

Increasing student success in first-year university through intentional curriculum design: the development of consistent unit guidelines.

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Abstract

The literature is clear that for transition pedagogy to be most effective it must be embedded throughout the first-year curriculum at an institutional level. Here, we pilot the development and implementation of guidelines for first-year unit development based on transition pedagogy and the Universal Design of Learning framework. Seven units with an average of 290 enrolled students were redeveloped for consistency and clarity, with a focus on three key areas: scaffolding of content, assessment design, and unit delivery. The average pass rate across all unit offerings increased from 67% (in 2022) to 85% (in 2023), accounting for approximately 360 additional passing grades. The guidelines are now used to inform all first-year unit development work at our university.

Proposal

Rationale

Australia is in the midst of a major educational reform. To meet the demand for far greater numbers of higher education graduates, graduates from non-traditional backgrounds will need to increase. Students from equity groups have traditionally had lower success at university, particularly when cumulative disadvantage is considered (Teakel et al., 2023; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). A well developed, institution wide transition pedagogy, including an intentionally designed curriculum has been shown to support diverse student cohorts (Kift et al., 2010). Similarly, the Universal Design for Learning framework provides a learner-centred approach that supports diverse populations (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). The aim of this initiative was to improve program level student success by developing and implementing a consistent set of guidelines for unit development to inform intentional and inclusive design.

Approach/method

Seven units with an average number of 290 enrolled students (range 43-558) from across three bachelor programs (Nursing, Business, and Education) were selected to participate in this project. Ethics approval was received from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Protocol No H21170).

The unit development involved reviewing all aspects of the unit with a program-based lens including LMS sites, learning analytics, open text unit evaluations and QILT survey responses. During this process a list of guidelines was created on what should be included in a well-designed first-year unit based on transition pedagogy and the Universal Design of Learning framework. The focus areas of the guidelines were well-scaffolded content, coherent assessment design, and unit delivery that enhanced accessibility and transparency. A small team of academic and professional staff worked together to redevelop the units based on the guidelines that emphasised achievable elements for academics without the support of a team –

such as a weekly checklist, pre-recorded concept videos or podcasts, consistent sequencing of learning content, and learning activities and frequent opportunities for students to clarify their understanding of assessment requirements.

Results

The average pass rate across all unit offerings increased on average from 67% (in 2022) to 85% (in 2023). This 18% increase accounted for approximately 360 additional passing grades of the 2019 students enrolled in the seven units. This was the result of a decrease in the number of zero-fail (ZF), fail (FL) grades and an increase in the number of credit (CR), distinction (DI) and high distinction (HD) grades (Figure 1A). The impact of the unit redevelopment on equity groups was evaluated (Figure 1 B). The average student level progress rate increased by 17% for the 509 students with no equity factors, while those with one, two or three equity factors saw an increase of 19%, 22% and 10%, respectively.

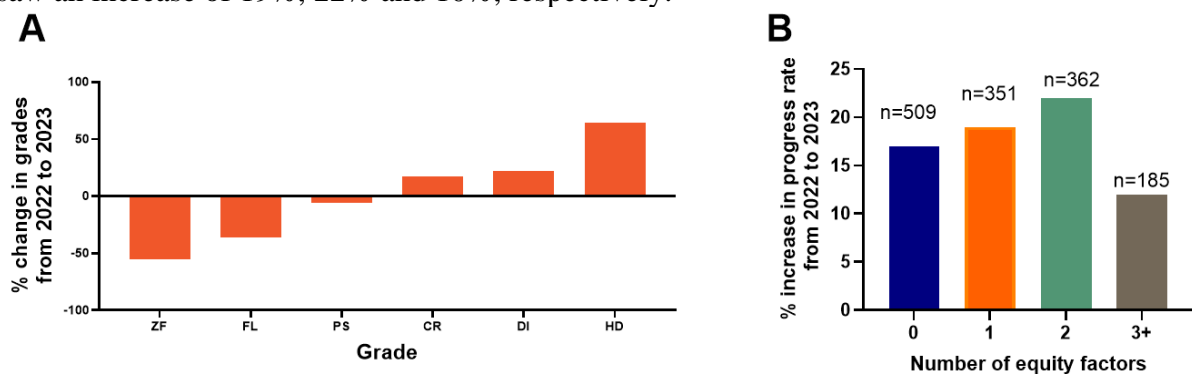


Figure 1. A). Changes in percentage of grades from 2022 to 2023. There were fewer zero fails (ZF) and more high distinctions (HD) and B) Average percentage increase in progress rate from 2022 to 2023 based on the number of cumulative equity factors.

Questions for audience discussion

1. What can we do to improve consistency and clarity in first-year units?
2. What is one area of unit design that is critical for a smooth transition?

References

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