

The FYE Journey and the Leap to Hyperspace: How to navigate a fledgling FYE structure into a sustainable, stand alone programme that makes pedagogical and economic sense

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Abstract

Luke Skywalker was on a mission to save his world but he couldn't do it on his own. He needed partners. Like Skywalker and the Rebel Alliance, many FYE programmes start small with high hope but have to battle stronger forces with sometimes entrenched ideas about how things have always been done. The challenge is how to initiate a pilot first year mentoring scheme and built it into a sustainable programme which will attract faculty and wider institutional support. This paper charts the progress of a fledgling FYE programme in the Faculty of Arts, University of Auckland, and outlines the benefit of building internal and external alliances to help guide that growth.

Introduction

The First Year Experience Programme in the Faculty of Arts (FOA) supports first year students' successful transition to tertiary education, subsequent academic progress and retention. The genesis of the programme was influenced by the McInnis, James, Hartley CSHE, University of Melbourne longitudinal study 'Trends in the First Year Experience In Australian Universities' (2000), McInnis and Hartley's findings on the impact of paid work hours on undergraduate students (2005) and Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis' summary in 2005 after a decade of research into levels of engagement for first year students in Australian universities. More latterly Krause's work on first year attrition (2005) and issues of transition (2006) have also been influential as has the work of Kift (2008) and Nelson (2010) linked to the university-wide QUT first year experience programme.

Backgrounding the relevance of the Australian research to the New Zealand situation is the wealth of American experience on student persistence, engagement and retention. The work of Kuh identifying that the key to student success is the level of their “engagement” (2007) is also endorsed by two decades of research by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) confirming that by being engaged students develop successful, long term learning habits.

Tinto’s (1998) often repeated insight that “Individuals are more likely to persist when they are either academically or social integrated and even more likely to persist when both forms of integrations occur” has been a useful touchstone for planning as are his insights on attrition, placing vital emphasis on the first ten weeks of transitions from school to college. And finally, George Kuh’s (2007) assertion that “connecting student to somebody or something worthwhile is everyone’s business” sums up the rationale behind our approach to building a sustainable programme which will attract ongoing institutional support and encourage academics and administrators to work together on the business of enhancing the learning environment for first year students.

The University of Auckland, Faculty of Arts FYE Scheme

Our FYE Programme is now in its second year of operation after a very successful pilot in 2010. Modelled on a similar programme at Queensland University of Technology, FYE has two central aims: to assist first year students to make a successful transition to the tertiary environment, and to develop an academic culture of achievement by providing enrichment opportunities for second and third-year students who act as mentors.

Each student is assigned a mentor. Mentors are high-achieving year two or three Arts students. Mentors are responsible for a group of approximately 50 students, whom they contact regularly via e-mail or in person. Eight mentors, designated as Team Leaders, have additional responsibilities, including data entry, and are paid for their work. In 2010, a total of 496 students were contacted at least once regarding missed classes or late assignments. Many of these students received multiple messages. Of these, 126 had both attendance and late assignment issues.

Student feedback on the First Year Experience Programme has been extremely positive. A survey conducted in semester one of 2010 showed that they greatly valued the extra support. For example, 81% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I think checking in with students who have missed classes or failed to turn in an assignment is a good idea.” 83% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I found the announcements on Cecil useful.” 89.5 % thought the First Year Experience Programme shows that the Arts Faculty cares about the welfare of new students. This was a heartening endorsement so early in the delivery of our programme.

In 2011, FYE is being offered to 1,563 1N students enrolled in 35 stage one courses. Attendance and assignment completion is tracked in tutorials, and students who have missed two or more classes or failed to hand in a piece of assessment are contacted. As

part of the expansion of the scheme in 2011, targeted curriculum support co-ordinated by the First year Experience Programme will be offered in two large stage one courses to encourage 'help seeking behaviour'¹ by linking university-wide teaching support services into the programme. This initiative brings together key staff from the Department, Library, and Student Learning, along with tutors and FYE mentors, to give students targeted assistance with a major assignment. It is a way to harness the University student support services already in existence, and focus that expertise for the benefit of Arts students. If these interventions which engage more directly with the curriculum are successful, more departments will be added in semester two.

Alongside developing an academic rationale for the programme there was the need to build a persuasive economic argument as is made evident in the Australian 'Hobsons Retention Project' (2010). This alignment of good teaching practice with rational economic argument seemed to be the right tack to follow to gain support to increase the scope and the effectiveness of our programme. It was at this next phase of expansion that we knew we needed to have outside input and benchmark ourselves against a programme in the mature phase of its operation. This is where the QUT contact was vital.

Learning from the QUT First Year Experience Programme

At the end of 2010, we visited the QUT with a view to benchmarking our FYE programme. A very full three-day agenda provided a detailed view of a robust scheme that has been running there for seven years. This was an opportunity to meet with key support staff, tour their very sophisticated call centre, and learn the history of how their programme grew from one department to a University-wide initiative. It was also a chance to review where Auckland should be at this stage, and to learn more about the best methods for expansion. Coming out of the QUT exchange, and the idea that FYE is "everybody's business" (Kuh, 2007, Kift, Nelson, Clarke, 2010) we designed our first steps into integrating curriculum design, library and student support services, outlined above, into our programme.

This Presentation

This presentation takes as a shaping metaphor, aspects of the narrative structure of the journey which shapes much popular culture goal orientated storytelling. It charts the stages of the journey through the first 18 months of a FYE programme broken down into achievable units to provide others with a possible template for their own institution. It also provides ideas for customising a programme to accommodate cultural difference and outlines the opportunity to implement new teaching strategies drawing on John Hattie's 2009 research considering the example set for tertiary teaching of assessment practices in New Zealand compulsory schooling. To conclude it outlines the benefit of having a collegial relationship with an institution which is further down the track in development

¹ 'help seeking behaviour' is a phrase used by QUT FYE programme which seeks to normalise the way in which all students are encouraged to seek academic assistance. We have found this approach useful for planning the next phase of our FYE programme.

that can signpost strategic goals, help smooth the FYE journey and provide inspiration for the growth of the 'Rebel Alliance'.

Session Plan

- 5 minutes: First year operation FYE: implementation, funding, goals and outcomes
- 5 minutes: Questions first year of operation
- 5 minutes: Preparation for 2nd year FYE: Outcome of collaboration with QUT
- 5 minutes: Questions on collaboration and influence on future planning
- 5 minutes: 'Assessment for learning' scheme - exemplar courses
Accommodating cultural difference
- 5 minutes: Questions on overall project and 'where from here?'

Possible questions/issues for the audience

- How do you pitch your FYE vision so someone will listen?
- How do you build faculty wide support?
- At what point do you scale up your programme?
- What are the danger points of expansion?
- How can you build in cultural awareness for target equity groups?
- Who are the 'must have' groups to be involved?
- How do you get academics, administrators and service providers to work together?
- How do you provide evidence that your programme is worth the investment?

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