

THE DIVERSITY OF OUR STUDENTS IS RECOGNISED AND WELCOMED

THIS EXEMPLAR IS DESIGNED BY THE GOOD PRACTICE PROJECT WITH DR NICOLA CORBETT-JARVIS, A LECTURER IN THE SCHOOL OF LAW

The JCU Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy adopts nine Core Principles, the third of which informs our practice that 'courses will endeavour to respond to the rich diversity of student backgrounds and pathways, and will offer all students opportunities to succeed through engagement, reflection and a commitment to learning.' The first year Law program exemplifies this practice. It also aligns with the University's Statement of Strategic Intent (2012) which includes the guiding principle that 'students are at the heart of our University', and the First Year Experience Transition Initiative which states 'effective first year transition pedagogy is about helping commencing students to stay and succeed at JCU.' In 2011, the first year teaching team in law received a JCU Award for Excellence in recognition of the team's outstanding commitment to continuous improvement of the First Year Experience (FYE) in Law and increasing retention rates. This exemplar provides a good practice example of effective first year transition pedagogy embedded in the FYE. Evidence of student engagement is exemplary and retention has improved incrementally since 2007.

Dr Nicola Corbett-Jarvis is a Lecturer and First Year Coordinator with the School of Law in Cairns. There is also a first year coordinator in Townsville who similarly focuses on, and assists with, student transition. First year coordinators engage in the coordination of orientation and strategy development that facilitate the successful transition of students commencing university. Dr Corbett-Jarvis explains that in the School of Law, all members of the first year teaching team are significantly involved in student-centred curriculum development and enhancement across the suite of first year subjects.

In 2005 a team of strongly committed and invested academics within the School of Law redesigned the first year program. This involved a shift in emphasis from an approach to teaching and learning that was largely traditional, lecture-intensive and content-driven to a mixed model that challenges students to undertake deep learning processes. The predominant objective of the FYE in Law is to enable a transformative, transitional experience that inspires students to stay and succeed. To achieve this, the law program adopts a fully integrated educational package that is attuned to recognising and responding to student diversity and is designed to build skills and confidence through a range of holistic and horizontally aligned first year subjects.

First year law students may be underprepared for tertiary study and more inclined to require significant skill development in order for them to succeed as university learners. In addition, many law students have little or no existing legal knowledge or experience and therefore require significant support so as to enable them to study their chosen discipline. The FYE in Law prides itself on engaging and motivating learning amongst an increasingly diverse student demographic. An incremental introduction to 'study skills' and 'legal skills' across the range of subjects coupled with scaffolded, formative feedback that occurs early in the semester facilitates students' transition at this overwhelming and crucial time in their first semester. The adoption of teaching and learning practices that are student-focused, fully integrated, supportive and scaffolded enables students to acquire and develop the necessary foundational skills and capacities for tertiary education and the study of Law.

Academic Orientation

Aside from introductory 0-Week activities designed as 'ice-breakers' to introduce students to their cohort and law tutors, the FYE in Law runs workshops dedicated to reducing student apprehension about the expectations of them as law students. For example, students attend a legal writing workshop to assist them with discipline-specific writing conventions. This is designed to reduce student anxiety about the uniqueness of legal writing by breaking down the writing process into simple steps. It also highlights legal writing as a key communication skill and its importance to law students and legal practitioners. Law students also attend a referencing and plagiarism workshop, which is integrated into their orientation in the second week of the semester. This is designed to ensure that students are not only aware of university policy and referencing convention in relation to their assignments but also so that they appreciate the ethical implications for them as future members of the legal profession. Ethical awareness is explored in further detail with students in their first few weeks. Library research and computer literacy skills are essential for all law subjects. To build confidence and reduce anxiety in locating and using legal resources in both print and electronic form, students are required to attend compulsory library research tutorials. It is essential that students acquire competency in utilising legal resources at an early stage because they are required to find, consider and use legal sources in substantive subjects throughout their degree, including during their first year. As use of these resources is critical to success as a law student, a library skills multiple-choice assessment is conducted prior to census date. This enables tutors to identify students that may require further assistance from the Law Librarian to improve their research skills at an early stage in the semester. It is also designed to help students feel more confident about their ability to locate appropriate resources in preparation for tutorials and assessments in all their law subjects.

For further information about any aspect of this exemplar, please email Dr Nicola Corbett-Jarvis at nichola.corbettjarvis@jcu.edu.au

2011 Faculty Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning - Ms Rachel Bradshaw

2009 ALTC Award for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning - Ms Kate Galloway

2008 JCU Teaching Award for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning - Ms Mandy Shorecore, Ms Dominique Thiriet, Ms Rachel Bradshaw

JCU Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy

ALL ENCOMPASSING FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE IN LAW		
SIX FIRST YEAR PRINCIPLES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition Diversity Design Engagement Assessment Evaluation and monitoring 	INTENTIONAL CURRICULUM DESIGN <p>Whole of first year, student-centred approach, avoiding compartmentalisation of subject matter, learning and teaching settings and assessment practices.</p> <p>Fully integrated educational package - constructively aligned to learning outcomes, teaching settings and assessment practices.</p> <p>Enabling of a transformative, transitional experience, setting the foundations for students to become self-reflective, independent learners and ethical scholars.</p> <p>Encouraging of students to develop broadly based legal, technological, critical and emotional literacy.</p> <p>Enhancement of students' skills and capacities to reverse unacceptable rates of attrition in the first year and later years.</p> <p>Facilitating of an ongoing team-based approach to staffing and teaching, explicitly inclusive of sessional staff.</p>	STUDENT-CENTRED AND SUPPORTED <ul style="list-style-type: none"> teaching adopts an approach of intellectual training in the broader context of university and beyond the focus is on developing generic skills, legal specific skills and ethical awareness horizontal alignment of skills and content, teaching and learning experiences and assessment practices, enables a deeper understanding of the law as a unified discipline authentic, interactive learning settings helps contextualise the law and legal theory, and the learning experience helps to motivate and inspire students to independent learning assessment items foster learning across individual subjects, and are staggered so as to avoid clashes in due dates, helping students and staff manage the workload integration of first year transition principles, facilitating a sense of engagement, support and belonging - building student resilience and positive learning experiences integrated pastoral care, designed to empower students to generate their own success in their degree interaction with timely referral, learning support services, teaching staff and course/subject coordinators fosters engagement, success and retention

Table 1: The first year law program achieves six integrated and complimentary outcomes, providing students with a comprehensive and holistic introduction to law.

Best practice in Teaching and Learning

Constructive horizontal alignment is considered a best practice in the teaching and learning delivery in FYE in Law. In the first semester full-time students enrol in the following three subjects: *Legal Institutions & Processes*; *Legal Research, Writing & Analysis*; and *Contract Law I*. Four common modules run across each first year law subject. Modules include Ethical Orientation to the Study of Law, Governance as a Conceptual Tool, Governance through Adjudicative Law, and Governance through Law in its Legislative Mode. Dr Corbett-Jarvis explains that this assists students with understanding that the study and practice of law does not involve studying a series of ostensibly discrete and isolated subjects and that it is a comprehensive inter-related body of knowledge. The reconsideration of key points, concepts and common principles in each subject reinforces their importance and provides students with the opportunity to engage with them from a range of perspectives.

Students experience learning within authentic, interactive learning environments which enable the reaffirmation of existing knowledge while developing necessary generic skills and legal specific skills required in their law studies. *Generic skills* include written and oral communication, reading for comprehension, critical thinking and reasoning, time management, interpersonal communication, and ethical awareness. *Legal specific skills* encompass legal research, critical analysis, capacity to identify legal issues and resolve legal problems, legal reasoning, capacity for directed self-learning, and ethical awareness.

The program adopts a hands-on approach to teaching delivery, which engages students across all subjects and teaching and learning activities. Authentic and interactive learning settings in all subjects create learning experiences which motivate and stimulate students' curiosity and engage them in the process of taking responsibility for their own learning. The FYE in Law is personalized as much as possible so learning experiences in lectures comprise small group discussions, interactive quizzes and debate-style discussions, as well as role play and mind-mapping exercises. Tutorials are used as a significant learning tool, integrating a scaffolded approach to problem-solving, particularly in the lead up to an assessment piece. Tutorial questions increase in complexity during the semester as students learn to enhance their skills and reflect on the feedback provided throughout the semester.

Legal Institutions & Processes introduces students to critical literacy. This subject includes exploration of contemporary local, regional, national and international issues from legal, political and social perspectives. It also explores the colonisation of Australia moving through to a Federation and related Indigenous issues. Such aspects are explored in a sensitive and structured manner with the support of the Indigenous Support Officer where needed. In this subject students complete two open-book multiple choice quizzes, each of which contains 10 questions. There is a time limit factored in to introduce students to 'time pressure' that will be experienced in exams throughout their degree. The purpose of these low-stakes exercises is to scaffold understanding of content. Students also compile 'news reports' which focus on and critique contemporary issues in a legal context.

Legal Research, Writing & Analysis is skills-based and is designed to enable students to develop generic study skills as well as law-specific skills required in legal practice. It also introduces students to 'reflective learning' through a series of writing tasks contained in the tutorial exercises. The structure of these exercises ensures that students are provided with regular formative feedback on

their legal writing. As part of this process, students engage in 'peer review', which is conducted anonymously. Students are provided with an 'answer guide' written in the form of a 'sample answer' and a rubric. These tutor-supported exercises enhance students' understanding of the standards applied to law students in assessments. It also provides students with a 'sample answer' so that they can comprehend what good performance of the task looks like. Through their application of the rubric to written work, students are more likely to feel informed about the expectations of them as law students in summative assessment tasks. After acting as a peer reviewer, students are then required to reflect on their performance in the task and identify areas of strength and also areas requiring improvement. Students are also required to explain how they might improve their work in the future. This exercise encourages students to be reflective independent learners who review their work, identify areas requiring improvement and utilise feedback to develop actions plans to improve their performance in future exercises and assessments.

Legal skills taught in *Legal Research, Writing & Analysis* are reinforced in *Contract Law I*, where students apply these skills to practical scenarios related to principles of contract law. *Contract Law I* also introduces students in an incremental manner to the skills of legal reasoning and problem solving through authentic learning settings and thus emphasizes the importance of these skills in legal practice and in particular, in relation to the provision of legal advice. The assessment in this subject is a 'tutorial portfolio' which incorporates a number of authentic assessment tasks. Extensive feedback is provided on writing, referencing, structure and the logical presentation of ideas as well as content. Students submit their tutorial answers after attending the relevant tutorial and exploring their ideas in class with their tutor. As students are able to review their answers and make amendments prior to submission, this encourages the development of the students' skills through reflective learning. This also increases students' confidence in their problem solving skills and the application of their new legal skills in a substantive subject. Students also receive their feedback on each submission prior to the due date of the next item in the portfolio so as to ensure that they are able to review and improve their performance in light of their tutor's comments. Critical literacy, writing skills and legal skills developed in these first semester subjects are reinforced and further enhanced through explicit teaching practice and scaffolded assessment in the second semester in two further compulsory law subjects; *Law, Society & Change* and *Legal Concepts*.

Formative assessments adopted by the FYE in Law not only measure and provide feedback to students on skills acquisition and their understanding of content, but also facilitate learning with the intention of helping students to reduce their risk of failure. Summative assessment pieces across all compulsory subjects are organized and staged so that students are not required to submit several pieces of assessment in the same week. They are also scaffolded through the use of incremental exercises designed to prepare students for such assessment.

Support Systems

The program has a pastoral care focus designed to foster students' ability to cope with a demanding first year of legal studies at university. Subject coordinators have for the most part an open door policy to provide academic support and advice. The First Year Coordinator on each campus emails their respective intake weekly to provide essential just in time information and reaffirm themselves as a first point of contact for transition students. Law mentors attend lectures in the first few weeks to enable those who missed the opportunity to sign up for the program. Members of the student law societies 'Inter Alia' and 'JCLUS' also attend lectures and discuss the range of social and professional events and opportunities in which students may engage throughout the year. Peer Assisted Learning (PAL), run by successful final year law students, is also offered to first year students. The PAL program is built on the foundations of the mentor program and is designed to provide social and academic support to all students. PAL leaders are trained to run weekly sessions promoting one-on-one academic support to students. These initiatives are overseen by the First Year Coordinator on each campus.

The On-Track Program provides a support mechanism to assist at-risk students. Data collected is used to identify and understand possible issues and to facilitate the provision of appropriate support. The On-Track program has trained peer-supporters who make contact with identified at-risk students and offer support. Students are encouraged to use, and referred where necessary to, support resources and facilities such as the Teaching and Learning Development Learning Centre, Mentors, PAL leaders and Indigenous Support Officers to assist with their progression.

Refining the First Year of Law Program

The first year team meet at least once per year to engage in reflective practice and review student comments and suggestions with a view to exploring ways in which the FYE in Law can be enhanced.

A future development in the first year law program includes introducing a fifth module, Sustainability of Governance in the Community to enable students to connect with sustainability as an essential component of governance. A literacy project is currently in development with a focus on developing students' writing skills in preparation for both tertiary study and legal writing. The FYE in Law continues to be refined in spite of limited resources - the benefits of which continue to be positively reflected in Student Feedback about Subject (SFS) and Student Feedback about Teaching (SFT).