

## **Re-living First Year – the first weeks**

Dr Gillian Colclough<sup>1</sup>, Ms Lindy Kimmins<sup>1</sup>, Dr Marcus Harmes<sup>2</sup>, Dr Lindsay Henderson<sup>2</sup>,  
<sup>1</sup>Learning & Teaching Support Unit and <sup>2</sup>Open Access College, University of Southern  
Queensland.

### **Abstract**

*Using data from a survey and interviews with First Year students in their first weeks, we developed a workshop that confronted lecturers with a similar range of new or different terms, concepts, technologies and practices. Bearing in mind also that some students may be conversing in their second or third language, while others are adjusting to a new social and geographic location, our workshop helps lecturers to recall important first year student experiences. It also offers strategies through which lecturers can help students adjust to their new intellectual, social and physical environment. Our FYHE Conference presentation shows the motivation for our workshop, and the professional development benefits of delivering it across discipline and faculty.*

### **The case for re-living the first weeks**

Most tertiary educators recognise the importance of the First Year Experience in terms of retention, satisfaction and overall student success. Consequently, most would support Orientation (O Week) activities, including organising library information sessions or tours, and other activities to facilitate the development of student awareness of the functions and facilities available to support their new relationship with tertiary study. Such instruction is important and actively promoted to new undergraduate students at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Nonetheless, not all undergraduate students attend or engage deeply with ‘O Week’ activities, and gaps in their knowledge about tertiary practice and culture have become apparent to us both from feedback during our direct teaching activities and in comments made to us by students attending consultations at our academic skills and maths support facility at USQ.

In addition to the direct entry undergraduate experience, USQ offers support and training to students who need to achieve certain skill levels in order to enrol in undergraduate study. Two of the researchers engaged in this project teach students who are preparing for university entry through the Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) and also through the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course, both presented by USQ’s Open Access College (OAC). OAC aims to facilitate eventual integration into the wider university community by addressing the academic and social needs of its students, many of whom did not complete secondary education or have come to Australia through humanitarian entry: hence, it aims to familiarise them with university culture and broader Australian culture. Nonetheless, while it could be argued that successful completion of undergraduate study is a measure of the success of OAC programs, some few students do not complete and the university does not follow them through their first year to establish whether they adjusted better than others because of the holistic approach at OAC.

Our engagement with common factors affecting their adjustment to university study led us to develop two strategies to meet first year student needs: firstly through data collection and student interview, and secondly by dissemination of our findings to the academic community through workshops. We chose to achieve the latter objective by presenting a workshop for first year educators during Learning and Teaching Week at USQ. Our Nuts & Bolts presentation at FYHE 11 will show the way in which we presented our findings, the professional development benefits of delivering such a workshop in the manner we chose and the potential for the workshop presentation to flow into enhancement of the transition experience for our first year students.

To this end, we chose to conduct research on student understanding of terms and phrases relevant to learning and university culture, and correlate our findings with deeper demographic information than that available in our usual student records, as well as paying attention to student feelings about their first weeks at our university. For example, we have asked students to identify their position in the family, whether or not it is their first time away from home and whether they speak languages other than English at home. Such information is now arguably a component of routine determinants of influences on the success of the First Year experience: we added to it by asking students about their comfort levels in relation to their lecturers, other students, classroom dynamics, university culture, other cultures and gender. The outcome of our holistic approach was that we found ourselves with a body of important knowledge about the First Year Experience, which we decided to disseminate to our colleagues through an internal workshop.

The message that we sought to deliver was that there is no generic First Year: our student body is composed of people from different age groups, with differing life experiences, socio-economic circumstances, cultural affiliations and prior learning, all of which have the potential to affect their success individually. Thus, the tertiary-speak in one lecture may be French to some of the students there but make sense to others, and the experience of being a new member of a large body of people may be exciting to some but for others be akin to being parachuted into a Peruvian jungle with 700 strangers and a Lonely Planet guide. As educators, we can adapt our teaching practices to meet more of our student needs, but this may not be enough. Many students need additional support to that provided in the online or classroom environment, as shown by recent activities, research and publications on peer support strategies. The student feedback provided within such publications is critical in that it offers personalised anecdotes about First Year feelings that emphasise the pressure that many students experience and their need for support.

The mere prospect of support has a positive effect: Boyd and Lintern (2006) argue that 'social support does not need to be tangible to have an effective positive outcome' because just knowing that support is available 'can be enough to alleviate anxiety regarding a stressful situation' (Wethington & Kessler, 1986, in Boyd & Lintern, 2006); similarly, Huijser, Kimmins and Evans (2008) show that peer support can help student wellbeing. We wanted our workshop to show that course leaders can address diverse student needs in several ways: firstly, by adapting their classroom (and online classroom) behavior so that it recognises the diverse and sometimes complex social and other needs of their students; secondly, by referring their students as a cohort to a program such as Meet-up or to academic support specialists, or thirdly, by referring individual students that they perceive to be in need of further support either to student support advisors who can meet their social, adjustment or economic needs or to academic support specialists, with whom they then build a working relationship for the sake of the student concerned. Consequently, we complemented our

primary research data with classroom and other feedback from students who have participated in USQ's Meet-up program (run by Lindy Kimmins, through Learning and Teaching Support) so that we could emphasise the value of lecturers reaching out to their colleagues in Learning and Teaching Support for help in providing their students with social and learning support. Ultimately, we designed an evidence-based workshop that seeks to maximise its impact by helping educators re-experience the diverse experiences of transition into undergraduate study, of what it feels like to be lost in a new world.

## **Re-living the first weeks – the USQ workshop**

At USQ, we knew that we would be delivering a workshop to participants who might quickly identify a relationship between their own teaching practice and the intended outcome of our workshop, reason their way to a means of achieving the objectives, and quickly lose interest. To engage and retain the attention of such seasoned learners, we decided to apply engagement principles applied in our daily work with students. Two of the researchers (Kimmins and Colclough) teach into USQ's Academic Learning Support, a branch of Learning and Teaching Support, while Harmes and Henderson teach in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) at USQ's Open Access College. Kimmins and Colclough conduct one-on-one consultations about academic skills with students across disciplines and faculties: since the students concerned have identified knowledge gaps before coming to us, we consequently spend much of our time using our skills in helping them to engage with university culture and learning processes. Although it is not always the case (as over 65% of ALS students are from NESB backgrounds, and a small number are postgraduate) we can assume that students who ask for ALS help have achieved some language or other proficiency that has enabled them to enrol in an undergraduate program. Harmes and Henderson face additional challenges at OAC, where many of their students are from a low SES group and a similarly high proportion are from NESB backgrounds, but have not yet attained the minimum standards for undergraduate enrolment. A consistent challenge therefore is to establish a meaningful academic baseline from which to engage students from disparate backgrounds.

While it is also influenced by core teaching and learning ideas such as those found in Tinto (1975, 1993, 1999) and Tinto and Russell (1994), our research and workshops refer mostly to conference presentations and academic publications in the last decade. We drew on the cultural course design approach of Munro-Smith (2003), the support model demonstrated by Boyd and Lintern (2006) and the benefits of peer support shown by Huijser, Kimmins and Evans (2008). Noble and Henderson (2009) and Johnson (2010) echo the latter article in their calls to recognise and respond to the need for targeted learning assistance in the First Year. In addition, our approach to providing student support is informed by research into levels of student engagement with new technologies, particularly those developed for tertiary use, as discussed by O'Brien and Symons (2007). Providing targeted assistance to students in their knowledge-building activities promotes student satisfaction and confidence, as shown by Krause (2001).

Summarily, our primary concerns while conducting our workshops were to expose the insecurities evidenced to us in our research and in our face-to-face encounters with needy students, and to emphasise the importance of ensuring that students are guided through the new ideas, labels and practices attached to their new world of learning. Our workshops provide lecturers with tools and strategies to assist their students. Our FYHE presentation

further explains our approach and offers a basis for discussion on ways in which we can further build our staff workshops to the benefit of new students.

## Session outline

**Ice breaker (5 minutes):** We encourage audience participation in our presentation by beginning the session mostly in another language. Using only a few English words, we use a few sentences to place our audience into an alien and challenging environment, in which important information is being imparted but not understood.

**Presenters (5 minutes):** We follow our introduction by explaining that this approach was one part of our strategy to address the challenges we faced in preparing a workshop for educators, who we had to assume were experienced and strategic learners that we needed to engage strongly in order to keep their attention.

### Paired

### discussion:

Participants consider one or more of the following:

- What teaching strategies should we pursue to engage and retain the interest and enthusiasm of First Year students?
- Where specialised support is in place, should academic support lecturers and course leaders develop a working relationship, sharing their approach to supporting an individual struggling student? What would be the benefits? What happens at your institution?
- Bill Johnston (2010) supports Wheeler and Birtles' (1993) contention that it remains important to offer underperforming First Year students 'proactive follow-up and intervention', preferably in one hour face to face consultations. Such additional learning support should have 'regard for the personal, social, institutional and pedagogical contexts' of the student experience. Should this support be provided by course leaders, or a specialised support service?

**Presenters and whole group discussion (10 minutes):** We will conclude with a discussion about whether participants would consider, have considered or introduced similar workshops within their own institutions.

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