A Staff-Centred Approach to Enhancing First Year Learning and Teaching at the University of New South Wales

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This paper reports on a staff-centred approach to enhancing first year learning and teaching at UNSW. The initiative provides opportunities for a First Year Coordinators Network to attend workshops and develop "community strategies" that are then shared more widely through a designated website to support staff in addressing first year learning and teaching issues. The initiative promotes sustainable change in first year learning and teaching by encouraging teaching as community property (Schulman, 1993) and the idea that teaching and learning can be improved through conversation and community (Palmer, 1993). The UNSW Survey of Student Engagement and First Year Student Engagement (adapted from the National Survey of Student Engagement in the U.S.) were used to assess the impact of the approach on first year student learning and engagement. Results suggest significant improvements from 2004-2006 in areas such as level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction.

This paper describes a staff-centred approach to supporting academic and general staff involved in first year learning and teaching at The University of New South Wales (UNSW). In addition to issues associated with first year student learning, feedback from staff pointed to a range of broader issues and concerns impacting on their experience of teaching and coordinating first year courses. For example, responses to a survey distributed to first year teachers and coordinators at UNSW on the challenges they face in their role indicated that staff often feel unrecognised and unrewarded for their efforts. Responses suggested that insufficient funding and resources, work overload and time management issues were also common to the experience of staff involved in first year teaching.

While these issues are common to the academic profession, they may be seen as particularly pronounced in the case of first year. Teaching and coordinating large first year courses is often associated with challenges such as a greater administrative load, resource constraints, feelings of anonymity for staff and students, greater student diversity, more time needed for marking and providing feedback and longer consultation hours. In addition to these challenges, academics teaching and coordinating first year have to incorporate ways of supporting first year students' transition to university. Collectively, these challenges mean that staff need to manage their time carefully and enhance their communication with students and colleagues, in addition to finding time to look after their own wellbeing.

In a paper describing the impact of learning communities on the experience of new academic staff, Fayne (2006) tracks "their developmental trajectory, which led them from an initial concern with self and survival to an eventual focus on student learning" (p.277). Similarly, the initiative at UNSW to support staff teaching and coordinating first year at UNSW is built

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on the notion that if staff are supported with issues associated with "self and survival" then they will be in a much better position to address issues associated with first year student learning and engagement. The importance of addressing "the human condition of the teacher" is echoed strongly in the work of Palmer (1998):

> In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriateness, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher on whom so much depends. (p.3)

The First Year Coordinators Network, workshops and website that form the main components of the UNSW first year initiative focus on community building amongst staff. As suggested by Schulman, "if we wish to see greater recognition and reward attached to teaching, we must change the status of teaching from private to community property" (p. 141). Schulman's strategies for encouraging teaching as community property include opportunities for peer review amongst staff and the production of "artefacts" (documentation and transformation). The network, workshops and website developed as part of this initiative focus on peer review and support, the development of visible artefacts to promote first year teaching and increased recognition and reward. This is supported by Winefield et al. (2002) who suggest that peer support and recognition are two of the major contributors to enhancing the experience of academic staff.

Modelling student-centred learning: towards staff-centred development

In a paper addressing perceptions of academic staff development, Buckridge (2003) asks the very important question: "…when we invoke the idea of 'student-centred learning', do we acknowledge its correlative of 'staff-centred development'?" For example, academic development units may promote the idea that student motivation and engagement can be increased by creating a community of learners. To what degree, however, do we promote this idea within a staff development context? Similarly, if we consider factors such as acknowledging student diversity and providing structured opportunities for reflection and feedback as key principles of student learning and engagement, to what extent do we apply these guiding principles in our approach to staff development?

In order to model student-centred learning, the "Guidelines on Learning That Inform Teaching at UNSW" (University of New South Wales, 2004b), from here on referred to as "the Guidelines", have been deliberately used as a framework for the development of workshops and resources to support staff teaching and coordinating first year, and to guide the process of community building amongst staff. The use of the Guidelines applies key principles of student learning and engagement in the context of staff support and development.

The Guidelines were developed to support and assist staff in reflecting on and improving their teaching in order to enhance the educational experience we offer our students. Each guideline is based on a survey of the literature in higher education and student learning as well as on student feedback about the learning experience at UNSW. Applied in the context of staff development, the Guidelines are intended to foster staff engagement and create inclusive development opportunities. In the following Guidelines, the word "student" has been replaced by "staff". Collectively these Guidelines have been used to guide the development of workshops, resources and the nurturing of learning communities amongst staff teaching and coordinating first year:

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Guideline 4: Structured occasions for reflection allow [staff] to explore their experiences, challenge current beliefs, and develop new practices and understandings.

Guideline 5: Learning is more effective when [the] prior experience and knowledge [of staff is] recognised and built on.

Guideline 7: If dialogue is encouraged between [staff] thus creating a community of learners, [staff] motivation and engagement can be increased.

Guideline 14: Learning cooperatively with peers — rather than in an individualistic or competitive way — may help [staff] to develop interpersonal, professional, and cognitive skills to a higher level.

The Guidelines above focus on opportunities for reflection and community building by encouraging dialogue about learning and teaching and drawing on the collective experience of staff. As a framework for staff development activities they respond directly to feedback from first year staff about the need for more time to reflect on teaching and share issues and strategies with colleagues from similar and different disciplinary backgrounds. Overall, this approach supports the idea that for student-centered learning to be meaningful, similar principles must apply to academics and non-academics undertaking staff development.

Supporting First Year Learning and Teaching at UNSW: about the initiative

The aim of the first year initiative at UNSW is to identify key issues for First Year Coordinators and teachers and to develop appropriate resources to support this group. Based on the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 2002), this involves providing opportunities for First Year Coordinators to attend workshops to share learning and teaching issues and strategies and develop their practice collaboratively with colleagues. In addition, the aim is to draw on the experience of this group to assist with the ongoing development of a First Year Teaching website to support the first year learning and teaching community more broadly.
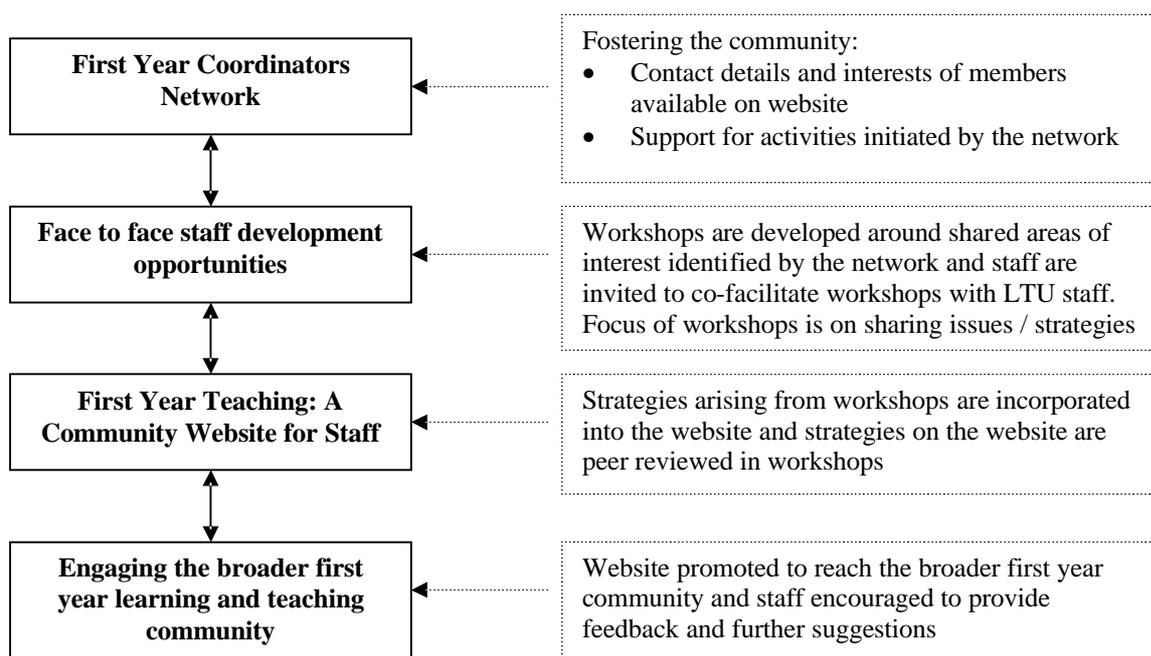
The goal of the initiative is to improve the experience of staff teaching and coordinating first year. This distinguishes it from projects that focus primarily on the student learning experience. While improving first year student engagement is a fundamental goal of the project, the means by which this is achieved is through support for those responsible for teaching and supporting first year. This approach recognises that staff teaching and coordinating first year courses are under increased pressure as a result of growing student numbers, limited resources, and issues associated with student disengagement (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). The intended outcomes of the project are that First Year Coordinators and teachers will feel more supported in their role by having access to the network, workshops and resources that address their identified needs.

As shown in Figure 1, the initiative comprises a First Year Coordinators Network, a series of workshops and the ongoing development of a website to support the broader first year learning and teaching community.

First Year Coordinators Network

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The First Year Coordinators Network was established in 2005 to provide staff with regular opportunities to share experiences, issues and strategies with colleagues (the network consisting of approximately 125 staff). Members of the network are invited to attend workshops on shared areas of interest and concern in learning and teaching, and contribute to the ongoing development of the First Year Teaching website.

Figure 1. Components of the staff-centred approach to enhancing first year learning and teaching at UNSW

First Year Coordinators Network	Fostering the community: • Contact details and interests of members available on website • Support for activities initiated by the network
Face to face staff development opportunities	Workshops are developed around shared areas of interest identified by the network and staff are invited to co-facilitate workshops with LTU staff. Focus of workshops is on sharing issues / strategies
First Year Teaching: A Community Website for Staff	Strategies arising from workshops are incorporated into the website and strategies on the website are peer reviewed in workshops
Engaging the broader first year learning and teaching community	Website promoted to reach the broader first year community and staff encouraged to provide feedback and further suggestions

Face to face staff development opportunities

Workshops for First Year Coordinators and teachers are intended to provide opportunities for staff to share issues and experiences. During the first workshop participants endorsed the development of a website to support staff involved in first year learning and teaching. In particular, they identified the need for a website to support first year coordinators, first year teachers (including full-time and sessional staff), and first year advisors. Subsequent workshops have focused on different aspects of teaching first year such as managing tutors in large first year courses and team teaching in first year. A total of 59 staff participated in these early workshops representing seven Faculties and three support units across the University.

First Year Teaching: A Community Website for Staff

Based on feedback from the initial First Year Coordinators workshop, a First Year Teaching website was developed in late 2005 to support staff involved in first year learning and teaching at UNSW (http://www.firstyear.unsw.edu.au). As shown in Figure 2, the website includes "community strategies" for addressing issues specific to first year such as teaching and coordinating large first year classes, time management, dealing with resource constraints and strategies for self care. In addition to a focus on the teaching experience, the website offers ideas, strategies and resources to support staff in enhancing their students' experience

of learning in first year at UNSW. For example it addresses questions such as how can we support students' transition, engage first year students in their learning, encourage interactions with diverse groups of students, provide challenging learning experiences and help first year students to feel part of the discipline community? The website also provides information about current activities and resources at UNSW and provides access to supporting resources.

Since 2001, initiatives central to the First Year Experience at UNSW such as the First Year Learning and Teaching Awards, Peer Mentoring for first year students, the First Year Coordinators Network and initiatives to improve students' social and academic transition to University have produced many valuable supporting resources. The website brings all of these resources together in one place to make them easily accessible to staff.

Figure 2. Structure of First Year Teaching: A Community Website for Staff
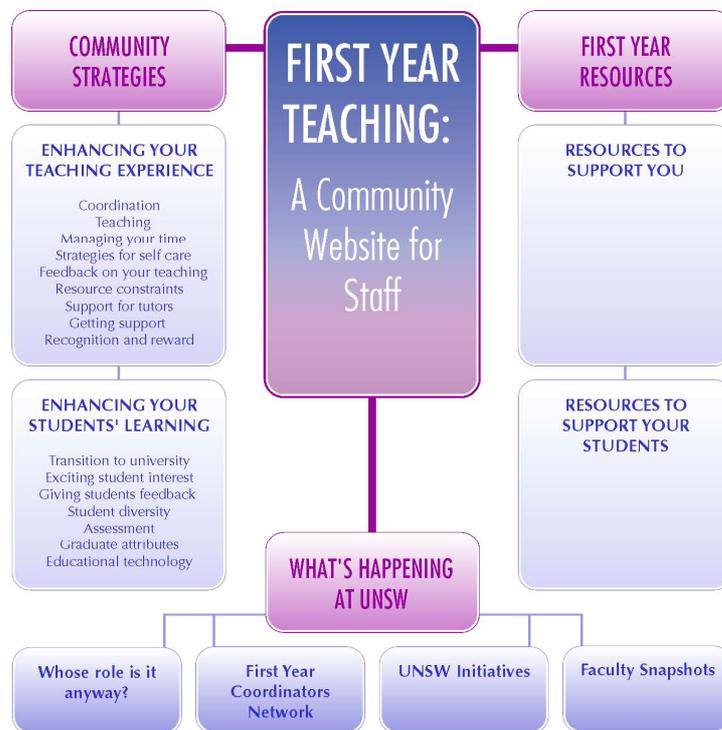
Improvements in levels of engagement for first year students

In order to assess the impact of the initiative on the first year student experience, comparisons were made between institutional data collected between 2004 and 2006. In Session 2, 2004, UNSW conducted a *Survey of First Year Student Engagement*. The survey was an adaptation of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) used widely in the USA. Over the past two years, the University's annual student survey was also adapted to reflect the NSSE. As this broader survey includes the same set of core items, and includes first year student respondents, comparisons can be made between the surveys from 2004 to 2006.

In general, the surveys were designed to obtain information about the extent to which participation in programs and activities at UNSW is actually providing for students' learning and personal development. The surveys are intended to help the University gain a better

understanding of how students engage with their learning experience at UNSW and whether they are satisfied with the quality of education, facilities and services provided. The surveys were developed for use at UNSW by the Institutional Analysis and Reporting Office, with the assistance of the Learning and Teaching Unit.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the USA is based on five scales on student engagement: level of academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student-faculty interaction; enriching educational experiences; and supportive campus environment. Its design is based on the belief that "the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development" (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005). Items included in these scales are considered to be benchmarks of effective educational practice. The surveys at UNSW were designed to incorporate many of these items. In some cases the wording of items was altered slightly to suit the Australian context.

Survey Methodology and Response Rates

The Survey of First Year Student Engagement 2004 was posted to 953 students in their first year of undergraduate study at UNSW (i.e. students new to higher education). Valid returns were obtained from 279 respondents, a response rate of 29.3%. In broad terms, the distribution of the respondents by Faculty reflected the distribution of the total target population.

The Student Experience Survey 2006 was administered to students online through myUNSW. The student sample size was 7000, broken down by career level, faculty and citizenship to match the distribution of the current UNSW student population. Valid returns were obtained from 2,189 students (a 30% response rate). Of these, 668 were first year students. An analysis demonstrated that the distribution of first year student respondents by Faculty was representative of the overall distribution of undergraduate commencing students at UNSW.

Results

Figure 3 shows comparisons between 2004 and 2006 for items that correspond directly with the scales of student engagement which form the basis of NSSE. The scale "Supportive Campus Environment" is not included because the rating scale for associated items was adjusted in 2006. Percentages shown in Figure 3 are aggregates of the two highest points on the response scale used for each item (for example, "very often", "often" or "very much", "quite a bit").

Figure 3. Comparison of first year student data between 2004 and 2006

	2004 %	2006 %
LEVEL OF ACADEMIC CHALLENGE		
Worked harder than you thought you could to meet a lecturer's standards or expectations	37.9	36.4
Analysing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory, such as a particular case or situation in depth	63.9	79.4*
Synthesising and organising ideas, information or experiences into new, more complex interpretations/relationships	62.5	67.4
Making judgments about the value of information, arguments or methods	50.2	63.9*
Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations	64.6	70.8

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LEVEL OF ACTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING	%	%
Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	49.1	58*
Made a class presentation	39.1	42.5
Worked with other students on projects during class	29.3	59.6*
Prepared class assignments that required working with classmates outside of class	48.7	48.9
Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)	12.2	16.6
Participated in a community-based project as part of a UNSW course	3.9	5
Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class time	55.2	57.3

STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION	%	%
Discussed grades or assignments with a lecturer or tutor outside of class times	12.2	14.9
Talked about career plans with a member of academic staff or careers adviser	4.3	7.7
Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with members of academic staff outside of class	9	12.3
Received prompt feedback from teaching staff on your academic performance (written or oral)	27.6	35.4*
Worked with members of academic staff on activities other than coursework	4.3	6.5
Contributing to the welfare of your community	18.5	29.6

ENRICHING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES	%	%
Used an electronic medium (list-serv, chat group, Internet, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment	56	50.7
Had meaningful conversations with students of a different cultural group or ethnicity than your own	56.3	57.7
Had meaningful conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their belief/opinions/values	55.9	51.7

Statistically significant (Two-proportion z-test, unequal variances, 1%)

Results suggest improvements between 2004 and 2006 in the extent to which students are challenged academically, in particular, improvements in the extent to which students' coursework has emphasised analysing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory, such as a particular case or situation in depth, and making judgements about the value of information, arguments or methods.

Results also suggest improvements in the area of active and collaborative learning, in particular, improvements in the extent to which first year students reported asking questions or contributing to class discussions, and working with other students on projects during class. Improvements were also found for other items on the survey that are designed to measure opportunities for students to develop graduate attributes. Items where improvement between 2004 and 2006 was found to be statistically significant (based on a two-proportion z-test, unequal variances, 5%) include: acquiring a broad general education; writing clearly and effectively; thinking critically and analytically; analysing quantitative problems; working effectively with others; working effectively on your own; understanding yourself; and solving complex real-world problems.

Improvements can also be seen across all items associated with student-faculty interaction. Of particular significance is an improvement in the extent to which first year students reported receiving prompt feedback on their academic performance.

The items that suggest least improvement between 2004 and 2006 fall into the scale "enriching educational experiences". This result suggests that first year students are not being provided with opportunities that encourage meaningful conversations with students of

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different cultural groups and ethnicities, and with students who have different beliefs, opinions or values. However, a further item on the survey which asks students about the extent to which their experience has contributed to their understanding of people of other cultural and ethnic backgrounds yielded a significant improvement between 2004 and 2006. At this stage there is not enough known about ways in which staff are drawing on and acknowledging student diversity in the curriculum. Such information would shed further light on the results associated with these items. The dramatic increase in opportunities for first year students to participate in group work projects may have impacted on this latter more positive result.

What factors may have contributed to these improvements?

There are a number of factors suggesting that improvements can be attributed, in part, to the learning and teaching initiatives described in this paper. It was expected that the benefits of the first year awards scheme in 2002 and 2003 (that resulted in 39 projects to improve engagement and the embedding of graduate attributes in first year) may not be seen until later years. Many of the projects developed during the awards period were fully implemented in the following year, and further refined in subsequent years. The areas of learning and teaching targeted through the awards scheme correspond with the areas showing most improvement. For example, the focus of the awards was on supporting first year projects that excited and engaged students in their learning and that integrated graduate attributes in first year courses. Specifically, projects covered the following themes:

- exciting student interest in the discipline
- encouraging active, student-centred learning
- developing students information literacy and research skills
- developing students group work skills
- developing students critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- developing students communication skills
- using educational technology to enhance learning in first year
- supporting first year peer mentoring

Areas which showed the least improvement between 2004 and 2006 were not targeted through the awards scheme and as a result were not the focus of subsequent case studies and website resources that were shared with the broader first year teaching community.

The underlying strategy of the awards scheme was that the results of projects be shared more broadly. This occurred through two first year forums, two resource booklets and online versions of all case studies in 2005. In addition, first year awardees continued to participate in a range of other learning and teaching initiatives such as participation in academic panels in programs for new staff, and facilitating learning and teaching workshops in collaboration with staff from the Learning and Teaching Unit through the University's UNILT (UNSW Network in Learning and Teaching) Program. This broader sharing of resources may have contributed to improvements between 2004 and 2006.

Website statistics show a steady increase in visitors to the First Year Teaching site since its development in late 2005, and indicate that all 39 of the first year case studies have been regularly accessed by staff (several of them being accessed over 300 times each in 2005). Similarly the resource booklets which emerged from the awards process and fora have been consistently accessed through the website. For example between October 2004 and August

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2005, proceedings of the first year forum 2002 were accessed 844 times and proceedings of the first year forum 2003 were accessed 2250 times. While it is difficult to gauge exactly how many of these downloads were from UNSW staff, website statistics indicate that UNSW staff represent a significant proportion of visitors to the website.

Other contributing factors

In addition to the initiatives described here, improvements could also be attributed to the number of staff attending the five-day intensive UNSW Foundations of Learning and Teaching (FULT) Program. From 2005, UNSW introduced a set of Faculty Learning and Teaching Indicators which included a requirement that all new staff attend the FULT Program. This significantly increased the number of staff who participated in the program, and a large proportion of these staff members teach into first year courses. Therefore, it is likely that the increase in participation levels may have also made an important contribution to improvements in the level of first year student engagement indicated by the Student Experience Surveys between 2004 and 2006.

It is likely that a number of other important curriculum developments contributed to improvements over the past three years. These include the introduction of the new Medical curriculum which places significant emphasis on the development of students' graduate attributes, and a new first year Engineering course which focuses on group work and problem solving in design Engineering. Both the new Medical curriculum and first year design course in the Faculty of Engineering explicitly support students in reflecting on their learning and skills development through the use of portfolios, reflective journals and peer review processes. It could be argued that these changes have contributed to improvements in items associated with graduate attributes such as "understanding yourself", "solving complex real-world problems", and "developing a personal code of values and ethics".

The way forward

The goal of the staff-centred initiative to enhance first year learning and teaching at UNSW is to increase support, reward and recognition, and a sense of community for staff involved in teaching and coordinating first year. Through this process, strategies for supporting the first year student learning experience are shared widely amongst staff. Institutional survey results suggest that this approach is having a positive impact on first year students' learning experience, showing significant improvements between 2004 and 2006 in a number of key areas including level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, and student-faculty interaction.

While other policies (such as the Faculty Learning and Teaching Performance Indicators) and curriculum changes in first year are likely to have contributed to improvements, the staff development component is considered a key factor in keeping staff engaged and supported in their teaching practice. The focus of the initiative on responsiveness, integration and community is believed to increase the likelihood of sustainability in terms of ongoing improvement of the staff and student experience. In 2007, workshops have been substituted with a series of "Learning and Teaching Nuts and Bolts" sessions held once a month for First Year Coordinators and staff who have completed the University's Foundations Program. To date, sessions in the series have focused on areas of importance identified through the survey results such as group work and student diversity.

The five scales of student engagement which form the basis of the NSSE and the UNSW Student Experience Survey are considered to be useful tools for monitoring improvements in the first year student experience and identifying areas that could be targeted in future staff development initiatives, policies and practices.

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