

Victoria University's First Year College – Creating Culture through Revolutionary Transformation

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Abstract

This report reviews the findings of a staff satisfaction survey conducted in 2018 following the creation of a transformative and revolutionary approach to tertiary education in Australia, namely the creation of a new First Year College at Victoria University. The First Year College is dedicated to developing and delivering all first year units across Victoria University, using the transformative and revolutionary student-centered and transition pedagogy-driven First Year Model, encompassing highly engaging workshops delivered in block mode. This report discusses the staff satisfaction and challenges encountered in the inaugural year with the view to compare data following the 2019 teaching year.

Introduction

In 2018 Victoria University (VU) embarked upon a transformative and innovative approach to delivering tertiary education in Australia (Victoria University, 2017). VU set about developing and implementing the VU First Year Model (FYM), and this was supported by the creation of a First Year College (FYC). During 2018, the FYC delivered 160 units using the FYM which encompasses block mode teaching, supported by student-centered learning and highly engaging 3-hour workshops. The workshops comprise 'hands-on' activities and replace the traditional lecture/tutorial delivery. The carefully designed assessments are completed during the 4-week block and replace the traditional exam format. Each unit was underpinned by transitions pedagogies and engaging activities. Student-centred, motivated staff were recruited from within the University and externally. (McCluskey, Weldon & Smallridge, 2018)

The First Year College

The FYC is a multi-disciplinary College that has approximately 100 staff from all disciplines. The leadership structure consists of a Dean, four senior leadership staff, a leadership team of all Level C academics and above, and all remaining staff. The reporting lines are multi-disciplinary and the offices were randomly allocated to ensure this inclusive approach remained. In developing the units for delivery prior to the commencement of the teaching year, a multi-disciplinary team approach was formed and staff from all disciplines supported and assisted each other in the planning of units, assessments and student-centered engagement activities. This approach, and a common goal, provided for a unique and positive working environment.

The multi-disciplinary approach and the establishment of a new College with a common goal has led to some positive culture change within the University (McCluskey, Weldon & Smallridge, 2018). As the staff survey results indicate, there was a sense of belonging and collegiality that was deemed important to most staff. The College also set up some expectations that further developed the unity through a common Final Friday. Final Friday is the last day of the four week block where all staff come together to have grades ratified and engage in a brief meeting, unit meetings and pizza eating. This Final Friday has become a highlight of the College where all staff are welcome and look forward to engaging with their peers.

Assessing First Year College Staff's Experiences

In March 2018 First Year College staff were surveyed about their experiences in the newly implemented First Year College (FYC). Thirty percent of the FYC teaching staff (76% full-time and 24% part-time; 45% academic teaching researchers [ATRs] and 55% academic teaching scholars (ATs) responded to a survey that sought to identify what had worked well for teaching staff, together with the key challenges faced in delivery the revolutionary First Year model. The survey consisted of 10 questions including 4 open-ended questions that allowed staff to respond in their own words about their work environment, successes and challenges.

Key Findings

A. Quantitative Responses

Staff responses to a set of 11 questions about the FYC and work environment are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Staff Responses Relating to the FYC and Work Environment

First Year College (FYC)	Percentage who agreed or strongly agreed
I am proud to tell people where I work	86.21
FYC motivates me to go above and beyond in my role	86.21
I can see myself working in the FYC in 2 years' time	82.76
I am very satisfied with my current job	72.41
I have confidence in FYC leadership team	93.1
Work Environment	
I know what is expected of me at work	93.1
I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right	93.1
I find my day to day work challenging and interesting	100
In the last ten days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work	96.2
I am given the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect me	82.76
At work, all my colleagues are treated with respect	96.35

B. Qualitative Responses

(i) What Worked Well for Teaching Staff Within Immediate Work Area

In an inductive content analysis process recommended by Patton (2002), three key themes were identified in staff responses to what was working well within their immediate work area. These themes are listed in the following table together with representative quotes.

Table 2

What Worked Well for Teaching Staff Within Their Immediate Work Area

Key Themes	Representative Quotes
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Team Work and Collegiality	<i>The team work of our teaching team, always positive and willing to share ideas and be open to other ideas. I believe the student results will be exactly what we would have expected from a successful roll-out of First Year Model, engaged students improving their skills and providing vibrant classrooms, as opposed to sleepy lecture rooms.</i>
Student-focussed Approach	<i>Small class sizes. Active learning, which is dependent on unit-knowledgeable staff ... I think the materials are much more engaging, and it is great to be able to get to know the students by spending so much time with them each week.</i>
Critical Support for Teachers	<i>Having direct and highly approachable contact with the management of FYC. The support is second to none! ... Bravo for the project manager, the college senior management team and all the college support staff to manage such a large and new army of teachers.</i>

(ii) Opportunities for Improvement

In an inductive content analysis process recommended by Patton (2002), the following key themes were identified in the teaching staff's responses to things that could be changed or improved.

Table 3
Opportunities for Improvement

Key Themes	Representative Quotes
Clarify selected policies	<i>Clear policy for student extensions so we know what to tell them is the process.</i>
Clarify ATS, ATR and Unit Convening roles	<i>Currently it feels like the ATR and ATS do the same job all round except the ATS does double the teaching and marking and is paid less money</i>
Review professional development activities	<i>Professional development is readily available however with teaching and marking and clashes with timetable it is very difficult to attend and contribute on a deep level</i>
Build communications and interaction with senior college	<i>Lines of communication and a healthier relationship between the Discipline College and the First Year College</i>
Reallocate office space	<i>Look at getting office space for people, putting people with the groups they are working with so they can collaborate easily.</i>
Review scheduling of blocks	<i>A break between every second block rather than 16 weeks straight of teaching.</i>

Review scheduling of complementary activities	<i>Some students complained about the timetable clashing and limited availability for mandatory complementary activities.</i>
Allow enrolment into multiple blocks	<i>I think students should be allowed to select 2 units in a block, say block 6 and block 7.</i>
Review excessive workloads	<i>The workload is unsustainable. I have one day to mark 60 assessments. Even if each one took 5 minutes that's 5.5 hours of marking per week. Everything needs to be self-marking if we only have one day to get it back to them. The FYM means that we have less time to mark and provide meaningful feedback.</i>

(iii) General Comments about the Work Environment

Teaching staff were also given the opportunity to provide comment about their work environment. While many of the comments mirrored the themes reported in Tables 2 and 3, it is noteworthy to include two comment that illustrate the general response from the majority of the teaching staff, namely:

“I am very happy with the roll-out of the FYC. I really like Andrew’s (Smallridge) study, involvement and positive nature. I work with a team of Academic. ATs and sessional staff, it is a good team of hard working and considerate staff” and

“I have never worked in such a positive university environment! On my first day, I called my wife (who is also an academic) and said, “I don’t work at VU anymore, this is a different university!”

Discussion

The results from the First Year College Survey are most encouraging. They suggest the teaching staff have, in the main, embraced, endorsed and appreciated their involvement in the revolutionary block teaching model. Notwithstanding, the teaching staff have highlighted that the roll-out of this student-centred transformative initiative must continue to evolve (Kift, Nelson & Nelson, 2010). To this end, the teaching staff are importantly positioned at the ‘coal-face’ to identify the challenges, consult with management, and subsequently implement changes that will continue to ‘rewrite’ best practice in the delivery of tertiary education.

In conclusion, it is noted that a number of initiatives have been implemented since receiving information from the teaching staff in the 2018 First Year College Survey. These include: A FYC Wellness committee, Women in First Year College group, review of roles and responsibilities of ATS and ATR staff, review of workload allocation across the year, access to professional development to support teaching staff and one-on-one meetings with the Dean for each teaching staff member. We are very optimistic that improvements will continue to be made to enhance the well-being of the teaching staff, students and University.

Key Questions

1. How does your institution develop and/or support staff capability in teaching and learning and research?
2. What challenges are you able to identify in your teaching environment, and how have they been addressed by your institution?
3. What have been the main learnings from this presentation to inform your institution moving forward?

References

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