

In Australian universities, there is an increasing recognition of the need to provide opportunity, excellence and wider participation of a variety of students in the Higher Education experience. Enhancing the student experience and outcomes has become a focus of Australian higher education. The University of Western Sydney has adopted a student lifecycle approach with a focus on supporting student transition to and through the university experience. A catalyst for the successful progression and completion of study has been the quality of the first year undergraduate experience. Positive learning experiences, student engagement, retention and transition of students has been a priority for the University. Developing new horizons, the First Year Experience, including first year retention and transition was targeted as a strategic priority for the Cycle 2 Australian Universities Quality Assurance (AUQA) review by the University of Western Sydney who appointed First Year Advisors across the university. First Year advisors were seen as being integral to the retention and transition strategies of commencing students.

Retention in the First Year was seen to be critical as it is estimated that the loss of a first year student represents approximately \$20,000 in lost fee income for the University. Successful strategies for the retention and transition of First Year students has previously been reported by Scott, Shah, Grebennikov and Singh, (2008) and James, Krause, and Jennings (2010) and included clear management of student expectations, consistently accessible and responsive staff, transition support orientation, the presence of a supportive peer group and use of a coherent, responsive, flexible, relevant and clear course design.

Within the University of Western Sydney, the School of Social Sciences and Psychology applied for a Learning and Teaching Enhancements Grant 2012 to focus on the First year experience particularly targeting First Year learning and assessment. Five core units with a combined enrolment of 3,000 students per semester were targeted over the duration of a year in a process of pre intervention, intervention and post intervention phases in the Learning and Teaching Assessment Initiative project. A range of innovative strategies for transition and retention of First Year Higher Education students was implemented to enhance student's independent learning skills, evolving identities and engagement.

### **Aims**

The Learning and Teaching Assessment Initiative project aims to:

- identify, define and map the development and implementation of a range of innovative strategies in five first year core units in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology for transition and retention of First Year Higher Education students in relation to the UWS Quality Management framework (Scott, Shah, Grebennikov and Singh, 2008).
- support and optimise student engagement, retention and transition through University, focusing on the First Year Undergraduate Experience.
- develop and implement strategies to ensure the sustainability and success of First Year advising, orientation, transition and mentoring initiatives by

targeting five core first year units from Social Sciences and Psychology in Autumn and Spring semester 2012.

- cultivate and adopt an approach to target academic literacy.
- monitor, mentor and support first year undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds and abilities, students at risk and equity groups to experience positive learning experiences and successful outcomes in their university experience.
- initiate and develop new strategies for the retention and transition of First Year students.
- develop and implement effective, quality teaching, learning and assessment for First Year students.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample comprised 2400 undergraduate First Year students in two core units in Psychology and Social Sciences in First semester and 3000 First year students in three core units in Psychology and Social Sciences in the Second semester. Students were both male and female aged 18 – 55 years.

### **Materials and Procedure**

First Year strategies in the two targeted core units demonstrated, not only the diversity of strategies, but also strategies that were effective with particular courses and cohorts of students. Strategies were then aligned to the UWS Quality Management framework for commencing student transition and retention. The four interventions were progressively developed, implemented and evaluated throughout the year through a three phase preintervention, intervention and post intervention plan.

## **Results**

An initial mapping exercise revealed that strategies adopted in the two core First Year units in social Sciences and Psychology supported First Year students across key stages of experiences. These included: a) academic literacy screening and building academic writing and study skills support into core units; b) increasing the use of peer assistance specifically in “flexible and responsive learning programs” – especially PASS and student support rooms d) student-centred Week 0 Orientation; e) pit stops; f) identification of students at risk and intervention within the first few weeks of the semester (first failed assessment; vUWS access; attendance) and follow up emails and calls for identified students. A critical aspect of this innovation was the implementation of a First Year Advisor. As the Preintervention phase has just been completed, the achievements of this phase can be reported in relation to the Project plan. Phase 2, the Intervention phase, will commence in July, 2012 with the post intervention completed in November.

## **Conclusion**

Student feedback in the form of focus groups and interviews and the Commencing student survey have shown the usefulness and worthwhileness of strategies to support the retention and transition of First Year students. Later on this year the impact of these strategies will be measured through student feedback at the end of the semester, retention rates and the number of Fail and AF grades. The UWS Quality Management framework for commencing student transition and retention has been a catalyst for mapping and developing effective learning and teaching strategies in core First Year units. This three phase intervention process of innovative teaching, learning and assessment strategies is intended to result in improved teaching evaluation scores, improved responses to surveys on commencing student's university experience and improved retention and transition of students. This has implications for enhancing the First Year student experience, retaining students and the evolving of student identities.

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## **Glossary**

**AUQA** – is the Australian Universities Quality Agency. The UWS Cycle 2 AUQA audit, took place in 9-12 May 2011. The University of Western Sydney is successfully improving quality. Over the past five years UWS has taken a wide range of steps to improve the quality of the total UWS student experience, targeting the First Year Experience in relation to retention and transition in the latest AUQA audit.

**PASS** – “Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) is a student centred learning program where students work with other students to understand the content of their units and develop various study strategies to help improve academic performance. Through actively working together with other students, students are more engaged with the content. Each PASS group is run by a facilitator who has successfully studied the unit previously. PASS is free and voluntary.

PASS is based on a program called Supplemental Instruction which was created by Dr Deanna Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, USA in 1973. Since then, faculty and staff from over 1500 institutions in the USA and 29 other countries have been trained to implement this type of program. In Australia similar programs are usually called PASS or PAL (Peer Assisted Learning). Research has consistently shown that students who attend PASS can improve both their course grade and their enjoyment of the subject. Additionally, research consistently shows that subjects that run PASS tend to attain lower failure and attrition rates”.

**PIT STOPS** – Just like a pit stop in an International Car Race where tyres, oil and water are checked and changed, Pit-Stop is a drop-in lecturer and tutor assistance service which is offered on a per unit basis. Pit-Stop provides students with the opportunity to drop into the designated Pit-Stop room for contents clarification, seek assistance and ask questions during scheduled and announced hours.

An example is:

As mentioned in the lectures, we are offering what we call “Pit Stop” meetings for all students during the semester break. The idea is for you to come and meet the First Year Advisor, the Unit Coordinator, the Librarians, and possibly some of the tutors. At this meeting we will concentrate on your Literature Review, and we will be able to provide you with some feedback on what you have already written. Therefore, in order for you to gain admission into these Pit Stop Meetings you must either bring a couple of paragraphs of what you have already written or an outline or plan of what you intend to write.

- The second purpose of these meetings is to provide you with the opportunity to discuss any other issues that may be causing you concern, to provide us with feedback about the unit so far, or simply just to make sure that you are on the right track in your studies.

Another example:

- In particular at this Pit Stop we will be targeting:  
Tips on answering multiple choice questions and how to study effectively for multiple choice exams

**vUWS** - pronounced 'views' is where students can access learning materials and participate in online activities, individually or with peers. All units have a vUWS presence where important information on each of your unit or course sites is accessed.