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
- provided 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?