

## Small beginnings: the (continuing) journey of a first year coordinator

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## Historical perspective

(≈ 10 years ago)

- relatively small university
- homogenous student intake

### •Support for first year students

- "sink or swim" approach

*University level*

- no support specifically for first years

*Faculty level*

- formal enrolment counseling days

## Where I started (1995)

### Issues

- numbers doubled over the previous 8 years
- increasingly diverse intake
- no longer enough to provide only "implicit" support
- John Dearn's writings

### Academic issues

- "pedagogical gap" in school-university transition
- lack of tertiary learning skills
- unfamiliarity with subject material

### Social issues

- lack of confidence
- loneliness
- financial worries
- need for adjustment of expectations

## 1. Study groups (initiated 1995)

- Isolation in large classes
  - lack of social networks
  - need to take responsibility for own learning
- ⇒ *academic & social adjustment required*

### Aims of Study Group program

1. to promote cooperative learning
  2. to stimulate the formation of peer-support groups
- informal, voluntary, active learning
  - lecturer as facilitator only
  - study skills plus support of lecture material
  - provide social network

### CUTSD comments:

"While the educational aims laudable, it must be considered the normal responsibility of a university to provide adequate support from within its own resources if it chooses to enrol under prepared students".

## 2. Peer mentoring

- peer support from experienced students
- finding your way about
- library skills
- writing prac. reports, revision techniques
- participants identified at enrolments, but also advertised to all in lectures

VERY enthusiastic responses

Same year: Mature Age Mentor Scheme begun by Student Counselling Service

## 3. Bridging unit (1999)

- aimed at mature age students or school leavers with no background in Biology
- 4 x 3 hr sessions prior to semester
- provides gentle introduction to basic discipline-specific skills & concepts & related study skills
- takes place in regular teaching spaces
- provides social network

Now included as "Life Sciences Supplementary program", an unexamined unit in summer semester

## 4. Survey of Life Sciences students 2002/3

*Why did they choose to study life sciences?*

*Which teaching and learning strategies are most effective in motivating students at uni?*

*What additional learning support or different teaching approaches may better meet student needs?*

### Results

- 60% : "interest" and 31% "career" = motivation
- most appreciated learning experiences in practical classes (39.5%)
- good lectures rated as important by only 11%
- 44.5% requested more tutorials
- importance of enthusiastic teachers

## University : current

- 3 campuses - 14,000 students
- Zoology first year ≈ 250
- increasingly diverse intake
- new degrees attracting international students
- removal of prerequisites
- increase in attrition b/w enrolment & first census

## University Teaching & Learning Development Plan 2003-5

"Students may expect to receive additional support during their first year at university to assist with their transition to higher education and to ensure their chances of success are maximised"

### Current university initiatives include:

- Unistart
- Mentors - school-level programs encouraged
- coordinated approach to Orientation
- NW centre - University Preparation Program
- "First Year Experience Project"

## Some final thoughts

How should responsibility for supporting first year students best be partitioned between school, faculty and university?

Can students need too much support?  
- when might bridging units have to become a pre-university year?