

## **“ASSing about – the Arrive, Stay and Succeed Retention Project at JCU”**

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This “Nuts and Bolts” workshop will commence with a description of the Arrive, Stay and Succeed (ASS) Project. Workshop participants will gain an insight into the development of the Project and the enthusiasm engendered by the Project both among the ASS team and in the wider University community. Some of the “models of good practice” in place in First Year programs at JCU will also be presented.

In the discussion following the presentation, participants will be encouraged to share experiences from their own institutions.

### **Some background**

Support staff (Learning Advisers, Library staff, counsellors etc) at James Cook University have had a long active involvement in the First Year Experience (FYE). JCU Learning Advisers attended the first FYE Conference held in Brisbane in 1995 and have been represented at all subsequent conferences. Inspired by what we saw and heard, we introduced a number of innovations to the FYE at JCU – these included a university wide mentor program and a number of pre-orientation and orientation programs aimed at helping new students settle in to the University. The focus of all these programs was to help new students to feel part of the University community.

The importance of an institution-wide approach emerged as a central theme of the 2004 FYHE Conference. In his report on this conference, Learning Adviser Alan Calder commented on the importance of senior management leadership of the FYHE so that institutions move beyond the piecemeal approaches of enthusiastic individuals. He noted also that JCU was yet to adopt an institution-wide FYHE approach.

We were excited when Kerri-lee Krause was invited to be keynote speaker at the 2005 Teaching Symposium at JCU. One of the key points made by Kerri-lee was the importance of university-wide responses if retention issues were to be addressed in an effective way.

At the end of 2005 Teaching and Learning Development (TLD) staff proposed the First Year Retention Project for 2006. TLD includes Learning Advisers, Academic Developers and Student Equity staff. The project was launched in March 2006 with half-day seminars on both the Townsville and Cairns campuses. These were attended by over 100 representatives from all sections of the University – academic staff, administrative staff and support staff. A 100 page Retention booklet was distributed to participants at the launch and to Heads of Schools, and a website was set up with resources and communication.

### **The first phase**

In late May 2006, First Year Experience Questionnaires were completed by 1000 students from the first year cohort. The questionnaire used was adapted from that developed by Melbourne University and used in the DEST national surveys.

The JCU survey data gave a comprehensive picture of a first year student group. While the majority were aware of services offered and did know where to go for help – there were a large number who were unaware of the support services and who were not communicating with staff or support services. The demographic data reveal that more than half our students have a health care card (suggesting little financial support), around 70% have parents who

finished education at primary or secondary levels, and many have low prior academic achievement. The DEST student statistics of JCU commencing students for 2006 confirm the diversity of the group, and the high proportion of equity target groups, including around 50% from rural and remote locations.

## **The second phase**

The second phase in the Retention Project was the establishment of a teaching and learning focus group consisting of TLD staff and a small group of academics - one representing each faculty and one from Cairns. They were seconded for one day a week, and each of their schools was paid \$10000 from Equity funds to cover the costs of their participation. Our goal was to develop a teaching and learning plan for teachers of first year students, with special focus on equity groups. At our first meeting in August we came up with the colourful name for our group - the Arrive Stay and Succeed (ASS) @JCU team (aka JCU Assers).

The first two activities of the group were to plan a roundtable consultation with staff across the University in October and to begin a series of meetings inside faculties to consider the 2007 Orientation program with a special emphasis on seeing how the long-established JCU mentor program could be better integrated into faculty programs.

40 representatives from across the University (academic, support and admin staff) were invited to the Retention Roundtable held in October to bring forward their sections' plans for change aimed at improving FYE. From the Roundtable it was intended that a set of recommendations for endorsement and funding would go to SMG for implementation in 2007. Plans were also made for FYE conferences in Cairns and Townsville aimed at Heads of School and the staff who would be teaching first-year classes in 2007.

The *Teaching First Year Students* conferences in Cairns (50 participants) and Townsville (90 participants) were a great success. Participants in the Conference were briefed on data from the 1000 First Year Experience questionnaires, exposed to the literature on contemporary university students, (e.g., Gen X/Y and Millennials) and reminded of the importance of retention to Schools, to the University, to students and their families and to the FNQ region.

Participants were encouraged to build repertoires of good practice for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as they relate to first year students at JCU. Participants were also provided with information about JCU support and administrative services and given an update on the potential of LearnJCU (Blackboard) and other aspects of flexible learning. The major theme of the conference was "models of good practice" and participants were surprised and excited by the examples of good practice shared at the Conference.

## **Orientation in 2007**

The second major activity conducted by the ASS team in Study Period 2 in 2007 was to consider ways in which the JCU Mentor Program could be better incorporated into faculty orientation programs on the Townsville campus.

The JCU Student Mentor Program commenced on the Cairns campus and is well accepted by the entire University community and integrated into school and faculty programs on that campus. The program on the Townsville campus has been very effective but there has not been the same degree of contact with staff in the schools and faculties as there has been in Cairns.

Another concern for Orientation 2007 was the possible effects of VSU. In the past the Student Association has been an important part of Orientation Week and there were some concerns

that the Student Association would have little capacity to provide the traditional social programs in 2007.

ASS team members convened meetings of key academic and administration staff in each of the four faculties. At these meetings we discussed how faculties could become more involved in the Mentor Program and what Orientation Week 2007 might look like under VSU. At these meetings it was agreed that faculty staff would become more involved in mentor recruitment and mentor training, and that mentors would be given a higher profile in schools and faculties in 2007 through contacts with academic advisers and mentor photos on school noticeboards.

The Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts planned an integrated faculty welcome day that included formal introductions to courses and faculties, student panel discussions, purchase of faculty shirts for mentors, mentor tours and provision of lunch.

The outcome of these activities was that this year we had a most successful Orientation Week (based on student feedback) and we are sure a major factor was the increase in interest in Orientation from teaching and administrative staff as a result of the ASS project.

### **Back to the Future**

At the end of 2006 the ASS team prepared a proposal to the University Senior Management Group (SMG) for a new stream of funding specifically for improving the First Year Experience. This was to be an integrative university-wide fund not located within divisions or faculties.

In making this proposal we were mindful of the research that demonstrated that only those institutions that invest in such “front-end loading” of first year resources effectively address first year retention issues. The proposal was for a commitment of \$1455000 from the University over three years. In our submission we reminded the SMG that a modest goal of a 3% increase in retention would deliver a financial return of \$3,000,000 to the university.

It is anticipated that this return would be realised gradually over a number of years, and that the proposed three-year project would effect the sustainable embedding of processes and activities into faculties and schools during that time. In effect, we sought top-down support for strategies grounded in research and practice to enable various sections of the university community to work together to encourage more students to *arrive, stay and succeed* at JCU.

The main components of the Funding proposal are outlined below

- A First Year Experience Project Leader be appointed at Senior Lecturer level for a fixed term of 3 years to research and monitor the first year student experience at JCU, and to coordinate and strengthen the range of FYE activities in faculties and divisions.
- The First Year Experience Questionnaire be conducted each year for the next 3 years. We have base data from the 2006 survey, but changing patterns of student enrolment make it essential to maintain accurate information, particularly to track equity groups and as part of the evaluation of strategies introduced.
- Competitive FYE grants be available for School- Faculty- or Division- based bids to improve first year student success and retention. These grants should target issues raised by the FYEQ data and literature, such as improved early communication to students, added support, social and academic engagement, teaching, student life.

- The number of Learning Advisers (LAs) be increased to support FY student learning. This would involve two additional LAs - one in Townsville and one in Cairns. In 2006 the EFTSL:LA ratio at JCU is by far the lowest of the group of universities JCU benchmarks against (this group includes Newcastle, Murdoch, Wollongong, Flinders and Tasmania).

### **The current state of play**

Sadly the progress of the ASS funding bid has been diverted. We have received funding to employ a First Year Experience Project Leader for 12 months in 2007. Although their official paid secondments have come to an end, the ASS faculty reps remain enthusiastic in their commitment to improving first year students' experience. New funding approaches are now being sought that will embed sustainable change to culture and practice so that more students arrive, stay and succeed at JCU.

The ASS Project Team – Kay Martinez (Academic Developer), Alan Calder (Learning Adviser), Audrey Milton (Academic Developer), Pierre Benckendorff (School of Business), Leanne Dalley (School of Education), Darryl Hawkins (School of Public Health, Tropical Medicine and Rehabilitation Sciences), Marion Hooper (School of Mathematics, Physics and Information Technology), Phil Schneider (School of Engineering), Peter Hanley (Learning Adviser).