning of these subjects and there are various links available to students (see [http://myonlinenursingdegree.com/biology-help.html](http://myonlinenursingdegree.com/biology-help.html) for example). However, these links are often unreliable and are time inefficient as students filter through information that is either too advanced or irrelevant, which in turn generates more anxiety. Gretsy & Cotton (2003) developed a freely available online resource with the view of improving the bioscience knowledge of nursing students prior to commencement of their studies (see [http://www.headstartinbiology.com/](http://www.headstartinbiology.com/)). However, the problem of subject specificity and reliability of links remain.
Action taken

Alternative ways of improving and supplementing nursing students’ base knowledge of biophysical science needs to be investigated. A key strategy lies in the production of a pre-study resource that is tailored to the subject material presented in NSC1500. The originality of the creation of a CD support package for this subject lies in the unique combination of disciplines, that is, the physical, biological and microbiological. The aims of Ready, Set, Go ... will be to:

1. Offer extra support material and guidance about biophysical sciences within a nursing context.
2. Provide information in an accessible format.
3. Provide formative assessment in the form of self-testing of subject material so that students can assess their own level of scientific knowledge (online quizzes with instant feedback), and
4. Build a good foundation for other nursing studies.

The resource will not contain any new material and there will be no summative requirement for students to complete it. Its primary role is to serve those students who are apprehensive of their ability to understand biological and physical science concepts, which in turn has the potential to reduce the fear and anxiety in relation to this discipline. Although intended to be used prior to and/or early in their studies, embedding the package into the course materials will also ensure that it will continue to be a valuable study aid during the semester.

Proposed activities

Ready, Set, Go ... will be a technology-enhanced, flexible learning support package that will be made available via CD for all USQ students upon acceptance into the BNUR (Pre-Reg) program for the 2010 intake. The target audience will be students intending to enrol in NSC1500 Biophysical Sciences in Nursing in semester 1 of that year and will be an optional resource specifically designed for students who do not have any science background.

The support package will be developed over three stages:

Stage 1: Initial students needs analysis

A student needs analysis will be carried out before any development work is initiated by evaluating the semester 1, 2009 NSC1500 student cohort. The aim of this exercise will be to discover nursing students’ perceptions of their own scientific knowledge prior to starting the subject, and the amount and type of help they would have liked before their subject began.

Stage 2: Development of the resource

The information provided by the student needs analysis will provide the basis of subject matter in the Ready, Set, Go ... CD package and will be used to guide its development. Quizzes with instant feedback will be one form of learning activity and will enable students to assess their own level from the outset.
Stage 3: Delivery and evaluation of the resource

The CD will be made available to all students upon acceptance into the 2010 intake to ensure that students receive adequate time to utilise the resource thereby utilising it to its full potential. The continued use of the resource throughout the semester will also be reiterated for the purpose of those students enrolling late. Evaluation of the resource will be performed approximately one month after enrolling in NSC1500 to ascertain whether students have used the resource and then at the end of the subject to evaluate its usefulness as a study aid. The evaluation of Ready, Set, Go … will be designed to assess its usefulness as a flexible support resource for first year nursing students. In particular, it will measure its effectiveness as an instrument for enhancing the student learning experience by reporting change in student attitudes, participation rate, workload perception and overall performance.

Various evaluations will be performed throughout the project and will primarily focus on:

Content and design of the Ready, Set, Go … package

The influence of Ready, Set, Go … package on the student learning experience

The impact of the Ready, Set, Go … package on learning outcomes and student performance.

Intended project outcomes

This project intends to considerably reduce the amount of anxiety experienced by nursing students in science subjects and thereby reduce associated workload by providing an optional contextualised science resource for students to complete either prior to or early in their studies. Ready, Set, Go… is a targeted CD resource that aims to provide substantial benefits for students in supporting the sciences in the nursing curriculum and is expected to achieve three key outcomes:

- Increased flexibility in student learning for both domestic and international students by providing a resource that can be accessed by all students as and when required in their own time.
- Facilitate the transition to first year science study in nursing.
- Enhanced learning experiences for students.

NSC1500 is an introductory first year subject and a positive student experience in this subject can set the scene for success in subsequent years. It lays the foundation for many nursing science and nursing subjects, therefore, improving this subject should benefit retention and progression as well as enhance knowledge and reduce anxiety in relation to application of knowledge in subsequent subjects.

People involved

This project is supported by a 2008 USQ Associate Learning and Teaching Fellowship. The fellowship team includes Bernadette McCabe (Subject leader and chemistry/biochemistry/microbiology module design); Helen Ison (Examiner, Fraser Coast campus and microbiology module design) and Alfio Parisi (physics module design).

Further resources

Nil.
References


Contact details

**Postal address (work):** Dr Bernadette McCabe  
University of Southern Queensland  
West St  
Toowoomba Qld 4350

**Email:** mccabe@usq.edu.au; **Phone:** (07) 4631 1623; **Fax:** (07) 4631 1530
Keywords

english language development, language proficiency, post-entry language diagnosis, diagnostic tool

Context

Good, if not excellent, English language and communication skills are essential for both academic and professional success in Australia. However, students enter Australian universities from a variety of pathways and with a diverse range of academic experience and English language competence. With there being no common standard for a minimum level of English language proficiency, many university students need ongoing English language development to achieve their goals. To better identify students who may need language development, many universities conduct some type of post-entry diagnostic language assessment, while many universities which have not yet done so are currently developing tools and procedures for this purpose. Recent activity in post-entry English language diagnosis comes at a time when Australian education bodies such as the International Education Association of Australia and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) are emphasising the need for continued English language development among tertiary students, particularly international English as a second language (ESL) students.

Deakin students, like those in other universities, have a wide range of linguistic skills, including proficiency gaps. Without a university-wide process for identifying and assisting students who may need language development, Deakin University was concerned that many students were not reaching their full potential academically or on graduation. To address this concern, Deakin felt that the best course of action would be to provide each commencing student with post-entry English language diagnosis and accompanying development resources. The diagnosis would provide a base line for all commencing students and identify gaps in language competence for academic and professional success, while the resources would focus on the specific areas of need as diagnosed and be readily accessible to students.

Action taken

Deakin University determined that a post-entry diagnostic tool with a complementary language development program would be implemented as soon as possible. First, Deakin undertook a comprehensive survey of existing tools that might be used. It was clear from this survey that no existing tool would meet the needs of Deakin, which required a tool which would:

- be available at no cost to all students, including international, domestic, off-campus and disabled students
- be accessible online
- allow students multiple access opportunities during their qualification so they could track their progress and attempts over time
• provide both academic and professional versions
• give an indication of language development needs and direct students to relevant language programs and resources within and outside the University
• interface with Deakin’s database (Callista) to provide institutional reports.

To meet these requirements, Deakin needed to develop its own diagnostic tool along with the corresponding language resources and administrative processes. This development began in 2008 and has resulted in *iDeaL*, Deakin’s internet-based language program. The development of *iDeaL* has of course drawn heavily on previous diagnostic work and has incorporated design elements from numerous sources. In particular, excellent models are provided by the tests of the European Commission’s DIALANG and the Business Language Testing Service (BULATS) and by the University of Auckland’s Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA — http://www.delna.auckland.ac.nz/about.php) screening tool.

**Tips and tricks**

*iDeaL* has two particularly interesting features. First, it is an integrated development program which screens, diagnoses, provides immediate feedback and identifies appropriate resources to help students to develop their language skills. Second, the design of the tool allows for random generation of items so that students can sit the tool multiple times and complete either academic or professional versions.

**An integrated resource**

As an integrated resource, *iDeaL* attempts to:

a. identify students who may need language development with an initial screening
b. isolate the different skill areas that need development with the diagnostic tool
c. provide the feedback and resources that will enable students to act upon their *iDeaL* results.

This section briefly describes these elements of *iDeaL*.

**iDeaL screening**

The decision to include a screening component in the *iDeaL* came about after investigating the DELNA’s online screening tool, upon which the *iDeaL* screening is closely modelled.

The purpose of the screening component is to quickly identify students who would likely not gain anything by undertaking the longer diagnostic tool. Students who score well on the screening items are ‘exempted’ from further action but are invited to access the program if they would like to.

**iDeaL diagnostic**

The diagnostic tool covers 10 subcategories across reading, writing and listening (see Table 1). Diagnostic feedback is given at this subcategory level. The choice of diagnostic subcategories reflects the assumption that language ability includes both linguistic knowledge and strategic competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), and thus includes categories such as ‘making inferences’ and ‘critical reading’, which require readers to call upon strategic skills or contextual knowledge.
The limitations of the electronic environment and the requirement to provide students with immediate, automated feedback also shaped the choices made. In particular, the writing section was limited to item types which involved text manipulation and discrete choices, rather than items which reflect the productive nature of ‘real’ writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro skill</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>1. Understanding information</td>
<td>Comprehend informational aspects such as main ideas and details, key vocabulary items, logical relationships within a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Making inferences</td>
<td>Read ‘beyond the words’ to understand meta-features such as tone, attitude, audience, purpose, context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Critical reading</td>
<td>Use a range of skills and strategies to understand gist and details and to infer and/or comment on a longer text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>4. Grammar and punctuation</td>
<td>Locate errors in grammar and punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Vocabulary and spelling</td>
<td>Use vocabulary appropriately and spell correctly when writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Expressing logical relationships</td>
<td>Show clear relationships between/among ideas at the sentence level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Cohesion and coherence</td>
<td>Use cohesive devices to clarify the progression of ideas in a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>8. Listening for details</td>
<td>Identify specific details in short exchanges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Making inferences</td>
<td>Understand meaning beyond the text, e.g. tone, attitude, audience, speaker, purpose, context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Following extended speech</td>
<td>Use a range of skills and strategies to understand gist and details and to infer and/or comment on a longer text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**iDealL feedback and resources**

Students receive immediate feedback in the form of a percentage score for each of the 10 subcategories. Resources and development strategies are linked to each subcategory so that students can choose on which areas to focus. Resources include links to websites, direction to computer-based or text resources held at Deakin, information on relevant workshops at Deakin and access to faculty-specific information and resources.

**iDealL’s design**

In addition to its attempt to provide an integrated English language development program, another key feature of iDealL is the overall design of the diagnostic tool — it generates items randomly to allow students to sit the tool multiple times and access either academic or professional versions at each sitting. Within the 10 subcategories above, any number of items can be input. This allows for academics and other interested stakeholders to contribute appropriate items for inclusion. The iDealL team is currently compiling item writers’ guidelines for this purpose.
Results, evaluation, impact

Initial testing of system workability and item pre-testing were done in late 2008. Revisions were made based on these testing outcomes, and it is the revised form of iDeaL which has been described in the above sections. Deakin is piloting iDeaL in this form throughout 2009, and further information will be made available once the piloting has been completed.

Further resources

Readers may be interested in looking at some of the online tools that helped to inform the development of iDeaL:

- The home page for the University of Auckland’s DELNA is www.delna.auckland.ac.nz
- To download or get more information about the DIALANG, go to http://www.dialang.org/english/index.htm
- To view the BULATS online language assessment, visit http://www.bulats.org/tests/online_test.php
- Curtin University’s UniEnglish also provides online post-entry diagnostic assessment, and information is available at http://unienglish.curtin.edu.au/assessment.cfm
- The iDeaL website will soon be available at www.deakin.edu.au/ideal

Reference


Contact details

Postal address: Ms Lynn Morrison
Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood VIC 3125

Email: lynn.morrison@deakin.edu.au; Phone: (03) 9244 3853; Fax: (03) 9244 6965
Peer assisted study sessions

Dr Martin H. Murray
School of Urban Development
Queensland University of Technology
m.murray@qut.edu.au

Keywords
engagement, PASS, peer learning, professional development

Context: The problem

My journey with Peer Assisted Study Sessions, or Supplemental Instruction (SI), began in 1993 when I took over a 1st year, 1st semester unit in QUT's Bachelor of Engineering program. The unit had 500 enrolments with students from all 10 engineering majors at QUT. The 500 students received a 2 hour lecture and a 1 hour tutorial per week, usually run by academic staff or postgraduate students. The unit covered basic mechanics, which comprises a challenging set of topics on how forces interact with various bodies. One normally expects 1st year students to find it difficult to come to grips with the material. However, when I ran that unit in 1993, the failure rate had been usually around 50%.

The situation was intolerable. So, in 1994 I reconstructed the whole unit, creating a comprehensive (90 page) study guide, which was simply a guide to where to find the appropriate material in the text book, together with supplementary explanatory material, worked examples, and activities they could do to help understand the text book content. I also introduced computer aided learning programs closely linked to the unit's schedule. All of these changes enabled me to reduce the lecture to 1 hour per week and increase tutorials to 2 hours per student per week so students were spending more time actively learning than passively listening.

What was the net result of all this work? At the end of 1st semester 1994, the failure rate was 50%! On investigation, I found that students were attending at best only 1 hour a week of tutorials and so they were not giving themselves enough time to get help in understanding the material.

Action taken: PASS arrives

I needed to find an alternative form of active learning to help students use that 2nd tutorial hour effectively. They needed some variety in their face-to-face learning experiences, and especially needed one that would help them come to grips with difficult concepts.

In late 1994 I heard about the Peer Assisted Study Scheme (PASS). The first PASS program was instituted at QUT in a 1st year unit in the Nursing degree in 1992 — the scheme originated at the University of Missouri Kansas City in 1972 where it is called ‘Supplemental Instruction’; it has been widely implemented around the world and has a long history of good success in improving learning. In that Nursing unit the failure rate dropped from 20% beforehand to 5% afterwards. Consequently, over the space of 3 years I adopted and progressively adapted the PASS scheme into my first year engineering unit, to the extent that this implementation of PASS is unique amongst the >1000 implementations around the world.
Results, evaluation, impact

So, what was the result of all this work? The failure rate dropped from over 50% to just over 20%, students attended the PASS sessions in droves and in surveys claimed that PASS was the most enjoyable and useful aspect of this first year unit. Figure 1 shows the effect of PASS on students’ grades.

![Figure 1: Effect of PASS on First Year Students' Performance](image)

In Figure 1, the horizontal axis shows the high school rank for these engineering students (rank by Overall Position (OP) where OP1 = highest, OP10 = median rank from Queensland high schools). Then, for all the students who achieved a given OP rank, the mean was calculated of the final percentage marks in the unit for all those students in that OP rank, and that mean mark is plotted in Figure 1.

Clearly from Figure 1, students from across all levels of academic skill benefited from attending PASS sessions. In particular, the positive effect of PASS is most pronounced for students with an OP rank in the left half of the graph where the mean final mark for those with OP 12 was only a little less than for those with OP 7 and was nearly equal to the mean mark of those with OP 3 before PASS was implemented. Students’ comments on PASS include:

*The time we spend in the PASS tutorial is the most beneficial.*

*The PASS tutorials are an awesome place to learn!*  

*The PASS Tutorials are fantastic. They provide excellent help in understanding anything I don’t know.*

Tips and tricks: How PASS works in Engineering at QUT

The first main fundamental aspect of PASS is that it is targeted at high-risk units, not at-risk students. It isn’t a remedial program. PASS works hard to get students interacting from across the whole spectrum of academic capability, recognising that learning between students is very effective. Low performing students are lifted by the abilities of the brighter students, and the latter are benefited because the best way to know you’ve learned something is to try and teach it to someone else.
The other fundamental of PASS is that it takes students who had high grades in that at-risk unit, who have shown themselves to be good at working with people, and after careful training gets them to lead facilitated learning sessions for new students in that unit, and ensures the leaders are supervised in some way. Figure 2 shows how PASS has been uniquely implemented in Engineering at QUT.

In this implementation, the students in the 1st year engineering unit attend PASS sessions that are facilitated by student leaders who are now in the 2nd year of their course. Those leaders are in turn supervised weekly by 3rd year students who proved to be outstanding leaders in the previous year. Finally, managing the whole program is a 4th year student (known as the ‘Supremo’) who was an exemplary supervisor in the previous year. The close supervisory and management structure has been the key to this instance of PASS, in that it ensures the leaders are not the ‘sage on the stage’ but the ‘guide on the side’. Leaders must not answer students’ questions but redirect them back to the group. Leaders must also not stand at the front but must always sit amongst the students, as one of them, ensuring that the students are at the board, or working in groups, and debating difficult concepts in a guided forum.

Aside from the benefits to the learning of the 1st year students, there are valuable outcomes for the leaders, supervisors and Supremo. Over the 15 years of PASS in this program, in excess of 240 students have been given opportunities to improve their employer-valued skills of group facilitation and management, public speaking and leadership, in ways they would never experience elsewhere. The whole program therefore involves students helping students to learn in the best way: student-centred, student-run, and continuously adaptable. One leader summarised the program very well:

*I have seen students walk into a session feeling confused, unmotivated and/or overwhelmed and seen them walk out of a session feeling inspired and focused, having developed a network of study peers.*
### Contact details

**Postal address (work):** Dr Martin H. Murray  
Faculty Director, First Year Experience  
School of Urban Development  
Queensland University of Technology  
GPO Box 2434  
Brisbane  QLD  4001

**Email:** m.murray@qut.edu.au; **Phone:** +61 7 31382513; **Fax:** +61 7 31381170
Developing a framework for supporting academic literacy development in first year health undergraduates

Associate Professor Robyn Nash
Faculty of Health
Queensland University of Technology
r.nash@qut.edu.au

Dr Sandy Sacre
Faculty of Health
Queensland University of Technology
s.sacre@qut.edu.au

Keywords
transition, assessment, academic literacy, health undergraduates, diagnostic assessment

Context

Summary

Academic literacy represents the foundation of university study and its mastery is directly related to success at tertiary studies. There is a clear association between first year students’ academic literacy skills, their academic success throughout their course, and degree completion (Holder, Jones, Robinson & Krass, 1999). Like students in any faculty, first year health students come to the tertiary education system with varied levels of abilities and skills and it is incumbent upon us to ensure early on that they are all equipped with the essential skills that will give them the best chance of academic success throughout their course, as well as degree completion. A DETYA report into the first year experience of students from several Australian universities found that one of the most effective initiatives was an early piece of written work with feedback and subsequent support (McInnes, James & Hartley, 2000). A robust predictor of course success is the use of a diagnostic writing task, and this can be used to assess skill level, help students adjust their evaluation of their own performance, and determine what kinds of support are needed by individual students, including those who may be ‘at-risk’ (Bonanno, 2002; Scouller, et al., 2008).

This showcase describes an initiative in the Faculty of Health at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) where a short diagnostic writing task is introduced to first year undergraduates in a range of programs. The task is assessed using an adaptation of the MASUS Procedure (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) (Webb & Bonanno, 1994). Feedback to the students, including MASUS scores, then enables students to be directed to developmental workshops targeting their academic literacy needs. This showcase highlights a work in progress.
Background

Numerous reports and publications have highlighted the importance of supporting first year university students in a range of ways including preparing them for the academic skill demands of their courses (Bonanno, 2002; Nelson, Kift & Harper, 2005). Students are more likely to persist when they are aware of the institution’s high expectations for their learning, can access needed academic and social support, and are able to be actively involved with other students and faculty (academics) in learning (Tinto, 2002). As Maloney (2003) has stated, even at-risk university students can participate fully and successfully if they are ‘held to high standards, directly taught strategies for accomplishing good work within academic conventions, informed of the demands of the institution, and treated as colleagues in the shared adventure of learning’ (p. 664).

Support needs to be contextualised to disciplines

The development of literacy skills needs to be recognised and addressed within degree programs if this issue is to be taken seriously (Holder et al., 1999). Because members within each discipline write and think in distinctive ways, students must learn about the culturally-specific academic demands of the particular disciplines in which they are enrolled (Webb, English & Bonanno, 1995). Further, the introduction of students to the genres and conventions of specific disciplines must undoubtedly be an integral part of teaching within those disciplines, and it logically follows that academic literacy should be taught through a contextually-based approach (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004; Reid & Parker, 2002). Thus, an understanding of the need to regard literacy needs from a contextual, discipline-based perspective has emerged (Fiocco, 1996; Kazlauskas & Applebee, 2007; Kirkness, 2006).

Written tasks are key

Oral and written communication skills, particularly, have a profound influence on how well students achieve and how fully they are able to participate in intellectual interactions at university (Kirkness, 2006). Writing tasks, with explicit assistance from lecturers at the draft stage, have been found to be far more useful to students than written assessments with summative comments at the end (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000; Paxton, 1995). Freebody and Luke’s framework (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999) identifies four roles of the literacy learner: breaking the code of texts; participating in the meanings of texts; using texts functionally; and critically analysing and transforming texts. At James Cook University, a five week program was developed to help students cope with the reading and writing requirements of a core subject in education studies (Hirst et al., 2004). The authors looked at samples of the students’ writing each week and discussed how they could be improved. As a result of this exercise, they found that 88% of at-risk students passed the essay requirements for the subject, compared to a pass rate of 45% for a similar cohort who did not attend.
**Diagnostic tasks and procedures**

Admissions rankings and indices such as the University Admission Index or Overall Position ranking do not necessarily indicate likelihood of success at university or academic readiness (Bonanno, 2002). In the case of international students, language tests and scores also do not always predict university success and academic skills. In self-evaluations of academic literacy skills, students have been shown to overestimate their abilities, so this cannot be relied upon as the basis for recommendations about support required (Scouller, Bonanno, Smith & Krass, 2008). As Scouller et al. (2008) have stated, students’ ‘generally unrealistic self-evaluation of their skills is a matter of concern if we are expecting students themselves to recognise the nature of their developmental or remedial needs through normal course assignment assessment and feedback, and be motivated to do something about it’ (p. 177).

In 1993, a group of academics at the Learning Centre at the University of Sydney, developed the MASUS Procedure (Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students) (Webb & Bonanno, 1994). This diagnostic assessment instrument has been adapted for use across a range of disciplines over the past 15 years, and student performance in three of the four MASUS assessment areas has been found to be significant predictors of degree progression (Holder et al., 1999).

The four MASUS assessment areas cover literacy skills ranging from 'macro skills such as understanding, processing and selecting relevant information, structuring texts appropriately and developing and supporting an argument, to micro skills of cohesion and grammatical accuracy at the paragraph and sentence level’ (Bonanno, 2002, p.2). Students are rated from 4 (indicating control of that set of skills at an adequate level for first year undergraduate work) to 1 (indicating weakness in a particular area) on each of the following four assessment areas: Use of source material; structure and development of text; control of academic writing style; and grammatical correctness. The MASUS writing task is usually integrated into course content and administered after the first few weeks of semester, as a timed, supervised exercise during lecture or tutorial time.

**Action taken: Faculty of Health framework**

The Faculty of Health at QUT sought to adopt a developmental and integrated model of academic literacy support. It was thought that a 'remedial' model would potentially stigmatise students in the lower range of potential. In any case, such models have been found to be inequitable and too generic (Skillen et al., 1998). Further, it has been shown that students are less likely to attend remedial programs than those they see as integral to successful study of their discipline (Shackleford & Blickem, 2007). Similarly, the adoption of an ‘adjunct’ model was rejected. The adjunct approach tends to offer generic workshops on specific skill types to all students, timetabled outside of their subject commitments (Bonanno, 2002).

One of the problems with the approach of offering adjunct support in parallel with subject study has been its unwitting cultivation of an artificial divide between academic processes and content (Webb et al., 1995). In recent times, the ‘integrated’ model has been common; with discipline-specific workshops offered as part of the course, and often developed by teaching and learning support staff together (Bonanno, 2002). This model works on the premise that learning development would be more relevant and effective when offered within the context of specific disciplines that the students were enrolled in (Merten, Murray & Quinlan, 1995).
The Faculty of Health has been working with a framework whereby the model is integrated, in that the development of academic literacy is contextualised within the health disciplines. However, in order to ensure that all first year health students can attend, the workshops have been timetabled outside of subject commitments. This has also allowed for the availability of specialised teaching and learning support staff to implement the workshops.

All first year health students are assessed using an adaptation of the MASUS procedure, with a specialised workshop and guide for marking and rating student submissions according to this diagnostic procedure. In all of the targeted subjects, the diagnostic assessment takes place within the first four weeks of semester, with feedback given in time for workshop attendance if needed. In some subjects, the MASUS is conducted in class and in other subjects, it is completed in the students’ own time. In a later piece of assessment, the students are again rated on the MASUS, allowing for comparisons to be made with the earlier piece and for the workshop effectiveness to be evaluated.

Further resources
Nil.

References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Dr Sandy Sacre
Office of the Executive Dean
Faculty of Health
Queensland University of Technology
Victoria Park Road
Kelvin Grove Qld 4059

Email: s.sacre@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 3022; Fax: (07) 3138 5662
Real world curriculum design for a changing workplace

Associate Professor Karen Nelson
Director, First Year Experience
Queensland University of Technology
kj.nelson@qut.edu.au

Dr Margot Duncan
Transitions-In Project
Queensland University of Technology
m.duncan@qut.edu.au

Ms Carole Quinn
Transitions-In Project
Queensland University of Technology
c2.quinn@qut.edu.au

Dr John Clarke
Transitions-In Project
Queensland University of Technology
ja.clarke@qut.edu.au

Keywords
curriculum design, engagement

Context
The Bachelor of Corporate Systems Management was developed by the Faculty (now School) of Information Technology at QUT in response to demand from the Queensland ICT sector and the industry-based Faculty Advisory Board for a new type of business-oriented IT graduate to fill the global IT skills gap reported by the National, Victorian and Queensland Governments and to address the trend towards offshore outsourcing of IT production.

From a curriculum design perspective, the overall aim of this program is that students will develop the knowledge, skills and experience that will allow them to mediate between the business areas of organisations requiring information and technology systems, services and support and the ICT departments or organisations that create, provide and maintain these facilities.

Within this overall aim, the first year of the program has clear objectives which are to:

- support students in their first year of study at university
- introduce students to the fundamental theoretical construct (Systems Theory) underpinning the study of information systems so that they have a foundation for understanding and explaining the complexity of ICT deployment within organisations
- assist students to understand the roles of information systems, sources and services within contemporary organisations
- familiarise students with the roles performed by information systems personnel with contemporary organisations (Nelson 2008).
The first year of this degree program has four core subjects in first semester, three in the second semester and one elective subject that students choose from their complementary studies discipline. The structure of the program is shown below.

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<tr>
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<th>Semester 2</th>
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<tr>
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<td>ITB365 Business analysis</td>
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<td>ITB361 Socio-technical systems</td>
<td>ITB366 IS operations</td>
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<td>ITB362 Organisational databases</td>
<td>BSB126 Marketing</td>
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<td>ITB002 IT Professional studies</td>
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<td>ITB298 Process modelling</td>
<td>Complementary studies</td>
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<td>ITB264 IS consulting</td>
<td>Complementary studies</td>
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<td>Complementary studies</td>
<td>ITB370 Project / Cooperative education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complementary studies</td>
<td>ITB233 Enterprise systems operations</td>
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<td>Complementary studies</td>
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**Action taken**

The degree program is explicitly designed to assist transition, scaffold learning and develop graduate attributes and particular attention has been paid to developing the generic attributes within an ICT environment during the first year.

The ability to engage students in their learning is central to the design of the BCSM. The lectures, structured workshops and practical (computer lab) activities in the first year (and subsequent) subjects revolve around a series of organisational case studies which represent the common domains of IT application: finance and banking, primary industries — mining, creative industries — film development, and government. These case studies are used as proxies for experience, to frame assessment items and as a common reference point across the program. The case studies and small subject-specific vignettes are planned to address more advanced subject-specific content (e.g. business issues vignettes used in the advanced subject ITB298 process modelling).

The program is designed to support students’ engagement in a number of ways.

**Supporting students in their first year of study at university**

- The program coordinator attends the first lecture in the ITB360 core subject to explain the program structure, the purpose of each of the first year subjects and how these subjects relate to the program and importantly to the IT profession.
- Various ‘get-to-know-you’ activities occur in ITB002 and ITB360.
- Introductory lecture materials in each subject follow a similar format where the first few slides show – where have we been’ and ‘where are we going’ as a way of connecting topics both forward and backwards.
- Consistent expectations about the first year subjects are achieved through uniform language and formats for assignment requirements. For example, the formal written report structure, marking criteria and performance standards introduced in ITB002 are reused (with minimal contextual modifications) for written assignment items in concurrent and subsequent subjects. The criteria and performance standards for reflective commentaries and oral presentations are similarly shared.
• One of the analytical skills required of IT graduates is the ability to elicit information from clients about information or systems needs. In ITB360, students are introduced to interviewing techniques and work through a process to plan and conduct an analytical interview with personnel from the organisations represented in the BCSM program case studies.

Supporting engagement with the learning environment

• Two concerns for commencing students at QUT are academic literacy and teamwork. With regard to the former, material was integrated into the curriculum of two subjects that explicitly focused on developing information literacy. The first introduced the notion of academic writing incorporating the use of reliable sources and acknowledging these sources. The second included a series of virtual and physical ‘library’ workshops and were designed collaboratively by the subject coordinator and IT reference librarian.

• With regard to teamwork, students work in collaborative groups in ITB360 and ITB363 (but there were no dependencies in terms of assessment) and in organised and supported teams in ITB002 and BSB115.

• Weekly assessment items were used as part of the monitoring student engagement process to identify not only individual students requiring additional support but also inappropriately designed aspects of the curriculum.

• ITB002 has an early item of assessment which was used to provide formative feedback, monitor participation and trigger interventions (such as connecting students with an appropriate support service). Attendance in class is monitored weekly in ITB360, ITB002.

Introducing core theoretical constructs

Socio-technical systems theory, which underpins the study of information technology in organisations, is introduced in ITB361 using an inverted curriculum model where real ICT products such as mobile phones, surveillance cameras, MP3 players, personal satellite navigation systems are investigated as examples of socio-technical systems implementations. Building from the ‘real’ to the theoretical model, students examine the role of these artefacts in contemporary society to facilitate understanding of the social and the technical constructs.

Career expectations and alignment

Industry participation is designed into the curriculum and occurs throughout the whole program.

In first year:

• ITB360 introduces students to ePortfolio to record their aspirations and store career-related artefacts. Students are encouraged to continue using it in subsequent subjects. Preconceptions that students may have about the types of work carried out in the IT profession or the types of people working in IT roles are examined. Students are provided with the opportunity to explore their own backgrounds and career expectations.

• While ITB360 helps students understand the roles performed by IT people in organisations, ITB002 introduces and develops the teamwork (including conflict resolution) and communication skills (interpersonal, written and oral) required of IT professionals.

• ITB002 focuses on ‘why professional skills (communication and teamwork) are important for IT professionals’.
• In ITB360, students conduct interviews with industry personnel (representing the case studies) to elicit information about how ICT is used in their organisation and the types of work performed by the IT groups.

• A senior database administrator and managers from the case study domains lecture students in ITB362.

• ITB363 accommodates Q&A sessions with industry project managers about their experiences managing various project issues (e.g. risk, change processes, resources, time, budget ...)

• ITB364 students perform a systems analysis and design activity for an industry project related to the case studies.

In subsequent years:

• ITB365 students work with real world clients to build on their analysis and design skills to perform a business analysis and develop a business case for an industry project.

• ITB264 involves industry IT specialists who address the group about particular IT consulting challenges, which are then further explored in team assignment work.

• ITB298 students learn how to model business processes related to particular aspects of the industry case studies.

• In ITB370 (a capstone subject) students will perform an end-to-end industry strength project for a ‘client’ under the supervision of an academic supervisor.

**Tips and tricks**

The process of conceptualising, designing and developing the program, its subjects and their content included: a swot analysis, development of a working vision and key principles, and identification of core skills and knowledge. The key principles, core skills and knowledge requirements were developed through an analysis of the skills and aptitudes sought after in the ICT jobs market and in the QUT and Faculty of IT Graduate Capabilities (Attributes). These were grouped into knowledge packets which formed the foundation of the subjects. Existing subjects were examined to identify which of the necessary learning objectives and graduate capabilities were already being taught. Skills that were taught and skills that were assessed were differentiated and only subjects that taught and assessed the required skills were included in a second mapping exercise. New subjects were developed where existing subjects did not meet the program requirements. The required knowledge and skill development was then mapped across a three year degree program to ensure their introduction, development and extension in a logical progression from the first to the third year.
Results, evaluation, impact

Evaluations of the subject, teaching and student outcomes for each of the first year subjects and other aspects of the program have been performed. In particular, evaluations were conducted on the two subjects, ITB363 and ITB366 (previously offered as elective subjects), which use a self directed learning packet followed by a two hour workshop. Notably, attendance in these sessions was high with approximately 90% of students present each week, indicating that these sessions were seen as effective learning opportunities. In general, students responded positively to the learning packets approach — most appreciated the flexibility it provided although some students also reported problems with motivation and finding the time to do the work outside of class. A participation mark was allocated for student contributions to the discussion but feedback indicated some students thought it was unfair so an additional alternative reflective journal was introduced. Student feedback also indicated that embedding real-world case studies and the engagement with industry professionals was particularly relevant.

References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Karen Nelson
Queensland University of Technology
GPO Box 2434
Brisbane Qld 4001
Gardens Point, X Block, Room X209

Email: kj.nelson@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 7548
Teamwork resources to support students and teachers at QUT

Associate Professor Karen Nelson
Director, First Year Experience
Queensland University of Technology
kj.nelson@qut.edu.au

Mrs Judith Smith
Transitions Coordinator, Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
je.smith@qut.edu.au

Ms Carole Quinn
Transitions-In Project
Queensland University of Technology
c2.quinn@qut.edu.au

Dr John Clarke
Transitions-In Project
Queensland University of Technology
ja.clarke@qut.edu.au

Dr Margot Duncan
Transitions-In Project
Queensland University of Technology
m.duncan@qut.edu.au

Keywords

curriculum design, assessment

Context

The educational advantage of students working cooperatively in teams has been acknowledged in the higher education sector as being profitable in the world of work and other post-university experiences. Job advertisements across all sectors consistently cite the need for teamwork skills and this importance is acknowledged at QUT within the graduate capabilities (attributes) required for all students. The development of these skills for many university students is one of the most painful and often complained about experiences. It has been found to cause the most distress and concern for both the students and the teachers attempting to manage teamwork assessment (Nelson et al., 2006).

QUT students are more likely to work with other students on group assignments and projects outside of university time as compared to other universities (Krause et al., 2005) but are not always given the opportunity to learn about teamwork or how to participate effectively in teams.
There is no standardised approach to managing and assessing teamwork. Individual teaching teams tend to approach teamwork in different ways and various technologies are used to assist with teamwork processes (for example, QUT’s TeamWorker and the QUT Faculty of Information Technology’s Team Learning site). Practice has been inconsistent and has not always been designed to help students learn about teamwork or participate effectively in teams. In this context, both academic staff and students require support. A common approach to assist teachers design and implement optimal conditions for setting teamwork assessment is required, and so are aligned resources that support students during the teamwork process.

**Actions taken**

**A Teamwork Protocol for staff**

The ‘Enhancing Transition at QUT’ Project (ET@QUT), funded through a QUT Large Teaching and Learning Development Grant, identified a requirement for a staff-focused Teamwork Protocol to assist teachers with all aspects of student teamwork. The protocol aims to assist academic staff design curriculum and learning activities for students expected to work collaboratively on teamwork assessment items. It is not an extensive document on the complexities and dynamics of teamwork processes, but instead presents itself as a set of best practice guidelines to assist in team design, development, management, support and assessment. It recommends embedding training for teamwork and monitoring student involvement and, if necessary, supporting students in the event of team dysfunction. Guidelines are provided for all aspects of the design process such as the development of real-world relevance; choosing the ideal team structure; planning for intervention and conflict resolution; and selecting appropriate marking options. While still allowing academic staff to exercise creativity in assessment design, the guidelines increase the possibility of students’ experiencing a consistent and explicit approach to teamwork throughout their degree program.

An online diagnostic tool for teachers to evaluate their teamwork processes has been developed in conjunction with the Teamwork Protocol. The user is invited to answer a series of questions directly mapped to the Teamwork Protocol and a results window graphs the responses. Positive responses indicate how well the Teamwork Protocol elements are being met while negative responses indicate areas to address in order to improve teamwork projects. No information is collected; the tool is for self diagnosis only.

**A Teamwork Survival Guide for students**

The *Teamwork Survival Guide: Essential Tips for Getting Started* is a just-in-time strategy designed to be distributed to students when a new teamwork task is introduced into a subject where students are expected to manage their own process. It is a simple one page sheet that explains different expectations, skills and motivations, unequal participation and provides tools to help students work through some of these sources of conflict. The *Survival Guide* was developed by the Transitions-In Project team using the resources developed by ET@QUT. The ET@QUT project evaluated qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups with teaching staff, student groups, employers and employees to identify the major themes and issues related to conflict. The data revealed that the major cause of student stress and disagreement was related to teamwork. The resources were compiled with the intention that they be embedded as a learning tool in the design of team assessment by staff. To avoid duplication of effort some of these resources are now being incorporated into the online teamwork learning modules for students (see below).
Whilst QUT is currently implementing strategies for the teaching and support of teamwork, there remain subjects where students are left to manage their own teams. During semester 1 2009, *The Survival Guide* will be trialled in these subjects as well as in subjects where teamwork is supported to assess its usefulness to students in improving their teamwork experience.

**Online team learning modules for students**

The Engaging Students project (funded through a Large Teaching and Learning Grant) identified a need for online resources to support the development of teamwork skills in first year students. First year subject coordinators from the Faculties of Information Technology and Creative Industries contributed to the development and design of these interactive modules and their integration into student learning.

The team learning modules are designed to prepare students to achieve project goals in teams. They require students to reflect upon and critically analyse previous and current team experiences in order to arrive at understandings of team behaviours. These reflective exercises are underpinned with a theoretical background which informs best practice in the field.

Currently there are three modules: *Successful Teams, Team Roles, and Team Lifecycles*. The following modules are in development: *Understanding Conflict, Resolving Conflict and Working in Multicultural Teams*.

**Tips and tricks**

**The Teamwork Protocol**

The Teamwork Protocol deals with the teamwork skills and basic principles that should be developed, embedded and adhered to in the first year of study. Subject designers are able to use the rationale of teamwork when developing their subject outlines and lecture notes. It provides guidance and suggestions on designing and developing team assessment and details the crucial team processes and assessment criteria that need to be considered before, during and at the completion of team project. Additionally, the protocol incorporates generic templates provided by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) to assist with team processes.

**A Teamwork Survival Guide for students**

First year students suffer extreme information overload in the first few weeks of classes. It is hoped that by receiving a succinct, easily readable, just-in-time brochure directly from their subject coordinator, they will attend their first team meetings armed with a resource that will assist them to identify their strengths and with tools to measure and monitor each team member’s contribution mitigating the most apparent sources of conflict in teams.

**Online team learning modules for students**

The online team learning modules provide opportunities for students to individually reflect on their past and current team experiences. The students’ responses are recorded and can be reviewed by them at any time. Their individual learning from the modules is integrated into face-to-face classroom conversation to assist them to apply team theory and personal reflection into their current team activity. The students are able to apply the team process skills they have developed in selected modules to the formation of their team agreements. The modules also allow students to recognise the relevance and importance of team skills to their professional development.
Results, evaluation, impact

Teamwork Protocol

Demand for copies of the Teamwork Protocol has been high—300 hard copies have been distributed and a number of electronic versions forwarded across the state and country. It is available through the National Library (ISBN 9781741071771, http://nla.gov.au/anbd.bib-an42125773), and an electronic version is posted on the QUT Staff Just-in-time resources for teamwork site on Blackboard.

If implementation of the protocol is successful, the project team predicts that the resulting consistency and explicitness in approaches to teamwork will lead to more coherent skill development across subjects, more realistic expectations for students and staff, and better communication between all those participating in the process.

This protocol represents an attempt to assist in the instruction of teamwork assessment for first year students across QUT. We anticipate that teaching staff will view this protocol as a generic resource in teamwork instruction, processes and evaluation.

It is recommended that this protocol be progressively implemented across QUT, not only to attain teamwork teaching consistency, but also to address and deal with the misconceptions and conflict around the importance of the teamwork experience. The project team has designed and conducted training for staff but an ongoing commitment is required to fully embed the principles into curricula.

The Teamwork Survival Guide for students

In the initial instance a print run of 2000 brochures will be distributed to four first year subjects in first semester 2009. Evaluation through focus groups and interviews will follow. Depending on feedback from subject coordinators and students on its usefulness and effectiveness, the brochure will be made more broadly available to subjects conducting teamwork and will be distributed through the QUT Library’s kickSTART, studySMART workshop program.

Online team learning modules for students

The initial modules were developed, trialled and evaluated through core subjects in the Faculties of Information Technology and Creative Industries. Feedback from staff and student surveys and focus groups indicated that the learning modules were a significant source of knowledge and real life examples for students, which they could then apply in their current teamwork activities. The feedback also indicated that students wanted more relevant examples. Based on the evaluation, the modules have been revised to include videos of practitioner’s reflections on their team experiences and, in Semester 2, 2008, the modules were integrated into the foundation subject Creative Industries People and Practices (1300 students). More than 95% of students undertook these modules. A further three modules are being developed based on subject coordinators’ feedback and will incorporate work undertaken in the Transitions-In Project.
Further resources

Electronic copies of the QUT Teamwork Protocol are available from Carole Quinn: c2.quinn@qut.edu.au, or phone (07) 3138 1977.)

References


For QUT staff only

Blackboard Just-in-time teamwork site

Online team learning modules for students: www.teamlearning.qut.edu.au

Contact details

Postal address (work): Karen Nelson
Queensland University of Technology
GPO Box 2434
Brisbane Qld 4001
Gardens Point, X Block, Room X209

Email: kj.nelson@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 7548
Introducing first year students to psychology in professional contexts

Dr Erin O’Connor
School of Psychology and Counselling
Queensland University of Technology
el.oconnor@qut.edu.au

Dr Julie Hansen
School of Psychology and Counselling
Queensland University of Technology
ja.hansen@qut.edu.au

Mr Gregory Thorne
Careers and Employment
Queensland University of Technology
g.thorne@qut.edu.au

Keywords
transition, engagement, professional development

Context
An undergraduate psychology degree provides a foundation for diverse career pathways. However, unlike foundation programs for professions such as social work, counselling, nursing, and education — which have a strong applied focus, and include substantial practical work — an undergraduate psychology degree has a strong theoretical focus, providing a foundation in the science of psychology, rather than applied training as a psychologist (which requires postgraduate study). As a consequence, undergraduate psychology programs typically include few opportunities for practical work placements.

Many first year students enter the psychology degree with little understanding of what the program will be like, where their degree can take them, and of the many career options open to psychology graduates. Confronted with a program with a stronger focus on scientific principles and research than they had imagined, many students find it difficult to see the link between the theoretical knowledge they gain through their degree and its relevance and application to their future careers. This lack of clarity can persist throughout the degree, and is particularly problematic for students who exit the 3-year psychology degree and do not gain a place in a 4th year program, required for provisional registration as a psychologist.

The need to better address the relationship between theory and practice has been evident in graduates’ comments on the national Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). While students rate the positives of our psychology program as excellent teaching, support and encouragement, and fascinating subject matter, the overwhelming suggestions for improvement have highlighted the need for stronger links between theory and practice, and more opportunities to gain practical experience.
Thus, student feedback has identified a clear need to better link theory and practice, to ensure that students emerge from their psychology degree with ‘realistic ideas about how to implement their psychological knowledge, skills, and values in occupational pursuits in a variety of settings’ (APA Taskforce, 2002). In addressing this need, the School of Psychology & Counselling at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) developed a very successful extra-curricular program of careers seminars and invited speakers, as well as orientation and support for students to undertake volunteer work in the community alongside their formal study.

Our career development program, developed in collaboration with staff from the Careers and Employment Service, has been of significant benefit to the students who participated. Participating students have reported a much greater understanding of the relevance of their studies to future work, a greater appreciation of the application of psychology in the workplace, and more confidence in their own knowledge and abilities. However, these initiatives have little impact on the majority of students, who do not attend extra-curricular activities. These initiatives need to be embedded within the formal curriculum.

**Action taken**

A new first-year subject *Psychology in the Professional Contexts* was developed to introduce first year psychology students to the profession of psychology, making explicit the links between research, theory and practice, and engaging students, in the earliest stages of their degree, in their own career planning and development. The subject was designed to help commencing psychology students to contextualise their learning, to more clearly see the connections between their formal study and future career pathways, and to provide students with tools to actively manage and reflect upon their own learning and career development throughout the degree.

Class time involved a diverse range of learning activities, including:

- Lectures introducing models of psychological practice; the diverse applications of psychology in the workplace and the community; and legal, ethical and cultural factors that shape psychological practice.
- Workshops and tutorials focused on skills development to promote students’ active and reflective learning and career planning.
- A range of engaging activities to bring the experience of psychological work into the classroom, including:
  - guest speakers from diverse areas of psychological practice
  - opportunities to meet staff in the school and discuss their research and practice
  - panel discussions involving past students
  - a (humorous) debate by staff and postgraduate students: *Is psychology past its prime?*

By encouraging first-year students to see themselves as professionals-in-training in a vibrant and diverse professional community, we aimed to:

- increase students’ awareness of professional opportunities in psychology
- encourage student networking and volunteering throughout their degree
- increase strategic elective choice’
- encourage students to engage in deep learning by providing them with tools to reflect on their learning and the professional applications of skills and knowledge gained through the degree.
Assessment

Students completed three types of assessment tasks.

- **Professional reflections.** Across the semester, students submitted reflections through the QUT e-Portfolio tool. Students described a recent learning experience and explained how they might apply this learning in a professional context related to psychology.

- **Team task: Profile of a related organisation.** Teams of 3 to 5 students researched an organisation engaged in work related to psychology, and interviewed a representative from the organisation (not necessarily a psychologist). The students presented an overview of the organisation, their staff and clients, their mission, and their methods of work to their tutorial class.
  - **Developing teamwork skills.** This team task was supported by tutorial activities designed to develop communication and teamwork skills. The student teams participated in problem solving activities during tutorial time. With their tutors, teams analysed the strengths and weaknesses of their communication during these problem solving tasks. This analysis was not assessed.

- **Exam.** Students were assessed on their understanding of social, cultural, legal, and ethical factors that influence psychological practice. This exam was designed to encourage students to integrate material from different topic areas covered in the lectures, workshops and readings.

Tips and tricks

- Work collaboratively with careers and employment staff to integrate personal and career development into the formal curriculum.

- Encourage reflection on learning and skills development from the outset of the degree.

- Clarify professional requirements, career opportunities, and the relevance and application of learning experiences in the workplace.

- Invite students to have fun with their studies and interact with staff and other students (for example, humorous staff debate to familiarise students with senior staff and postgraduate students in a collegial environment).

Results, evaluation, impact

The subject was evaluated through student surveys distributed prior to starting the subject and at the end of the semester. QUT’s universal online student evaluation tool, the Learning Experience Survey (LEX), was also used.

Commencing students have poor prior knowledge about the psychology profession

A survey of the class of 82 students in the first week of semester suggested poor knowledge about the profession of psychology, or training requirements:

- Most students (57) were intending to become psychologists
  - but only 22 students (26%) understood how long this training would take
  - and only 6 (10%) of the 57 students who wanted to be psychologists were aware of the training requirements.

- None of the respondents were able to name a specific skill they believed should be included in their training.
Students’ understanding of the profession of psychology and professional training requirements improved after completing the subject

- Student estimates of the number of years required for training as a psychologist (currently 6 years in QLD) improved: Average estimate in week 1 = 5 yrs (SD 1.26); average estimate in week 13 M = 5.9 years (SD 0.46), t (21) = 3.177, p < .001*.
  * Based on 24 surveys able to be matched through a student-generated code only
- Students agreed/strongly agreed that their understanding of psychology as a profession had improved through studying the subject.

Overall, the complexity of student-generated definitions of psychology did not change.

Student satisfaction with the subject

Based on Learning Experience Survey (LEX) responses (with 43% response rate):
- 97.4% were satisfied with the workload and level of difficulty of the course
- 87.2% were satisfied with the relevance to the degree topic and the presentation of the lectures.

Student feedback — strengths of the subject

The inclusion of guest speakers was brilliant, and makes learning from other [subjects] more relevant.

Hearing their stories [past students] really enlightened me about the different avenues of psychology. It has made me feel more confident about the importance of completing this degree.

Group work was really valuable, and helped me to learn about myself as a group member, identifying my skills and my weakness.
Student suggestions for improvement

I would have liked more information about volunteering in the community.
I would have liked to see the [subject] as more of a history of psychology, complete with the guest speakers that we’ve had.

Future development of the subject

Further development of this subject will involve:

- Encouraging students to continue the initiatives seeded in this subject, through networking and seeking profession-based experiences (including volunteering) throughout their degree.
- Consideration of other formats to encourage more interaction between students (for example, an online wiki or networking site).
- Further review of the workshops to ensure relevance to current and future developments in psychology.

Presentations from QUT Careers and Employment staff and professionals external to QUT will continue to be important aspects of the subject.

Further resources
Nil.

References

Contact details
Postal address (work): Dr Erin O'Connor
School of Psychology and Counselling
Queensland University of Technology
GPO Box 2434
Brisbane Qld 4001

Email: el.oconnor@qut.edu.au; Phone: +61 7 3138 4939; Fax: +61 7 3138 4660
Experiment kit for first year Physics students to undertake practicals at any place and any time

Associate Professor Alfio Parisi  
Faculty of Sciences  
University of Southern Queensland  
parisi@usq.edu.au

Ms Joanna Turner  
Faculty of Sciences  
University of Southern Queensland  
turnerjo@usq.edu.au

Keywords  
diversity, experiments, laboratory, practicals

Context  
Experimental work is an essential component of Physics subjects in order to reinforce the concepts covered in lectures and to teach students how to undertake experiments, analyse results and report the findings. For students studying by distance education, there is the difficulty of attending the University campus in order to undertake this experimental work. One option to overcome this is the use of concentrated compulsory residential schools at a set time during the year. The problem with this is the cost to the student in the form of accommodation, travel and time away from work and the family, along with the need to cover a large amount of material in a relatively short period of time. For the on-campus students, there is the difficulty of undertaking the experimental work at a fixed time of the week in a set period. This has the potential to clash with other classes, work requirements and any other commitments.

Action taken  
This paper describes a take home experiment kit that was developed at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba to allow students with a variety of educational backgrounds and from different disciplines in a first year Physics subject to undertake the experiments outside of the laboratory at a place and time that suits each individual student (Turner and Parisi, 2008). This can be done by the students at any time at home in any town or country or any other place that suits the student.

The experiments were designed to use low cost readily available equipment and materials. McAlexander (2003) has developed a kit with apparatus for some simple experiments, some of which are observational experiments. In an advanced third year Physics subject, a series of exercises have been developed for students to access, via the internet, data from detectors set up at the University (Parisi, 2005). In this project, the experiments were designed to specifically relate to the concepts in the subject and to allow hands-on use of the apparatus.
The experiment kit developed in this project contained the equipment and the materials required, along with the instructions on the required background reading, how to set up the experiment, measure the relevant variables and analyse the data to achieve the required objectives. All of this was packaged in a small box, referred to as an experiment kit that the students were able to purchase through the University Bookshop. For students living out of town, the Bookshop mails the kit to the students.

**Tips and tricks**

For a project of this type, it was necessary to keep the total cost of the equipment and materials in the experiment kit as low as possible in order to reduce the students’ expense. Prior to the finalisation of the experiment kits, a student undertook the experiments in order to trial the equipment, materials and instructions. Based on the comments provided, the instructions were modified as required.

In order to minimise any possible problems the students may encounter when undertaking the experiments and the results analysis and report writing, they were provided with instructions for report writing, a marking criteria and photographs of example setups of the equipment. During the semester as the students worked on the experiments, it was necessary to monitor on a daily basis the electronic discussion forum in order to provide rapid feedback to any student queries on any particular aspects of the experiments.

**Results, evaluation, impact**

The project outcome was the development of an experiment kit with six experiments. These were first made available to students enrolled in a first year Physics subject in semester one, 2007 and are still being used for each semester one offer of the first year subject. The students purchase the kit with the equipment and instructions for each experiment from the Bookshop for about $40 (plus GST).

The experiments were designed so that:

- The concepts provided in the lectures were reinforced, allowing students to gain a basic knowledge and understanding of the relevant Physics concepts.
- The students had to undertake further reading on the concept from either the subject text or other relevant reference text.
- There were measurements and recording of the various variables in each experiment.
- Calculations were necessary to be undertaken based on the data.
- It was necessary to undertake some form of plotting of data on graphs, along with analysis of the graphs.

Through the use of simple apparatus and materials that are readily available, the kits introduce the concept that Physics is relevant to aspects in our everyday lives. The details of the experiments are as follows:

- For the Simple Pendulum experiment, students use the force of gravity on a pendulum consisting of a lead sinker on a string to calculate the acceleration due to gravity.
- In the Refraction and Reflection experiment, students develop an understanding of Snell’s Law, dispersion of light and light paths, including recording of light paths.
- The Electric Circuits experiment provides the students with a basic knowledge of Ohm’s law, voltages, currents, resistors and the use of a multimeter.
The Spring Constant experiment introduces Hooke’s law and concepts of stress, strain and elasticity.

In the Fluids experiment, students obtain a better understanding of buoyancy and Archimedes Principle and calculate the density of fluids and the density of objects in fluids and apply the concept of Pascal’s Principle.

During the Speed of Sound in Air experiment, students develop an understanding of wavelength, frequency, standing waves and resonance in order to measure the speed of sound.

These experiments develop graphing skills and skills in the interpretation of graphed data, and all experiments require the setting up of the equipment, data measurement and analysis and have extension questions. The reports submitted by the students indicated that the students who completed the reports had obtained an understanding of what was expected in this assessment item.

Furthermore, the experiment kits have provided flexibility in terms of the environment in which the students are able to learn. They allow students to work at their own pace and also repeat any experiments as necessary and also explore any other aspects of the experiment while eliminating the need for a compulsory residential school or timetabled laboratory classes.

Further resources
Further resources and information on the experiment kits described are available in Turner and Parisi (2008).

Acknowledgements
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References


Contact details
Postal address: Associate Professor Alfio Parisi
Faculty of Sciences
University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba Qld 4350

Email: parisi@usq.edu.au; Phone: (07) 4631 2226; Fax: (07) 4631 2721
Linking assessment and engagement: Curriculum redesign in a first year biology course

Dr Ann Parkinson  
Faculty of Science, Health & Education  
University of the Sunshine Coast  
aparkins@usc.edu.au

Dr Leigh Findlay  
Faculty of Science, Health & Education  
University of the Sunshine Coast  
efindlay@usc.edu.au

Professor Tania Aspland  
Faculty of Science, Health & Education  
University of the Sunshine Coast  
taspland@usc.edu.au

Keywords  
assessment, engagement, science education, rubric, biology

Context

Situational analysis

Cell Biology is a science subject taught in the first year of several Bachelor programs at the University of the Sunshine Coast. A prerequisite subject for several advanced level subjects, Cell Biology is taught in the first semester to between 250 and 450 students. The subject has been problematic, with five different subject coordinators over the last ten years, and a diverse teaching staff with low teaching capacity. High failure rates (>35%), low student motivation and engagement and assessment primarily consisting of high stakes examinations (including mid-semester and practical examinations) were associated with the subject.

In 2006, an internal Faculty review of the subject recommended:

- incorporation of on-line learning management system, Blackboard (Bb)
- tutorials to augment lectures and laboratory classes
- stronger team teaching approach
- concept-orientated curriculum
- varied assessment tasks, linked to learning outcomes
- new subject coordinator (1st author of this paper).

Curriculum renewal for 2008

A curriculum renewal project (based on a 2007 needs assessment) entailed design and implementation of new tutorials to provide meaningful learning experiences, and redevelopment of assessment to (a) increase engagement with students, (b) improve scheduling to reduce stress and provide information on progression, (c) improve guidance and (d) provide meaningful feedback.
**Action taken**

The redeveloped assessment tasks are described below.

**The ‘CSI’, a contextualised, investigative assignment**

In the CSI (Cell Specific Investigation) assignment, students chose a cell type, described the cell’s structure and function and linked the cell type to at least one concept covered in their lectures (e.g. cell metabolism, cell division, animal or plant tissue structure and function) to demonstrate understanding of the integrative nature of the subject. Students also needed to incorporate current topical research that linked the cell type with a biology discipline (e.g. environmental science, biomedical science, biology education), which allowed them to follow their own personal or future career interests (Steglich, 2000). Choice of presentation format was allowed, with suggested formats of pamphlets, fact sheets, PowerPoint presentations, science magazine articles, mini-posters or self-choice within the assignment criteria (e.g. one group opted for a board game format). Individual or small group submission was also permitted. Scaffolded support and clear guidelines on group work were supplied.

**Criterion referenced assessment**

Clear expectations and marking criteria for the assignment were provided in comprehensive instructions and an analytical rubric. Guidance on assignment development was provided by the use of three timely checkpoint forms (Weeks 3, 6 and 9), which were discussed with tutors and provided ‘staged deadlines’ (Race et al., 2005; p. 91) to help keep students on track for successful completion. Sufficient time to develop the work (at least 10 weeks) facilitated deeper thinking and the opportunity for group development. Additional support facilities included Blackboard discussion areas with peers and tutors and face-to-face drop-in sessions with the subject coordinator (Race et al., 2005).

**Online quizzes for formative and summative assessment**

Fortnightly online quizzes, grouped on their alignment to the learning outcomes and subject goals, were delivered via Blackboard and tested understanding and comprehension of the subject content (Theory quizzes, 15%) and scientific skills (Lab quizzes, 10%).

Quiz questions (MCQ, True/False and/or Fill in the Blank) were easily constructed in a word-processed document, before formatting and uploading to Blackboard using the software Respondus (Version 3.5). Pools of questions on common topics ensured a different question set for each quiz to minimise cheating. Multiple attempts within a week were allowed for each quiz, with the highest score recorded.

**Assessment of scientific writing skills**

Three scientific writing assignments (SWAs) were developed to assess students’ skills. These assessments were incorporated with a newly-developed set of tutorials devoted to active learning exercises that developed the students’ understanding of scientific reports.

For SWA1 (5%, due Week 3), students searched a database for both abstracts and full-text articles and answered bibliographic and content based questions exploring the organisation of information in a scientific research paper.
Students then helped develop, carry out and collect data for an experiment, which was then written up as a further two assignments (SWA2-Methods, 7%, due Week 7 and SWA3-Results, 8%, due Week 9). Support was provided with analytical rubrics, exemplars and interactive tutorial exercises, including how to grade using a rubric and exercises on paraphrasing, referencing and plagiarism.

**Tips and tricks**

Criterion-referenced assessment was introduced into the subject with the use of analytical rubrics for the CSI and the SWAs. The rubrics were useful both for students preparing assignments and teaching staff marking the assignments. The ability to analyse results for individual criteria will also prove useful to determine whether certain aspects of the learning tasks require redevelopment.

Giving students choice in assessment appears to improve engagement and stimulate creativity.

Blackboard proved useful for displaying and linking to examples of presentation formats for the CSI assignment.

Next year we will use SafeAssign (plagiarism detection software) for students to submit a draft of their CSI assignment to help them avoid plagiarism.

Instruction in specific science writing should be early in the science curriculum (Firooznia & Andreadis, 2006) and developed and built upon throughout a degree program (Jerde & Taper, 2004). Next year we plan to introduce a peer assessment exercise to help develop writing skills further.

Providing practice quizzes is important for students new to Blackboard to avoid stress associated with new modalities.

**Results, evaluation, impact**

In 2008, the overall subject failure rate decreased from 35% to 25%, whilst still maintaining or improving the academic standards. The overall grade distribution was improved, with overall percent scores increasing from 58.7 ±15.4% in 2007 to 64.7±15.8% in 2008. The percentage of students achieving a Credit grade or higher also increased from 32.0% to 48.6%.

**CSI**

The mean score for the CSI assignment was 69.6 ± 12.3% (n = 193 assignments), with 64% of students achieving a Credit grade or higher. Interestingly, the mean for the group assignments was higher (73.6 ± 8.7%; n = 33 groups; 91 students; median = 74.0; 0 failures), compared to the mean for individual assignments (68.6 ± 13.1%; n = 161, median = 69.5; 10 failures). Nineteen students (9%) failed to submit a CSI assignment for grading. Markers commented that grading was more pleasurable due to the variety of topics and presentation formats.

**Quizzes**

The average score for the theory quizzes was 63.2 ± 24.5% (median = 68; n = 256). Whilst 10 students failed to complete any quizzes, 59% of students completed all 5 and 72% passed. There was a significant correlation between the theory quiz score and the overall subject grade (R2= 0.67, P<0.001). Only 6% of students failed to complete any of the lab quizzes, with an average score of 68.5±26.6% (median = 75). A majority of students (59%) achieved a Credit grade or higher. There was also a substantial increase in the final exam grades from 2007 to 2008 (mean and SD: 55.2 ± 17.5% to 61.2 ±18.0%).
SWAs

Results for the SWAs varied from a mean score of 86.0 ± 22.1% for SWA1 (14 failed to submit), 71.6 ± 9.9% for SWA2 (11 failed to submit) and 61.4 ± 13.5% for SWA3 (26 failed to submit). Analysis of results from a second semester physiology subject indicated that students who completed Cell Biology performed better in a scientific report assessment than other students (mean and SD: 64.3 ± 17.6% vs 61.0 ± 17.2%; Student’s t test, P<0.05).

Further resources

Nil.

References


Contact details

*Postal address (work):* Dr Ann L. Parkinson  
Faculty of Science, Health & Education  
University of the Sunshine Coast  
Locked Bag 4  
Maroochydore DC Qld 4558

*Email:* aparks@usc.edu.au; *Phone:* (07) 5430 2825; *Fax:* (07) 5430 2887
Successful first year student transition and timely higher education affordances: A research project in progress

Dr Sorrel Penn-Edwards
School of Education and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education
Griffith University
s.pennedwards@griffith.edu.au

Dr Sharn Donnison
Faculty of Education
La Trobe University
S.Donnison@latrobe.edu.au

Dr Sarah Prestridge
School of Education and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education
Griffith University
s.prestridge@griffith.edu.au

Keywords
transition, engagement

Context
The university provides institutional affordances, such as academic literacies support, computing skills workshops and research skills training for students to aid transition to higher education. The effectiveness of these relies on timely provision and promotion and the engagement of the students. This project aims to inform the timely provision of these affordances.

Action taken

Phase 1
Phase one of this project funded by a Griffith University Grant for Learning and Teaching, focused on mapping first year transition through the engagement practices of the 2008 Bachelor of Education (Primary) at the Logan campus. The methodology included the completion of student-centred checklists and reflective responses at student critical stages in the first semester. This was followed by student focus groups in second semester gathering feedback on a model of ‘student critical stages continuum of engagement’ (SCSCE).

The mapping of best transitional and engagement practices for successful student transition showing categories of first year student engagement practices — The UniNavigator — version 1 will be trialled with the 2009 intake of B.Ed.(Sec) students.
Phase 2

Phase two has received funding to be undertaken at La Trobe University in 2009 and aims to clarify the nature and extent of engagement apropos to university affordances and critical stages within the first year of study for Bachelor of Education students at Bendigo campus. The results will inform the development of an interactive web-based resource to support first year students in the crucial transition period.

Phase 3

Phase three, the development and trialling of the web-based resource (UniNavigator), aims to take place at Griffith University and La Trobe University in 2010 in conjunction with the suggested offering of the newly reviewed and adapted B.Ed.(Sec). The primary outcome, the UniNavigator, will aid student self-development and retention outcomes and inform strategies for First Year Advising as well as transitional institutional practices.

Results, evaluation, impact

Phase 1 findings

Critical points of engagement — student engagement with university affordances

Universities primarily operate on a two semester cycle with affordances being offered variously throughout semesters. While students can engage with some university offered affordances in a flexible and ‘as needs’ basis, most affordances, especially those targeted at first year students, are generally for set periods of time within the first semester and in some instances within the first six weeks of semester. O-Week and the first weeks of semester are prime time slots for many of these affordances.

Essentially, university affordances are conceptualised as if students engage in their tertiary studies in uniform ways and that transition is encapsulated in the first six weeks of semester one. However, the study has shown that students do not engage in the manner as presupposed by universities. Their engagement is of a complicated cyclical nature where they will engage and re-engage at different levels and at different times with affordances as the need arises. This need is tied to ‘critical points’ in their studies and these critical points are specifically related to course assessment. Unfortunately, the student need to re-engage with a particular university affordance to successfully complete an assessment is offered hampered by the timing of that affordance.

Categories of first year student engagement practices

The data revealed that there are identifiable categories of engagement practices related to courses and assessment:

- Pre-engagement — those who actively engage in institutional affordances prior to courses starting — for example, in first semester this is post-enrolment, pre-orientation (aiming for the active university learning experience).
- Early engagement — those who actively engage in institutional affordances early in the semester — for example, in first semester this is post-orientation.
• Just-in-time engagement (crisis-response engagement) — those who actively engage in institutional affordances only in reaction to assignment submissions.

• Late engagement — those who actively engage in institutional affordances as a reaction to the first signs of ‘academic reality’ — assignment marks and feedback.

• False engagement — those who believed themselves to be engaged but in fact they were not fully/actively engaged.

• Non-achieving engagement — those who were fully engaged but are not achieving well.

• Second-time around engagement — those who actively engage in institutional affordances as a reaction to final ‘academic reality’ — course grades.

• Non-engagement — those who do not actively engage in institutional affordances.

• Meltdown — a point of being overwhelmed and feelings of not being able to cope.

Student engagement and lifelong learning

The research data has shown that students’ engagement with academic affordances is predominately assessment driven and raises the question of how this mind-set fits with that of lifelong learning.

All universities have a rhetoric of lifelong learning, yet the way affordances are organised in universities does not actually support lifelong learning: they presuppose that once learnt, always learnt. They do not account for ongoing process of learning and a need to re-engage (often at different levels at the one point in time) with various concepts as the need arises. This is underpinned by some affordances that are offered once only with the expectation that all of a student cohort will have ‘gotten’ it in a given set time.

The question is not just how to achieve student engagement with the affordances in first year, but also how such affordance engagement fits with a philosophy of lifelong learning, life-wide learning and life-deep learning.
Figure 1: UniNavigator mapping of student engagement categories and points of engagement

Further resources
Nil.

Contact details
Postal address (work): Dr Sorrel Penn-Edwards
School of Education and Professional Studies (Brisbane/Logan)
Mt Gravatt Campus Griffith University
176 Messines Ridge Road
Mt Gravatt Qld 4122

Email: s.pennedwards@griffith.edu.au; Phone: +61 (0)7 373 55765; Fax: +61 (0)7 373 56868
Contextualising the learning of assessment practices: Meeting the academic skills needs of international students

Dr Kathy Turner
Queensland Institute of Business and Technology
kturner@staff.qibt.qld.edu.au

Mrs Leigh Pointon
Queensland Institute of Business and Technology
leigh@qibt.qld.edu.au

Keywords
transition, assessment, international students, academic skills

Context
The transition of international students into Australian universities can be particularly challenging for both students and staff. Significant differences in educational cultures and, in particular in assessment cultures, and the general lack of explicit instructions in the cultural practices at ‘western’ universities mean international students are very unclear about what is expected of them (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; Gourlay, 2006; Wong, 2004). Not surprisingly, failure rates for students transitioning across cultures can be very high (Levy, Osborn, & Plunkett, 2003) and grades in courses lower than average (McMurray and Sharma, 2003).

English competence appears the most visible problem and certainly needs to be addressed. However, it is not the only, nor perhaps the most significant area requiring support. Level of English ability explains only a small amount of the variance in the academic performance of those students who are using English as an additional language (Elder, Eralm, & Randow, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). Moreover, English language problems are not common to all international students. For example, although most students from China find serious difficulties with English, students from south Asian countries such as Indonesia have fewer problems, while students from India have none (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2004).

Significantly, whether or not international students have English problems, most experience major transition difficulties. Indian students exemplify the problem clearly. Despite their proficiency in English, they experience equal if not larger problems than those students from non-English speaking backgrounds (Handa & Power, 2005: Shaw, Moore, & Gandhidasan, 2007). As Woodrow (2006) commented ‘variables other than language proficiency are relevant’ in explaining transition difficulties’ (p. 64).

Although assessment is central to all teaching and learning, most Asian and Middle Eastern international students have little or no knowledge or experience in the styles of assessment used within an Australian university. The problems these students face in relation to specific skills such as writing without plagiarism (Chanock, 2008), library skills (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001) and collaborative learning skills (Wong, 2004) have been documented.
Anecdotally, it is clear too that international students are not prepared for the types of examination questions (e.g. short answer) nor are they familiar with different formats for presenting information (essays, reports, reflective essays, and seminar presentations). More significantly, is the lack of knowledge of, and experience in, the deeper issues underlying most assessment in an Australian university. In general, Asian, Indian sub-continent and Middle Eastern students are unfamiliar with the particular style of critical thinking expected in Australian universities (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). They are unaware of the academic expectations in relation to reading as ‘the key to knowledge and success’ (Mclean & Ransom, 2005, p. 54).

To further compound the problem, writing styles also differ across cultures (Ostler, 1987) so these students are not accustomed to the Australian academic writing style particularly its reliance on the construction of an argument based on a thorough knowledge of the relevant literature. These vast cultural differences place many international students at a severe disadvantage (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003) in attempting assessment and thus learning at an Australian university.

It is difficult for international students to find help as they move into a remarkably different educational culture with its specific cultural assessment practices. For many students the culturally polite means of communication between lecturers and tutors used in their home country may inhibit them from asking for the information they need (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). More importantly, is the fact that assessment practices are such a culturally ‘obvious’ and deep part of learning that many Australian lecturers and tutors do not make them explicit (Mclean & Ransom, 2005) and may even be unaware of the assessment needs of international students.

Assessment however is an integral part of learning, and for the student it is their way of learning (Biggs, 2003). Studying at university without knowledge of the assessment practices is like being a carpenter without tools. As such universities have an ethical requirement to provide assessment support needed for all students, and because of their most pressing needs, for international students in particular.

Typically universities have addressed the needs faced by international students in undertaking their assessment/learning by making available academic language and learning advisers. These advisers help students, via the provision of targeted workshops, or individual consultations, develop the skills they need to perform effectively in their course assessment. However, as Chanock (2007) has indicated, the challenges that these advisers face in attempting to meet their obligations, are significant.

In many universities, academic language and learning advisers, or centres, are hidden away in locations that are difficult for students to find or readily access. They are ‘often located at the margins of academic divisions, with student services or in separate units outside of the teaching faculties’ (Chanock, 2007, p.272). Students must therefore either be highly motivated to seek out assistance, be very aware that they need the assistance, or wait until they are sent to the ‘crash repair shop’ (Chanock, 2007, p.273) after having performed poorly on a written assessment item.

Structural issues however are not the only perceived limitations of this kind of support mechanism. It is argued that deficiencies in the teaching of academic literacy skills outside of specific disciplinary context are inevitable (see for example Hepworth, as cited in Star & McDonald, 2007). As Green, Hammer and Star (2009) have identified, ‘specificists’ believe that the development of literacy skills such as critical thinking cannot be treated as an isolated activity, rather skill development must be embedded within a disciplinary context (p.20).
The alternative response to that of providing support via academic language and learning advisers/centres is to embed the support or skill development within disciplinary programs. However, this approach also has its limitations. For example, within content heavy programs, there would not be time, resources or adequate opportunity for lecturers or tutors to develop within their students academic literacies that are vital for effective academic performance. Further, many faculty do not have the motivation or interest. As Chanock (2007) indicates, faculty staff consider the development of academic literacy as ‘mechanical and uninteresting’; they see content of this kind as ‘separate from the project in which they themselves are engaged’ (p. 273).

**Action taken**

**Queensland Institute of Business and Technology (QIBT)**

Clearly the difficulties facing the teaching of academic skills should not deter universities from seeking innovative ways of addressing these real needs in all students, and especially in international students. The Queensland Institute of Business and Technology (QIBT) in particular has had to address this issue because most of its students come from different educational cultures.

QIBT provides pathway programs primarily for international students who do not have the necessary English or academic qualifications to gain direct entry to their preferred university degree. Students complete the first year of the degree program in a highly supportive teaching and learning environment and qualify with a Diploma level award, and entry to the second year of the degree.

**Teaching assessment skills within an academic context**

A key element of the academic program at QIBT is the inclusion of an innovative subject for credit called Academic and Professional Skills Development. The subject is situated in the first semester of a student’s study program and provides an essential transition experience for students entering an unfamiliar educational context.

The academic context for the subject is distinctive. It was recognised that skills subjects had to be taught within an academic context to enable meaningful learning. To meet the profound needs of (mainly) international students studying across a range of significantly different programs (from Business to IT and Hotel Management) a suitable ‘new’ context had to be provided. It was decided that the whole subject in terms of its content and assessment would be based on the body of academic literature related to the student experience of assessment. In using this literature, students were able to learn and practice skills within an academic context and more importantly learn deeply about the expectations of a ‘western’ university in the very process of reading the literature relevant to the subject. Such a literature base also provided the students with a point of familiarity within an experience which was mostly unfamiliar.

A textbook (Turner, Ireland, Krenus, & Pointon, 2008) was written as a means of supporting the learning of academic skills within a meaningful context. It treats academic reading, writing, listening, collaborative learning and researching as serious ‘academic’ business. It understands these as part of the general ‘western’ educational culture of the independent learner, rather than as a series of isolated skills. It also provides exercises for all activities based on the literature on the student experience of assessment and a Revised Edition of the textbook, available in August of 2009, contains even more exercises. The textbook enables the subject to teach skills in a meaningful manner to a diverse group of students.
The subject is designed to facilitate the learning of a range of skills, while at the same time building understanding of the key features of the Australian educational culture. It gives due attention to an ordered introduction to most of the basic skills required for assessment (from dealing with assignment topics; searching for the literature; reading; writing; presenting in different formats and attending to different types of assignment, for example, case studies, reports, essays; giving professional presentations and managing group work processes).

Equally, if not more importantly, it builds in some of the deeper aspects of the Australian university culture of learning. It treats academic reading as an intellectual activity with support for critical and informed reading skills. It encourages and displays how to find arguments and how to present them in a manner which shows both a knowledge of the literature and a critical stance towards it. It builds towards introducing the students to the nature of theory, its significant role in academic learning, and a critical awareness of the embedded nature of theory such that, as Volet (2003) has pointed out, ‘even abstract theoretical frameworks are advantageous to some and disadvantageous to others’ (p. 7). This is achieved by concluding with a brief analysis of the theory of learning and of the way in which that theory has been used in an attempt to understand international student learning.

Assessment is used throughout the subject to build learning of the skills. As the educational culture of a ‘western’ university is so foreign to the students (both domestic and international), scaffolding of tasks is essential as is the use of formative assessment. The major piece of assessment is an essay on some area of academic concern within the literature of the student experience of assessment. The topic is presented early in the semester and one suitable academic article provided. At each stage of the essay writing process students are encouraged and supported in their learning through a clear assessment guide, tutorial practice, checking, formative and summative assessment, and modelling:

- The essay assessment is given early with ample time for development of skills.
- A clear assessment guide outlines the marking criteria.
- A ‘compulsory’ article is provided and help given in reading it in tutorials.
- Searching of library catalogues and academic databases is built around the essay topic.
- Students produce a bibliography of readings which tutors check for suitability.
- Students engage in short in-class tests of their basic skills such as paraphrasing, quoting, citing and writing reference list items. A small mark is awarded (2 marks for each item) and students are able to re-submit corrected pieces for the full mark.
- An annotated model student essay is provided.
- Support for developed paragraph writing is given in tutorials.
- A short mid-semester examination tests the ability to write a developed paragraph using the academic literature.
- Students are encouraged to use Turnitin (an online plagiarism checking tool) as many times as they choose to check that they are not plagiarising.
- Students are given feedback on their essays.
- Students correct problems in basic skills found in their essay in tutorial time (participation is rewarded with 2 marks).
Assessment also includes a group presentation. The topic is related to the essay to allow all students to have a basis of knowledge for the presentation as a means of encouraging a focus on group management and presentation skills. To maximise learning, some group meetings are held within tutorial time and tutors check on group processes. Peer assessment is also used as a means of moderating the final mark for individual students (if needed) and to develop self reflection and commitment to the group work process for all students.

A final examination tests overall learning in the subject and gives the students a focused means of attending to a range of the types of examination question found within an Australian educational context.

Teaching an academic skills subject based on the literature of the student experience of assessment also supports the language needs of international students. The immersion in a subject on assessment immediately provides students with an excellent basis of language skills relevant to almost all assessment in most subjects at university. As well, the academic skills subject further encourages relevant language acquisition by each week including some tutorial exercises in key academic language skills (such as the use of appropriate tense; tentative forms and connectives) and making available self marking online language skill exercises.

Results, evaluation, impact

The Academic and Professional Skills subject appears to be very well received by almost all students. An online confidential voluntary evaluation was conducted in semester 3, 2007 with 233 of the 286 enrolled in the subject completing it. Students found the subject both very clear and helpful. Greater than 75% of the respondents gave positive ratings (good, very good, excellent) for the subject in all areas of teaching, assessment, learning, structure and supporting materials. More impressively, approximately 50% rated each item as very good or excellent (from a 7 point scale).

The written comments supplied were instructive as to what the students liked most. Many comments noted the value of the skills taught, for example: ‘International students do not have much opportunities for writing essay. We also do not know how to write essay in University. However, we can learn through this course even it is difficult’ [sic]. A number of students commented on the value to them of examples in both lectures and tutorials, for example: ‘I reckon that activities and question time during the lecture was great in that it allows students to pay more attention to the lecture’ [sic]. A small number of students indicated areas of improvement. The most frequently mentioned (3 students) was that the content had been covered previously either at Australian high schools or in an English for Academic Purposes subject. While, this is not in fact correct, the perception of its being so needs addressing.

The subject appears to have helped students in their other studies. Ideally, an evaluation of its success in preparing students for other subjects in the first year of their degree or in later years needs to be carried out. This has not yet been done; however, there is some evidence of success across subjects. Other first year lecturers (notably in Marketing and Accounting) have offered comments that, with the introduction of the academic skills subject, they found their students much better prepared. Additionally, an analysis of QIBT graduate outcomes in students’ second year of study (at Griffith University) showed a significant decrease in the failure rate (approximately 15%) after Academic and Professional Skills Development was introduced into their QIBT Diploma programs.
An academic skills subject taught within the context of the literature on assessment has many advantages. It meaningfully teaches the basic skills required for success at university. While it would be helpful for most university students, it is essential for the many international students who have a radically different prior educational culture. It provides students with the knowledge and expertise to meet specific challenges within any disciplinary area with greater ease. It supports lecturers within specific disciplines. As students have acquired a basis in assessment practices, the lecturers can confidently focus on teaching their specific disciplinary requirements for assessment. As well, for those of us who teach on the subject it offers the chance to become aware of the numerous skills that make up even the most apparently simple and obvious of our assessment practices.

Further resources
Nil.

References


Contact details

Postal address: Dr Kathy Turner
Queensland Institute of Business and Technology

Email: kturner@staff.qibt.qld.edu.au
Rewriting the first year biology essay: Addressing student diversity through a dialogic approach to assessment practice

Dr Gerry Rayner
School of Biological Sciences
Monash University
gerry.rayner@sci.monash.edu.au

Ms Colleen Cridland
Learning Skills Unit, Library
Monash University
collen.cridland@lib.monash.edu.au

Keywords
diversity, assessment, alignment, validity

Context

Writing standards

This paper reports on the implementation and outcomes of a project aimed at enhancing student writing skills and the feedback students received on their written work in first year Biology subjects within the Faculty of Science at Monash University.

Writing in general, and perhaps essay writing in particular, is an intellectually challenging process, and the vast majority 1st year students experience considerable difficulty with structuring, researching, and writing essays. Nevertheless, writing is an essential element of the methodology of scholarship and research in higher education and the development or refinement of student writing skills is an often stated objective of a vast number of undergraduate subjects. In spite of this, academics continue to bemoan the poor writing skills of their students.

The standard of undergraduate student writing has received considerable press in the recent past, particularly with regard to a perceived lack of what are considered to be fundamental, but essential, skills in sentence structure and punctuation. Writing is a constructivist skill and is related to many other facets of cognitive development, including reading and critical thinking. A number of researchers (Cranney et al. 2008) have pointed the finger at middle to upper secondary school teachers, citing a lack of skills development at these levels as the reason many first year students struggle with writing at university. However, such a view minimises the importance of addressing the needs of a diverse student population at first year level.

An increase in the diversity of entrance pathways for students into undergraduate programs has resulted in first year cohorts that challenge past held notions of academic readiness. International students, students from within Australia with English as a first language as well as students with English as a Second Language (ESL) access undergraduate science programs through many pathways (foundation and bridging programs, and through Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) with ESL and mainstream English).
Some students do not have prior subject knowledge of first year subjects. Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) scores of students undertaking science programs range from very low to very high. In summary, the heterogeneity of first year students no longer provides a standard platform of academic literacy on which to construct discipline knowledge.

**Do traditional models of assessing student written work provide value for money?**

In addition to the intrinsic problems students have with writing, the Biology project sought to address problems associated with assessment practices and to improve the feedback students received on their written submission. The problems associated with assessment can be grouped into three categories:

5. **Reliability and validity of the feedback:** the feedback should adequately reflect the objectives of the assessment and does not provide a reliable measure of student performance.

6. **Effectiveness of the feedback:** markers should have the skills, knowledge and experience to provide feedback that will engage with the level of skills, knowledge and experience of the student.

7. **Student access to feedback:** the timing and delivery of feedback should provide an opportunity for the student to utilise it in the process of learning.

High quality, consistent feedback on written work is essential in enhancing student writing skills. In spite of this, past assessment processes at university have not always given the practice of assessment the scrutiny it deserves (Barrett 1999). In spite of the large amounts of money spent on assessment of student work, Hounsell et al. 2005 express serious concerns about a perceived decline in effective guidance and feedback on assessed work. Thus, it is incumbent upon program and subject coordinators to provide students with valid, reliable, accurate and consistent feedback about not just the content of their essay or other written work, but also the quality of their writing and mechanisms by which they can improve their writing skills. The assessment process should provide a valuable opportunity for students to acquire discipline-specific modes of communication and develop the academic literacies required for their program of study.

**Project beginnings**

The innovation to the essay writing process in 2008 built upon a diagnostic assessment of student written communication skills, and appraisal of feedback provided to a practical laboratory report assessment in 2007, which identified a number of issues. These were:

- Students received varying amounts of feedback — even from the same marker.
- ESL students assessed in a different way (more harshly, and penalised more often and to a greater degree as text difficult to decipher).
- Assessment based upon content rather than expression of understanding.
Action taken

The first year biology essay was restructured to a draft-final process. At the end of week four, each student submitted (electronically) a full-length draft essay, which was annotated, corrected and returned within two weeks, and then students revised and redeveloped their essays in response to feedback. Students also had the opportunity to meet with their teachers for feedback. The process of writing the essay was supported by academic skills classes developed and presented by the Learning Skills Unit. Students resubmitted the essay for final assessment by the start of week eight. This process required the redevelopment of a draft essay rubric which, together with clearly written essay writing guidelines, was made available to students prior to submission of their draft essay.

The approach was based on a social constructivist theory of learning (Rust et al. 2005), where learning outcomes are achieved via active construction of shared knowledge and learning experiences within the discipline context. Marker moderation workshops were also conducted. These provided a forum for discussion of marking criteria and benchmarks of writing performance, and facilitated greater alignment of markers in terms of their expectations and judgement regarding student writing, in order to improve the consistency, validity and accuracy of feedback to students.

Results, evaluation, impact

Anecdotally, markers considered there to be, on average, a 20% improvement in the quality of the essay from the draft to the final essay. A preliminary analysis of essay marks suggests a positive effect of workshop attendance on student marks for specific essay criteria. For example, students who attended the learning skills workshops on in-text referencing and reference list had significantly higher marks for associated criteria than non-attendees (Fig. 1).

![Figure 1: Criterion marks (mean ± standard error) for (a) in-text referencing and (b) reference list structure, of 15 randomly-selected workshop attendees and non-attendees.](image)

Student feedback

Students responded very favourably to the restructured essay writing procedure. For example, over 97% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I think the essay submission process (draft essay followed by feedback and annotations followed by final essay submission) should help me to improve my writing skills’ (Fig. 2).
Almost 83% of students considered that the nature (quality and quantity) of feedback on their draft essay will help to enhance their writing skills (Fig. 3).
More than 83% of students who responded to the survey considered that the feedback they received was written clearly and was easy to understand (Fig. 4).

![Likert Score Diagram](image)

**Figure 4**: Student responses to the statement 'The feedback I received was clearly written and easy to understand (n= 189).

Specific student comments included:

- *It’s a good idea to have a draft because some of the questions were quite tricky and it was easy to go down the wrong track answering the question so this gives us a chance to make sure we are doing what is required.*
- *Submitting the draft essay is very helpful. It provided me with guidance as well as motivating me to start the essay weeks before the final due date.*
- *It was good to receive the draft essay back early (before the suggested date). The feedback helped me understand where improvements were required.*
- *I think that it is very important to have the opportunity to submit a draft essay and to receive feedback before producing a final copy as it is not always easy to know exactly what to focus on in some of the broader topics. The feedback given usually gives some direction as to whether the topic has been covered sufficiently or not. It is good to be some added guidance because as a first year student you don’t really know how things should be done and to what standard.*
- *The feedback that I got on my essay was very helpful since I knew clearly what areas in my essay that I can work on before I submit my final essay.*

**Framework for cycle of continuous evaluation and improvement**

A major outcome of the project was the development of a framework for a cycle of continuous evaluation and improvement of student writing assessment practices within first-year Biology subjects. The cycle is achieved through a continuing dialogue between the Subject Co-ordinator, Learning Skills and Library staff, the markers and teachers and most importantly the students themselves (Fig. 5).
Define student skills and learning outcomes

Adjust criteria, marker training and writing workshops

Identify gaps between desired / required and actual results

Design criteria, align topics and markers

Writing and marker workshops, provision of rubric, guidelines

Analyse data, survey students and markers

Figure 5: Development and deployment of a feedback assessment and procedural evaluation cycle of student writing in first-year Biology.

References


Contact details
Postal address (work): Dr Gerry Rayner
School of Biological Sciences
Monash University

Email: gerry.rayner@sci.monash.edu.au; Phone: (03) 990 55629; Fax: (03) 990 55613
PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) at UOW

Ms Sally Rogan
Student Services
University of Wollongong
sally@uow.edu.au

Ms Kylie Austin
Student Services
University of Wollongong
kaustin@uow.edu.au

Keywords
First Year Experience Program, transition, engagement, peer learning

Peer Assisted Study Sessions or PASS is a voluntary academic assistance program predominantly offered as a first year experience initiative that encompasses the principals of transition and engagement. PASS is designed to assist in the transition to university life in an environment which is supportive and engaging for students. It utilises peer-led group study sessions which combine discipline specific learning skills and consolidation of content. PASS usually targets historically difficult subjects which students struggle with and caters for a range of abilities and student goals within each session. At the University of Wollongong (UOW) and other institutions, PASS is sometimes attached to subjects for other reasons, such as the establishment of broader learning communities within smaller cohorts such as Creative Arts. UOW is the National Centre for PASS and supports all nine of its faculties with the program. The Program Manager, Sally Rogan, is the internationally accredited (UMKC) National PASS Trainer.

Context
UOW is a medium sized, multi-campus university and currently has approximately 22,000 students (on-shore and off-shore). The University commences around 3,000 undergraduate first years per year at the main campus. The University of Wollongong was Ranked No. 1 in Teaching and Learning in Australia by the Department of Education in September 2005 and 2006, with the PASS Program being the cornerstone of UOW’s First Year Experience. PASS commenced at UOW in 2003 in the Informatics and Commerce faculties, which both had difficult core first year subjects with high failure rates, large numbers of international students and significant numbers of domestic students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB). After strong outcomes of reduced failure rates and very positive student feedback, other faculties quickly requested PASS support in disciplines such as Mathematics, Chemistry and Health Sciences. The UOW now runs the most diverse PASS Program of any Australian university, supporting first year, second year and postgraduate subjects across nine faculties.

The PASS Program is largely based on Supplemental Instruction (SI), developed by Dr Deanna Martin in 1973 at the University of Missouri Kansas City. SI and PASS have been implemented in over 30 countries. The UOW, as the National Centre for PASS in Australia, practices and disseminates a relatively pure model of the SI program.
With Sally Rogan as the National Trainer since 2005, the National Centre offers support to PASS Programs in the Australasian region. Over 120 staff from 25 institutions in Australia, NZ and Malaysia have now benefited from training and assistance from the PASS team at the University of Wollongong.

PASS not only assists students in the transition to university life, but encourages an engaged learning community based upon prominent educational theory. Some of the theoretical perspectives which support and underpin PASS include Behavioural Learning Theory, Cognitive Development Theory and Social Interdependence Theory. In particular the work of Vygotsky is predominantly relevant as he puts forth the notion that learning takes place when learners practice with the assistance of more capable others and that knowledge is actively constructed by people talking, working & discovering together (Vialle et. al. 2008).

One of the factors which has contributed to the success and longevity of PASS/SI is that PASS is not a remedial program, as PASS supports high-risk subjects rather than just targeting high-risk students. All students enrolled in a targeted subject are encouraged to attend PASS, not just those struggling, thus avoiding any remedial stigma for participants or the program.

**Action taken**

PASS at UOW has been rolled out across all nine faculties in stages of expansion and consolidation. For the first 5 years, PASS concentrated on supporting traditionally difficult, technical subjects in such disciplines as Computer Science, Mathematics, Chemistry and Economics. PASS then successfully expanded its support to the Law, Creative Arts and Arts Faculties. It is also in its second year of supporting the Graduate School of Medicine.

Throughout the semester, the PASS sessions are facilitated by PASS Peer Leaders, students who have previously completed the targeted subject (or a higher level version of it) and have demonstrated strong competency. Peer Leaders complete an initial 2 days of training and receive on-going professional development and support from a senior Peer Leader. The PASS sessions can be best described as ‘super group learning’ wherein the PASS Leader facilitates group study strategies, activities and collaborative study techniques specific to the subject.

Peer Leaders are not surrogate tutors or teachers. Their role is to guide a group of 10 to 15 students to review and consolidate their understanding of subject materials by managing group dynamics, posing questions relevant to course material and encouraging collaboration. Leaders are trained to work with mixed ability groups to extend more competent students and enable struggling students to learn from their more advanced peers. This fosters a learning environment which includes and engages each participant.

Each week, PASS Leaders offer regularly scheduled PASS sessions which are held on campus in designated rooms. PASS Leaders promote their sessions as ‘guaranteed study time’ and this is certainly appreciated by today’s heavily committed students. During a typical PASS session, students compare and clarify lecture notes, review textbook readings, and discuss key course concepts. PASS also provides an opportunity for asking questions which students may worry are ‘silly’ and for picking up excellent study and exam tips from successful higher year students.

At UOW, PASS is implemented in subjects through a number of mechanisms but usually comes about through requests from subject lecturers, Heads of Departments or Associate Deans.
Tips and tricks

PASS at UOW is recognised for being an innovative and high quality program. In particular, the quality of the Leader training, its use of online enrolment and senior Peer Leaders mentoring new Leaders and assisting to manage the program have all been widely recognised and modelled. PASS at UOW also has consistent and sustained high level support from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic & International) and other high ranking staff. PASS has also aligned its student and Leader experiences with UOW’s Graduate Qualities and shown strong skills in marketing its Peer Leaders to the top graduate recruiters.

Results, evaluation, impact

The benefits of the PASS program extend to students, PASS Leaders, teaching staff and the institution itself. In terms of students, many report PASS to be enjoyable, comfortable, a non-threatening learning environment and an improved transition to university life. PASS Peer Leaders also benefit from enhanced leadership, communication and teamwork skills. This has been crucial when applying for graduate positions and also provides the opportunity for senior Leaders to be promoted to assist with PASS administration. For the past 7 years, the PASS Manager has been the only permanent staff member in PASS, all others assisting with the management of the program and associated events have been promoted senior Leaders. The support and forum based structure of PASS sessions is also valuable for teaching staff, as their students are able to consolidate lecture material in small groups, freeing up valuable consultation time for individual issues. The UOW itself also reaps the benefits of the PASS program, as it enhances student experience by reducing transition problems and improving retention rates (National UOW PASS brochure).

PASS at the UOW has been rigorously assessed using quantitative and qualitative surveys, with reports each semester and econometric analysis using the Heckman technique. Research from Dr Martin O’Brien, UOW School of Economics, noted ‘results from Mathematics, Chemistry, and Commerce ... indicate that it is predominantly weaker students, rather than high achievers, who were more likely to attend and therefore benefit from PASS participation. Therefore, the estimated influence of PASS is increased after controlling for this self-selection in all three subjects analysed’ (O’Brien, 2006). This mirrors overseas research and counters assumptions that the success of PASS is largely driven by already motivated and high achieving students attending. Rather, as Dr O’Brien states, it is the weaker students who are benefiting from attending PASS regularly, often improving their results by more than 10 marks.

The success of PASS at the UOW has been emphasised by the multiple awards the program has received in regard to its contribution to teaching and learning. These awards include the Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Outstanding Contribution to Sally Rogan in 2003 and a Commendation by AUQA and its addition to the National Good Practice Database in 2005 (see http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=2608). Most recently, the PASS Program team has been awarded a UOW Award for Outstanding Contribution to Teaching And Learning (2007), and Sally Rogan and Phillip Dawson have been awarded a Carrick Citation (2007) for ‘Leadership and mentoring in the adaptation, dissemination and advancement of the Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) Program’. The originator of SI / PASS, Dr Deanna Martin, also said that the UOW PASS Program 'hits all the benchmarks of an exceptional implementation'.

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UOW also initiated a National PASS Forum to promote collaboration and dissemination of best practice in PASS within the Australasia region. The most recent Forum was co-hosted with the University of Sydney on the 30th of September 2008. It included Leader Professional Development activities and new National Peer Leader Awards. Finally, the PASS National Centre initiated and then launched the new Australasian Journal of Peer Learning at the Forum in 2008, in collaboration with staff from QUT and The University of Melbourne.

Further resources
National UOW PASS Brochure

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Contact details
Postal address (work): Ms Kylie Austin
Student Services
Building 11, University of Wollongong
Northfields Avenue
North Wollongong NSW 2522

Email: kaustin@uow.edu.au; Phone: (02) 4221 5685; Fax: (02) 4221 5667
Engaging first year students through embedded peer tutoring

Mr Rick Ryan
Manager, Leadership, Equity & Diversity, College of Science Engineering and Technology
RMIT University
rick.ryan@rmit.edu.au

Ms Rebecca Carmichael
Student Engagement and Leadership, Student Services
RMIT University
rebecca.carmichael@rmit.edu.au

Ms Sophia Xenos
Discipline of Psychology, School of Health Sciences
RMIT University
sophia.xenos@rmit.edu.au

Mr Peter Saunders
Discipline of Psychology, School of Health Sciences
RMIT University
peter.saunders@rmit.edu.au

Ms Andrea Chester
Discipline of Psychology, School of Health Sciences
RMIT University
andrea.chester@rmit.edu.au

Keywords
engagement, transition, peer-to-peer interaction, randomised controlled trial

Context
Psychology Peer Assisted Tutorial Support (PPATS) is a peer-to-peer interaction program with demonstrated efficacy in enhancing first year student (FYS) academic achievement and wellbeing. Integration of the peer-to-peer interaction within the first year curriculum is well established as an effective strategy to meet multiple learning and transition goals (Hurd, 2000; Ramirez, 1997; Tinto, 1997). To ensure maximum student engagement, the PPATS model embraces universal design principles by embedding the program in FYS scheduled tutorial time. PPATS was developed to enhance academic and social transition, build critical skills and improve pass rates. Embedding PPATS in the first semester of first year provides a solid foundation from which students benefit throughout their academic career.
Higher education academic and social transition

Beginning University entails adaptation to new responsibilities and freedoms as well as dislocation from established friendship groups or the family unit. For many students, the transition can be stressful resulting in FYS experiencing levels of depression, anxiety and stress higher than population norms or than is experienced in second and subsequent years (Quinlivan, Xenos, Chester, & Reece, 2007). Perhaps unsurprisingly, such rapid change results in some FYS struggling to cope with the demands of new skill acquisition, multiple competing deadlines and ultimately failing to succeed.

Critical skills acquisition and pass rates

Analysis of data from a range of sources, including student evaluations, FYS grades, and a five-year longitudinal study of psychology undergraduates (Quinlivan, et al., 2007) revealed persistent difficulties in learning skills of scientific writing, specifically writing a laboratory report. Introduced in first year and built upon in subsequent years, scientific writing skills are central to academic success in the psychology program. Even when tutorials were dedicated to scientific writing skills it continued to be identified as difficult for FYS to master. Failure to acquire this core skill in first year affects new students’ confidence and academic career path. Closer examination also revealed non-submission of assessment to be associated with poor academic success. A consistent FYS fail rate of about 15% in this first year course was noted.

Action taken

PPATS is the product of a three stage model (Brown, Carmichael, & Ryan, 2008) involving:

- identification of student needs and clarification of objectives
- recognition of real and perceived limitations such as workload, funding and student numbers
- design of an appropriate model to meet these needs, identification of the skill set required by peer tutors and development of the training package.

Phase one: Needs analysis

Initial discussions scoped the project including student needs, organisational limitations such as resources and time, as well as learning and teaching objectives. In particular two main objectives were identified for the PPATS pilot:

- the development of an empirically validated program of peer-to-peer interaction to assist FYS acquire foundational skills of scientific writing, with the potential to be extended to a wide number of courses in the sciences and social sciences
- the development of a learning community within undergraduate psychology to formalise communication and knowledge sharing between new and more experienced students and ameliorate FYS academic/social transition issues.
Phase two: Design and implementation planning

Second and third year students with a distinction average were invited to be PPATS peer tutors. A randomised controlled trial was used to evaluate the impact of the intervention before committing resources to full implementation. This meant that although all tute groups used the same academic material, only one tutorial group included peer tutors. We refined the project team, recruiting Student Services staff from the Study and Learning Centre to design and implement the academic peer tutor training. We also appointed a senior tutor as the PPATS ‘Champion’ of the project.

Phase three: PPATS articulated

The Champion played an active role in peer tutor training provided to peer tutors at the beginning of semester. The Champion also facilitated the in-class peer-to-peer interaction, held weekly briefings with peer tutors, and provided email support. A manual containing weekly activities for peer tutors to deliver was also developed. The PPATS program was embedded in tutorials with pairs of peer tutors allocated to small groups of FYS who met during tutorial time. The interaction supported a series of scaffolded activities focusing on lab report writing, leading students through exercises and discussions on issues including academic integrity, APA style and self-assessment processes. Although academically driven, PPATS was also designed to provide social support and thus facilitate transition.

Tips and tricks

Effective planning

Effective peer-to-peer interaction relies on strong planning across multiple levels including:

- Articulating clear roles and parameters for peer tutors, the students they work with, and the teaching staff (Champion) involved in the program. As this form of teaching challenges traditional approaches, clarity around new roles can help reduce uncertainty and anxiety.
- Training for peer tutors as well as the Champion and regular opportunities to brief/ debrief. Peer-to-peer interaction generates immediate student feedback and opportunities for timely reaction. However new ways of working also throw up unexpected issues. Sharing and collaboration is at the heart of any community of learning.
- Making time to explore expectations by inviting everyone involved with the program to share their initial thoughts about the process helps to make explicit all participants’ roles and responsibilities as well as to clarify expectations around anticipated outcomes. Comparing initial expectations with later experiences also provides a measure of change and outcome.
- Ensuring physical teaching spaces are appropriate for the planned interactions. The traditional teaching space of forward facing tables is not ideal and rooms need to be large enough to accommodate the additional participants.
Skill development and other benefits

Peer-to-peer interaction provides opportunities to enhance the skills of and benefit for all participants. Staff who are setting up such programs often worry about recruiting peer tutors, however, we did not find it necessary to offer monetary incentives. Feedback from peer tutors confirmed that many just wanted to give back. Advertising the expected skill acquisition, support and training, as well as program objectives, nevertheless assists recruitment.

Post PPATS peer tutor focus groups confirmed the significance from their experience as it enhanced interpersonal skills, refined content knowledge, honed problem solving skills and generated a greater sense of participation in their learning community. Tangible rewards, such as acknowledgement of participation on academic transcripts, are also valued.

FYS can learn important skills of small group work, while benefiting from peers tutors who have negotiated the demands of the course successfully. Although the peer-to-peer interaction focuses on core academic skills, new students seek and gain invaluable tips which help them to cope and become 'streetwise' to their new environment. Peer tutors are also a resource that allows the Champion to enhance the learning and teaching experience in the classroom. Observation of the peer-to-peer interactions and work with the peer tutors is an opportunity for reflective practice.

Ownership of the peer tutoring program

Encouraging participants to name their own program helps establish its identity enhances ownership and sustainability of your new community of learning.

Results, evaluation, impact

A unique feature of the PPATS program was its rigorous randomised controlled trial design and evaluation strategy in which the peer tutored students were compared with students in comparable tutorials without peer tutoring (control group).

Impact of PPATS on student performance and wellbeing

The impact of PPATS on students was significant. The PPATS program improved FYS grades and retention as well as academic self-efficacy. It impacted on students' reported levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, with students reporting lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress in comparison to controls. The PPATS program also positively impacted self esteem and problem-solving ability, with students reporting higher levels of self esteem and improved problem solving ability following participation in PPATS. Benefits identified by FYS included improved grades, increased motivation, improved study techniques and confidence as academic learners, increased social engagement, and enhanced motivation to attend classes and engage in learning as a result of their interaction with the peer tutors.
The impact of PPATS on peer tutors

The impact of PPATS on peer tutors was equally positive. Key benefits identified by peer tutors included the consolidation of academic skills, improvement in leadership competencies, and a heightened sense of purpose and responsibility. Additional outcomes included increased motivation to study and academic confidence, improved confidence and social engagement, and increased self-reflection. PPATS also positively impacted on the peer tutors’ psychological wellbeing, with levels of depression, anxiety, and stress lower upon completion of the program. There was an increase for peer tutors in the verbalising sub-scale of academic self-efficacy and in self-esteem following participation in PPATS.

Further resources

Rick Ryan’s www site has a range of information about peer tutoring both at RMIT and elsewhere http://www.rmit.edu.au/set/ad/sled/mentoring


References


### Contact details

*Postal address (work)*: Mr Rick Ryan  
Manager, Leadership, Equity & Diversity  
College of Science, Engineering and Technology  
RMIT University

*Email*: rick.ryan@rmit.edu.au
Enhancing the first-year student learning experience through quality improvement of courses

Dr Sheila Scutter
School of Health Sciences
University of South Australia
Sheila.scutter@unisa.edu.au

Dr Denise Wood
School of Communication
University of South Australia
Denise.wood@unisa.edu.au

Keywords
transition, evaluation and assessment, peer review, first year experience

Context
The importance of student engagement has gained considerable attention in recent years in light of the growing evidence from various studies in Australia (McInnis, 2001; Krause et al, 2005; Kift, 2003, 2008) and overseas (Kuh, 2006; Tinto, 2000, 2002; Yorke, 2008) of the link between student engagement and retention. This research, combined with evidence of increasing student disengagement (McInnis, 2001; Krause et al, 2005; Strahm, M., & Danaher, 2005), brings into sharp focus the need for an integrated and planned approach to enhancing the first-year experience (Krause et al, 2005; Kuh, 2006; Kift, 2008).

Kift (2008) advocates a ‘top-down and bottom-up approach’; an approach that acknowledges the need for an institutional framework, as well as the articulation of criteria to guide the design of courses that are ‘engaging, supportive, intentional, relevant and social’ (Star, 2005 cited in Kift, 2008). Such a ‘top-down and bottom-up approach’ is consistent with the philosophy underpinning the design and development of an online instrument and associated website as part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council project, which aim to support quality improvement of courses/programs through peer review and reflective practice. The Boyer (1990) approach to scholarship, which is based on an understanding of the communal basis of all scholarly activity, is central to the design and development of the instrument. The instrument and associated website provide a scaffold for academics developing course material and at the same time empowers academics to construct their own tailored evaluation checklists and to contribute to the developing database of criteria. Through this communal approach, the instrument and its associated website provide an opportunity for just-in-time academic staff development by providing the accepted standards, information about how to meet these and exemplars contributed by academics themselves.

2. This project is supported by The Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of The Australian Learning and Teaching Council. The project team is led by Denise Wood (UniSA) and team members are Sheila Scutter (UniSA), Dale Wache (UniSA), Ingrid Day (UniSA), Martin Freney (UniSA), Richard Lamb (UniSA), Jenny Sim (RMIT), Sally Kift (QUT), Kerri-Lee Krause (Griffith University), Ron Oliver (Edith Cowan University), Jacque McDonald (USQ), Shirley Reushle (QUT).
The project also addresses an identified need for an objective and accessible system that supports academics in the development or redevelopment of their own courses through reflective processes and enables them to use these same criteria to have their work evaluated. In exposing their work to scholarly appraisal and such public scrutiny, academics can also have their work affirmed and used as evidence when seeking promotion within their institution.

**Action taken**

This showcase presentation draws on the growing body of literature addressing principles for the design of a curriculum that is engaging as well as supportive of the needs of transitioning students in their first-year of university study. It is argued that, in addition to adhering to good curriculum principles applicable to all university courses, the curriculum provided to first year students needs to provide opportunities for students to transition from previous learning experiences to the higher education sector. For example, many students entering higher education will not previously have taken a course that is online or of a blended format and may need more staged exposure to this type of learning than more advanced students. The peer review instrument can support academics in addressing these requirements.

Although attitudes vary, it is evident that some academics view the teaching of first year students as unfulfilling and less prestigious than more senior or postgraduate students. Thus, first year teaching may be delegated to junior academics or post-graduate students without any special consideration of the skills needed to develop and deliver successful courses to first year students. As Kift (2008) states, particular recognition is needed for teachers who engage in ‘... this difficult, and presently unglamorous, work with first year students’. However at present there is no tool available to evaluate the first year curriculum developed, leading to difficulties in achieving teaching awards, promotion and other appropriate recognition.

The Peer Review Instrument described in this showcase provides a mechanism for curriculum review according to criteria selected by the academic. Thus, the academic may elect to review a course or invite their peers to review their courses according to criteria that meet their own interests, emerging priorities of their institution or of higher education in general. Furthermore, the instrument addresses the requirements of particular awards and recognition, in this case the first year curriculum. The Peer Review Instrument therefore provides a way of examining the first year curriculum.

Kift identifies five key aspects of the first year experience, one of which is the first year curriculum. The first year curriculum should address these aspirations, while still incorporating best practice in other aspects of curriculum.

According to Kift, the first year curriculum should:

- inform the student’s vocational aspirations early in the course
- address the learning needs and skills required for their current area of study
- promote student involvement in their learning
- provide quality and authentic learning experiences
- assist with the transition to studying at tertiary level.
The Peer Review Instrument (PRI)

The instrument incorporates banks of criteria for use in peer review, detailed explanations of the meanings of the criteria, examples of best practice and a database that records the outcomes of the peer review process. The initial selection of criteria for course evaluation was based on a comprehensive review of the academic literature and therefore is relevant to a wide audience. Academics using the instrument can select the criteria against which they wish to evaluate their courses. They also have the flexibility to add to the database of criteria, including links to other resources and examples of best practice.

The four main components of the instrument are instructional design, interface design, the use of multimedia to engage learners and technical aspects of multimedia. These four main components are broken down into the following sections:

8. Instructional design
   - clarity of expectations
   - building student knowledge
   - learning activities
   - assessment
   - evaluation
   - human interaction

9. Interface design

10. Use of media
   - interactive multimedia
   - writing style and accuracy of text
   - copyright

11. Technical aspects.

One of the primary principles underlying the development of the instrument was the flexibility of the instrument to accommodate changing technologies and educational priorities. It has been developed so that it may be adapted by individual academics or institutions to address their specific contexts. For example, the tool can be used to evaluate components of courses focusing on strategies for strengthening the teaching and research nexus. Likewise a bank of criteria to specifically address the first year curriculum is being developed. The criteria embedded within these banks are designed to be selected according to the evaluation aims and particular aspects of individual courses.

Tips and tricks

Incorporating the first year experience into the Peer Review Instrument

Kift describes the six first year curriculum design principles as Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment, and Evaluation and Monitoring. These principles can be incorporated into the instrument by adding a first year curriculum bank of criteria, or by adding criteria to existing banks. The banks of criteria are designed so that after deciding upon the aims of the review, the academic can select banks 'off the shelf' by selecting particular banks. The banks can be further edited by the academic to avoid duplication of criteria.
Results, evaluation, impact

This instrument develops further an instrument described by George et al. (2004). The previous instrument and website were shown to assist both the academic teacher and professional developer in the creation, development and review of online learning environments. The instrument supports academic staff in reflective practice and provides a structured and informed approach to peer review. The new extended Peer Review Instrument is currently at the stage of Beta testing. Academics are invited to view the instrument, to suggest new criteria or make changes to existing criteria and to include links to the literature or examples of best practice.

Further resources

The Peer Review tool can be accessed by registering for an account at the following url: http://peerreview.unisa.edu.au/peerreview/public/. After completing this form you will receive an email containing your username and password. More information about this project can be found on our Wiki at http://peerreview.unisa.edu.au/wiki/index.php/Instructions

References


**Contact details**

*Postal address (work):* Dr Sheila Scutter  
School of Health Sciences  
UniSA

*Email: Sheila.scutter@unisa.edu.au*
Research into academic numeracy

Associate Professor Janet A. Taylor
Learning and Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
taylorja@usq.edu.au

Ms Linda Galligan
Learning and Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
galligan@usq.edu.au

Keywords
transition, numeracy, adult

Context
Academic numeracy is a critical awareness that allows students to become confident and competent in using mathematics and to be able to situate, interpret, critique, use, communicate and even create mathematics within their discipline’s setting. Academic numeracy is usually based on both the mathematics learnt at school and the mathematics needed in disciplines such as nursing or economics. Many students at both school and university are opting to study easier types of mathematics; universities are removing mathematical pre-requisites from award programs and not recognising the embedded mathematics within many of their courses. These trends ensure that initiatives which allow students to bridge the mathematical gaps to university are still necessary. Yet while research into mathematics at university does exist, it is still in it infancy. There are many questions not fully answered and as universities move into the culture of quality and performance matched funding, it is essential that we continue to address the following questions:

• What academic numeracy is needed by students at university?
• What are students’ academic numeracy skills on entering university?
• What are the most effective ways to develop the academic numeracy skills of university students?

This Showcase will highlight some of the research undertaken by the authors and the curricula and resources developed by them and the team at USQ.

Action taken
We aimed to enhance mathematics learning at USQ for more than a decade. To develop students’ academic numeracy, we have developed resources and curricula in fields such as Nursing, Economics, Statistics and Engineering that focused, not only on traditional mathematics, but on learning skills.

Tips and tricks
An overview of our programs is available online and examples of some successes can be found under the ‘Further resources’ section below.
Results, evaluation, impact

In 2008 we wrote a chapter *Adults Returning to Study Mathematics* in the book *Research in Mathematics Education in Australasia 2004-2007*. This chapter focused on adults learning mathematics in two distinct sections: adults learning mathematics in the workplace and community; and adults engaged in further studies (e.g. university or vocational studies), including bridging mathematics. The overview investigated the research available on adults in basic numeracy education through to those gaining access to or supported at university study involving mathematics in a variety of forms.

Consideration was also given to relevant definitions of ‘adult’, ‘mathematics’ and ‘numeracy’, and to the relationship between research into learning and research into teaching practice or curriculum design. We concluded that the area of adults learning mathematics is still under-theorised and under-researched at a time when 21st century needs are demanding a population with increasing numeracy-based skills and knowledge.

In 2006 we wrote a journal article *Mathematics for maths anxious tertiary students: integrating the cognitive and affective domains using interactive multimedia* in the journal *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*. This article drew on our knowledge and experience with commencing university students who come from a diversity of backgrounds and have a broad range of abilities and attitudes. It is well known that attitudes towards mathematics, especially mathematics anxiety, can affect students’ performance to the extent that mathematics is often seen as a barrier to success by many. This paper reported on the design, development and evaluation of an interactive multimedia resource designed to explicitly address students’ beliefs and attitudes towards mathematics by following five real life characters as they progress through the highs and low of studying a preparatory mathematics course.

The resource was built within two theoretical frameworks: one related to effective numeracy teaching (Marr and Helme 1991); and the other to effective educational technology development (Laurillard 2002) and utilised a number of multimedia alternatives (video, audio, animations, diarying, interactive examples and self assessment) to encourage students to feel part of a group, to reflect on their feelings and beliefs about mathematics, to expose students to authentic problem solving and generally build confidence through practice and self-assessment.

Evaluation of the resource indicated that it encouraged students to value their own mathematical ability and helped to build confidence, while developing mathematical problem solving skills. The evaluation clearly demonstrated that it was possible to address the affective domain through multimedia initiatives and can complement the current focus on computer mediated communication as the primary method of addressing affective goals within the online environment.

In the Showcase poster we also highlight some of the data collated for an invited presentation at the Adults Learning Maths international conference in 2005 entitled *Research into research on adults in Bridging Mathematics: the past, the present and the future*. In the Showcase poster we show the Queensland Mathematics Year 12 enrolment patterns from 1996 to 2004 in the three major courses Mathematics A, B and C.
Finally, we highlight our USQ approach to academic numeracy developed for an invited presentation in 2007 at an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded symposium on Learning Support in mathematics and statistics in Australian Universities, entitled *Affecting systemic change in academic numeracy: steps on the journey*. The Showcase poster depicts a proposed model of academic numeracy linked to student learning experiences and outcomes. A successful academic numeracy model is also closely related to university wide projects, university policy, faculty support, staff development and mentoring, university wide curriculum development, as well as the more traditional one to one consultations, generic classes and resources and preparatory programs.

**Further resources**


Preparatory Programs (Tertiary Preparation Program: TPP)

Integrated Support (Engineering, Data Analysis, Economics, Nursing)

Integrated Support (Foundation Mathematics: MAT1100)

The Learning Centre and ALSonline

**References**


Marr, Beth and Helme, Sue (1991) *Breaking the Maths Barrier*, LLASP, Centre for Professional Communication, University of South Australia.


**Contact details**

*Postal address (work):* Associate Professor Janet A. Taylor

*After 16 February:* Director, Teaching and Learning

Southern Cross University

Lismore NSW 2480

*Email:* janet.taylor@scu.edu.au; *Phone:* (02) 66 203087; *Fax:* (02) 66 203426

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Study and assessment: What works in first year university

Associate Professor Janet A. Taylor
Learning and Teaching Support Unit
University of Southern Queensland
taylorja@usq.edu.au

Keywords
assessment, student perceptions, study habits, distance education

Context
It is well known that studying at university for the first time can be problematic for both recent school leavers and mature-aged students. This Showcase summarises the work from two studies: one on student perceptions and study habits in a first year mathematics course and the second on assessment practices that work for first year.

Studies were undertaken at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) using students in their first year of study. USQ has over 70% of students enrolled in distance education, so participant students and courses were primarily those offered at a distance.

Action taken: Student perceptions and study habits
An extensive student questionnaire was developed, consisting of 115 items grouped into 32 questions. The questionnaire focused on ascertaining students’ perceptions of university procedures, knowledge about support services, beliefs about themselves as learners along with their expectations about university study and life. One hundred and forty-eight on-campus students (63% of group) completed the questionnaire in tutorial classes and 63 distance education students (18% of group) completed mailed surveys. Both groups completed the surveys in the eighth week of study, allowing them time to engage with university study and life. Follow-up interviews were conducted face-to-face or by phone with a sample of 20 students selected randomly from specified groups.

Results, evaluation, impact: Student perceptions and study habits
The findings indicate that on-campus students spend significantly less time studying than distance education students, with both groups studying fewer hours than expected by curriculum designers. Students clearly reported the characteristics that they believed defined an effective student, yet few displayed the characteristics in their study practices and few accessed or had the skills to access the available support offered.

The study concluded that:
- The presence and visibility of significant amounts of stand-alone support does not appear to be enough to support students in these early weeks of study. Students do not take up the offers of support for reasons hypothesised to be related to situated self esteem and self knowledge, as well as the help-seeking environment.
If academic staff and curriculum designers want to engage students to fully participate in university study from an early stage, they will need to address approaches that explicitly address the need for students to develop self-regulatory and help-seeking behaviours.

In particular, students will need to not only be given explicit 'permission' to ask for help but the personal skills with which to do this.

(Full paper at: http://sleid.cqu.edu.au/include/getdoc.php?id=593&article=129&mode=pdf)

**Action taken: Assessment practices**

For most students assessment guides their study and learning practice. Yet in the literature associated with the first year of study at university, few have mobilised the power of assessment to develop and engage first year undergraduate students. This section of the Showcase presents a model of assessment for first year students that divides the semester into three overlapping assessment phases.

- Assessment for transition provides opportunities to engage the students in study and to kick start their activity in the course. It is characterised by low contribution to final grades and relatively low to zero marking times.

- Assessment for development is the heart of the course’s assessment scheme and can feed forward into assessment for achievement. These assessments allow for significant feedback and low to middle contributions to the final grade. Marking times would be relatively high.

- Assessment for achievement includes final assessments such as essays, portfolios and examinations. Feedback and thence marking times may be relatively lower than the ‘Assessment for development’, but contribution to final grade would be relatively higher.

**Results, evaluation, impact: Assessment practices**

The implementation and usefulness of this model is supported by examples from mathematics, engineering, computing, communication and nursing studies at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (as more fully set out in Taylor(2008)). Particular attention is paid to assessments for transition which occur early in the semester and are linked more closely with processes than specific content. There is clear evidence that this assessment model improves participation of students, especially distance education students.

To take one example of an ‘Assessment for Transition’ in mathematics:

*Foundation Mathematics (MAT1100) at USQ is a large first year service mathematics course which enrolls 800 students (500 distance) studying science, engineering, surveying, and computing. The students in the course demonstrate a huge diversity of mathematical backgrounds and attitudes to studying mathematics. The first assignment asks students to reflect on their past mathematical experiences, to confirm vital information about how the course operates and to develop a study plan for the course. It is compulsory and is completed in week two, with a flexible submission time to allow for late enrolments. This assignment ensures that students do not procrastinate, while answers to reflective questions confirm (or otherwise) to the tutors that students have the skills and knowledge necessary for transition to the course, and allows for follow-up of students with concerns.*
In a course evaluation students had mixed feelings about this assessment and were often surprised by its reflective and discursive nature, especially in a mathematics subject. Yet eight weeks into the semester, 69% of students indicated they were using their study plan to assist with their study requirements. One student indicated:

Making us do a study plan. I thought it a bit stupid and irrelevant at first but [it] was in fact the most useful and helpful thing for maintaining the workload evenly throughout the semester.

The year in which this assignment was introduced saw an increase in students’ completion of the next assessment activity and an increase of 10% in the overall pass rate for the course.

Other examples of the implementation of the model are demonstrated in computing, engineering, nursing and communication (Taylor, 2008).

(Full paper at: http://jutlp.uow.edu.au/2008_v05_i01/2_Taylor011.html)

Further resources


Contact details
Postal address (work): Associate Professor Janet A. Taylor
After 16 February:
Director, Teaching and Learning
Southern Cross University
Lismore  NSW  2480

Email: janet.taylor@scu.edu.au; Phone: (02) 66 203087; Fax: (02) 66 203426
Sox and the city: Introducing first year students to studio based learning, teaching and assessment

Professor Suzi Vaughan
Fashion, Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
s2.vaughan@qut.edu.au

Keywords
studio based learning, communities of practice, studio critique (crit), engagement, assessment

Context
Studio based learning, with all its inherent components (the project, the extended hours of contact, the ‘final crit’) has become accepted as the traditional (best) way for design students to develop their ability to think and act in a ‘designerly’ fashion; however, despite the increased research into studio based pedagogies, there are a number of conceptions that seem largely impervious to change and it is two of these ‘untouchables’ that this paper, and the first year orientation project described in it, seeks to challenge. One: the conception of the critique or ‘crit’ as a ‘rite of passage’ — an essentially negative experience with an emphasis on criticism, confrontation, even humiliation; two: the idea that first year study should be based on simple, basic or ‘abstracted’ theories and skills which students should, at a later date, be able to put together to assemble a more complex and concrete ‘whole’.

Learning in a studio setting is quite different from school and from more ‘traditional’ university lecture environments. While one (school) provides a substantial degree of structure and a fairly stable, small cohort, the other (university) is often experienced by students as a ‘spectator sport’ (Tinto, 1997, 2003) where they become part of a larger, less stable ‘cohort’; where lecturers talk and few students are active participants. Studio, on the other hand, is more like a second family, ‘with the best and worst aspects of family life manifested on a day-to-day basis’ (Anthony, 1991: 12).

The extended hours spent in the studio, the intensity of project deadlines and the shared experience of the ‘crit’ bring students closer, and unite them in an experience that few other university students understand. Not only is the learning environment very different — with students adopting (or allocated) spaces in the studio that they return to throughout the year, where 24/7 access is the norm and students come to think of the studio as their second home — but the assessment practices are also quite distinctive.

Unlike the largely private, solitary tasks that are undertaken in many disciplines — where students prepare and submit work (such as essays or exams) without any input from tutor or peers, then receive feedback a number of days or weeks later, again in a private form — design students engage in tasks that are public, both in the preparation, which generally takes place in a shared studio space, and in the tasks themselves, which almost always involve the public presentation of work, accompanied by instant oral feedback from lecturers and peers in the form of a ‘crit’.
The ‘crit’ has developed something of a mixed reputation within design higher education, with some departments/schools seemingly priding themselves on the depth of humiliation they can drive students to. This paper outlines a different approach to the ‘crit’; based on a belief that students need to build trust and confidence in order to take the risks inherent in the fashion design process, that they should genuinely be able to believe that each project has an infinite number of possible responses and there is no one ‘correct’ answer being sought or any ‘hidden curriculum’ dictating demands other than those that are declared.

Creative practice is often accompanied by a degree of vulnerability and students, as novice designers, can feel as though they are putting ‘themselves’ on display, not just their drawings or samples. Fashion, however, is an industry where the outcomes of a designer’s work are publicly paraded, critiqued, bought and copied. Students must develop the skills to survive in this context; therefore, first year assessment tasks need to incorporate a level of ‘public’ display and critique but with an emphasis on constructive feedback (rather than negative), on cultivating an environment of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where students become part of a ‘community of practice’ and where ‘shared knowledge’, ‘shared knowing’ and ‘shared responsibility’ (Tinto, 2003) are built up within a studio environment.

We know that university students who feel engaged in their studies and find relevance to a future career or profession (Kember, Ho & Hong, 2008; Krause & Coates, 2008) are more likely to feel ‘invested’ in their study, and are therefore more inclined to persist when they encounter difficulties, doubts or disappointments. Alongside this, a shift in focus from teaching to learning has been part of the pedagogic discourse for a number of years, with research into student learning styles/preferences (Entwistle, 1988; Honey & Mumford, 1992; Kolb, 2000) illuminating learning from a number of different angles.

In the face of this research however many first year programs continue to abstract theories, introduce complex ideas or processes as a series of dislocated parts and provide a partial (at best) map of the way this ‘foundational’ knowledge will enable students to become full ‘participants’ in the profession to which they aspire:

…I didactic instruction creates unintended practices. The conflict stems from the fact that there is a difference between talking about a practice from outside and talking within it... In a community of practice, there are no special forms of discourse aimed at apprentices or crucial to their centripetal movement toward full participation that correspond to the marked genres of the question-answer-evaluation format of classroom teaching, or the lecturing of college professor.


Fashion design education revolves around a series of tensions; between the head and the hands, the expressive and the analytical, between abstract concepts (ideas) and three dimensional outcomes (products), between risk (novelty) and safety (a supportive learning environment). To become a successful creative practitioner within the fashion industry requires a complex blend of conceptual, technical and business skills. The curriculum therefore needs to provide authentic learning opportunities for students to develop their skills and capabilities in a challenging yet secure space. This curriculum framework must be flexible enough to allow for individual interpretation, but with sufficient clarity to form a scaffold in the early stages of study. It should provide ‘apprentice’ design students with an introduction to the language, values and philosophy of the community of practice they have joined and, at the same time reflect the realities and complexities of the industry into which they will graduate.
Action taken

We have developed a project to introduce first year students to design practice and to provide an early opportunity to engage in ‘legitimate peripheral participation’. This short, challenging project — titled ‘sox’ — introduces students to studio based learning and to the opportunities and tensions inherent in the conception of fashion design. In the first week of semester, each student is given eight pairs of standard sports socks and asked to transform these undisputedly mundane items into innovative, yet wearable garments to be publicly displayed and critiqued the following week. Students are introduced to the industrial machines and learn basic sewing skills to enable them to put the garments together, but the criteria for assessment do not focus on technical expertise but on creativity within the constraints of a brief. The assessment is developmental and formative, offering students an opportunity to understand the educational process which will define their learning experiences over the next three years. While there is no summative assessment, the project requires students to work to a brief and complete their work within specified timelines.

Individual approaches to the project highlight the current learning styles of the students; while some commence with in-depth research, analysis and writing; others sketch; some methodically work out mannequin sizes and stretch factor in the socks; some use their technical skills as a starting point for their design whilst others go directly to the mannequin and start pinning and draping without any apparent plan.

Tips and tricks

Innovative aspects of the work include: the idea of a short orientation project that acts as a ‘microcosm’ of studio based learning; the idea of the ‘crit’ as a constructive, positive learning experience instead of a negative, stressful one; the idea of starting with the complex, concrete whole instead of the simple, abstracted parts as a means of motivating and engaging ‘apprentice/novice’ students in ‘legitimate peripheral participation’.

Results, evaluation, impact

We have not undertaken any systematic evaluation of the ‘sox’ project to date but in terms of impact, the project has proved invaluable as a learning experience for both students and staff. By the end of the project most students have developed an appreciation of the individuality of the fashion design process evidenced in increased levels of confidence and understanding and a recognition that lecturers respect their abilities regardless of their very varied levels of skill. The project also allows first year lecturers to develop an awareness of the current learning preferences of each student. Gleaning this information so early on is priceless; it is the ‘data’ needed to develop our ‘mass-customised’ constructivist approach to teaching where learning is seen as individualised, thus enabling students’ creativity to flourish within the ‘confines’ of university assessment.

Further resources

Nil.
References


Contact details

Postal address (work): Professor Suzi Vaughan  
QUT Creative Industries Precinct  
Z6 Level 5, Musk Avenue  
Kelvin Grove Qld 4059

Email: s2.vaughan@qut.edu.au; Phone: (07) 3138 8258; Fax: (07) 3138 8195
Integration of the Bachelor of Business core curriculum: Investigation and implementation

Mr David Watson
Course Director, Faculty of Business and Economics
Monash University
david.watson@buseco.monash.edu.au

Ms Ann Turner
Manager, Education Office, Faculty of Business and Economics
Monash University
ann.turner@buseco.monash.edu.au

Keywords
design, engagement, collaboration, integration

Context
The Monash Faculty of Business and Economics is the largest in Australia. It teaches three undergraduate programs across its five Australian and two international campuses and has a first year intake of over 3000 students each year. The Bachelor of Business program is taught on the Caulfield campus.

All first year Bachelor of Business students are required to complete a foundation sequence of six subjects which are considered to be the essential building blocks of business decision making — accounting, organisational behaviour, economics, marketing, business statistics and business law.

In 2006, an external panel reviewed the Bachelor of Business program and recommended that the:

• program structure be adjusted to provide more flexibility and choice for students
• core curriculum, or foundation sequence, be better integrated
• foundation sequence take a more active role in graduate attribute (or employability skill) development
• orientation and transition programs be improved to better prepare students for their whole course experience
• co-curriculum continue to provide support for low performing first years but also offer more extension opportunities for high performers.

The review also recommended the appointment of an academic Course (Program) Director and that this new position be given broad ranging powers and responsibilities to achieve the outcomes recommended. At the same time, the University chose to restructure and integrate its learning support and library services.

The newly appointed Bachelor of Business Program Director and the Library-Learning Commons Integration Project Manager elected to use the opportunity presented by the external review and the restructure to undertake fundamental reappraisal of the first year learning experience. The Director and staff of the University’s Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) were also co-opted into the project.
A key element of the project success was the coordinated/integrated approach adopted and partnership that was established between the faculty, university support services and all first year subject co-ordinators.

In summary, the objectives of the project were to achieve:

- better cohesion in the core curriculum through the use of integrated teaching materials
- a more strategic approach towards academic and generic skill development
- better preparation of students to move from generalist into more specialised curricula
- better alignment of students’ expectations and abilities to ensure they move into specialisations to which they are best suited and which best align with their further study and career ambitions
- higher student progression and retention rates and, ultimately, higher student satisfaction with their course experience.

Action taken

Since the project commenced in 2007, it has been distinguished by a high level of cross-discipline and cross-service collaboration and consultation. The project has involved more than 60 staff from across the faculty and the broader university. It has involved:

- senior university and faculty staff
- discipline experts from the six academic departments of the faculty
- course management and administrative staff
- student development staff
- central university service providers including the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT), Library and Learning Skills (LLS) and Health Wellbeing and Development (HWD)
- and, perhaps most importantly, two key first year experience stakeholder groups — students and tutors.

The underlying principles for the project were shared vision, co-operation, collaboration and communication. The Program Director deliberately took the role of ‘client’ rather than ‘project manager’ and empowered the project participants to take control of the process. This resulted in a high degree of ownership and peer-to-peer communication that had been absent prior to the commencement of this initiative. At its best this approach resulted in some highly innovative and successful development but, at times, required mediation and more active direction by the Program Director.

2007 Project Focus: Review — what do we do, why do we do it and what can or should we do differently.

- Three day intensive workshop involving all 60 participants with a broad focus on the first year experience content, look and feel.
- A detailed subject by subject examination of learning objectives and assessment regimes involving first year subject co-ordinators, curriculum designers and library-learning skills staff.
- Curriculum development in response to address issues identified in the earlier project stages.
- Library-Learning Skills program redesign to more closely link academic skill development workshops with first year curriculum content and assessment tasks. Focus on pro-active, rather than remedial, service delivery.
- Design of co-curricula and extra-curricula enhancement opportunities.
2008 Project Focus: Implementation and Innovation.

- New and/or refreshed curriculum delivery commenced.
- Library-Learning academic development and support programs launched.
- Identification of a need for dedicated teaching, learning, co-curricula and social spaces to enhance the first year experience.
- Renewed focus on learning outcomes and the development of graduate attributes.

2009 Project Focus: Enhancement.

- Introduction into the curriculum of foundation skills and experience required to achieve whole of course based learning outcomes.
- Integrated teaching, learning, co-curricula and social space opened to provide a cohort focused first year experience.
- Recruitment of first cohort for Leaders Year of the P.A.L. program.

Tips and tricks

*Ownership is important.* The biggest difficulty was in persuading academics to ‘let go’ of content and the project invested heavily in encouraging subject leaders to drive the process of change from within.

*Create shared vision, goals and understanding.* The focus throughout the project was on information sharing so that peers created shared goals, exchanged teaching and assessment techniques and reached an understanding that a core curriculum requires shared responsibility for academic and generic skill development.

*Involve students and tutors in first year curriculum design.* As the two key cohorts in the first year experience, the inputs provided by both tutors and students into the project were thoughtful and positive.

*‘All of University’ involvement is essential and effective.* The Dean of Faculty and the University Executive were supportive of and participated in the project. Their presence at key meetings lent weight to the importance and value of the process.

*Hold meetings off-site as far as possible.* Taking staff away from their offices freed them from day-to-day distractions and allowed them to focus fully on the task at hand. Our investment in the social and networking aspects of the process was invaluable.

Results, evaluation, impact

Our first year subject leaders found the early stages of the change process confronting but the resulting classroom experience rewarding. Earlier criticism that the project would result in a ‘dumbing-down’ of content were confounded. Subject leaders reported that students were more engaged and motivated and that the quality of their assessment tasks was noticeably improved. A general improvement in mark and grade distributions reflect this, as does a notable decline in the number of students failing to meet required performance standards. This is true even for subjects that have historically been perceived by students as being particularly difficult, notably business law and business statistics.

The student experience has also improved and this is reflected in university mandated subject evaluations, particularly in relation to questions regarding ‘effectiveness of and feedback on assessment’.
The ‘reach’ of the key university support services, particularly the library-learning service, was vastly improved. Instead of providing principally remedial services to failing students, the library-learning service co-curricula programs were closely integrated with the cycle of curriculum delivery and assessment tasks. As a result, significantly more students were exposed to and benefited from the expertise and value of the services. This integration of the curriculum and co-curricula support delivery is now regarded by the university as the model for all future service delivery.

Further resources
Nil.

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<th>Contact details</th>
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| Postal address (work): Mr David Watson  
PO Box 197  
Caulfield East VIC 3145 |
| Email: david.watson@buseco.monash.edu.au; Phone: (03) 9903 2880; Fax: (03) 9903 1301 |
Transition and the total learning experience: Reform of undergraduate education in Hong Kong

Associate Professor Beverley Webster
Deputy Director, Centre for Advancement of University Teaching
University of Hong Kong
bwebster@hku.hk

Keywords
academic transition, discipline induction, integration, student outcomes

Context
Hong Kong’s economic well being depends heavily upon its ability to become a knowledge-based economy. The higher education sector is a key source of impetus for social development and human capital is the single most important asset of Hong Kong’ (UCG, 2004, p. 4). Whether young people can face up to the challenges of a changing world depends significantly on the learning experiences through the years of formal education. The Hong Kong government has initiated a major and bold curriculum reform for the higher education sector to be implemented by 2012 being the adoption of a 3+3+4 system. One of the most significant challenges for this reform is expansion of the undergraduate curriculum to include another year. Recognised as a major issue for the new 4-Year Undergraduate Curriculum will be the experiences during the first year for these undergraduates and universities in Hong Kong have a unique opportunity to work on developing a curriculum which promotes more positive and productive first year student outcomes.

Existing research on the First Year Experience (FYE) at University suggests that first year students’ integration into the academic and social communities at university impacts greatly on their persistence in their undergraduate program as well as their intellectual, social and emotional well-being (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Latham and Green (1997) view the first year as a significant episode in which many changes are encountered while the student moves from a familiar environment to an unknown one. First year experience research portrays this initial year of university as a critical stage of adjustment and substantial intellectual development (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2001; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

The difficulties in transition and adjustment coupled with the high withdrawal rate in some countries (particularly Australia, the US and the UK) have attracted large amounts of research (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Yorke & Longden, 2007). Many efforts to improve the experience of the first year undergraduate are focused on issues of academic transition, having to shift from old study habits and style of learning to those demanded by university (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Lam & Kwan, 1999; McInnis, James, & McNaught, 1995; Yorke & Longden, 2007). In their surveys of a sample of first year students, Lowe and Cook (2003) found many students reported having struggled with academic demands, their workload and the need for more independent learning styles.
From interviews, Asmar and associates (2000) identify transitional difficulties in relation to intrinsic: taking greater personal responsibilities for work, adjusting to different teaching styles, coping with the workload, adjusting to large classes and having language difficulties. Extrinsic included the lack of feedback on assessment, timetabling, and the lack of access and availability of lecturers and tutors. As reported by Krause and her colleagues (2005) on findings from their decade-long study on Australian students, systematic approaches to orienting new students can have consistent positive impact on their first year experience and as a result, retention is improved.

Although Hong Kong institutions of higher education do not have attrition problems, there is still a concern, particularly with the upcoming curriculum reform, that the first year of undergraduate experience can be improved and better student outcomes can be achieved. It is recognised that more traditional issues of academic transition, concentrated on issues of transiting from secondary education to tertiary education should be addressed with Hong Kong undergraduates, however, initial pilot work conducted in Hong Kong indicates that a focus on areas such as transition in relation to induction to academic discipline and integration into the university community are more likely to promote better learning strategies, better learning outcomes and a sense of achievement.

Of particular importance to the Hong Kong community is the achievement of graduate attributes, being able to demonstrate leadership, think critically and solve ill-defined problems, to work collaboratively and with integrity. In developing a new curriculum how to promote student attainment of such attributes is one priority. Studies related to academic orientation are normally not concerned with how first year students are getting inducted into their academic discipline in terms of the extent to which they have acquired the academic discourse and gained understanding of the key concepts of the discipline. After the first year of undergraduate education it is also not often expected that students will be able to demonstrate the development of generic attributes. However, acknowledging that the first year experiences can influence experiences in subsequent years, we need to consider how to promote the development of these in the first year.

**Action taken**

In the need to better understand student learning experiences and the influences on learning outcomes for Hong Kong undergraduates as we prepare to develop a new curriculum best suited to fostering positive student outcomes, the following conceptual model (see Figure 1) is tested. The data were collected from 458 undergraduate students who completed the Student Learning Experience Questionnaire (SLEQ) at the end of their first year in the 2008 academic year.
The questionnaire included the well known dimensions of the Course Experience Questionnaire (Wilson, Lizzio, & Ramsden, 1997), and the Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1986). In addition to these, the dimensions of Academic Transition (for example, differences in approach to teaching, mode of learning, types of assessments), Induction to Discipline (for example, understanding of the relationships between courses, key concepts and theories, employment and research opportunities), and Integration (for example, fitting into university life well, my first year opening up an exciting future, feeling positive about being a student at the university) were also included. These dimensions were developed and validated in Hong Kong from data previously collected. Three student outcomes were measured in this study. The performance indicator was an accumulative GPA, goal achievement included both academic and personal goals, and graduate attributes were measured using indicators developed specifically for the universities institutional wide learning outcomes (for example, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, leadership).

**Results, evaluation, impact**

It is well known that there are positive correlations between the student experience of the course in relation to good teaching, clear goals and standards, workload and assessment and that positive perceptions of these is related to students adopting deeper approaches to their study. This phenomenon was also evident in the data collected from these 458 students. Students who perceived the teaching to be good, the goals and standards to be clear, the workload to be appropriate and the assessment to promote understanding were those students who adopted deeper strategies to their learning. The results reported below (see Table 1) include the new dimensions of academic transition, induction to discipline and integration and how these are related to deep learning strategies and the student performance outcomes, graduate attributes and achievement of goals.
Table 1: Correlations between student experiences and student outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Academic transition</th>
<th>Induction to discipline</th>
<th>Integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deep approaches</td>
<td>.123</td>
<td>.373</td>
<td>.439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGPA</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate attributes</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>.486</td>
<td>.604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.428</td>
<td>.530</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Estimates in italics are significant at p < .01

It is clear that, for these students, issues of induction to discipline and integration are more significant in relation to achievement of student outcomes than are academic transition difficulties. Correlations of .3 and greater are considered worthy of note, and although smaller correlations may be statistically significant they do not demonstrate an educationally substantive relationship. The strongest relationships with student performance outcomes, graduate attributes and achievement of goals are student perception of integration into the university and student perception of induction to the academic discipline. Although students indicate difficulty with academic transition such as differences in teaching and learning approaches and assessments, the relationship of these with student outcomes is not substantive.

From the data analysis, a few initial conclusions could be drawn. Although students perceived differences in teaching and learning to be difficult, these are not related to deeper strategies for learning or to learning and goal achievement outcomes. This suggests that in developing the first year curriculum, these differences are certainly worthy of note, but they are not the major areas that we should concentrate on in making improvements in the student learning experience. It is important that students feel sufficiently inducted into the discipline and have a sense of integration into the university, and these are two areas that are significantly and substantively related to student approaches to learning and student outcomes.

Further resources
Nil.

References


Meeting of the National Association for Research in Science Teaching, New Orleans, LA.


Contact details

Postal address (work): Associate Professor Beverley Webster
Deputy Director
Centre for Advancement of University Teaching
University of Hong Kong

Email: bwebster@hku.hk
Biographical statements

Elisa Bone
Elisa Bone joined the University of Adelaide in late 2007, after working in scientific publishing for a year following her PhD. Along with other staff involved in first-year teaching, Elisa has been investigating ways to improve the delivery and management of biology and ecology courses at the first-year level, in order to increase engagement of students and retention of students into second year studies.

Lynn Burnett
Dr Lynn Burnett is an academic at the Griffith Institute for Higher Education (GIHE). Her primary role is Coordinator of the First Year Advisors (FYAs) across Griffith University. The FYAs work directly with first year students at a program level; Lynn works with the FYAs and Deans/Deputy Deans (Learning and Teaching) at a local level to enhance practice and understanding of the FYA role. At an institution-wide level, Lynn informs policy and institution-wide cultural change and works towards increasing visibility, understanding and career advancement of the FYA role. She has a background and interest in first year experience, student experience, qualitative research, education, diversity issues and women’s studies.

Margaret Carmody
Margaret Carmody joined the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Academic Skills Unit in 1996 and is the Academic Skills and Disability Adviser on the Canberra Campus and is also the Lecturer in Charge of the Masters unit Literature for Children and Young Adults and two units in the Bachelor of Education (Primary and Early Childhood): Children’s Literature for Literacy and Linguistics for Literacy.

Margaret’s teaching and research experience is in the fields of adult education, literature and communication, academic skills and disability and has included teaching positions at ACU, ADFA, UC and CIT. Margaret has a Master of Disability Studies (Flinders University); BA (Hons) (Flinders University), majors English and Drama; Dip Ed (University of Adelaide); Litt B. (ANU), Thesis: The children’s fiction of Colin Thiele; and Adult Literacy and Numeracy Teaching Certificates (TAFE NSW). Margaret is also an Enrolled Nurse, and has completed the Medication Practice for Enrolled Nurses Post Enrolment — Statement of Attainment (CIT). She has completed the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (ACU).
Lisa Chopin

Dr Lisa Chopin is a senior lecturer in physiology in the School of Life Sciences at QUT and leader of the Ghrelin research group at the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI) at QUT. Lisa was the recipient of a 2008 Australian Learning and Teaching Council Teaching Excellence Award.

Malcolm Corney

Malcolm Corney is a lecturer in the School of Information Technology at QUT. He has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in software development, software engineering and computer forensics. He has won Faculty of IT awards for both individual and team teaching. In 2009, he will be developing and teaching students in first year in an engaging and exciting new unit, Building IT Systems.

Patricia Cretchley

With a background of extensive teaching and curriculum development leadership in three prior universities, Pat Cretchley is currently Senior Lecturer and Teaching & Learning Consultant at QUT, working with colleagues on curriculum and professional development in the Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering. Her commitment to addressing issues of first year learning transitions and student diversity stems from wide experience of teaching and working with early undergraduate students in a range of disciplines.

Determination to improve the first year experience has fuelled her research into student learning, publications and presentations, her development of scholarly forums for discourse on student learning, and her establishment of the Southern Hemisphere Delta series of Learning & Teaching Symposia.

Pat's grant-supported ‘Project Emu’ work is currently addressing the needs of a diverse range of first-year mathematics students at USQ via early intervention, counselling, engagement and support. Her commitment to early undergraduate teaching has been rewarded with a USQ Award for Excellence, and her sustained efforts to support student learning have been recognised by a 2008 Carrick/ALTC Citation.
Andrew Funston

Andrew Funston is a lecturer in the School of Communication, Culture and Languages at Victoria University. He coordinates units dealing with information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social change, and organisational communication. He also coordinates the BA foundation unit 'Knowing and Knowledge' (K&K).

In 2008 the K&K teaching team was awarded the Executive Dean's Excellence in Teaching Award.

Prior to his work at Victoria University Andrew worked for the Victorian Government in the area of Arts and Youth Affairs. He was a report writer (with Mary Crooks) for the three major reports of the Powerline Review Panel 1988–1989, and author of a Victorian Government study into the training level of the popular music industry. He was a board member of ‘The Push’ and 200 Gertrude Street Artists Studios and Gallery.

Andrew’s research interests include young people’s use of mobile phones and the internet, electronic community building, and take-up of digital TV in Australia. He is also interested in communication and development issues, including nation building in Timor-Leste. He has supervised postgraduate theses on: older people’s use of the internet; e-health and privacy issues; and local government intranets.

Laura Gregory

Dr Laura Gregory was appointed at the Queensland University of Technology in 2005 as an associate lecturer in anatomy, and attained a promotion to Lecturer level B in 2007. Currently she coordinates and provides interactive learning environments for a series of four anatomy units in the School of Life Sciences, Faculty of Science and Technology, for medical imaging and radiotherapy students. Unit content includes anatomical terminology, histology, cytology, systemic anatomy, regional anatomy and imaging anatomy (plain and contrast radiography, computerised tomography and magnetic resonance imaging). Laura was awarded the Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Queensland in 2006 and continues to have a strong research focus at QUT in improving bone strength and skeletal quality; particularly in the areas of bone metastasis, fracture healing and bone adaptation.

Al Grenfell

Because of the strong curriculum functionality of the new student management system selected by QUT for implementation during 2009, Al Grenfell is currently managing a curriculum and academic policy project with the program (Student and Academic Management System, SAMS). Student study plans are part of the curriculum functionality in SAMS; Al Grenfell’s team has developed approaches whereby this functionality can be best exploited, particularly for FYE students. Al has a protracted history in learning and teaching at tertiary level, as well as extensive experience in curriculum design. Prior to joining SAMS he was Assistant Dean (Teaching and Learning) in the Faculty of Science at QUT.
Robyn Henderson

Dr Robyn Henderson is a Senior Lecturer (Literacies Education) at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. She researches in the areas of multiliteracies, digital and academic literacies, and the effects of mobility on school-based literacy learning. Recent work with Dr Karen Noble within the faculty has led her to combine her interest in academic literacies and social justice issues with the practical work of ensuring the successful transition of 'at-risk' students into university study. This research partnership has been awarded two Associate Fellowships (Learning and Teaching).

Lin Howie

Lin Howie, MEd Mgt. (Hons), BSc (Hons), PGCE, Dip Tch (ECE), is Principal Lecturer in the School of Education at Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) in Auckland, New Zealand. Lin’s interests are in curriculum design, assessment, children’s creativity and children’s transitions. Lin has lead the development of two teacher education programs at MIT — a Diploma in Teaching (ECE) and a BEd(Early Childhood Teaching). One of the main underpinning principles of the BEd(ECT) design was to provide a program which supported students with the transition to academic learning through creating a supportive social as well as a supportive academic environment with the aim of fostering independent learning.

Clair Hughes

Clair Hughes is a Lecturer in Higher Education in the Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) at the University of Queensland (UQ). Assessment has been a major focus of her work for a number of years. As well as supporting the assessment practice of individual coordinators and teachers across a range of disciplines, Clair has provided assessment leadership at institutional, faculty and school level for which she was awarded UQ (2007) and Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) (2008) Citations. The outcomes of her research in areas such as assessment task design, course coordinator assessment confidence and influences on practice and the assessment of graduate attributes, has been disseminated through international conferences and journals.

Clair is currently engaged in an ALTC-funded project to scope the embedding of graduate attributes in curriculum and assessment (The National GAP) with colleagues from the University of Sydney and Griffith University, as well as a number of assessment enhancement initiatives supported by the UQ Teaching and Learning Strategic Grants Scheme.
Henk Huijser
Dr Henk Huijser is a Lecturer in Learning Enhancement (Communication) in the Learning and Teaching Support Unit at USQ, and is also a researcher in the Public Memory Research Centre at that same institution. His research interests include technology enhanced learning and teaching and cultural diversity.

Patty Kamvounias
Patty Kamvounias teaches business law in the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney. Her major research areas and interests are in consumer law, competition law and learning and teaching in higher education.

Megan Kek
Megan Kek received her PhD in education from The University of Adelaide, Australia in 2007. She is currently a lecturer in learning and teaching enhancement with the Learning and Teaching Support Unit at the University of Southern Queensland. Her research interests are educational environments, approaches to learning and teaching, and problem-based learning. She has worked in various aspects of tertiary education as lecturer, academic manager, curriculum designer, and evaluator in Singapore. Her experience included training and educational consulting in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Megan is the recipient of institutional and national awards in excellence for teaching and curriculum innovation in Singapore. She is the co-author of Authentic problem-based learning: Rewriting business education (2002).

Lindy Kimmins
Lindy Kimmins is a coordinator of the Meet-Up program at USQ. Meet-Up can provide peer support sessions in any course in any faculty of the university. Lindy also works in Academic Learning Support, in particular as LTSU representative in the Faculty of Business. Her research interests include academic skills and their embedding in courses, and peer support programs.
Katherine Lindsay

Katherine Lindsay is the Director of Curriculum at the University of Newcastle Law School. She has taught first year law for well over a decade and, in company of her first year team, has sought to provide a range of academic and pastoral supports to facilitate the transition of first year law students. She is the winner of four teaching awards, including an ALTC Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning and a NSW Quality Teaching Award.

Joanna Logan

Joanna Logan is a Liaison Librarian for the Faculty of Education at QUT. Her liaison areas include the Schools of Early Childhood and Learning and Professional Studies. She has a particular interest in working with staff and students in transnational programs.

Ann Luzeckyj

Ann Luzeckyj is currently employed as an Academic Developer at Flinders University. In this role she is responsible for providing support to academic staff who deliver topics to first year students. Her other duties include the development and delivery of the Flinders Foundations of University Teaching; supporting an Internship program and the delivery of a number of workshops on various topics. Ann also is the Project Manager for the Carrick-funded PATHE project (Preparing Academics to Teach in Higher Education).

Prior to this, from 2005–2008, Ann was the Manager, Academic Library Services for the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences and associated research institutes at the University of South Australia. Ann had worked in libraries since 1990 (in London from 1990 to 1998 and at UniSA since 1998). As a librarian she had many, varied roles and was mainly employed in the higher education sector. Ann is also a doctoral candidate at the University of South Australia and her thesis is titled ‘Centring students online: Discursive practices and higher education policy’.
Alan McAlpine

Alan McAlpine graduated in the UK with a B.Sc. in Biology and a PhD in Biochemistry. His research focus entailed investigating protein structures. His career entailed a series of postdoctoral research positions and ultimately a career change into the people development field. Alan worked with the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) in Cambridge, UK designing and delivering career development courses for PhD students, building his training and people development skills as well as in project management. Alan arrived in Brisbane, for the second time, early in 2000 and worked on similar career development projects with Trevor-Roberts Associates (a career consultancy).

A lot of his time was spent helping individuals to achieve that elusive career and life balance. Alan developed a program which allowed students and Young Professionals to work together and enhance their skills to further their careers. Alan moved to New Zealand in April 2004 to take up the first Australasian appointment of postgraduate careers counsellor before returning to Brisbane and QUT in a similar role early in 2005. He has recently taken on the management role, looking after Careers & Employment and is thoroughly enjoying the challenge. His outside interests primarily revolve around his family at present. He has a five-year-old son, whom he is desperately trying to introduce to the ‘real game’ of football.

Bernadette McCabe

Dr Bernadette McCabe is a senior lecturer in microbiology in the Department of Biological and Physical Sciences at the University of Southern Queensland. She has completed a PhD in fermentation science and recently a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching and Learning. Her teaching duties include microbiology and biochemistry, as well as service teaching into the Bachelor of Nursing (Pre-Reg) program. Her research interests include enzymology and fermentation science and, more recently, she has developed research interests in learning and teaching in parallel with her specific research interests in microbiology. This has grown gradually out of a curiosity in discovering how to better understand how students learn science, particularly nursing students.
Claire Macken

Claire Macken is a lecturer in the School of Law at Deakin University in Burwood, Victoria. She lectures first year in the introductory law unit, *Law Society and Civil Rights*, is author of two introductory books for law students and has been invited to speak on teaching at a number of national conferences. Claire has recently developed an online centre of learning excellence for law students in a strategically funded project entitled ‘Law Essentials’ (www.deakin.edu.au/buslaw/lawessentials). In teaching, Claire innovatively uses a range of resources to enhance student learning, by taking calculated risks and using technology creatively, supported by pedagogical research on learning styles and student engagement. Examples include ‘movie-making’ to capture students’ attention in class, ‘clickers’ and interactive technology, and innovative PowerPoint presentations. Claire has won a number of awards in relation to her teaching, most recently the Deakin University Medal for Excellence in Teaching (the Jim and Alison Leslie Award), and was runner-up Australasian Law Teacher of the Year.

Representing the Faculty of Business and Law, one of Claire’s latest challenges is as a ‘joint appointee’, an initiative to strategically develop teaching and learning at Deakin University by providing a conduit between each of the University’s faculties and the Institute of Teaching and Learning. Claire has embarked on a joint project of developing guidelines for excellence in teaching and learning. In her capacity as a joint appointee, Claire initiated a new global newsletter to all academic staff, *Teaching and Learning Matters*, and has worked on the development of the new online teaching and learning framework.

Janet Malcolm

Janet Malcolm is a senior lecturer at Manukau Institute of Technology with the responsibility of year one coordinator for first year students of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching). She has 15 years experience as an early childhood teacher and five years as a lecturer. Janet will begin her research on student perceptions of their first year experience this year as part of her masters program. Her interests include first year experiences for students and infant and toddler care and education.
Rikki Mawad

Rikki is a student at UTAS undertaking her Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice after graduating from a BA/LLB (Hons) (UTAS) in December 2008. Rikki held the position of the President of the Tasmania University Union Inc. (TUU) from November 2005 to May 2008 and is currently working as the Communications Officer in the UTAS Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT).

Rikki collaborated in Professor Sally Kift’s ALTC Fellowship on First Year Curriculum Design to provide a student perspective on the first year experience (FYE) in higher education and to comment on a selection of first year programs in place at various institutions. This showcase presentation focuses on her Fellowship commentary and is structured around student expectations, experiences and evaluations of first year. The aim of this showcase is to offer some support and encouragement to those leading the sector in first year curriculum design and to provide some insight from a student perspective.

Lynn Morrison

Lynn Morrison is a Language and Learning Adviser at Deakin University. Before joining Deakin, she worked primarily in international English education. Her experience teaching academic preparation programs for international students both in Australia and abroad reflects her interest in the linguistic and cultural aspects of transition to Australian university for international students. She has also been highly involved in curriculum design, materials development and quality assurance for TESOL programs. She has been an IELTS examiner as well as an IELTS examiner trainer, and has created English language assessment tools for various purposes.

Martin Murray

Dr Martin Murray has been an engineering academic for 30 years and has a particular interest in new students through being his Faculty’s First Year Experience Director. He has written many publications on peer learning and has won various local and national teaching awards.

Robyn Nash

Associate Professor Robyn Nash is the Assistant Dean (Teaching and Learning) in the Faculty of Health at QUT. She is also the Director of Academic Programs (Undergraduate) in the School of Nursing and Midwifery.
Erin O’Connor

Dr Erin O’Connor is a lecturer in the School of Psychology & Counselling at QUT with a passion for teaching and learning, and a strong desire to help students engage with their studies. Erin’s principal role in the psychology program in 2008 was to develop two new units designed to strengthen the ‘real world’ focus of the undergraduate psychology degree. The first of these units, *Psychology in Professional Contexts*, is a foundation unit designed to introduce first year students to the study and practice of psychology, and to set the stage for their professional and career development throughout their degree. The second unit, *Psychology in the Community*, is the first ‘work integrated learning’ unit offered within the psychology program. These units have made a significant difference to student engagement and professional development within the psychology program.

Erin’s enthusiasm and commitment to student engagement has also seen her introduce other student-centred initiatives, including a Book Club and Film Nights to discuss books and films with a psychological flavour. She has used her own experience in volunteering in a wide range of organisations to demonstrate to students the value of community engagement and volunteering to their own professional and personal development.

Alfio Parisi

Alfio Parisi is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Southern Queensland. He has over twenty years experience in lecturing science and has established a research unit in solar ultraviolet radiation.
Ann Parkinson

Ann Parkinson is a Lecturer in Physiology and Anatomy at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). She is current Coordinator of First Year students for the Faculty of Science, Health and Education (2006–2009). Ann teaches primarily into first year biology and second year physiology courses. Most of her teaching to date has been in large cohort classes. Ann is a keen and enthusiastic teacher. She completed her Graduate Certificate in Professional Learning at USC in 2008 and in April 2008 she was awarded the Vice-Chancellor’s Medal for Outstanding teacher at USC.

Ann’s research into teaching and learning to date has included projects on: student engagement in physiology laboratory classes; development of innovative pedagogies for increased engagement and improved learning; development of an internship program for pre-service biology teachers; promoting learning for first year university students through the use of ‘Clickers’; and integrating language and writing support into the teaching of scientific report writing. Ann’s primary interests lie with curriculum design in the areas of assessment and pedagogies for engagement, and she is interested in designing assessment to increase student engagement and learning in an equitable manner. Ann has developed criterion referenced assessments with accompanying scoring rubrics for several different assessment items in both first and second year courses. Ann is also involved in the development of teaching and learning activities to engage and improve learning outcomes in first year students that might also lead to better first year retention rates.

Sorrel Penn-Edwards

Dr Sorrel Penn-Edwards is an academic in the School of Education and Professional Studies, presently convening and lecturing in undergraduate courses in English — Media Literacies; Readers and Literary Texts; and Australian Literary Studies. She is the First Year Advisor (FYA) for the Bachelor of Secondary Education, working directly with first year students in that program. Her research interests include: first year transition and engagement; video, multimedia and hypertext production and use; media; literature; English and media curriculum; communication; student learning styles; Montessori education. Her qualifications include: B.Sc.; Grad Dip App Film & TV; Grad Cert Higher Edn; Grad Dip Teach.; M.Lit.St.; PhD.
Leigh Pointon

Leigh Pointon has a bachelor of Commerce (Hons) from Griffith University and a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education from the Queensland University of Technology. She has delivered courses in Industrial Relations, Human Resource Management, and Employment Relations within the Griffith University Bachelor of Commerce, Employment Relations and Business Communication, within the Queensland Institute of Business and Technology Diploma of Commerce, and Government Business and Society within the Queensland University of Technology Bachelor of Business. More recently Leigh has held an educational management role as the Deputy Academic Director of the Queensland Institute of Business and Technology, where she is responsible for the coordination of five academic programs.

Gerry Rayner

Gerry Rayner is a lecturer in the School of Biological Sciences at Monash University, with a background in plant ecology, and coordinates the first year biology units. He has a particular interest in improving the teaching and student learning of science, in particular biology, and in developing and applying methods for improving the quality of student writing and the feedback they receive on submitted work.

Sally Rogan

Sally Rogan is the Manager of First Year and Transition Programs at the University of Wollongong (UOW). She implemented PASS at UOW in 2003. She is also the National PASS Trainer for Australia and New Zealand. In this role, Sally has now assisted and trained over 120 staff from 25 institutions in the implementation and management of a quality PASS Program. Sally has presented on PASS at numerous international conferences and has been awarded a Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning and two UOW awards for Outstanding Contribution.
Rick Ryan

Rick Ryan is the Manager, Leadership, Equity and Diversity in RMIT University’s College of Science, Engineering and Technology (SET). In this capacity Rick is a hands-on consultant to the academic staff of the College’s 10 schools. In practice, this activity includes the initiation of peer-to-peer interaction programs from introductory consultations, design through implementation, review and improvement.

Since 2005 Rick has participated in the establishment of more than 15 peer-to-peer interaction/mentoring programs in a range of disciplines including Engineering, Health, Medical, Computer and Applied Sciences. Central to the success and sustainability of this activity is collaboration with staff from the RMIT Student Engagement and Leadership Department to support School/Program staff to manage their ‘own’ peer-to-peer interaction scheme.

Other related activities:

- Peer-to-peer interaction/mentoring and peer tutoring website for the dissemination of mentoring resources http://www.rmit.edu.au/set/ad/sled/mentoring.
- Co-presented the paper ‘Supporting 1st year learning and teaching through academic mentoring and peer-tutoring’ at the 11th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) Conference.
- In collaboration with the ‘additional authors’ of this abstract/poster, awarded $70,000 in RMIT Learning and Teaching Investment Fund (LTIF) grants.
- Co-ordinate cross-school skill sharing workshops for staff to (a) introduce and expand the use of online technologies to enhance peer-to-peer interaction, (b) embed peer-to-peer interactions as a core activity for supporting the first year student (FYE) experience, and (c) allow staff that co-ordinate peer-to-peer interaction programs to disseminate their work, share learning’s and gain feedback from their peers.

Sheila Scutter

Dr Sheila Scutter has been teaching and researching into the teaching of health science students for 10 years, with particular interest in first year teaching, which has a very heavy content base in first year. She has also focused on embedding an evidence-based culture in teaching and practice and on improving attitudes to research in both students and clinicians in the field of medical radiation. Sheila spent an interesting year working in the higher education sector in the UAE, particularly with quality review.
Janet Taylor

Janet Taylor is currently Associate Professor and Coordinator of Academic Learning Skills within The Learning and Teaching Support Unit at the University of Southern Queensland. Janet has Masters and PhD degrees in zoology with a strong link with mathematical applications and a teaching qualification in mathematics education. Janet is a Fellow of HERDSA and in her 25 years in higher education she has enjoyed teaching and writing curriculum for mathematics and biology at four Australian universities; primarily at first year level, and in the last fifteen years for distance education. She has been the recipient of three national teaching development grants and has received a Carrick (now ALTC) Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning in an area that focuses on the development of students’ academic skills.

Janet is widely published and is involved in current research projects investigating students’ learning experiences within the first year of study and the application of new technologies to learning. Her most recent publication of interest is a paper in the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* entitled ‘Assessment in first year university: A model to manage transition’.

In late February 2009 Janet will take up the position of Professor and Director of Teaching and Learning at Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales.

Suzi Vaughan

Professor Suzi Vaughan is originally from the UK, and completed her fashion training at St Martin’s School of Art in London. She worked for a number of years as a designer in the fashion industry before moving into fashion education in 1995, becoming a Course Director at the London College of Fashion. Suzi came to QUT in 2002 as QUT’s inaugural Head of Fashion and is now the Portfolio Director for Fashion, Journalism/Media and Communication. She still teaches design at undergraduate level.
David Watson

David is a Director of Accreditation and Director of Bachelor of Business Programs for the Faculty of Business and Economics at Monash University.

As Director of Accreditation, David has successfully guided the faculty through Accreditation to EQUIS and AMBA standards and is currently guiding the faculty’s application for AACSB Accreditation.

As Director of Bachelor of Business programs David is responsible for overall program design and delivery to more than 4000 undergraduate students at Monash’s Caulfield Campus.

David’s teaching interests included strategy, marketing strategy, innovation, international marketing, and competitive advantage. His research explores the relationships between supermarkets and their suppliers.

Prior to joining Monash, David worked Australian Trade Commission, where he was involved in strategy development for the Commission and for its clients. As a marketing and strategy consultant, he has developed business opportunities in the North America, UK, Germany, Russia, North Asia and South East Asia.

He is a member of the Academic Board of Monash University and is also a member of Faculty Board for the Faculty of Business and Economics.

Beverley Webster

Beverley Webster is currently an Associate Professor and the Deputy Director of the Centre for Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) at The University of Hong Kong. Here she provides a diverse range of professional development to academic staff. Hong Kong has initiated a major curriculum reform that includes the expansion of the undergraduate curriculum to include another year and the full implementation in the new curriculum of an outcomes-based approach. One of the most significant challenges for CAUT is supporting faculty in preparing for this additional year. Beverley also oversees the annual collection of student learning experience data, the major surveys are targeted at first and final year undergraduates, research postgraduates and the international experience of undergraduates. These data are reported back to Faculty and used to support the professional development and curriculum improvement.

Previously, Beverley taught in schools for many years in the areas of mathematics, computing and physical education and has owned and operated small businesses in England and Australia. After completing a PhD, Beverley taught across disciplines in several universities before relocating to Hong Kong where she is also working on several large research projects and has published in areas related to student learning experiences and learning environments in higher education.