

ALTC

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Category: The First-Year Experience

**Charles Darwin University's Common Unit Program:
Supporting the academic and social transition of all our
first year students in all their diversity**



Common Units Teaching and Management Team

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1. Synopsis

“Every university should include this foundation program... I take my hat off to CDU.” (CUC107 Student, 2007)

The Common Unit Program at Charles Darwin University (CDU) has established itself as an essential and innovative approach to assisting first year students in making a successful transition into higher education. The program responds to a number of key considerations in the 21st century higher education climate: globalised learning, student diversity, changing literacies, technological advancement, the increasing emphasis on graduate skills and the importance of improving student retention and success. It achieves its aims by requiring all undergraduate students to complete two units, one focused on academic skill development and the other on contextual and cultural knowledge. The units are taught across disciplines, cater for large numbers and are offered internally and externally. The program plays a key role in leading innovations and best practice for effective multidisciplinary, first year pedagogy at CDU. Research over a ten-year period into the factors for success in common units and the first year confirms the effectiveness of the program in increasing the retention and success of CDU students. This quantitative data is supported by students’ endorsement of the program’s effectiveness in supporting their transition to higher education.

2. Selection criteria

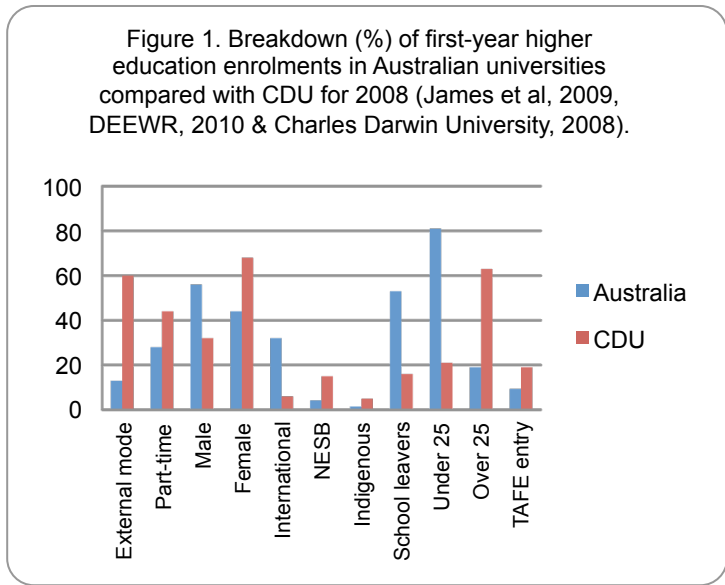
2a. Distinctiveness, coherence and clarity of purpose

Supporting first-year learning at a university with distinct challenges

The Common Unit Program aims to:

- Develop students’ practical academic skills, including: critical thinking, reading, researching and writing
- Provide an induction into theoretical and practical aspects of university culture
- Build an understanding of the complexities of the increasingly diverse communities we live and work in
- Introduce and develop graduate attributes, including practical skills and citizenship skills

CDU possesses a unique profile that presents a range of significant challenges for teaching and learning. These include its geographical remoteness, dual sector organisation, and high numbers of external and non-traditional students (including students who have delayed enrolment; attend part-time, work full time; are financially independent; have dependents; are single parents; and/or lack a high school diploma. (Oblinger & Oblinger 2010, p. 8)) The university has 14,082 Vocational Educational Training (VET) students and 7,154 Higher Education (HE) students. The nexus between VET and HE students is an ongoing preoccupation for university administrators as they consider ways to provide smoother, effective and advantageous pathways for students from one sector to another that take into account different ways in which students learn and are assessed (DEEWR 2008, p.192). The student demographic is affected by the remoteness of the Territory and the relatively small regional population. Because our students are drawn from a relatively small population, a number of them fit into one or more of the non-traditional categories that are predictors of educational disadvantage: first in family, low socio economic background, entry into higher education via alternative pathways (enabling or VET) and study in external mode. Large proportions of this external cohort are Nursing and Education students, who in turn include high proportions of first in family students (Hillman 2005; DEST 1996 & James et al 2004). Figure 1 illustrates the distinctiveness of our demographic compared to other universities.



Responding to these challenges relating to geography and educational disadvantage requires carefully conceived pedagogy and technologies. The Common Unit Program plays a vital role in easing the transition of these students through its provision of carefully scaffolded skill development and an emphasis on a supportive approach that empathises with the myriad challenges students face, academically, economically and personally (Hillman 2005, DEEWR 2008, Wylie 2005, Considine & Zappalà 2002). These objectives are captured in policy and practices developed

by the program management and embodied in the program manifesto on our website. Endorsement from the CDU Academic Board for the continued responsiveness of the program attests to its relevance in supporting first year success at the university. (Report presented Meeting Sept 2009 3.3.4) The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) review (2005) commended the program: “The Panel’s view is that they are a valuable contribution to the achievement of CDU’s goals...” and the Baldwin (2008) review provided a strong “endorsement for the vision, design and implementation of the program”.¹ Most importantly, endorsements from our students continue to grow as the program evolves. This is reflected in formal commentary through the university’s Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching Survey (SELTS), additional internal surveys and unsolicited commentary. A 2010 survey established 73% support for separate skills units in the first year of study.² A more recent, 2011 survey found that 70.2% of students agreed that studying the unit improved their overall experience of higher education³. A comparison of averages of common unit performance in SELT evaluations against those for students’ cognate units show the common units maintaining equal standing in students’ perceptions with scores of above 5 on the Likert scale of 1-7.⁴ This is a significant achievement for units that are compulsory skills oriented units.

A comprehensive, systematic cycle of internal and external review ensures coherence and clarity of purpose

Our longitudinal study (three phases over ten years) into retention and success in common units (Tyler 2002, 2005, 2010) has been significant in informing the ongoing coherence and clarity of purpose in the program. Of equal importance have been two external reviews (Baldwin & McGuiness 2001 and Baldwin 2008) and a systematic cycle of annual internal review. This ongoing review and development of the program has been guided by findings from DEST (2005); DEEWR (2008), James, Kraus and Jennings (2009) who report on the first year experience in Australian universities. The pedagogy has been informed by theory regarding the importance of cultural capital and contextual knowledge (Martin 1999, Rothery 1996, Chouliarki 1997, Macdonald 2003, Hirsch 1987); academic language learning theory (Rose, Lui-Chivizhe, McKnight and Smith, 2004, Rose 2005a, Rose 2009), and experiential, constructivist and situated learning approaches (Kolb 1984, 2002, 2004; Fleming and Baume, 2006; Naylor & Keogh 1999). As a consequence of this reflective practice, a number of important changes have taken place in the structure, management, and delivery of the program since its inception in 1998.

Structurally the program now achieves its aims via two streams: (1) academic and graduate skill development and (2) contextual knowledge. All students complete CUC107 Northern Perspectives, which explores issues of culture and sustainability, and choose one of the following skills units: CUC100 Academic Literacies (for Humanities/Social Sciences students) or CUC106 Design & Innovation: Communicating Technology (for Technology/Science/Business students).

A management strategy that ensures a systematic approach to coordination, implementation and evaluation

In 2001 the Common Units Management Group created a .5 position to oversee the operations and academic integrity of the program. Initially entitled “Academic Consultant Common Units”, the position is now known as “Theme Leader Common Units”. This appointment has been an essential component of our commitment to ensuring that teaching and learning in our units embodies best practice. The Theme Leader also facilitates systematic evaluation, and annual cycles of reflection and review in each of the units and is responsible for articulating and providing mechanisms for maintaining standards, leading research projects and maintaining and promoting links across the university community and beyond. Quality processes and mechanisms are particularly important for a multidisciplinary program with high student numbers (2000 each year) and teaching staff (15-20).

Some recent strategies implemented by the management group (2009) in response to our Retention and Success study, and internal and external review (Baldwin 2008) include the systematic implementation and provision of:

- Formal, systematic documentation of semester and annual review meetings for each common unit.
- Improved external support and assignment feedback and turnaround for students through comprehensive guidelines, systematic moderation and professional development for teaching staff.⁵
- Tools for 21st century learning including: Tablet PC, wireless-enabled classrooms (E-Learning studios)⁶ for internal students and options for video streaming, blogs and Wimba (CDU’s live, virtual classroom environment) for external students.⁷

¹ Baldwin (2008) report under *Evaluation - External* at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

² Retention and Success (Stage 4) presentation – slides 20-28 at *Research*: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

³ 2011 Survey of usefulness of common units at: *Student Evaluation – students’ comments*: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

⁴ SELT responses and analysis under *Evaluation - Internal* at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

⁵ *Guidelines for Common Units Staff – Teaching Staff* at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/managing.html>

- Mechanisms to ensure at-risk students are identified and referred to support tutorials⁸ early in the semester.
- Improved scaffolding of learning materials⁹ to support external at-risk students.
- Further strategies for confidence building through social support mechanisms.¹⁰
- Staff induction to promote an understanding of student diversity and consistent formative, experiential and inclusive approaches to teaching in our E-Learning studio classrooms.¹¹
- Clear provision and dissemination of options for recognition of prior learning.¹²
- Mechanisms for improved input from schools through membership of the CU review teams and management group meetings.
- Charts clearly mapping common units with graduate attributes.¹³
- Review of the common unit website to specifically reflect the manifesto of common units and policy and guidelines for best practice.

Innovations referencing changing educational climates put the program at the vanguard of strategies to improve the first year experience

“Your ... want for everyone to have a decent start at uni and helping us all reach our little academic goals is what keeps me going some days. I should have in reality applied to get experience credit for this subject, but now I am glad I did not, because I feel you and your subject have given me an extra edge and confidence.” (CUC100 Student, 2011)

A distinctive feature of the Common Unit Program is its strong commitment to being responsive to the growing diversity of students and the increasingly globalised nature of university education. The increasing market-driven approach to university learning and its emphasis on acquisition of employability skills by graduates has been acknowledged by the program. Expanding participation and social inclusion are also key factors driving the Australian Government’s most recent higher education (HE) reform agenda to which universities are required to respond (James et al. 2009). These targets were reflected in the Bradley Review (DEEWR 2008) and challenge universities to establish administrative frameworks, infrastructure and pedagogy that attract low socio economic students (SES) and facilitate their success.

The common units’ design and pedagogy are in direct response to these forces and are designed to incorporate students’ diverse cultural backgrounds and literacies (including the need for language support from our increasing numbers of first in family, Indigenous and other language background students) and the learning preferences of net generation students. (Laurillard 2002; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2010) We do this through the following innovative pedagogical principles and approaches:

- Establishing the program as a compulsory measure for all first year students.¹⁴
- By designing a multidisciplinary program whereby students from all disciplines learn together and the teaching staff are drawn from all disciplines¹⁵, we expose students to the multidisciplinary nature of professional life.¹⁶
- Explicitly embedding the Graduate Attributes in learning objectives, content, and assessment of all the Common Units establishes the students’ awareness, motivation and graduate capabilities from the first year of their study.¹⁷
- Adjusting the focus of CUC107 from knowledge of region and Indigenous culture to a broader focus on cultural intelligence.¹⁸
- The retrofitting of learning spaces as E-Learning studios to encourage collaborative learning and utilise technology to enhance experiential learning opportunities. Additionally, these technologies more effectively engage younger cohorts (particularly males under 25, identified as being at higher risk of failure (Tyler 2004 and Oblinger & Oblinger 2010)). In 2011 a survey of students’ perceptions of the E-Learning spaces overwhelmingly supported the effectiveness of these spaces for positive collaborative learning with 87.6 % of

⁶ Ongoing Review - Associated Projects: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

⁷ Information about the units: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/commonunits.html>

⁸ Sample email to staff: Supporting Teaching Materials p. 3

⁹ Reading maps & guide: Supporting Teaching Materials p. 10

¹⁰ Ongoing review - Associated Projects: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

¹¹ Staff PD program: Supporting Teaching Materials p. 4

¹² RPL for common units: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/rpl.html>

¹³ Grad Attributes Mapping: Handy Info at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/index.html>

¹⁴ About the Program at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/index.html>

¹⁵ Ongoing Review: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html> and <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/managing.html>

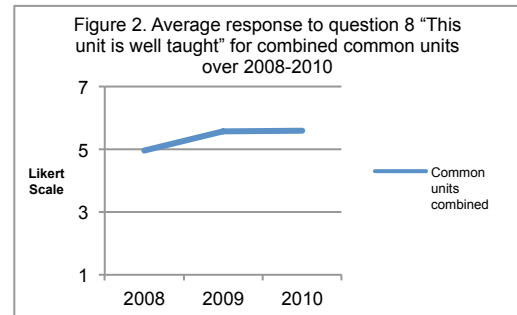
¹⁶ Common Units Factsheet at Handy Info: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/index.html>

¹⁷ Student Evaluation - students comments: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html> and Unit Info at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/commonunits.html>

¹⁸ CUC107 revision 2011 proposal at Ongoing Review-Associated Projects: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

- students surveyed in Semester 2, 2009 agreeing that: the E-Learning studio space and access to PCs and internet greatly enhanced their learning experience.¹⁹
- Ensuring a staff/student ratio of maximum 1 to 25 so that students' individual learning needs can be supported.²⁰

Analysis of students' response to SELT question 8 (which reflects overall impressions of the unit and consistently reflects the average score of all questions combined) indicates a steady improvement in students' perceptions of the common units over time. It also reflects students' significant satisfaction in the program, with all responses in the affirmative. Importantly, the trend upwards from 2008 indicates that the programs' responsiveness to outside review and internal evaluation since 2008 has impacted on students' perceptions (see Figure 2).



2b. Influence on student learning and student engagement

The responsiveness and innovations described in Criteria response 2a are designed to influence students' learning and engagement. The employment and success of these is exemplified below:

Incorporation of Graduate Attributes influences engagement by their direct relevance to students' futures

Each of the Common Units directly references the graduate attributes and encourages students to imagine their future careers and the kinds of skills and knowledge they will require to be successful. In asking students to think toward the future in order to understand the importance of skills and knowledge they are acquiring at university, we aim to increase their motivation and goal setting for their study in the common units and for the learning journey ahead. The relevance of their course curriculum also becomes more potent as they examine their workplace requirements through the common units. A comment provided through SELT 2009 affirms students' appreciation of the graduate attributes focus: "I have thoroughly enjoyed this unit and look forward to putting my knowledge from this unit into practice in my further study and workplace." (CUC100 Student, 2009)

CDU Graduate Attributes	
CDU Core Attribute	Generic Attribute
Personal Practical Knowledge	Acquisition
	Application
	Creativity
Citizenship	Communication
	Teamwork
	Social responsibility
World View	Flexibility
	Leadership

Because the unit assessment and content requires them to address issues from a personal perspective, interest and engagement is enhanced. In CUC100, students write an essay discussing the three most important employability skills for their profession. In CUC107, students examine the application of cultural safety in their proposed professional workplace. In CUC106, students consider sustainability and work in teams to build and communicate their design as they bring their disciplinary knowledge to providing design solutions for third world countries. Thus graduate attributes have a central place in the learning objectives for each of the common units.²¹

Our website provides a clear mapping of learning activities and assignments for the acquisition of the graduate attributes.²² 2011 students overwhelmingly (85%) endorsed the common units as playing a direct role in improving their graduate skills and awareness.²³ Commentary through SELT also reflects this endorsement: "I found it useful not only for my studies, but also for my current employment within an Indigenous organisation." (CUC107 Student, 2008)

Assessment and learning tasks are designed to enhance engagement – experiential, formative, real world, etc.

Encouraging student engagement is a challenging prospect in compulsory generic skills-oriented units. The Common Units facilitate engagement by ensuring the learning activities and assessments are meaningful and authentic; that they reference students' disciplinary considerations; and, where possible, are appropriately timed so that skill transfer can usefully be applied to other units. Assessments in each unit reference students' courses and proposed professions.

¹⁹ E-Learning Studios at *Ongoing Review-Associated Projects*: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html> and *Student Evaluation - students' comments*: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

²⁰ *Guidelines for Common Units Staff – Teaching Staff* at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/managing.html>

²¹ *Unit Information Guides* at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/commonunits.html>

²² *Grad Attributes Mapping: Handy Info* at: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/index.html>

²³ 2011 Survey of usefulness of common units at: *Student Evaluation - students comments* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

Each requires them to consider and respond to real world scenarios. For example: CUC106 assessments are designed to model genres students would utilise when managing projects in the workplace: a proposal report, an oral presentation and a technical report. CUC107 students present a policy proposal for improving cultural safety in their proposed workplace. CUC100 students explore professional websites and job advertisements to establish the employability skills required in their professions. Assessment descriptions for the units²⁴ articulate explicitly for students the purpose, relevance and real-world authenticity of assessments enhancing motivation and purposefulness of these (CHSE 2009).

E-Learning studios promote engagement and keep students on task

“The grouped tables encouraged interaction with other students and having access to computers and the internet was great because I learn best when there is interaction involved.” (CUC107 Student, 2011)

The E-Learning studio project (a joint retrofitting learning spaces initiative with the School of IT), aims to take advantage of technologies such as wireless and tablet PCs to develop dynamic learning spaces conducive to collaborative learning and IT enhanced learning. This has had the desired effect of engaging students much more effectively in learning as well as enhancing their experience and effectiveness.²⁵ The E-Learning studios allow the integration of a range of literacies; enhances experiential activity options; engages net gen/males; allows for more student centred teaching and caters for different learning styles. They also provide a physical environment and opportunities for team teaching conducive to student engagement. Student feedback in a general survey about space, technology, teaching methods and team teaching indicates a preference for learning in these more interactive spaces: “...the workspace was really well organised too. I enjoyed the grouping of tables, and the wireless access was a real benefit. It is my opinion that the rest of the uni should be made like this in the coming years.” (CUC106 Student, 2011) Importantly, increased attendance has been noted in all of the internal units, remaining at between 80-90% of original numbers. Attrition in internal classes decreased from 35% in 2008 before the introduction of E-Learning studios to 17% in 2010.



Multiple disciplinary groups & multidisciplinary content helps to engage students

“[It was] great working with a diverse group, getting their perspectives on outcomes and how to achieve them.”
“It allowed me to see my degree from other perspectives.” (CUC100 Student, 2011)

Working together with peers from a range of disciplines helps motivate students' attendance and engagement as they enjoy a broad range of perspectives and world views from each other and increase their opportunity to build social networks (Tinto 1997; Mackie 2001; Wylie 2005). In CUC106 for example, students work in multidisciplinary groups to design solutions to real world problems. A group may have members from IT, Engineering, Humanitarian Studies and Science with each contributing valuable disciplinary knowledge and perspectives and expanding each other's worldview. Connections made often continue beyond the classroom. In a survey of Semester 1, 2011 students made an 85% affirmative response to the following question “13. In this unit, did you find working with students from a range of courses a positive experience?”²⁶ As one student (male, under 25) commented: “I just liked the experience you know, experience of studying with students from different courses, doing different units, like I am doing social work so studying with someone who is doing engineering, pharmacy, nursing or teaching was really great and inspiring.” (CUC106 Student, 2010)



Scaffolding literacy (CUC100) to democratise classroom

To ensure the engagement of all students in class learning activities, readings, and assignments and to help meet our aim for creating a level playing field, a literacy scaffolding approach is applied. The key principal of this approach is to make text structures and meanings explicit rather than assuming that first year students can all read and understand complex academic texts independently. With this approach, lower literacy students are empowered with a general understanding of texts on which more detailed understandings can be built. Texts are unpacked in collaboration with the teacher and in small groups, so weaker students have the benefit of peers to assist the process.

²⁴ Assessment descriptions: Supporting Teaching Materials pp.8-9

²⁵ Williams et al 2009 at *Ongoing Review – Guiding Literature* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

²⁶ 2011 Survey of usefulness of common units at: *Student Evaluation - students comments* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

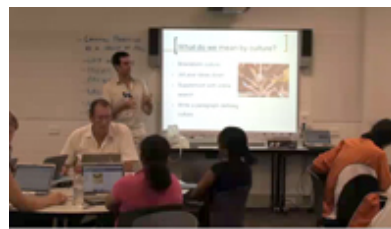
This approach ensures that students from other language backgrounds and those less experienced with formal academic texts can actively participate rather than feeling excluded from learning. Further, students are not only able to engage more readily in text meanings at a deeper level but also to apply this approach to reading and note-taking in other texts in their course. The methodology is described in Rose et al 2004²⁷. The value of this is reflected in SELT comments such as: “[The unit] definitely prepares you for reading texts and understanding essay writing,” and “Going through the readings, makes it worthwhile actually reading them and helps with understanding of all assignments.” (CUC100 Student, 2009)

Because our student groups have diverse literacy levels, scaffolding must be pitched at an appropriate level for advanced students to benefit. Consequently, additional tutorials are provided for those students who require the most support.

Engaging external students through range of media to cater for different learning styles and needs

“I’m an external student and I find that the videos really help my learning. I would very much like (well, need) these to continue as it is only fair that they do as the help external students keep up what’s happening with all the hands on stuff. It will help my learning in the future of this subject, thanks so much for doing it so far and I hope it continues in the future”. (CUC106 Student, 2011)

Studying externally presents as many challenges as conveniences for students. The necessity of self motivation, independent problem solving, being able to read instructions clearly, and written rather than spoken delivery of knowledge presents considerable obstacles for students’ engagement, retention and success. To mitigate these pressures, tutors in the common units utilise a range of media to cater for students’ different learning styles and to personalise the process of external study. Weekly letters, PowerPoints summarising the week’s key learning, chat rooms, blogs, Wimba (online classroom) sessions, and short video clips all supplement the standard online learning materials and readings and are essential components of responding to students diverse literacies and learning styles.



Over half the students surveyed utilise these tools and find them helpful in assisting their learning and sense of belonging to a learning community. A recent introduction of short video clips of internal workshops was met with enthusiasm by the external students: “I’d like to add my voice to the ‘Please continue the videos’ choir! Can’t speak for anyone else, but they really help to add a feeling of connection with the course as a whole; plus, I really don’t feel like I’m missing out on much at all when I get to see the same lectures as the internal students.” (CUC106 Student, 2011)

Evidence of the range of tools utilised and students’ appreciation of this can be seen in unsolicited feedback from students as well as comments through formal evaluations.²⁸

Pastoral approach and just in time response

“Hi everyone. We are now in Week 5. Isn’t it amazing how quickly the semester is passing? ... I hope everything is going smoothly now that you have got the hang of Learnline and how the unit works. Don’t forget to contact me if you have any queries. Regards, Elizabeth”

Our commitment to incorporating pastoral support as an integral aspect of our pedagogy is an essential component of engaging students in the Common Units. Students frequently comment that this care has made a significant difference to their maintaining motivation and the will to see out their first semester. Our pastoral policy requires the provision of friendly weekly emails (for external students) reminding them about key things to do, asking how they are and providing a gentle nudge to stay focussed. Just-in-time responses are another component of this support and tutors are asked to adhere to a 24-hour turnaround for emails and phone calls, and a 2-week turnaround for assignments.

Evidence of students’ appreciation is plentiful in formal and unsolicited evaluation. For example, from an external student (2011): “Thank you so much ... for all your help and support this semester :) Fantastic unit of work and brilliantly assisted by yourself :) Have a lovely break & thankyou once again :)” and an internal student (2009): “Taught in a friendly but professional fashion, great place to ask questions in an environment where we would not be put down.” Further

²⁷ Rose et al 2004 at *Ongoing Review – Guiding Literature* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

²⁸ *Student Evaluation – students’ comments:* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

comments are included in the learning portfolio.²⁹ Complete examples of the weekly letters received by students can also be seen in the portfolio.³⁰

2c. Breadth of impact

The Common Unit Program affects the experience of students throughout their course and beyond.

An impact across disciplines through a multidisciplinary approach

The multidisciplinary approach requires students to be exposed to a range of written genres appropriate for Humanities, Science and Technology disciplines. The range of genres that students are required to master to complete their assignments for the units include: an annotated bibliography; a discursive essay; a technical report; PowerPoint presentations; a photo essay and online discussion. Students work in multidisciplinary teams to complete the assignments, thus sharing disciplinary interests and viewpoints³¹. Through these experiences, students are not only taken beyond their disciplinary perspectives conceptually, but are also exposed to knowledge and skills in a way that reflects the increasingly pluralistic and globalised professional arenas for which they are preparing.

The employment of teaching teams from all disciplines ensures that students are exposed to a range of disciplinary perspectives from experts. At the same time, teachers from these disciplines are exposed to best practice in the utilisation of innovative learning technologies and academic literacy scaffolding, which feeds back to their own disciplines' teaching teams. Teaching teams for the three units over the 2010-2011 period are drawn from Psychology, Law, Nursing, Education, Sociology, Indigenous studies, Engineering, IT, Science, Fine Arts, Education, and Applied Linguistics. Staff are required to attend professional development and weekly team meetings, and they contribute to reflections and review of each units each semester. Staff report teaching in the units has considerably enhanced their disciplinary practice.³² As one staff member summed up: "... this team teaching [in CUC106] can be considered as a internal professional development; I gained a lot from my colleagues and also implemented some of the good hints and tips into my disciplinary units. This also brings consistency across the board and breaks the disconnect from core units and disciplinary units" (CUC106 Tutor and Assoc. Prof. Pharmacy).

Finally, each unit has a unit advisory group with members who are representative of each discipline. This reflects the university wide ownership of the program and also ensures that the nuances of disciplinary concerns are acknowledged in the design and delivery of the units. The CUC100 review team includes representatives from: Psychology, Nursing, Education, IT, Applied Linguistics, and the Enabling program. The CUC106 team includes Pharmacy, Humanitarian Studies, Science, IT, Engineering, Communication and Fine Arts, while the CUC107 team draws its representation from Cultural and Indigenous Studies, Sociology, IT, Science, Applied Linguistics, Anthropology, and Education.³³

An ongoing impact throughout students' course of study

"It allowed me to mingle and feel more comfortable at university. Also working with different students allowed me to be more open minded and take on their concepts and values and apply it to my life and studying activities". (CUC107 Student, 2011)

One of the essential aims of the program is to build students' academic and graduate skills and confidence. By raising a meta-awareness of the nature of the profession they are studying for and encouraging them to anticipate the professional skills they will require, the Common Units promote students' engagement and motivation for their degree. Results gathered through the most recent phase of our Retention and Success project (Tyler, Rolls, Bridgeman and Flack, 2010 presentation to management group) and recent surveys, assure us that this desired breadth of impact into students' overall success and motivation is being achieved. Further, findings from Tyler et al (2010) indicate that students who complete the Common Units are twice as likely to go on to complete their course.

Students' views confirm the impact of the units beyond the course and the application of skills and knowledge to other spheres within and beyond university. Findings also indicate an 8% increase in retention in common units from 2004 and a higher mean grade for students in the lowest TER Band 30-39 than those in the 40-49 band suggesting common units play an important role in closing the gap (Tyler et al 2005). A recent survey of students regarding the effect of the

²⁹ Student Evaluation – students' comments: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

³⁰ Examples of weekly emails to students: Supporting Teaching Materials pp.1-2

³¹ Assignment descriptions showing multidisciplinary approach: Supporting Teaching Materials p.8-9

³² Staff views of common unit effect on their teaching: Supporting Teaching Materials pp. 9-10

³³ Review Teams and process at Ongoing review- Review Process: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

graduate attribute focus in the Common Units suggested that 70.7% of students found this focus improved their understanding of their profession and the skills required.³⁴

An impact on school curriculums – CUC100 adaptation for their Year 11/12 group

In 2010, the Headmaster of Essington International Senior College approached the Common Unit Theme Leader about the feasibility of offering our academic literacies units to Year 11 and 12 students. CUC100 was chosen as the first of the units to be adapted for the Essington school terms and in Semester 1, 2011, 30 students from the college were enrolled in CUC100 on campus. This initiative represents an exciting opportunity to develop a model for improving the transition between schools and tertiary learning, and preparing high school students with an understanding of the culture and requirements of university. The adapted unit is described in the course accreditation documentation for the unit CUC100E.³⁵

2d. Concern for equity and diversity

Concern for equity and diversity is at the core of the Common Unit program's business. The units are driven by the university's desire to provide opportunities for educational attainment for our diverse group of students, and in recognition that we have high numbers of first in family and students from other language backgrounds (including Indigenous students). Our commitment to equity and diversity is embodied in the program's policy and processes as outlined on our website.³⁶ There are a number of strategies we have employed to help provide all students with an equitable experience, and through our reflective practice we continue to explore new pedagogies and technologies that will allow us to reach all students.

Supporting university transition by scaffolding

"I loved the lecturers, they are so nice and do not speak fast, and consider international students and make sure we understand and give lots of advice and information (on the phone or email)." (CUC107 Student, 2010)

One of the practical ways we address diversity is by underpinning the design of assessments and learning activities with an approach that provides adequate scaffolding³⁷ so that regardless of language or knowledge level, all students have adequate support to be able to successfully engage in learning. We do this at a whole unit level by emphasising formative assessments where students gradually build their skills before completing the summative task³⁸. We also provide scaffolding to assist students understand the readings and to build their own writing.³⁹ Finally, we adopt a pastoral attitude in our interactions with students that reflects a recognition of the individual challenges they face and assists them in building meta-cognitive skills for coping with study. This is described in our policy⁴⁰ and exemplified in our weekly letters.⁴¹ Students are further supported through the use of tools such as Wimba, Camtasia video clips, weekly emails, and individual one-to-one telephone or face-to-face discussions. This variety of tools for scaffolding is described in the unit previews⁴² and reinforced in regular announcements and emails to students.⁴³

Classroom space caters for diverse student needs, cultures and learning styles

Learning spaces reflect culture and affect experience (Williams, White, & Tutty 2006). For a learning space to cater for the diversity of our cohorts in culture, age, language ability and learning styles, they need to be flexible and allow for collaborative, experiential, self-paced learning as well as the opportunity to utilise visual, auditory and textual cues for learning. The two E-Learning studios, developed through a Common Unit / School of IT initiative, incorporate all of the above capacities. Classes are team taught, better allowing teachers' capacity to work individually with students. Lessons are organised so that students can work through activities at their own pace. Peer mentoring is promoted through the emphasis on group work, allowing weaker students to be mentored in a non-threatening way by other members of the group. Access to laptop computers and the internet allow both internal and external students to utilise the same



³⁴ 2011 Survey of usefulness of common units at: *Student Evaluation - students comments* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

³⁵ Course description CUC100 Essington Senior College: Supporting Teaching Materials p. 6

³⁶ *Policies and Processes at Managing Common Units - Guidelines for CU Staff* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/managing.html>

³⁷ "The temporary but essential nature of the mentor's assistance in supporting learners to carry out tasks successfully" (Hammond 2001, p. 3)

³⁸ Assignment descriptions showing multidisciplinary approach: Supporting Teaching Materials pp.8-9

³⁹ Example of prepared text and taxonomy: Supporting Teaching Materials p.10

⁴⁰ *Policies and Process at Managing Common Units - Guidelines for CU Staff* <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/managing.html>

⁴¹ Example of weekly letter: Supporting Teaching Materials p.1-2

⁴² Link to unit previews: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/commonunits.html>

⁴³ Announcements about support sessions/Wimba: Supporting Teaching Materials p.3

learning materials and tools as they learn. Students overwhelmingly support the value of the E-Learning spaces for fostering diverse learning, as reflected through a recent survey and in the following comment⁴⁴: “Group work really made it good, in that we could help each other in a much quicker fashion than if we had to wait for the teachers”. (CUC107 Student, 2011)

The physical arrangement of the E-Learning studios inspires collaborative mentoring approaches to teaching and learning and more dynamic interactive approaches to teaching. Most learning activities involve exploration and discussion of concepts and skills; thus there are numerous opportunities for students to engage with learning in different ways.⁴⁵

Approach to assessment that allows for formative learning

“This unit enables students to be confident doing other unit assignments, the unit is an eye-opener to university education.” (CUC100 Student, 2008)

Students with diverse knowledge and skill levels can only ever access concepts and skills from the point of view of their existing knowledge and literacy (Chouliarki 1997, Macdonald 2003, Northedge 2001). Assessments provide a vital opportunity for gauging students’ levels and the extent of scaffolding they need to progress. A formative assessment approach acknowledges the individual learner. It allows the tutor to observe each student’s knowledge and understanding and through individualised feedback provide the required scaffolding for success in the next assignment. A key principle of formative learning is allowing for student resubmission or extensions. In this way assessment becomes a tool to promote the development of learning rather than simply a tool for examination and testing (Juwah, Macfarlane-Dick, Mathew, Nicol, Ross & Smith 2004). The common unit management has encapsulated this formative approach in its policy.⁴⁶ Emails to students and learning contracts illustrate how this policy is put into practice.⁴⁷

The assessment regime for each unit begins with less demanding, more personalised assignments and builds towards a final assignment that brings together the skills and knowledge learned in previous assignments. In this way, the final assignment acts as the summative task and is more heavily weighted. With such a regime, there are opportunities for appropriate interventions, particularly for weak students who are identified through the first assignment. A relatively common example is where students need additional English language support in order to understand the requirements of their assignments and to improve their expression of ideas and conceptual understandings. Through early intervention and support, they increase their chances of successfully completing their assignments, reduce their stress, and build their language skills at the same time.

The following feedback to a 2010 student’s assignment exemplifies our formative approach: “Hi [student’s name]. This is a great effort and you have presented an argument that is well organized overall and backed up with some valid references. You have explained your argument quite well but your essay would have been much stronger if you had: Referenced more extensively in the text and made your point of argument more explicit in places. (See attached marked up version of assignment for details) In general though I can see you have taken on board the essential components of academic writing and shown a good understanding of the requirements of your profession. Cheers, Nicola”

Similarly, comments such as the following indicate the progress students are able to make with appropriate scaffolding in the literacies common units: “I stumbled across my final essay result last night and I am still in shock. I just wish to say thank you firstly for granting me additional time to complete my submission and secondly for your kindness in your feedback, it was somewhat overwhelming. Having had a less than easy week; to read your comments was very uplifting, thank you.” (CUC100 Student, 2009)

Through a formative approach to assessment, we also apply good pedagogy for deep learning by ensuring that assessments are meaningful and authentic. As one student reflects: “It was motivating to have a real life setting for the projects in this unit.” (CUC106 Student, 2009)

The challenge of ensuring the skills units are authentic and meaningful is met by asking students to build their skills through engaging with real world issues and producing assignments that model the genres of their disciplines and professions. Because the units are interdisciplinary, all assignments ask students to situate their responses from a disciplinary point of view.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Report on E-Learning project (Williams 2009) at *Ongoing Review-Guiding Literature*: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/improvement.html>

⁴⁵ Example of lesson plan CUC106: Supporting Teaching Materials p.5

⁴⁶ Formative learning policy at *A Developmental Approach*: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/students.html>

⁴⁷ Example email to student & Learning contracts: Supporting Teaching Materials p.7

⁴⁸ Assessment summary: Supporting Teaching Materials pp.8-9

Evening classes and external remote options for students to allow for flexibility

Research into what makes first year students “stay the course” recognises that “student situation”, in other words their personal circumstances, is a key factor for student success or withdrawal. Outside stressors can make or break students’ ability to endure other pressures associated with part-time study. (Tinto 1997, Mackie 2001, Wylie 2005) Common Units acknowledge students’ diverse situations by catering for students who have work and/or family commitments or those who are unable to study on campus. Internal class schedules include an after-hours option. Students can study the units externally each semester and students can avail themselves of a mixed mode option where they study independently, but attend classes as the need arises. We also offer the units both internally and externally on our Alice Springs campus.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ Options explained to students (*Fact sheet*) and links to timetable provided at: *Handy Info*: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/index.html>