

First Year Champions in Health and Biomedicine: a three year partnership with Academic Support & Development

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Abstract

Initiated in 2012, Victoria University's "First Year Champions" (FYC) Project has operationalised a coherent, strategic and adaptable "whole-of-university" approach to improving first year student experience (FYE), learning, retention and success. The Project comprises a network of College-based academics as FYCs, working with Academic Support and Development (ASD) and Transition and Retention staff to develop and facilitate customised First Year Experience plans within each of the Colleges. Informed by transitions pedagogy (Kift, 2009) and First Year Experience in Higher Education (FYHE) literature, these targeted plans combine the strengths of a "whole-of-university" approach with the flexibility of College-based approaches. The FYCs have become their own network enabling a supportive community of practice within which FYCs can work independently, but also collaboratively, sharing ideas, strategies and innovations, to improve FYE.

Context

Many students at this Australian university apply directly to the university and enter without a formal Year 12 score; compared with other Australian universities, this university has a high share of low Socio-Economic Status students ranked below the midpoint of the formal Year 12 scores. Of note, the data used to gauge university preparedness for first year students (attrition, average mark and pass rate) give a picture that whilst underprepared, the students are motivated to succeed. These students have been the focus of the 2012 – 2016 Strategic Plan which positioned the University as "Excellent, Engaged and Accessible" and now the 2016 – 2020 Strategic Plan which positions the university as being the University of Opportunity and Success by being "Open and Excellent" and "Achieving transformation".

In 2012 this Australian university strategically and purposefully assigned Academic Language and Learning (ALL) specialists to discipline Colleges with the aim of better supporting academic staff with the language and learning needs of their students. Whilst the ALL unit continued to work as a central unit, the closer alliance and where possible a desk amongst discipline academics, was argued as necessary for effective and intentional embedding of ALL within core curricula. Requests from academics for various forms of ALL involvement increased but produced uneven or patchy coverage when whole courses were reviewed. To map student learning across first year and then later years, to identify areas where students needed ALL development and then reinforcement, where the content message could be improved, and where other university support services could be utilised, the academic role of First Year Champion was created. In the College of Health and Biomedicine at Victoria University, various collaborations have been operationalised through the

development of First Year Champions (FYCs) since 2013. The role has been closely monitored for its impact on the student experience, engagement and retention.

Academic Language and Learning

At many Australian universities, ALL often happens as an extra activity, sitting outside a student's main area of study (Briguglio, 2014). Potentially this conflicts with the 'whole of institution approaches' increasingly seen as the key to improving retention outcomes (Kift, 2009; Tinto, 2009). Their work has been encapsulated in the notion of a 'transition pedagogy' in which there is intentional curriculum design and cross institutional engagement with the First Year Experience combined with strong senior leadership and support (Kift, Nelson, & Clark, 2010).

The value of supporting all students to acquire discipline specific academic literacies as part of their university course of study is well documented (eg Lea, 2008; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2005). However, while student success plays a key role in increasing student engagement, students struggling or experiencing failure are more likely to drop out (Krause & Coates, 2008; Willcoxson et al., 2011). It is therefore important that consideration be given to ways in which the design and scaffolding of learning particularly in first year can be used to assist all students to access the required knowledge and skills.

The work of ALL can assist the development of strategies to craft a transition pedagogy in collaboration with the disciplines. These strategies include team teaching, mini lectures, resource development, targeted discipline-based assessment-focused workshops, generic skill workshops, student peer mentoring, and individual fact-to-face or online consultations (Briguglio, 2014).

At Victoria University, our ALL strategies are informed by the following objectives:

1. Support the development of academic literacies for all commencing students in targeted first year units, including Diplomas, through a combination of collaborative course design, direct teaching & co-teaching, and discipline focused resources.
2. Provide a student peer mentoring opportunity for every commencing degree student.
3. Assist in the identification of diverse cohorts & at-risk students and provide a range of 'embedded', online & locally delivered additional support programs for these students.
4. Work collaboratively with staff & students to improve outcomes at all levels, including post-first year and postgraduate. Strategies may include assisting in unit redesign, direct teaching and co-teaching, embedded scaffolded materials and resources and additional 'at-risk' programs.
5. Conduct and disseminate research designed to develop the capacity of teaching and learning at VU.

The closer our strategies occur inside the core curriculum the more meaningful they are to students but this can only be effectively achieved with the collaboration of discipline academics.

Selection and Development of FYCs

Following a successful pilot of the role in the College of Business, the ALL team developed a First Year Champion Position Description for the Deans of Colleges and Directors of

Learning and Teaching to use in the call for Expressions of Interest from discipline academics in targeted degrees.

Key tasks of the FYC role

- Work closely with the Director of Learning and Teaching (Strategy and Operations) to develop and implement 1st year engagement objectives
- Work closely with Course Chairs and Unit Convenors to achieve 1st year engagement objectives
- Represent the College at all university 1st year engagement meetings and activities
- Coordinate course orientation (both commencing and mid-year intakes)
- Work closely with staff from organisations such as Academic Support and Development, Student Advising, Centre for Collaborative Learning and Teaching, Victoria University Student Union
- Develop and support the College student society
- Report activity/progress on 1st year engagement to the College Learning and Teaching Committee
- Facilitate 1st year engagement activities at the College Learning and Teaching planning meetings.

Key criteria for the position were that the academic was currently teaching in a first year unit of study, understood the challenges of engaging students in a complex and messy world, possessed the initiative to engage with busy Course Chairs and Unit Convenors, had the capacity to contribute to course planning and coordination and a demonstrated ability to work with central units.

Funding from ALL allowed for up to a half time release for the academic to focus on the first year experience in that degree and to support a range of initiatives, working in close collaboration with an ALL academic. The FYCs report directly to the Director of Teaching and Learning with a 'dotted line' accountability to the Dean of Students who has oversight of the ALL unit and the University Participation and Success Strategy. Each FYC has responsibility for the development of a project plan for the first year experience within their nominated degrees with the overarching objective of positively impacting on the quality of the overall student experience and enhancing student engagement, success and retention. Each College plan differs but addresses building first year teaching capability, embedding academic support into key first year units and strengthening links to all available support services.

In the College of Health the process for appointing two First Year Champions was as follows. All course enrolment and attrition data were reviewed carefully by the Senior Leadership team, consisting of the College Dean, Director Learning & Teaching, Director Research & Research Training and College Manager. The two courses with the highest attrition rates were Nursing (17.5%) and Paramedicine (16.94%). An Expression of Interest was circulated to the nursing and paramedicine course leaders with a request to forward to all staff teaching within the first year of the respective degrees; two 0.5 appointments were secured (2014-2016) and one appointment has been secured for 2017.

Retention and Academic Language and Learning support

Retention of students is critical to the economic health of the university as well as the longer term reputational value of demonstrating support for student success. There is growing evidence around the impact of different strategies on student retention, and while these vary across institutions and disciplines there is broad agreement on a number of practices which appear to consistently lead to positive student engagement and a subsequent reduction in attrition (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010).

Students may seek academic support at any point along the university journey however, to assist retention, the logic is to proactively ‘front load’. As the literature suggests that commencing students need to be supported to develop the required academic literacies for success and achievement in higher education, the FYC role was seen as integral to furthering engagement between ALL and discipline lecturers. This approach is grounded in a proactive, developmental and embedded model of academic support which sees scaffolding of the development of discipline related academic literacies as an integral component of higher education study, rather than a deficit model in which academic skills are seen as independent of discipline knowledge (Lea, 2008).

In the College of Health and Biomedicine the two largest courses, nursing and paramedicine, were part of the FYC trial then rollout, working closely with ALL. In 2014 the primary responsibility of the FYC was to further embed academic support and development through working collaboratively with discipline and ALL lecturers. In subsequent years the aim was to extend the reach of the academic support and development provision to greater numbers of students. Rather than running sessions that students could choose to attend, sessions ran within students’ allocated tutorial times. Sessions commenced in Orientation week and continued throughout both semesters in units of study specifically chosen for their previous high fail rates.

The following are a few examples of the type of collaboration that occurred.

Post Entry English Language Assessment (PELA) – “understanding the student cohort”

In a first semester nursing unit the FYC liaised with the ALL lecturer on the development of an embedded Post Entry Language Assessment task, which is designed to give lecturers greater insight into the language and learning capabilities of the entering student cohort. Students participated in an informal writing activity and while the assessment did not contribute to the overall unit mark, a grade was awarded: *limited*, *partially effective*, *adequate* and *confident*. General feedback was provided during the Week 3 tutorial to the cohort. Students deemed *limited* and *partially effective* were emailed individually and advised of the outcome. They were provided with a number of links and contact details for academic writing support, writing workshops, and invited to meet with the unit coordinator to discuss additional strategies.

Peer Assisted Study Sessions

Through the process of unit evaluation it was identified that a semester one unit, Bioscience, had a high failure rate (29.09%). Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) were established in 2015 and led by students who had previously achieved high grades in the subject for which they were providing support. PASS was established not as a remedial program for struggling students but rather to target difficult units. First year students were invited to attend the PASS sessions which were held twice per week over the entire semester. The guided study groups provided guaranteed study time for these units, in addition to regular class times.

First year teaching community of practice

The two FYCs aimed to raise the profile of first year-related issues by initiating a first year community of practice. This Community of Practice was established for all College staff involved in teaching first year students in 2014 and is ongoing. The purpose of the Community of Practice (CoP) was to promote the importance of teaching in the first year and to focus on strategies that can be of particular value in first year teaching. These forums discussed and shared practice on first year teaching and learning strategies and occurred on a regular basis. In addition, key staff involved in the first year met twice per year to review all first year strategies and issues arising from the CoP. Staff included FYC, ALL lecturer, Course Leader, First year Coordinator, First year unit coordinators, Transition coordinator, Student Link coordinator and Manager Students Supporting Student Learning.

Review of the first year student experience

Understanding and effectively managing students' engagement in higher education plays a significant role in enhancing learning processes and outcomes for students (Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012). Building from the College of Business pilot, in Week 12 a First Year Experience questionnaire developed from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) was distributed to commencing nursing and paramedic students. The purpose of this survey of the commencing student experience was twofold. Firstly, it was designed to provide baseline data regarding key aspects of the student experience in the course and thus be used to evaluate the impact of subsequent interventions to improve the quality of this experience. Secondly, it was designed to identify areas for improvement to inform the focus of these interventions.

The questionnaire was administered to a cohort of nursing students in class sessions on 21 May 2014 and 23 May 2014 (Week 12) of Semester 1. It was completed anonymously by 125 students.

Highlights

- Overall students who participated in this questionnaire are generally satisfied with their experience within the Bachelor of Nursing.
- Students expressed a higher than National satisfaction with academic staff although a low satisfaction with administrative staff.
- Over 80% expressed they would come to VU if they had to start again
- Bioscience was classed as a 'difficult' unit, with a high content to learn
- Professional studies was classed as an 'easy' unit because it was straight forward and easy to follow

The pattern of response from the surveyed students was encouraging. Most were positive about their first-year experience. There was a sense of their satisfaction and with their educational experience so far. There were some negative findings but, for most at least, students commented the course was turning out to be as good as they had hoped and, in some ways, better.

Engagement in the 'Steps to Success' – extended orientation program

The FYC and ALL lecturers were actively involved in the 'Steps to Success' extended orientation program (2014-2016) and also sought to actively engage all first year teaching staff in this program. The program was designed to ensure that students are clear about requirements in the early weeks of their university experience and to encourage them to

engage with the university more broadly, building their sense of belonging and well-being. Each week a one page PowerPoint slide was circulated to students via email and was discussed at the start of every lecture. Each slide contained pertinent information relating to the corresponding week. For example in Week one information was about setting up one's student email account, logging on to the learning management system while in Week 4 there was information on checking one's enrolment status and preparing for census.

Evaluation

Evaluation has been both qualitative and quantitative and at unit and College level which has assisted in highlighting the many ways the FYCs and their ALL partners have been effective.

ALL lecturers have the academic literacy and learning skills, educational knowledge and abilities to help the FYCs to communicate 'best practice' approaches relating to student retention and success with their discipline colleagues particularly the first year unit coordinators. The FYC/ALL relationship is based on an acceptance by the FYCs of the ALL role as 'internal consultants' who are able to support and facilitate them with the efficient and effective implementation of the transition pedagogy. Thus establishment of an academic role within Colleges, that is, for a discipline lecturer to be a First Year Champion and liaise for and with ALL has considerably reduced separation and isolation between university entities.

Students may seek academic support at any point along the university journey however, to assist retention, the logic is to proactively 'front load' academic skills. As the literature suggests that commencing students need to be supported to develop the required academic literacies for success and achievement in higher education, the First Year Champion role was seen as integral to furthering early engagement between ALL and discipline lecturers. This approach was proactive and a positive, developmental experience with academic skills acquisition contributing to successful acquisition of discipline knowledge (Lea, 2008).

Impact

Early data has indicated that the FYC/ALL approach has marginally improved progression rates in targeted degrees, and a range of positive outcomes have been reported. These include a renewed and energised focus on first year teaching and a breaking down of organisational silos, facilitating a greater level of collaboration across academic, professional and service areas. The ideas promoted by Kift (2009) and Nelson et al. (2012) regarding their centrality to the FY experience have been fully supported and the project outcomes are helping to indicate which initiatives should be sustained and which changes should become institutionalised. In addition the project has provided a partnership model for systematising a university wide approach to the first year experience, while ensuring a high level of engagement and ownership for Colleges who are able to customise and develop specific activities which are relevant and responsive to local priorities. The outcomes from the project to date and its effective use of existing university systems and resources, have now facilitated a strong commitment to extending key elements of the approach across other year levels.

Since the FYC role commenced, an overall decrease in student attrition has been noted in Paramedicine from 16.3% to 13.4% and Nursing from 17.5% to 14.5%. There was a slight increase in nursing attrition in 2015 (up 1.92%) however this coincided with a larger cohort intake with 22.7% of the entire intake having an ATAR of less than 49.9. This can be seen in Table 1: Bachelor of Nursing attrition rate and Table 2: Bachelor of Paramedicine attrition rate.

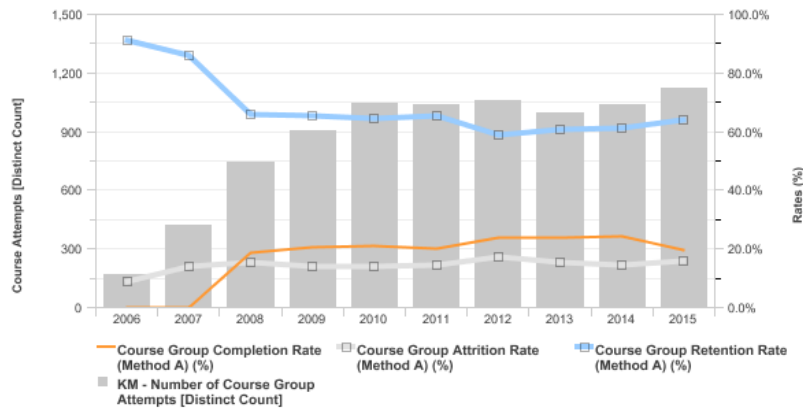


Table 1: Bachelor of Nursing attrition rate.

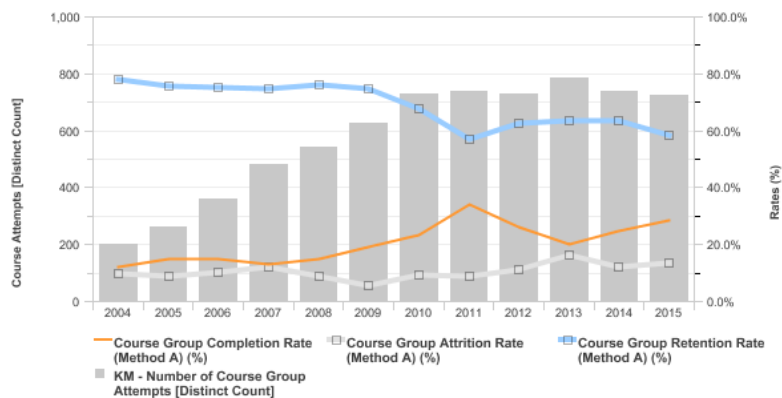


Table 2: Bachelor of Paramedicine attrition rate.

ALL has been embedded in a number of units across the College of Health and Biomedicine, student transition mentors have been engaged and a Peer Assisted Student Support program initiated. The combined strategies with the FYCs’ actions have achieved positive outcomes including improved pass rates (2013 – 2016) as shown in Table 3.

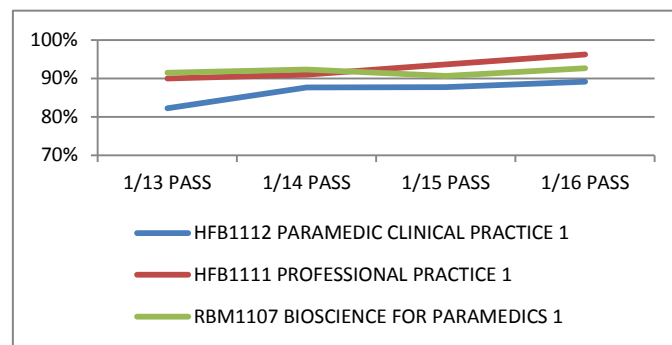


Table 3: Pass rates comparison for three targeted units of study

Additional to these supports a Community of Practice has been established that led to a First Year Forum being held in 2015. Further, the Student Link program has been utilised and an innovative use of Intelligent Agents through VU Collaborate has been trialled and systematised, contributing to the positive impact achieved. University systems have improved and what was outsourced in the Student Link (via Hobson’s) can now be achieved in-house.

The alignment of ALL lecturers and FYCs as a partnership was seen as a way of supporting new ways of thinking about first year learning and the student experience informed by both discipline knowledge and language and learning expertise. The FYCs partnership model received a 2016 Victoria University Vice-Chancellor’s Citation for Excellence in Programs that Enhance Learning. As student success and retention has improved in the targeted units, in 2017 the focus of FYC lecturers will move from course to an inclusive whole of College First Year cohort. Other critical student services have adopted or adapted our partnership model and have systematised ways to interact with the College, usually via the FYC. Figure 1 highlights these connections.



Figure 1 The FYC Partnership Model

Further to the findings of Willcoxson et al. (2011), the authors believe that knowledge gained from ALL strategies makes ALL lecturers pivotal for timely feedback and critical curriculum development for the benefit of students. That they cannot do it alone is obvious; discipline lecturers “own” the curriculum and the FYCs being discipline lecturers from “inside” each College have become the conduit for academic and other support services. Whilst now structurally enabled, the relationships, longevity of informed practice, evidence of outcomes and trust remain at the heart of a student-centred transitions pedagogy.

This year, 2017, is another year of transition for the university as further research at a whole of university level is being carried out to understand individual student needs, career goals, preparedness for higher education study, motivation and time available, given other commitments. This information is driving a new student experience with revamped curricula with interdisciplinary assessment that more comprehensively build peer support networks, student cohesion and students’ professional or discipline identity. An innovative approach to the first year experience is being developed which will have a whole of university focus for the first year student experience. This model, with a significant rearrangement and restructuring of “blended” and “flipped” teaching and learning activities, is a major extension of the existing First Year Champion project and will embody many of the pedagogical aspects of the ALL approach to supporting student success. For 2017, “Work closely with the Director of Learning and Teaching (Strategy and Operations) to engage in the consultation

and transition processes of the First Year College” was added to the tasks of the role on the Position Description.

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