

Trials, Tribulations & Triumphs of the First Year Model.

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Abstract

In 2018, Victoria University embarked upon an ambitious and innovative approach to delivering first year tertiary studies. A new multi-disciplinary First Year College was established, with new leadership and teaching staff appointed to student-centered positions. The structure in which the university delivered higher education radically changed from a “traditional” university structure (i.e. 12 week semesters, 1 week swot-vac and a 3 week exam period, with students studying 4 units concurrently) to an intensive “block” model, where students study 1 unit at a time for 1 month intensively and then move onto the next unit. This model enables students to study 4 units over the same 16 week semester period as traditional university models. Lectures were abolished from all units, class sizes were reduced, class timetabling was dramatically changed to allow for greater student study flexibility and accessibility, learning and teaching professional staff numbers increased and facilities were built and repurposed.

Introduction

The curriculum and units in the first year across all disciplines were completely redesigned and re-developed to be highly engaging, blended and student focused within the block model. Many of the principles of the Victoria University (VU) Model and the First Year College (FYC) were designed by embedding the ideas of transition pedagogies (Kift, 2009; 2015) to facilitate students’ passage from school to university life. It was an ambitious and exciting initiative that has resulted in increased student engagement, experience, grades and retention. The success of the First Year Model (FYM) within first year units has led to its future implementation across all years of undergraduate courses at Victoria University, beginning with second year courses from 2019. This emerging initiative report describes the trials, tribulations and triumphs in the first year of this endeavour by utilising the STARS acronym (students, transition, achievement, retention and success).

Students

There are approximately 27,000 students at VU. Many of the students are from the surrounding Western suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. The student cohort in the First Year College in the inaugural year of 2018 consisted of a high proportion of first in family, low socio-economic status students and students from a non-english speaking background along with other domestic students. With such a diverse student population, the data collected after the first year of teaching in block mode with a purposely-conceived First Year College was very promising. This is evident in the fact that VU is embarking upon the First Year and Beyond project, which will see the block mode of teaching rolled out to second year in 2019.

Transition

Higher rates of student retention are linked with an enhanced first year experience, allowing students to immerse themselves into tertiary education (Kift, 2015; O’Donnell et al., 2015;

Wilson, 2009). Victoria University’s First Year Model has embraced Sally Kift’s transitional pedagogy principles that has theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of its student success practices. Staff feedback has coincided in identifying some of these principles as pivotal for the improvement of the first year experience. These principles are transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, evaluation, and monitoring. The principles are not discipline explicit and act as general foundational guidelines that require specificity in order to be applied to teaching practices (Kift & Nelson, 2005 Kift, 2009; Kift et al., 2010). O’Donnell et al (2015) described the “Six First Year Firsts: Critical Curriculum Points” in the University of Wollongong (UOW report) which are six crucial moments in first year tertiary studies that substantially contribute to academic success. The success in the students’ first class, first week, first assessment, first feedback, first final test and first unit, will heavily influence the outcomes of future milestones (Harden-Thew & Dean 2015).

Transitions occur not only when beginning university but throughout the student experience. Transitions occur at several stages of a student’s academic career. Students have diverse abilities that influences their capacity to navigate the transition to tertiary education (Kift, 2009). Every stage and transition milestone is important and requires special attention. Whilst VU has a particular focus on the first year experience the principles apply at all points of transition for students. Kift and colleagues (2015) described as “third generation” approaches to first year transition and retention strategies as student learning focus (transition pedagogy). While many Australian academics and institutions support the concepts and philosophy of transitional pedagogy, only Victoria University has adopted institution-wide reforms and transformation in this area. A strategic whole of institution suite of transition activities including curricular, co-curricular and administrative support functions are mediated through “the organizing device of curriculum” (Kift & Nelson, 2005, p. 232).

Achievement

Student pass rates were improved overall from 2017 to the introduction of the FYC and the FYM in 2018. While much of this success can be attributed to the major overhaul of the curriculum, it is also largely due to the establishment of a First Year College and a staff who were purpose selected for their teaching passion and commitment to students.

The adoption of a block mode of teaching, with the expectation that students attend and fully engage in classes and with online content has shown positive results. All staff use the VU online learning management system ‘VU Collaborate’ to support the learning of content and to provide resources to excite and extend students. Students who engage with the online platform are more likely to succeed. The table below indicates clearly why engaging with the online platform will result in student success.

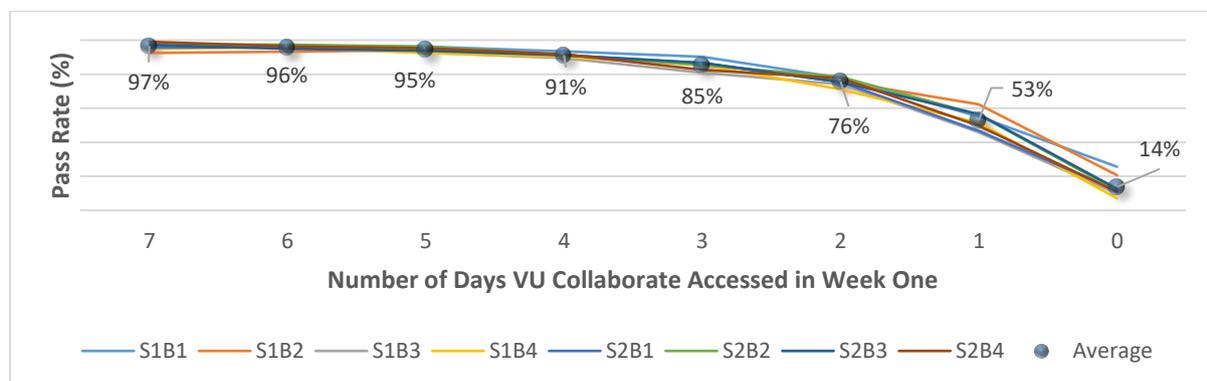


Figure 1: Pass rate by number of days VU Collaborate accessed in week one (2018).

As the FYM curriculum was being developed with Kift’s ‘transition pedagogies’ in mind, the staff were designing curriculum and learning and teaching and assessments that took into account our student diversity and the whole student experience. Staff were encouraged to include activities that were technology based with videos, H5P’s, simulations, community-based projects and other means of engaging students (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

Retention

Studies have demonstrated that universities who induct their students into the university culture and teachers who support students in their transition to learning both new academic skills and their discipline environment significantly improve the retention, success and satisfaction of students (Wilson, 2009). Victoria University’s VU’s Transformation Change paper (Victoria University, November 2017), as part of the organisational and revolutionary transformation has implemented a First Year College, a separate entity that has dramatically changed (revolutionized) tertiary education with a complete overhaul of the teaching strategies and content delivery.

Lectures have been replaced by face-to-face workshops and a highly interactive set of teaching and pedagogical tools that allow an ongoing participation and continuous access to all materials. Early results indicate an improvement in retention rates between 2017 and 2018 inter-semester retention data.

Success

Success was ascertained by pass rates, retention and completions. Pass rates by socio-economic status increased by 15%, 13% and 9% for low, medium and high respectively. Similarly, pass rates improved for both first in family and non-first in family students by 13 and 11% respectively (2017 vs. 2018 data)

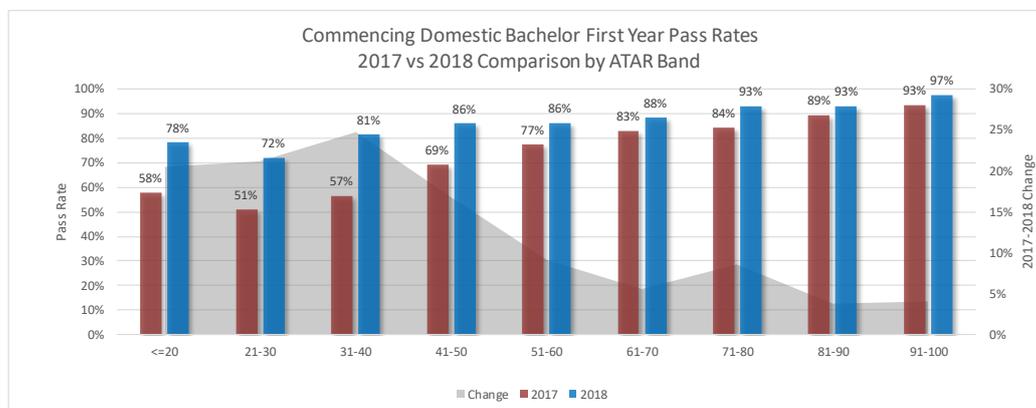


Figure 2: First year student pass rate comparison by ATAR band, 2017 vs. 2018.

All of these factors are closely linked to the student experience. As Lizzio and Wilson (2004) argue, poor teaching and curriculum that is not engaging and is deemed by the student as irrelevant or simply unhelpful will result in less student success. As the FYM has completely redesigned the curriculum and has employed motivated and expert permanent teaching professionals, the FYC is seeing success for its students.

The other innovative action that the FYM encompasses is that of the Study Essentials activities. These are activities attached to each unit, delivered by the student learning hubs that support learnings or assessment in that unit. E.g. how to create a great presentation, reading and writing skills. The FYC comes from the premise that students should see seek support to work towards

excellence and that support seeking behaviour is normal, with teachers constantly embracing this philosophy in the classroom. “To be effective, support must be early before student struggles undermine their motivation to persist and be structured so as to enhance student uptake of support” (Tinto, 2017. p.3).

Trials and Tribulations

While there were many successes in the implementation of the First Year College and the First Year model, there were certainly challenges. Major organisational change operates at many levels including process, structures, systems and institution wide challenges (Marshall, 2012). While the primary focus of the FYC and the FYM was to make the curriculum student-centered and staff- driven while remaining authentic and engaging, the shift to block mode-teaching delivery has had wide reaching effects, summarized in figure 1.

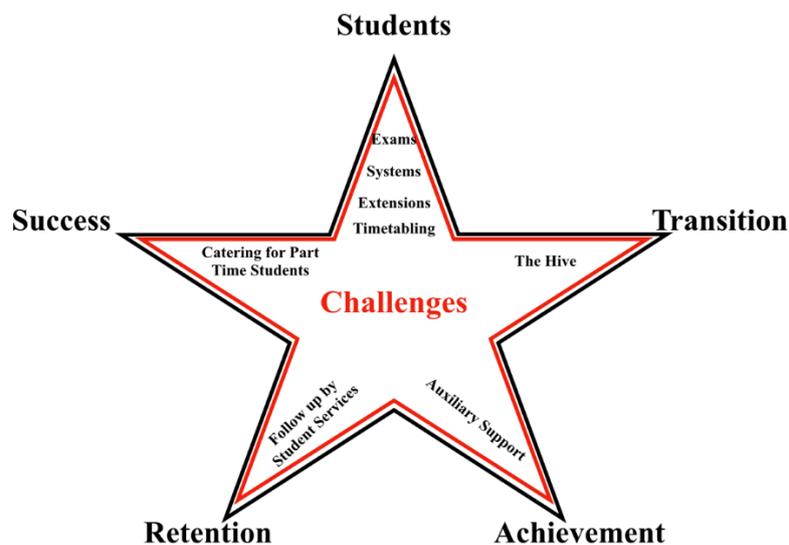


Figure 3: Summary of the challenges faced during the design and implementation of the First Year Model using the STARS acronym.

The primary challenge for all staff was the workload implications, with increased teaching contact time, faster turnarounds required for marking and continual updating of the learning management system online spaces compared to “traditional” university teaching. Every unit delivered in 2018 in the FYC was completely re-developed following the principles of success developed by Kift and Field, (2009). Using these principles in conjunction with developing engaging three-hour workshops was certainly a challenge and many staff worked up until day one of the semester. This worked with collaboration between a great number of staff as indicated below. It was a time of great innovation and discussion of pedagogy, engagement and assessment.

Conclusion

The VU Model with its transformative institution-wide approach to tertiary education has triumphed in the key S.T.A.R.S areas despite many trials and tribulations.

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