

First Year Experience and Internationalisation

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Internationalisation has been identified as an important aspect of university life and learning that encompasses a range of issues including the development of “globally aware citizens” and addressing the needs of international students. This paper reveals how the First Year Experience (FYE) discussion paper at Edith Cowan University (ECU) was developed by adopting an international perspective in an effort to seek best practice. A range of academic research and practical solutions to the problem of first year attrition and the development of positive strategies to engage first year students was examined. The discussion paper was constructed from a literature review that considered articles written in English from around the world. Attendance at both local and international conferences by working party team members also informed the discussion paper.

A holistic plan was developed with a view to implementing a range of strategies identified as best practices for retention of students and to enhance the experience of first year students, including international students, at ECU.

The importance of identifying and acknowledging a range of experiences from different countries and contexts can enhance and improve our knowledge of a

particular issue which contributes to the development of a ‘best practice’ attitude and implementation of different strategies to benefit all ECU students, staff, and the wider community.

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The authors of this paper are members of the Working Party for the First Year Experience (FYE) which, in 2011, is the focus of Curriculum 2012 and Beyond Project. The principal author has been working with the FYE Project Leaders Professor Lynne Cohen and Dr Bronwyn Harman on the development of a Discussion Paper to enhance the experience of first year students at ECU. The other authors have assisted with review of the Discussion Paper and strategies that are proposed therein.

Introduction

Internationalisation may be defined in a variety of ways and include a range of processes (King, 2008). However King (2008) has defined it in a way that she suggests is neutral – “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education” (p. 6). Internationalisation within a university includes not only the delivery of courses to international students in the institution’s home country but also includes delivery of courses to students in their home country (often referred to as ‘teaching offshore’), and the appointment of academic staff from different countries (King, 2008). Internationalisation therefore also includes the concept of introducing ideas from different cultures or domains into the teaching, learning and assessment processes of higher education institutions and to adopt strategies and processes across a range of actions required in and by universities to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse student populations.

Internationalising the curriculum has become a focus of many institutions who seek to attract international students. Researchers investigating the motives of business schools in the United Kingdom for internationalising their programs found that motives may vary across a range of domains such as institution management favouring internationalisation, a belief that internationalisation will improve the employability of domestic students, a desire to attract international students, and financial dependence upon the recruitment of international students (Bennet & Kane, 2009). Investigation of the aims of programs in the hospitality management domain found that the aims were mostly to provide domestic students with the skills and attitudes required to work in an international industry where culturally appropriate behaviour is expected (Brookes & Becket, 2011). Other research also supports the concept of improving employability for domestic students through an international experience (Crossman & Clarke, 2010) and others focus on the effects of teaching for international students (Sawir, 2011), including the effects of the nature of assessments that all student are required to complete (Sheridan, 2011). Long essays and oral presentations were considered

by academics as the top two methods of assessment (Sheridan, 2011); however these require a high level of language and academic literacy which can place pressure on international students for whom English is not their first language. The importance of a curriculum approach to internationalisation rather than an economic or management approach has been emphasised (Svensson & Wihlberg, 2010). Internationalising the curriculum at ECU and the Internationalisation policy (ECU, 2010a, b) combine the positive effects of internationalising the curriculum for both domestic and international students.

This paper presents the internationalisation aspect of developing a discussion paper to address issues in relation to the first year experience of students at ECU as part of the *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* project. The *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* project is a university wide project with a focus on providing the best possible overall experience for students, and as this project begins, the focus is on the First Year Experience (de Jong, Cullity, Middleton, & The ECU2012 UCF Working Party, 2010). To ensure the best outcomes for this project it was important that in developing the discussion paper for FYE that the team approached the task in a holistic manner and incorporated FYE strategies which are successful and understand those that have not been successful locally, nationally, and internationally. Additionally, the team considered the effects of transition to university study of international students whose experience is compounded by the complexities of transitioning into not only an academic culture but also a different social culture (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010).

A range of issues have been identified in the international academic literature as affecting the transition of commencing students to higher education. These issues include financial concerns, feeling lonely, and homesickness (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010). Up to 37% of international students in Australia have financial concerns (Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2009). Language barriers, communication issues, cultural differences, financial burdens, heavy workloads and difficulty in developing relationships with local students have been identified as hindrances to adaptation (Andrade, 2007; Malau-Aduli, 2011). In developing strategies for FYE these issues need to be considered in terms of meeting the diverse needs of all students. Some of these issues are also present for domestic students however, the combination of some of these issues increases pressure on international students who may also be suffering culture shock (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) which has been defined as “the anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg, 1960, p. 177).

Methodology

As part of the university wide and collaborative aspects of the Curriculum 2012, project staff were invited to participate and a group called the ‘Staff Led Group’ (SLG) was formed to assist key personnel in the development of plans for the implementation of the *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* project. From the SLG a smaller group of members were sought to create a Working Party to focus on the FYE. The working party consisting of staff interested in the *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* project was formed with staff from different schools and faculties within the university. This was expected to facilitate implementation across the schools to support the university wide nature of the project. The Working Party met at regular intervals to review information gathered by the team leaders, the Working Party members, and researcher working on the project.

The discussion paper was developed from four main sources. First, information was gathered from existing ECU staff about what was being undertaken in various faculties in relation to improving the experience of first year students. Second, the team leaders, working party members, and the researcher for the project attended the 14th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference held in Fremantle, again ensuring that a range of presentations were attended to maximise data gathering. These sources provided local knowledge and are not discussed further in this paper.

Third, the project leaders attended an international conference about FYE (24th International Conference on The First-Year Experience) and ensured that they viewed a range of presentations to maximise the gathering of information and ideas. This strategy allowed the team to consider ‘best practice’ from an international perspective and talk with people from institutions across the world. Attendance at workshops provided by researchers John Gardner and Betsy Barefoot from the John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education provided examples of where funds for the FYE should be directed and outlined successful strategies from the University of South Carolina. A workshop on Peer Mentoring validated the successful approach already implemented at ECU. The conference provided information on the importance of engaging with parents as well as students during the transition year. Providing students with the opportunity to provide useful and timely feedback is a successful strategy being used. Students feel valued and that their opinion matters. These are a few examples of engaging with students to ensure a successful transition during their first year at university.

The fourth strategy used to inform the discussion paper was a literature review that included an investigation of the international academic literature conducted by the project researcher. In addition to the academic literature, a range of specific university websites were viewed where it was considered that these universities had developed strategies that work and that might be adapted to ECU’s requirements. This extensive literature review that included a range of information and ideas from countries other than Australia ensured that the project considered “best practice” internationally for the development of strategies that the ECU FYE proposed in their discussion paper. “Best practice” is difficult to define, can be contextual, and may include a range of aspects (de Vries, 2010; Hallencreutz & Turner, 2011), not all of which are used simultaneously (Todaro, 2002). The FYE team defined “best practice” as the process of reviewing the literature and talking to others for ideas and programs that have been successful in other organisations; identifying potential ideas and programs that can be adapted for the specific needs of ECU; and choosing appropriate programs. This is consistent with concepts of “best practice” both in process and outcomes as identified in the academic literature (de Vries, 2010; Hallencreutz & Turner, 2011; Todaro, 2002).

The literature review

The sample was a range of documents from the academic literature and reports from various government departments and universities across the world. A library search of the academic literature using the term “first year experience” indicated that there were 1590 articles that met the requirement of being peer reviewed and with full text on line. Given the time limits on the development of the discussion paper, the project researcher initially limited the search to recent articles published in 2010 and 2011. This resulted in a more manageable number of articles (229). Earlier documents were reviewed if they were known to the research team and if they were considered to make a valuable contribution to the knowledge of FYE in Australia and/or internationally. A large international base was found in the academic literature. In

addition to these latest academic publications, the project researcher accessed works of the key authors of works on student retention, such as Tinto (USA); Yorke (UK); Kuh (USA), Gardner (USA), Barefoot (USA), Pascarella (USA) Terenzini (USA), McKinnis (Australia), Krause (Australia) and Kift (Australia). This was undertaken in a variety of ways such as a Google search of the name, or searching a university website that contained details of staff publications. Additionally, a range of reports to government departments was located through a Google search and reviewing reference lists of the recently published articles.

Results

The result of this process was the writing of a discussion paper for FYE at ECU that was constructed in a collaborative process with working party team members and then communicated by the working party team to the larger SLG for comment. As the Curriculum 2012 and Beyond project is a university wide project, the collaboration amongst individuals from different faculties was an important aspect of developing the discussion paper.

The discussion paper includes a range of strategies that have been assessed by the working party as “best practice” for FYE and useful for ECU to implement across the university to support FYE. The programs chosen for potential implementation have been drawn from those that have been identified as successful at an Australian or international higher education institution; and the majority are also supported by a considerable range of international literature.

Two examples of adopting “best practice” are provided. These were chosen for their ability to enhance students’ FYE and for the commonality of the concept across the international literature.

First, ECU has provided peer mentoring programs in several schools where first year students can be mentored by a second or third year student who has undergone mentor training. In regard to the current ECU programs, students have been provided with the opportunity to seek out the mentoring program. Successful mentoring programs operated in many higher education institutions internationally have adopted an “opt out” strategy. This means that all first year students are allocated a mentor and if for some reason they do not want a mentor, they have the opportunity to opt out of the program, generally after they have also talked to their first year coordinator or another staff member providing justification as to why they should opt out.

The second “best practice” example is to support the development of a Student Leadership Academy, partly modelled on the Student Leadership Institute at the University of Texas at El Paso. In reviewing these international models, consideration has been given to cultural and institutional differences. As an example, in the United States of America, many first year students live on campus and are therefore potentially more engaged with campus life. Although ECU has accommodation at all campuses, a much smaller proportion of first year students use this accommodation. Therefore in applying the Student Leadership Academy strategies, consideration must be given to differing social and cultural contexts.

Conclusions

This paper has described the process used by a team in the development of a discussion paper for FYE that is inclusive and has used processes and strategies from different cultures, providing an international aspect to the plan. Strategies included in the paper have been

developed through an extensive review of the international literature on FYE and how a range of institutions across the world have successfully addressed the retention of students and improved the experience of their first year students.

The research is however limited by the fact that the language of all articles was English and that the majority of the articles were from western cultures. However many of these articles focused on students from eastern cultures and there was a recognition in the literature of the increased challenges based on cultural differences.

The *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* FYE Working Party believe that the strategies that they have adopted in the development of the discussion paper have resulted in an international perspective being adopted with ideas from institutions in other parts of the world being included in its proposals. The strategies proposed for implementation also address some of the challenges faced by international students. The paper has detailed two specific examples of strategies that the FYE Working Party has included in their recommendations.

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