Project Report

April 2008

"Up to now, first year support efforts have tended to be piecemeal in the main, developed and sustained by individuals or small groups who champion the cause of first year transition. We have now reached the stage where universities must recognise the need for institution-wide approaches to enhancing the first year experience. Responsiveness to the needs of demographic and cultural subgroups demands that students support staff, academics and administrators work together to integrate their efforts and initiatives for the benefit of all students. Research and evaluation play a key role in assuring the quality, effectiveness, and adaptability of these efforts."

DEST. (**2005**) The *First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, p. 89

Executive Summary

The first year experience in higher education has been the subject of significant research and development in Australia and other western countries. The expansion of higher education has led to an increased requirement to support a diverse student population to make a successful transition into university. Further ongoing changes in the social and cultural contexts of students entering university have meant that institutions need to keep understanding and responding to student needs. Responsiveness to the needs of demographic and cultural subgroups demands that students, support staff, academics and administrators work together to integrate their efforts and initiatives for the benefit of all students.[1]

TLD conducted in 2006 a survey of students based on the national first year survey conducted from Melbourne University over the past decade. Subsequently, the First Year Experience Project at JCU under the direction of a project leader and an advisory group has sought to review the collective institutional knowledge, resources, programmes, information and strategies at the disposal of the institution. Currently these resources tend to operate in isolation from other work areas, schools, faculties and divisions. As a result, JCU students may experience their first year as disjointed and piecemeal. First Year Experience Questionnaire 2006 data[*] clearly identifies that improved performance is required at JCU.

James Cook University requires a significant paradigm shift in developing institutional rhetoric and resources targeting first year students' transition experiences and their retention and success. Student withdrawal is the result of a complex combination of students' characteristics, external pressures and institution related factors.[2] Only those institutions that invest in "front-end loading" of first year can effectively address first year transition issues, including retention, progress and course satisfaction.

It is argued that a modest goal of a 3% increase in retention would deliver a financial return of $3,000,000 to the university. In addition, JCU would become more competitive in the bid for Learning and Teaching Performance Funds (LTPF) if it possessed strategic, institution-wide approach to supporting transitions, including transitions into first year.

A review of first year experience literature identifies a number of common elements that support successful first year transition. Four priority areas have been recommended to build an effective approach for JCU. These recommendations may be implemented with minimal cost to the institution. Outlined further in this report (pp. 19- 26), the priorities relate to:

- Sense of Purpose
- Student Engagement
- Building Resilience
- Quality Teaching

The priorities have been identified to catalyse transformation of the first year experience at JCU, within the 2008 – 2009 period. These priorities represent substantial, sustainable changes and can form the basis of an effective transition

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[1] Nelson, Kift, Humphreys & Harper (2006)

[*] As analysed by Audrey Milton, Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Law Business and the Creative Arts (Formerly, Academic Developer, Teaching and Learning Development)

[2] Harvey, Drew & Smith (2006)

programme at JCU. It is recommended that VCAC endorse these priorities and consider implementation as part of the University's planning process.

Priority Areas (2008-2009)

1. SENSE OF PURPOSE - First Year Focus

Formal acknowledgement of first year transition issues within JCU's academic plan would facilitate a whole-of-institution approach and embed effective transition processes as a core university function.

1.1 It is recommended that those nominated as responsible (pp. 19- 26), review the First Year Experience Project recommendations outlined within this report to inform the development of operational performance targets for 2008 - 2009.

1.2 It is recommended that the academic plan, informed by FYE recommendations, support faculty and school based action plans, for 2008 - 2009, to operationalise a strategic focus on first year transition.

1.3 In addition, it is recommended that a full-time permanent First Year Experience Leader position be established. This would facilitate the systematic research, monitoring and co-ordination of the first year experience (support, technical, administrative and academic) in faculties and divisions at JCU.

This centralised role would support the development of an integrated, co-ordinated, intentional and proactive approach to the first year experience.   Utilising evidence based practice, the position would work across the institution, and operationally with academic, administrative and student service staff. In addition, the First Year Experience Leader will administer and analyse first year experience survey providing reliable current data to inform and enhance the first year experience at JCU.

2. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT   - Internal Communication Strategy
                                  - Curriculum Relevance
                                  - Flexible Learning Options

The first year students' experience at JCU is often perceived, by students, as disjointed and chaotic. Internal information silos have created a continual stream of conflicting messages for students. Students are overloaded with information from a variety of sources. Poor communication has a detrimental impact on the way students view their university and their role within the university community. An internal communication strategy is recommended to provide consistent and accurate information to students. An internal communication strategy would complement existing communication strategies.

2.1 It is recommended that a communications group be established to develop consistency, modes of communication used and simplification of communication with first year students across the Faculty, Schools and Divisions.

Possible terms of reference for the group are detailed further within the recommendations section of this report.

JCU's Course Experience Questionnaire (2005-2007) consistently captures comments from new graduates questioning the relevance of current curriculum. Graduates consistently express a disconnection between their university learning experience and the "real world". Under the sponsorship of Carrick many Australian universities are undertaking work in this area under the heading of Work Integrated Learning.

2.2 It is recommended that ongoing review of curriculum relevance to student expectations be undertaken by Heads of School in conjunction with Teaching and Learning Development.

The accessibility of traditional face-to-face university programmes is significantly reduced by work responsibilities and family/carer responsibilities of the modern first year student.

2.3 It is recommended that Heads of School in conjunction with Teaching and Learning Development work to increase the range of flexible learning options available in response to 1st year student needs.

2.4 The continuing development of appropriate facilities for teaching, learning and social interaction within common areas of the university is recommended.

3. BUILDING RESILIENCE - Review of Advisor Roles

Currently first year pastoral care roles and responsibilities of student advisors are not clearly articulated at a faculty or school level. These responsibilities are generally assumed to fall within the duties of the Academic Advisor. However, clear role descriptions or formal processes for the recruitment, training and support of staff undertaking this essential role are noticeably absent.

3.1 It is recommended that the First Year Experience Project Leader, undertake a review of advisor roles to identify support needs, standards of practice and pastoral care roles and responsibilities to support first year transition.

Possible terms of reference for this review are detailed further within the recommendations section of this report. This area intersects significantly with the issue of consistent communication.

4. QUALITY TEACHING - Support for Staff Teaching 1ST Year Students

Lecturers, tutors and practical demonstrators have a high level of one-to-one contact with first year students. These staff represent the face of JCU to many first year students and are also in a unique position to recognise and intervene when students are experiencing transition difficulties. Yet there does not seem to be sufficient preparation of staff in these areas for their role. The TLD sessional induction does not reach all staff and provides general information rather than being specific to first year students.

4.1 It is recommended that the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of each faculty commission a review of the appointment, training, preparation and support processes for staff teaching first year students, in recognition of transition demands.

Email access for sessional staff also requires urgent review by Information Technology and Resources (IT&R) and the Human Resources. A review of protocols is required to provide first year students and staff with improved continuity of access to academic staff. Current access protocols prevent communication with sessional staff between teaching periods.

5. **Finally, it is recommended that these issues are addressed at the Vice Chancellor's Advisory Committee.**

Currently at JCU

The transition to University represents a significant challenge to students regardless of university entrance score, personal circumstances and/or socio economic status (SES). The successful management of the first year students' transition into University has become entrenched in the core business of contemporary Universities nationally and world wide. Despite this, James Cook University (JCU) continues to maintain a reactive response to first year transition issues.

Considerable research is available about students in transition and their unique academic, administrative, social and support needs. Supported by first year experience literature from Australia, the UK and the US, an institution-wide approach to first year transition has become standard practice in the contemporary higher education environment. Research demonstrates that only those institutions that invest in such "front-end loading" of first year effectively address first year transition issues, including retention, progress and course satisfaction.

> **22.2% of JCU first year students don't feel they belong to the university community.**
>
> JCU First Year Experience Questionnaire, 2006

The conjunction of the pressures arising from the expansion in student numbers, innovations in teaching and learning, and intense market competition between universities, has changed the landscape of higher education.[3] Universities are now charactersied by their performance culture. The development of a positive performance management schema by the VCAC requires a renewed focus upon learning and teaching performance with particular focus upon the first year experience.

The seven indicators used by DEST in the assessment of Learning and Teaching performance are:

Success	Outcomes	Satisfaction
Progress rate Retention rate	Full-time employment Part or full-time further study	Graduate generic skills Graduate good teaching Overall graduate satisfaction

Significant improvement in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) indicators is required for JCU to develop distinction within the Australian higher education sector. It is also anticipated that JCU's performance in relation to student transition will be subjected to considerable scrutiny during the expected 2010 2011 AUQA audit.

Students in transition to higher education face increasingly complex and dynamic issues of diversity, in terms of both their demographics and backgrounds *and* their preparedness for tertiary study.[4] The DEST student statistics of JCU commencing students for 2006 confirm the diversity of the JCU first year student group, and the

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[3] Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training (2005)
[4] Nelson, Kift, Humphreys & Harper (2006)

high proportion of equity target groups, including around 50% from rural and remote locations, and over 20% from low SES backgrounds. As a result, these students must make numerous transitions in their first year irrespective of their academic preparedness for university study.

A review of first year experience literature identifies a number of common elements that support successful first year transition. These elements can be loosely classified under the following headings:

- **Developing a Sense of Purpose**
    - Universities must develop a strong understanding of their students' motivations, experiences and challenges
    - Curriculum focus needs to be more immediate to student's past experiences and what they intend to do in the future
    - Students should have a clear understanding of how current study activities (at any point in time) relates to their degree programme and future goals
    - Students may disengage due to poor choice of academic programme, including lack of vocational relevance.

- **Foster Student Engagement**
    - Krause (2005) describes engagement as "the time, energy and resources students devote to the activities designed to enhance learning at university."
    - Student engagement has academic and social dimensions
    - Competing priorities for students' time requires a significant shift towards student-centred approaches

- **Building Resilience**
    - Development of the skills or attributes to recover quickly from adverse circumstances (mental, physical or emotional crisis).
    - Some individuals seem to have a natural ability to bounce back whilst others have to learn how to become resilient.

- **Quality Teaching Focus**
  The Carrick Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education utilises the following criteria to award citations for outstanding contributions to student learning:
    - Approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students.
    - Development of curricula and resources that reflect a command in the field
    - Approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning.
    - Respect and support for the development of students as individuals
    - Scholarly activities that have influenced and enhanced learning and teaching

The following tables (Table 1 & 2) outline key components of First Year Experience/Transition strategies at other Australian universities particularly The Group of Eight (G8) Universities, identified and summarised as part of a report prepared by University of Queensland's First Year Experience Project in 2006.

Summary of First Year Experience Activities Within The Group of Eight (G8) Universities:

	The University of Adelaide	The Australian National University	The University of Melbourne	Monash University	The University of New South Wales	The University of Queensland	The University of Sydney	The University of Western Australia
2002 Attrition Undergraduate Rate (2002 rate for all domestic undergraduate students in Australia was 21.2%)	21%	-	19%	19%	17%	-	20%	23%
FYE/Transition Project or Policy Focus	√ - Project Focus	-	√ - Strategic Policy & Program Focus √ - Recognises undergraduate and post graduate students in their FYE focus	√ - Strategic Policy & Program Focus √ - Recognises undergraduate and post graduate students in their FYE focus	√ - Strategic Policy Focus	√ - Project Focus	√ - Strategic Policy and Project Focus	√ - Strategic Policy Focus
University Wide Approach	√ + Faculty-based	-	√ + strong research base + Faculty designed and driven initiatives	√	√	√ + Faculty-based	√	√
FYE/Transition Web Site	√ - Starting@University	New Students Welcome to Study at ANU - not very detailed	√ - Transition web site	√ - Transition web site	√ - First Steps web site	√ - Project Focused	√ - First Year Experience web site (dated as FYE Project Coordinator is on sabbatical)	√ - First Year Experience Program web site + Transition web site (specifically for students from rural secondary schools or schools how have low numbers of students articulating to tertiary study)
FYE/Transition Position	√ - based in the Centre for Learning and Professional Development. One full-time staff member (contract?)	X – but they do employ a full-time Student Information and Guidance Network Coordinator (mentoring program)	√ - Transition Team has a staff of four (4). √ - The Centre for Higher Education has multiple staff with Dr Kerri-Lee Krause as the leading researcher in the area.	√	√ - Multiple positions across the university (academic, research and support roles)	√ - Project related contract position	√ - Multiple positions plus Project related academic position	√ - The First Year Experience Program employs a full time staff of three (First Year Coordinator, First Year Advisor, and a First Year Project Officer). √ - Transition Support Program employs three full-time staff members (Academic Program Coordinator, Project Officer, and an Administrative Assistant). √ - Multiple other positions across the university (eg, Uni Mentor Scheme, etc)

Table 1

	The University of Adelaide	The Australian National University	The University of Melbourne	Monash University	The University of New South Wales	The University of Queensland	The University of Sydney	The University of Western Australia
Peer Mentoring Program	√ - Smooth Start program (year long program)	√ - Student Information and Guidance Network (runs for the first 6 to 8 weeks of every semester)	√	Recommended but does not appear to be a centrally organised program	√ - Peer Mentoring Project	√ - In many Faculties √ - Implementation currently in progress as campus wide initiative across Ipswich	√ - In many Faculties but does not appear to be a centrally organised program	√ - Uni Mentor Scheme (year long program)
O Week Activities	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
FYE/Transition Activities Beyond O Week	Appears to be focused on O Week and online resources	-	√ - Faculty-based √ - Online student blog	Appears to be focused on O Week and online resources	√	√ - 2006 was the first cycle of Faculty-based Induction Programs	√ - Student Welcome Orientation and Transition Team	√
FYE/Transition Activities and Connections with Secondary Schools	√ - Series of forums for school counsellors and year 12 students	X – but trial collaborative program (ANU Secondary College – Dec, 2005 to Term 4, 2007) for high achieving Year 11 and 12 students.	√ - Uni book and Master Class for Year 10 students	√	-	√ - Student Ambassadors organised through The Office of the Dean of Students. Could develop and strengthen current approaches further.	-	-
Parent and Partners Information Sessions	√ - Parent Guide (printed booklet)	-	-	√ - Parent Guide (printed booklet)	-	√ - Ipswich Campus √ - Parents of New Students information page as part of the New to UQ web site is under construction	-	-

Table 2

Burnett, L (2006) *The First Year Experience Project Report – September.* The University of Queensland, Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic).

JCU's current one size fits all approach to first year transition does not meet the diverse needs of the contemporary higher education environment. A multi-facet, institution-wide, evidence based approach is required to effectively manage the diverse expectations of students and staff.

Presently there are a large number of individual activities contributing to a successful transition experience across various aspects of JCU, within the faculties, schools and divisions. However, in the students' experience these generally appear piecemeal and most lack co-ordination and integration at an institutional level. These strategies have generally been implemented in an adhoc manner in response to identified needs at a subject or school level. Many of the strategies are driven by enthusiastic individuals with a personal interest in first year transition. As a result, initiatives developed remain unsustainable and are lost as a result of staff turnover and/or changing workloads and priorities.

The Vice-Chancellor's priorities for 2008 identified, *"JCU cannot afford to feature silos of activity that operate in isolation from each other."* Failure to effectively communicate across schools, faculties and divisions creates a fractured student experience. Academic, administrative and student service staff must work together to provide first year students with a seamless university experience.

Currently the first year students' experience is confused by a multitude of information sources, providing different, conflicting and/or inaccurate information. This disjointed first year experience has a negative impact upon the professional integrity of JCU and subsequently the perceived quality of its degree programmes.

First Year Experience Questionnaires[*] were completed by 1000 students from the first year cohort across Cairns and Townsville campuses in 2006. An analysis of this data indicates that addressing first year experience is critical for JCU. The JCU survey data offers a picture of first year student group who have not received good advice about coming here, who are insufficiently aware of services offered, who do not communicate well with staff or support services, and who often do not know where to go for help.

JCU First Year Students generally:

- **Feel overwhelmed by all they have to do**
- **Feel their school experience did not adequately prepare them for coming to University**
- **Don't know about many of the services available at University**

JCU First Year Experience Questionnaire, 2006

Bridging the gap between academic, administrative and support services is a substantial challenge for many universities. An institution-wide strategy imbedded in the institution's strategic intent, operational policy, endorsed by senior management and supported with adequate resourcing is critical. To create a supportive first year experience, transition issues must become recognised as JCU's core business and incorporated within operational performance targets across all departments and divisions. Students' total experience of university – not just what happens in the traditional

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[*] As analysed by Audrey Milton, Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Law Business and the Creative Arts (Formerly, Academic Developer, Teaching and Learning Development)

classroom – shapes their judgements of quality, promotes retention and engages them in productive learning.[5]

JCU first year students deserve to feel they are part of a learning institution, to be provided with opportunities to develop friendship networks, understand what is expected of them, know where to find assistance and information, and develop the skills necessary for university level-study.

JCU staff should feel the vital role they play in supporting this transition is acknowledged and valued by the institution. Currently, academic staff who consistently dedicate themselves to trying to help students and develop meaningful curricula believe they do so at the expense of developing their academic careers. Poor staff morale, motivation and collegiate relationships create a negative flow on effect to the student body. This has a significant impact on perceptions of JCU's reputation and academic integrity.

"Academic staff that are not research active are punished with more teaching."
Academic Staff Member, 2007.

JCU has commenced its investment in first year transition issues with the short-term appointment of a project leader. The project's intent is to promote a university-wide, co-ordinated approach to systematically research and monitor the first year student experience at JCU, and to co-ordinate and strengthen the range of first year activities (support, technical, administrative and academic) in faculties and divisions. However, as this report identifies significant further investment of institutional rhetoric and resources, is required to adequately transform the JCU First Year Experience.

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[5] Scott, G (2005)

JCU students in their own words …………………

"Learning how to write academically, it's not really well explained and it's really different to what we did at school."

Jacqi – Bachelor of Occupational Therapy

"My first shock was the JCU environment, I was expecting a university to be a professional place where everyone knew what was going on and everyone knew what was supposed to be happening… there was a lot of confusion and mis-information."

Michelle – Bachelor of Psychology

 "Many students are not really sure of the direction they are taking and need encouragement."

Mikayla – Bachelor of Science

"It would help to have everything in one central place and know where everything is rather than some in administration, some in the library and others in the school areas."

Brett – Bachelor of Planning

"It is really hard to know what the lecturers are expecting of you, and how much you need to do. It's all up to you, academically, you don't have teachers to guide you."

Jemma – Bachelor of Physiotherapy

 "Having to meet so many new people and not having a support group from high school is really hard.""

Brett – Bachelor of Planning

"When you get overwhelmed you just try and deal with it on your own. There is a tendency to draw into yourself and panic."

Aaminah – Bachelor of Medicine

"I found week 10 really hard. You feel really bogged down and want to give up."

Jemma – Bachelor of Physiotherapy

"My course choice just didn't fit into my life. I had no concept of what I was getting myself into."

Michelle – Bachelor of Psychology

It would be good if JCU could give students more social support. In the first year when you living by yourself for the first time, it's really hard to juggle."

Jemma – Bachelor of Physiotherapy

"You need to use your first year as a framework for the rest of your degree. You have to get used to the way the lecturers like the work because they all do things differently."

Josh – Bachelor of Arts

Over the past three months the project has sought to canvass all aspects of the institution – academics, administrators; student service staff and students to identify opportunities to collate collective institutional knowledge to ensure resources, programs, information and strategies at the disposal of the institution can be strategically and optimally delivered.

Institution-wide support is required to achieve tangible and/or sustainable outcomes. Action areas have been identified and are outlined within the following pages of this report. Utilised as an evidence-based decision making tool, it is proposed the action areas presented be used by faculties and divisions to assess current practices and identify operational performance targets.

First year experience literature identifies a number of common elements that support successful first year transition. As previously identified, these elements can be loosely classified under the following headings:
- Developing a Sense of Purpose
- Foster Student Engagement
- Building Resilience
- Quality Teaching Focus

Each of the priority areas recommended by the First Year Experience Project can be directly linked to these common elements. Therefore, informed by current evidence, an institution-wide focus on these priorities would create an effective transition programme for JCU.

The identified priorities are representative of common concerns raised by academics, administrators; student service staff and students. Performance targets have also been identified. To mitigate immediate risk to JCU these priority areas require urgent attention.

PRIORITY AREAS

1. SENSE OF PURPOSE – First Year Focus

An institution-wide approach to first year transition is supported in first year experience literature nationally and world-wide. The successful transition of students is a shared responsibility that requires a clearly articulated strategic intent and well co-ordinated operational accountabilities. In accordance with JCU's strategic planning, support for successful transition to university study should represent a core JCU function.

A strong transition focus is increasingly the practice in other universities. Research demonstrates that only those institutions that invest in "front-end loading" of first year effectively address first year transition issues, including retention, progress and course satisfaction.

"Front-end loading" does not specifically relate to the provision of increased financial resources. It relates to the level of priority afforded to transition issues and the explicit nature of the institution's operational intent. Many of the recommendations outlined within this report can be implemented with minimal cost to the institution.

Identified Performance Target:

1.1 It is recommended that those nominated as responsible (pp. 19-26), review the First Year Experience Project recommendations outlined within this report to inform the development of operational performance targets.

1.2 It is recommended that the academic plan, informed by FYE recommendations, support faculty and school based action plans to operationalise a strategic focus on first year transition.

Action areas identified by the First Year Experience Project are outlined further in this report (pp. 19- 26), and relate to the four evidence- based components to successful transition programmes.

1.3 In addition, it is recommended that a full-time permanent First Year Experience Leader position be established. This would facilitate the systematic research, monitoring and co-ordination of the first year experience (support, technical, administrative and academic) in faculties and divisions at JCU.

This centralised role would support the development of an integrated, co-ordinated, intentional and proactive approach to the first year experience. Utilising evidence based practice; the position would work across the institution, and operationally with academic, administrative and student service staff. In addition, the First Year Experience Leader will administer and analyse the first year experience survey at regular intervals as part of the institution's commitment to providing reliable current data to inform and improve the first year experience at JCU.

2. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT   - Internal Communication Strategy
- Curriculum Relevance
- Flexible Learning Options

The first year students' experience at JCU is often perceived by students as disjointed and chaotic. Internal information silos have created a continual stream of conflicting messages for students. Students are overloaded with information from a variety of sources. Poor communication has a detrimental impact on the way students view their university and their role within the university community. An internal communication strategy is recommended to provide consistent and accurate information to students.

Effective communication can facilitate student's transition to University and strengthen sense of community and loyalty. This can be demonstrated by the "Start University Now" programme offered by Central Queensland University (CQU).[6] JCU has traditionally competed with larger metropolitan universities for new enrolments. However, over the past three (3) years CQU has consistently increased its share of school leavers across the Mackay, Northern/North West and Far North regions.[7]

The development of an effective communication strategy must acknowledge the diversity of the student population. The first year student population is not a homogenous group. JCU's First Year Experience Questionnaire 2006, identified only 47.7% of respondents attended high school in the previous year. A significant paradigm shift is required to transform the manner in which JCU communicates with its' students.

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[6] Central Queensland University (2008)
[7] Queensland Government (2008)

42.5% of JCU first year students identify as the first in their immediate family to attend university and therefore have limited experience of university culture, jargon and processes. Successful transition to university is not a purely academic process. Failure to effectively communicate with the student population, will not position JCU well in the eyes of local students, their partners and families.

Using collective institutional knowledge a multi-layered, pro-active communication blueprint can be developed to identify information and resources required by students at key points throughout the academic year.

Increased diversity within the student population presents universities with a wide range of transition issues. Traditional strategies to promote student engagement are now challenged by the students' strong vocational expectations, increased hours of paid work, family/carer responsibilities and an attractive job market. Positive transition processes have a significant influence on a student's decision to invest 3-5 years of their life with a particular university pursuing undergraduate studies.

Many JCU students study for vocational reasons. University studies are seen as the gateway to their chosen profession. However, JCU's Course Experience Questionnaire (2005-2007) consistently captures comments from new graduates questioning the relevance of current curriculum. Graduates consistently express a disconnection between their university learning experience and the "real world". More opportunities to link theoretical knowledge with practical, relevant experiences that build industry skills are sought. Comments received from new graduates indicate they do not feel confident applying their theoretical knowledge in a work context and question the relevance of their university experience to current industry demands. They do not feel their study at JCU adequately prepares them for the rigours of a professional career.

First Year Experience Questionnaire 2006 data identified that paid work is the main or only source of income for the majority of first year students and 69.8% felt their paid work interfered with their academic performance. The accessibility of traditional face-to-face university programmes is significantly reduced by work responsibilities and family/carer responsibilities.

A significant increase in the average student's paid work, personal and familial commitments presents a number of challenges to the effective delivery of courses. The modern first year student group also includes an increased number of non-school leavers. However, despite the changing face of the first year student population, modes of delivery at JCU have changed very little. The majority of teaching at JCU is conducted face-to-face over the traditional 13 week semester with compulsory attendance requirements at prescribed times.

Identified Performance Target:

2.1 It is recommended that a communications group be established to develop consistency, modes of communication and simplification of communication with first year students across the Faculty Schools and Divisions.

Suggested terms of reference for the project would include:
- Review existing internal communication methods using a student centred approach
- Consultation with support, technical, administrative and academic staff in faculties and divisions

- Map student needs (particularly known transition issues) across the academic year
- Identify key dates (administrative, academic and support related)
- Develop key messages to be agreed upon, repeated and reinforced throughout the institution
- Utilising available evidence identify appropriate communication mediums for each message (face to face, print publication, Web, email, student newspaper, LearnJCU etc.)
- Develop a communication blueprint and action plan for implementation in 2009
- Establish required protocols including, pictorial representation, branding, design and version control

2.2 It is recommended that ongoing review of curriculum relevance to student expectations be undertaken by Heads of School in conjunction with Teaching and Learning Development.

2.3 It is recommended that Heads of School in conjunction with Teaching and Learning Development work to increase the range of flexible learning options available in response to 1st year student needs.

2.4 The continuing development of appropriate facilities for teaching, learning and social interaction within common areas of the university is recommended.

3. BUILDING RESILIENCE – Review of Academic Advisor Role

Currently first year pastoral care roles and responsibilities are not clearly articulated at a faculty or school level. These responsibilities are generally assumed to fall within Academic Advisor duties. However, limited to no training is provided to staff undertaking this valuable role. Despite this schools generally rely heavily on Academic Advisors to undertake responsibility for the transition problems faced by first year students.

This creates significant risk for the institution with particular reference to record keeping, academic counselling and appropriate referral to student services.

Identified Performance Target:

3.1 It is recommended that the First Year Experience Project Leader, undertake a review of advisor roles to identify support needs, standards of practice and pastoral care roles and responsibilities to support first year transition.

Suggested terms of reference for the group would include:
- Clearly identify and document pastoral care responsibilities and accountabilities
- Identify and develop resources and support required by staff to effectively perform support roles
- Utilising current evidence identify appropriate best practice models with due regard to the specific needs of faculties/schools.
- Develop clear procedural guidelines to improve accountability and protection for staff performing support roles
- Establish reporting relationships to address systemic issues identified by staff as impacting upon student experience

4. QUALITY TEACHING – Support for Staff Teaching 1ST Year Students

For the majority of first year students, lecturers, tutors and practical demonstrators represent the human face of JCU due to the personal contact they offer. These staff are in the unique position of being able to identify students experiencing a difficult transition.

JCU must clearly articulate its teaching performance standards to staff teaching 1st students to preserve JCU's academic integrity.

Teaching staff receive limited JCU specific training and resources to guide their teaching practice. The TLD sessional induction does not reach all staff and provides general information rather than being specific to first year students. Access to existing training is generally limited to a four (4) hour TLD induction, subject to the discretion of the school, budget and timetables. Sessional staff access to JCU email networks is disrupted between teaching periods making it difficult for staff to maintain effective lines of communication with the University, staff and students.

Further exploration of induction training, mentoring opportunities and a training guarantee scheme for teaching development activities, would significantly benefit the first year experience. Opportunities to increase JCU specific content and accessibility could also be identified. For example, in many large organisations mandatory online training packages are used to effectively communicate performance standards to geographically diverse staff entering the organisation on a periodic basis.

Identified Performance Target:

4.1 It is recommended that the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of each faculty commission a review of the appointment, training, preparation and support processes for staff teaching first year students, in recognition of transition demands.

Email access for sessional staff also requires review by Information Technology and Resources (IT&R) and the Human Resources. A review of protocols is recommended to provide first year students and staff with improved continuity of access to academic staff. Current access protocols prevent email communication with sessional staff between teaching period based employment contracts.

5. Finally, it is recommended that these issues are addressed at the Vice Chancellor's Advisory Committee.

ACTION AREAS

1. Sense of Purpose			
Priority			

Priority

    1.1 Inclusion of FYE recommendations within JCU academic plan (2008 -2009) - Academic Board

    1.2 Operational performance targets for faculties and divisions to incorporate FYE recommendations (Dec 2008) – PVC Faculty, DVC Divisions

    1.3 Establishment of a full-time permanent First Year Experience Leader position to systematically research, monitor and co-ordinate the First Year Experience (support, technical, administrative and academic) in faculties and divisions at JCU (Immediate) – Senior DVC

Action Areas	Area of Responsibility	Current Status	FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006

a) Development of 1st year teaching teams to co-ordinate content, assessment, and adopt a strategic approach to scaffolding generic skill development
 	
b) Identify minimum standards for first year teaching staff (e.g. Experienced lecturer with/or currently undertaking a formal teaching qualification)
 	
c) All staff teaching first year students to receive formal teaching induction including specialist preparation for teaching first year students
 	
d) Horizontal and vertical curriculum development that identifies relationships between subjects and the overall course in a manner that is clearly articulated to first year students
 	
e) Stated outcomes, course content and assessment items are clearly aligned and defined within subject outlines and monitored in practice by the Head of School
 	
f) Head of School ensures clear lines of communication between subject co-ordinator and service teachers towards maintaining quality in teaching and learning.
	Education Committee
	   • Endorsement of FYE recommendations
	
	PVC Faculty
	   • Identify and monitor performance targets in accordance to FYE action areas
	
	Heads of School
	   • Operationalise identified FYE performance targets
	
	First Year Experience Project
	
	Teaching & Learning Development
		First Year teaching staff perceive research is rewarded and given higher priority than quality teaching:
		"Academic staff that are not research active are punished with more teaching."
		
		Generally, team teaching is restricted to subjects. Limited horizontal and/or vertical planning and co-ordination occurs across degree programmes.
		
		It is generally accepted that the best teaching staff should be teaching first year.
		
		The Assessment Practices Policy states:
		3b. Assessments across all of the subjects in a course should cover the graduate attributes specified by Academic Board.
			73.7% agreed the quality of teaching in their course is generally good
			
			50.3% agreed the links between content in study period 1 subjects were good
			
			42.5% agreed there is a lot of overlapping content between their subjects
			
			51.5% identified they understood clearly what was expected for assessment tasks
			
			69.1% identified they sometimes received prompt feedback from teachers on assessed tasks (21.4% frequently)
			
			37.7% agreed assessment loads in each subject were roughly equal in terms of the workload and time committed.
			
			76.6% agree their course is intellectually stimulating
			
			51.5% understood clearly what was expected for assessment tasks

ACTION AREAS

2. Student Engagement			
Priority			
2.1 Development of an internal institution-wide communication strategy to improve communication with first year students (2009) - Manager Student Services, First Year Experience Leader			
Action Areas	**Area of Responsibility**	**Current Status**	**FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006**
a) Map student experience to enable "Just in Time" information dissemination b) Regular communication with first year students to normalise the first year transition period c) Review of Orientation Week programme in recognition of transition issues. d) Review use of All Student Email (e.g. targeted information, professional layout and focus tested content) e) Identify and co-ordinate communication strategies across key service areas (Student Enquiry Centre, Learning Advisers, Equity, Counselling Service etc.) f) Co-ordinated communication point for all students. (E.g. ability to communicate directly with a staff member.) g) Include prospective students in communication strategies (e.g. Tertiary Preparation Course, LearnJCU Communities, Bridging Programmes etc.) h) Review LearnJCU to maximise use as a communication tool for first year students i) Strategic targeting of information to specific student groups (i.e. 1st year students, On Track Programme)	First Year Experience Project Student Services Library & Information Services Teaching & Learning Development Equity International Student Centre SIAS Marketing, Student Services Information Technology & Resources	Bulk of information is provided to students during orientation week and week one. Information dissemination is generally responsive and ad hoc rather than co-ordinated and proactive in nature. All Student Emails are unable to target specific groups. Academic staff do not always utilise voicemail or automatic out of office replies on email when absent. First Year students generally have a poor knowledge of available support services.	15.2% agreed "University just hasn't lived up to my expectations" < 50% identified that they knew about JCU services and facilities. (e.g. Careers and Employment, Counselling, Disability Resources, Learning Advisors, International student advisors, Info Help, Equity etc.) 28.5% use email to contact lecturers/tutors on a weekly basis (3% daily) 53.9% agreed the enrolment process was easy to complete 93% frequently access Learn JCU 27.1% identified that university not being what they expected was an important factor in deciding whether to discontinue/defer their course.

ACTION AREAS

2. Student Engagement			

Priority
Establish a University-wide commitment to pursuing measures that:
    2.2 Facilitate ongoing review of curriculum relevance to student expectations (2009) – Heads of School, Teaching & Learning Development, Marketing
    2.3 Increase range of flexible learning options in response to 1st year student needs (2009) – Heads of School, Teaching & Learning Development, Associate Deans Teaching and Learning			

Action Areas	**Area of Responsibility**	**Current Status**	**FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006**
j) Maintain teaching quality and student engagement whilst increasing flexible learning options k) Work towards best practice standards in flexible learning as identified by ACCODE l) First Year teaching teams to review curriculum m) Improve flexibility for students to move between internal and external modes of study n) Address administrative and support structures available to external students o) Co-ordination of external/block mode delivery across university (e.g. Appropriate room allocation, availability of on campus accommodation, extended operation hours for services etc.) p) Continue monitoring of first year student experience q) School level focus groups to provide feedback on student experience of the curriculum in first year	Education Committee Heads of School Teaching and Learning Development Student Services Library & Information Services Student Services Library & Information Services Teaching and Learning Development Equity International Students Centre SIAS Accommodation Providers First Year Experience Project	Three schools identified as delivering degree programmes externally or via mixed mode delivery. However, not all students are eligible to enrol externally Limited opportunities exist for students to swap between external and internal studies to accommodate personal commitments. Four schools identified one or two first year core subjects available by block mode delivery. Face to face teaching generally perceived as most effective Many schools require compulsory attendance to tutorials or pracs. Three schools identified as providing full-time only, fully prescribed programmes	73.2% identified part/time casual work as a source of income 9.4% identified full-time work as a source of income 15.4% identified that paid work commitments was an important factor in deciding whether to discontinue/defer their course. 15.8% identified that classes not offered at convenient times was an important factor in deciding whether to discontinue/defer their course. 16.6% identified that finding employment was an important factor in deciding whether to discontinue/defer their course. 93% frequently access Learn JCU

ACTION AREAS

Student Engagement			
Priority			
2.4 Continuing development of appropriate facilities for teaching, learning and social interaction within common areas within the university (2009) – Facilities Management Office			
Action Areas	**Area of Responsibility**	**Current Status**	**FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006**
r) Review of teaching facilities in consideration of current and future teaching needs s) Improved maintenance of buildings and grounds t) Development of common areas for students within schools to foster student interaction, engagement and sense of community	Facilities Management Office Learning Spaces Committee Facilities and Infrastructure Advisory Committee (FIAC)	General movement towards a tutorial/prac teaching focus (i.e. Moving away from lecture focus) Facilities generally perceived as run-down and in poor repair leading to negative perceptions on teaching and course quality. Perceived lack of parity in resources available between schools. Difficult to foster cohort identity as limited spaces for students to congregate and socialise informally. Limited opportunities are available for external/block mode students to engage with the university community.	13.7% hope to change to a different institution this year or next year. 15.2% University just hasn't lived up to my expectations.

ACTION AREAS

3. Building Resilience			
Priority			
3.1 First Year Experience Project to conduct a review of Academic and Student Advisor roles to identify pastoral care responsibilities, practice standards, and level of support required to assist first year transition (2008) - PVC Faculty, Heads of School			
Action Areas	**Area of Responsibility**	**Current Status**	**FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006**
a) Develop processes for identifying students experiencing transition difficulties	Heads of School Student Services First Year Experience Project	The majority of first year subjects are taught in complete isolation from each other.	< 50% identified that they knew about JCU services and facilities.
b) Review Academic Progression Protocols to identify additional intervention opportunities		Teaching staff generally perceive new students enter University with unrealistic expectations.	31.1% agreed they had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at University
c) Review support programmes for students identified as "At Risk"[*]		Students at JCU are generally required to make a number of transitions within their first year:	42.8% frequently feel overwhelmed by all they had to do
d) Develop University-wide withdrawal protocols to facilitate future re-enrolment and capture useful data		- Academic - Financial - Emotional	52.44% agreed their teachers make a real effort to understand difficulties students may be having with their work.
e) Continue to rationalise the processes of enabling courses to provide consistent pathways for prospective students.	PVC Faculty	- Geographic - Relationships	
f) Develop student advisor training and support to identify transition problems and implement intervention strategies	Human Resources First Year Experience Project Student Services	- Independence/Responsibility - Time Management Prac demonstrators and tutors generally have higher level of one-to-one contact with students than lecturing staff.	32.8% agreed teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress 41.8% agree it is really hard to keep up with the volume of work in their course.
		Exit interviews are generally not conducted with students leaving degree programmes.	

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[*] Defined as student in breach of minimum academic standards in accordance with Academic Progression Policy - JCU

ACTION AREAS

3. Building Resilience			
Action Areas	**Area of Responsibility**	**Current Status**	**FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006**
g) Support staff to identify and address predictable transition issues h) Strengthen links between academic and student service staff i) Review of Student Consultation Times Policy j) Review Student Grievance Process k) In response to changing student demographics, identify strategies to encourage family support for non school leavers l) Strengthen links with parents m) Incorporate socialisation activities within courses for first 3 weeks of each teaching period during the first year. n) Recognition and support for the specific needs of student equity groups.	First Year Experience Project Student Services Student Services Marketing Student Association Subject Co-ordinators Equity SIAS International Student Centre Student Services Teaching and Learning Development	The majority of schools do not actively incorporate socialisation activities into the curriculum. Group work skills are developed incidentally. Schools predominately rely on Academic Advisors to undertake primary responsibility for first year transition issues. However, no standardised training programme is provided for staff undertaking the role. The Academic Advisor role differs greatly between faculties and schools. Academic staff consultation hours are not widely utilised by students. It is likely that future AUQA audits will highlight the inefficiencies of the University's current student grievance system. Not all staff receive induction training.	73.77% agreed they feel confident that at least one of their teachers knows their name. 22.2% feel very uncomfortable participating in group discussions. 62.1% irregularly or never work with other students on course areas with which they had problems 58.9% irregularly or never get together with other students to discuss subjects 32.2% never study with other students 10.9% never ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion 56.9% feel part of a group of students and staff committed to learning 69% really like being a university student 53.6% really like being on their university campus 36.9% generally keep to themselves at university

ACTION AREAS

4. Quality Teaching			
Priority			
4.1 It is recommended that the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of each faculty commission a review of the appointment, training, preparation and support processes for first year teaching staff, in recognition of transition demands. (2008) – PVC Faculty, Heads of School, Teaching & Learning Development, Associate Deans Teaching and Learning			
Action Areas	**Area of Responsibility**	**Current Status**	**FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006**

a) Review academic workload formula in recognition of demands of 1st year teaching
b) Use of PMP process to improve teaching with particular focus on 1st year experience
c) Improve teaching focus through an academic staff development model that encourages permanent and sessional, 1st year teaching staff to access professional development in Teaching and Learning
d) Implement strategic initiatives to support a collaborative approach to delivering degree programmes across schools/disciplines to reduced disjointed first year experience
e) Audit current first year activities at a faculty and school level to identify opportunities for collaboration and improvement with reference to:
    o Fostering student engagement
    o Developing a sense of purpose
    o Building resilience
    o Quality Teaching Focus
	Education Committee
	• Endorsement of FYE recommendations
	
	PVC Faculty
	• Identify and monitor performance targets in accordance to FYE action areas
	
	Heads of School
	• Conduct audit of current FYE initiatives
	• Operationalise FYE performance targets
	
	Teaching and Learning Development
	
	Associate Deans Teaching and Learning
		Within some schools the most inexperienced academics tend to be assigned large first year classes.
		
		Marking in first year is considered more labour intensive due to need for formative assessment and detailed feedback.
		
		First year classes are generally larger.
		
		A number of schools are moving towards generic first year programmes resulting in further increases in 1st Year class sizes in 2008.
		
		A cost recovery model utilised for in-service professional development activities.
		
		Schools choosing to offer subjects "in house". (e.g. Education offering science subjects, Business offering communication subjects)
			56.9% agreed they felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning
			
			54.5% agreed staff are usually available to discuss their work
			
			27.7% agree they regularly seek advice and help from teaching staff
			
			67.3% agreed the teaching staff are good at explaining things
			
			65.1% agreed staff made it clear from the start what they expect from students
			
			31.1% have had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at university
			
			38.1% agree most staff take an interest in their progress
			
			77% agree they have been encouraged to be an independent learner

ACTION AREAS

Quality Teaching			
Action Areas	**Area of Responsibility**	**Current Status**	**FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006**
f) Ensure staff competency in use of learning technology (e.g. Videoconferencing, LearnJCU) g) Minimum standards in relation to use of LearnJCU are identified, implemented and monitored h) Review email access for sessional teaching staff between teaching period based employment contracts.	Information Technology and Resources		

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[*] As analysed by Audrey Milton, Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Law Business and the Creative Arts (Formerly, Academic Developer, Teaching and Learning Development)