

Faculty focus on FYE for FY Associate Dean Teaching and Learning

A/Prof Kay Martinez
Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences
James Cook University
Townsville.

In 2008, James Cook University appointed Associate Deans Teaching and Learning to each of its four faculties. This session will document my first year journey in that role within the Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, and as such is most closely related to the conference topic of *Institutional transformation and the FYE*.

The nuts & bolts session will consist of four major sections:

Section 1: The context

Data will be offered about the FY student demographic of the faculty within the university, the range of course offerings, and institutional imperatives such as a major curriculum review, and a new University Plan with explicit commitment to offering a socially inclusive learning environment for all students, with particular focus on the first year experience.

Section 2: Strategies related to improving first year experience

A range of initiatives will be outlined, and outcomes and challenges identified, with a focus on three particular initiatives. First was the holding of Faculty First Year Summits, which gathered academic, professional, support and technical staff on two occasions on each campus. The Ideas Summits were held mid-year, and key staff were invited to consult with colleagues in their work areas, and to bring to the summit ideas for improving FYE across the faculty. The Summit group worked together to settle on a coordinated set of campus-specific strategies, and to nominate a team leader for each strategy. Participants were then asked to consult back with colleagues in their work areas to decide on an action plan to advance the strategy for the start of the following academic year. Action Summits were held later in the year, and each campus Summit group collated their action plans. The Summits resulted in two major outcomes: a set of faculty-wide principles and commitments to FYE; and a combined set of action plans relating to three areas of FYE: early inquiries and first contact; orientation week; and early weeks in class. These outcomes will be shared with session participants, along with an analysis of the effectiveness of the Summits, consideration of their impact, and the challenges faced in implementing all proposed actions.

The second major initiative involved student focus groups, aimed at enriching the data obtained through formal institutional feedback surveys. This strategy (along with most others outlined) was conducted through the Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee. Members pooled ideas about which aspects of teaching and learning were of special interest, and the focus group interviews targeted those topics. Students were asked about the following: their experiences of their introduction and welcome to JCU, subject outlines, LearnJCU (the Blackboard system), feedback on assessment, flexibility of learning options, timetabling, and learning spaces. We also asked students for their views on 'good teaching'. Key themes from the interviews were summarised, and circulated by email to all students across the faculty for further comment. In all, almost one hundred students participated. During the conference

session, a summary of the student responses will be presented, along with discussion of the ways in which this information was then used throughout the faculty.

The third initiative relates to special lunches hosted by the Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor for teachers of FY classes, including sessional staff. These events were held on each campus as a trial last year, and were conducted very informally as a way of recognising the expertise involved in the effective teaching of FY students. This year, we have included student mentors in the lunch invitation, as a way of further recognising their work and in an effort to build closer relationships between them and the FY teachers so that mentoring is incorporated more fully into the curriculum. Additionally, we are using the occasions to promote the use of Early Warning Systems now added as a feature of LearnJCU, as a way of identifying and supporting FY students who have not submitted work, or who have not accessed their online subject sites.

During the conference session, other strategies will also be mentioned, such as ‘Teaching Windows’, a faculty showcasing of good teaching with a special section on teaching first years; the appointment of a Faculty Scholar to develop a bank of FY ‘fit-for-purpose’ assessment resources, as part of an ALTC project on distributed leadership; involvement in an institutional retention project; and the current development of two core FY subjects in the Bachelor of Arts.

Section 3: FYE in the role of Associate Dean Teaching and Learning

In the final section of the conference session, I will briefly comment on challenges I have experienced during my first year in the role of Associate Dean Teaching and Learning, particularly in terms of evaluating the impact of this work. I will outline the ways in which I have developed and used organisational and communication structures to acquit the role, particularly related to improving FYE. Special focus will be on the composition and function of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee, and on maintaining a strong working relationship with the university’s First Year Project Leader, Tanya Acheson. Additionally, I will argue for academic leadership as an aspect of this role, and the importance of being connected to national communities and projects such as FYHE, the rich resources and support offered from the ALTC First Year Transition senior fellowship of Prof Sally Kift, and national work led by Prof Deborah Southwell on the role of the Associate Dean Teaching and Learning as a leadership position.

Section 4: Participant discussion

Finally, participants will be invited to respond to strategies and issues outlined in the session, and to share experiences of ways in which Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning have attempted to have an impact on improving first year students’ experiences within their own universities.