



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

Note: The First Year Experience Project has involved a diverse range of JCU academic and professional staff since the development of the "Arrive Stay and Succeed at JCU" focus in 2006. This project was established by TLD, and involved Kay Martinez (Associate Dean Teaching & Learning, Faculty of Arts, Education & Social Sciences), Alan Calder (Learning Adviser), Pierre Benckendorff (School of Business), Phil Schneider (School of Engineering), Darryl Hawkins (School of Public Health, Tropical Medicine and Rehabilitation Sciences), Leanne Dalley-Trim (School of Education), Peter Hanley (Learning Adviser), Scott Bradey (TLD), Marion Hooper (School of Mathematics, Physics and Information Technology), Amanda Townsend (Materials Production Officer), and many other JCU academic, administrative, technical and support staff. Audrey Milton (Associate Dean Teaching & Learning, Faculty of Law Business & the Creative Arts) led the analysis of data from the 1000 First Year Experience Questionnaires, providing a valuable data base to inform future actions to improve the transition experiences of first year students at JCU.

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

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.

ACTION AREAS

1. Sense of Purpose			
Priority			
Action Areas	Area of Responsibility	Current Status	FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006
<p>a) Development of 1st year teaching teams to co-ordinate content, assessment, and adopt a strategic approach to scaffolding generic skill development</p> <p>b) Identify minimum standards for first year teaching staff (e.g. Experienced lecturer with/or currently undertaking a formal teaching qualification)</p> <p>c) All staff teaching first year students to receive formal teaching induction including specialist preparation for teaching first year students</p> <p>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</p> <p>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</p> <p>f) Head of School ensures clear lines of communication between subject co-ordinator and service teachers towards maintaining quality in teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Education Committee</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsement of FYE recommendations <p>PVC Faculty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and monitor performance targets in accordance to FYE action areas <p>Heads of School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operationalise identified FYE performance targets <p>First Year Experience Project</p> <p>Teaching & Learning Development</p>	<p>First Year teaching staff perceive research is rewarded and given higher priority than quality teaching: <i>“Academic staff that are not research active are punished with more teaching.”</i></p> <p>Generally, team teaching is restricted to subjects. Limited horizontal and/or vertical planning and co-ordination occurs across degree programmes.</p> <p>It is generally accepted that the best teaching staff should be teaching first year.</p> <p>The Assessment Practices Policy states: <i>3b. Assessments across all of the subjects in a course should cover the graduate attributes specified by Academic Board.</i></p>	<p>73.7% agreed the quality of teaching in their course is generally good</p> <p>50.3% agreed the links between content in study period 1 subjects were good</p> <p>42.5% agreed there is a lot of overlapping content between their subjects</p> <p>51.5% identified they understood clearly what was expected for assessment tasks</p> <p>69.1% identified they sometimes received prompt feedback from teachers on assessed tasks (21.4% frequently)</p> <p>37.7% agreed assessment loads in each subject were roughly equal in terms of the workload and time committed.</p> <p>76.6% agree their course is intellectually stimulating</p> <p>51.5% understood clearly what was expected for assessment tasks</p>

ACTION AREAS

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

ACTION AREAS

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

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)	<p>General movement towards a tutorial/prac teaching focus (i.e. Moving away from lecture focus)</p> <p>Facilities generally perceived as rundown and in poor repair leading to negative perceptions on teaching and course quality.</p> <p>Perceived lack of parity in resources available between schools.</p> <p>Difficult to foster cohort identity as limited spaces for students to congregate and socialise informally.</p> <p>Limited opportunities are available for external/block mode students to engage with the university community.</p>	<p>13.7% hope to change to a different institution this year or next year.</p> <p>15.2% University just hasn't lived up to my expectations.</p>

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 b) Review Academic Progression Protocols to identify additional intervention opportunities c) Review support programmes for students identified as "At Risk" [*] d) Develop University-wide withdrawal protocols to facilitate future re-enrolment and capture useful data e) Continue to rationalise the processes of enabling courses to provide consistent pathways for prospective students. f) Develop student advisor training and support to identify transition problems and implement intervention strategies	Heads of School Student Services First Year Experience Project PVC Faculty Human Resources First Year Experience Project Student Services	<p>The majority of first year subjects are taught in complete isolation from each other.</p> <p>Teaching staff generally perceive new students enter University with unrealistic expectations.</p> <p>Students at JCU are generally required to make a number of transitions within their first year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic • Financial • Emotional • Geographic • Relationships • Independence/Responsibility • Time Management <p>Prac demonstrators and tutors generally have higher level of one-to-one contact with students than lecturing staff.</p> <p>Exit interviews are generally not conducted with students leaving degree programmes.</p>	< 50% identified that they knew about JCU services and facilities. 31.1% agreed they had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at University 42.8% frequently feel overwhelmed by all they had to do 52.44% agreed their teachers make a real effort to understand difficulties students may be having with their work. 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.

* 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
<p>g) Support staff to identify and address predictable transition issues</p> <p>h) Strengthen links between academic and student service staff</p> <p>i) Review of Student Consultation Times Policy</p> <p>j) Review Student Grievance Process</p> <p>k) In response to changing student demographics, identify strategies to encourage family support for non school leavers</p> <p>l) Strengthen links with parents</p> <p>m) Incorporate socialisation activities within courses for first 3 weeks of each teaching period during the first year.</p> <p>n) Recognition and support for the specific needs of student equity groups.</p>	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	<p>The majority of schools do not actively incorporate socialisation activities into the curriculum. Group work skills are developed incidentally.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Academic staff consultation hours are not widely utilised by students.</p> <p>It is likely that future AUQA audits will highlight the inefficiencies of the University's current student grievance system.</p> <p>Not all staff receive induction training.</p>	<p>73.77% agreed they feel confident that at least one of their teachers knows their name.</p> <p>22.2% feel very uncomfortable participating in group discussions.</p> <p>62.1% irregularly or never work with other students on course areas with which they had problems</p> <p>58.9% irregularly or never get together with other students to discuss subjects</p> <p>32.2% never study with other students</p> <p>10.9% never ask questions in class or contribute to class discussion</p> <p>56.9% feel part of a group of students and staff committed to learning</p> <p>69% really like being a university student</p> <p>53.6% really like being on their university campus</p> <p>36.9% generally keep to themselves at university</p>

ACTION AREAS

4. Quality Teaching			
Priority			
Action Areas	Area of Responsibility	Current Status	FYE Questionnaire Data, 2006
<p>a) Review academic workload formula in recognition of demands of 1st year teaching</p> <p>b) Use of PMP process to improve teaching with particular focus on 1st year experience</p> <p>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</p> <p>d) Implement strategic initiatives to support a collaborative approach to delivering degree programmes across schools/disciplines to reduced disjointed first year experience</p> <p>e) Audit current first year activities at a faculty and school level to identify opportunities for collaboration and improvement with reference to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fostering student engagement ○ Developing a sense of purpose ○ Building resilience ○ Quality Teaching Focus 	<p>Education Committee</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsement of FYE recommendations <p>PVC Faculty</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and monitor performance targets in accordance to FYE action areas <p>Heads of School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct audit of current FYE initiatives • Operationalise FYE performance targets <p>Teaching and Learning Development</p> <p>Associate Deans Teaching and Learning</p>	<p>Within some schools the most inexperienced academics tend to be assigned large first year classes.</p> <p>Marking in first year is considered more labour intensive due to need for formative assessment and detailed feedback.</p> <p>First year classes are generally larger.</p> <p>A number of schools are moving towards generic first year programmes resulting in further increases in 1st Year class sizes in 2008.</p> <p>A cost recovery model utilised for in-service professional development activities.</p> <p>Schools choosing to offer subjects “in house”. (e.g. Education offering science subjects, Business offering communication subjects)</p>	<p>56.9% agreed they felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning</p> <p>54.5% agreed staff are usually available to discuss their work</p> <p>27.7% agree they regularly seek advice and help from teaching staff</p> <p>67.3% agreed the teaching staff are good at explaining things</p> <p>65.1% agreed staff made it clear from the start what they expect from students</p> <p>31.1% have had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at university</p> <p>38.1% agree most staff take an interest in their progress</p> <p>77% agree they have been encouraged to be an independent learner</p>

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)