Adoption of First Year Curriculum Principles in support of an enhanced CSU student experience

Background

There is wide agreement that student success at university is largely determined by their experiences during the first year. While a positive first year can set the foundation for a successful overall student experience, the first year is also the time when students are most at risk of withdrawing from their studies. As we strive to meet the Government’s participation targets, our student cohorts will become increasingly diverse, potentially exacerbating further the risk factors associated with the transition to University study.

New national data confirms the trend of students spending less time on campus and ‘on task’ as they struggle to balance paid work, study and other commitments. The data confirms our experience at CSU, that students no longer have the time, or perhaps the inclination to seek co-curricular support. This phenomenon is not restricted to our younger on campus students, with our DE students also displaying attrition rates higher than sector averages.

It is no longer sufficient to support the transition to the first year of university study by adding programs around or in aid of the curriculum. Instead we must focus on the central experience all first students have in common and which is within our institutional control – the curriculum. According to Kift (2009) it is within the first year curriculum that students must be engaged, supported, and realise their sense of belonging. Kift argues that the obvious way to support increased participation and diversity is through coherent, integrated, intentional, supportive first year curriculum design. It is this approach that has led to the development of a sound set of research based principles to guide intentional first year curriculum design.

A transition pedagogy

In 2009, Professor Sally Kift completed an ALTC Senior fellowship on the issue of Transition Pedagogy. A major Fellowship outcome was the “articulation of a research based transition pedagogy – a guiding philosophy for the intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts. This transition pedagogy is framed around the identification of six First Year Curriculum Principles that stand out as supportive of first year learning engagement, success and retention.” (Kift 2009) The interconnected principles are:

1. Transition
2. Diversity
3. Design
4. Engagement
5. Assessment
6. Evaluation and monitoring

The expanded principles and supporting checklists, case studies and expert commentaries are available at:

- First Year Curriculum Principles: a transition pedagogy [825kb .PDF]
- First Year Curriculum Principles: checklist for senior staff [52kb .PDF]
- First Year Curriculum Principles: checklist for course coordinators [88kb .PDF]
- First Year Curriculum Principles: checklist for first year teachers [96kb .PDF]

The relevance of the principles to CSU

While the principles may seem a statement of the obvious to those well versed in transition and first year learning and teaching issues, it is somewhat surprising that no statement of such principles or referral to guidelines in support of the first year curriculum exist at CSU. Perhaps we have assumed too much, and with a professional development focus that has leant towards the introduction of new technologies over the past decade, in some areas our focus on best practice to support students in their transition to University may have been lost.

As the notion of curriculum renewal gathers momentum through the CSU Degree Initiative and other imperatives such as sustainability, internationalization and cultural competence, it seems timely that broad overarching first year curriculum design guidelines are widely available and understood across CSU. Although the principles are titled ‘first year curriculum principles’ they are equally relevant to any year of study and provide a framework on which to base a holistic approach to curriculum design that actively supports student engagement whilst acknowledging their diversity.

In discussions with various academic staff about the principles it has been interesting to note the comments. A very experienced academic staff member found them to be a ‘revelation’. From another, ‘the principles are a language and framework on which to base and affirm my current practice as I don’t have an education background’, and from a new academic, a ‘welcome lifeline that is desperately needed for those of us new to university teaching’. Finally, from a Head of School “I think we should have them printed and have them on large posters in every staffroom at CSU!”

The development of the first year curriculum principles and supporting materials are timely, both across the sector and from an organisational perspective. The reforms of the Bradley review and the widening participation agenda certainly highlight the critical nature of this work at a national level. From the CSU perspective, the reforms combined with a recommendation from AUQA to improve the consistency and quality of the academic experience for students, the declining student perceptions of their student experience (CEQ) and increasing attrition
rates, it seems timely to reaffirm our commitment to a first year curriculum that actively supports student participation, engagement and success.

**Advantages of the principles**

It is unwise and a wasteful use of resources to ‘reinvent the wheel’, particularly when a well researched, broadly disseminated and widely accepted model supported by the ALTC already exists in the form of the First Year Curriculum principles.

**The first year curriculum principles are:**

- Broad, overarching, versatile principles that apply equally to all disciplines, cohorts and delivery modes
- Written in plain English and supported by practical guidelines and case studies that explicitly link research to practice
- Appropriate for use in the induction and ongoing professional development of new academic staff
- Able to be used as a framework to benchmark current practice of academic staff
- Equally relevant to support staff
- Relevant to all stages of the student experience – not just the first year
- Widely accepted across the sector. The principles have been broadly disseminated and are supported both within Australia and internationally.

**Ways the principles can be used include:**

- As the basis of professional development for new staff
- As a reminder to experienced staff of the importance of transition and student engagement issues
- As a framework to benchmark existing programs/subjects/courses
- As the basis for curriculum renewal
- To assist in the performance management of staff
- As the basis for mapping third party/partner approach to transition issues
- As the basis for operational planning
- As leverage and evidence for funding, grants and awards
- As a discussion starter around student experience issues

**Next Steps**

- The principles and supporting resources will tabled at Faculty L&T Committees for discussion and advice back to the Transition Steering Committee and the University L&T Committee
A major professional development activity – The CSU Student Engagement Forum - has been planned for September 20/21st this year. Professor Sally Kift, along with Professor Marcia Devlin will be the keynote speakers focusing on the First Year Curriculum Principles and importance of the intentional first year curriculum in order to engage and retain students. Information about the forum is available at [http://www.csu.edu.au/student/transition/forum/index.htm](http://www.csu.edu.au/student/transition/forum/index.htm).

DLTS have nominated 2 educational designers whose professional development focus will be on transition issues including the first year curriculum principles.

**Recommendations**

1. That the First Year Curriculum Principles be accepted and adopted as Guiding Principles for the First Year Curriculum design at CSU

2. That the principles and supporting case studies and expert commentaries be broadly disseminated across CSU including discussions at L&T committees, school boards and other relevant forums, being made available on the transition and teaching and learning web sites and via posters distributed to every school.

3. That the principles be addressed in all new staff induction resources and activities

4. That L&T committee members, heads of school, course directors and teachers of first year students are strongly encouraged to attend the Student Engagement forum where the principles will be discussed

5. That the principles, supporting case studies and expert commentaries form the basis of ongoing professional development activities conducted by the DLTS including FULT

6. That the principles be used as overarching principles in the Curriculum Renewal project

**Reference**


Liz Smith, Director Transition - March 2010