



The CDU Common Unit Program: Responding to Diversity

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CONTEXT

The Common Unit Program at Charles Darwin University (CDU) has established itself as an essential and innovative program for assisting first year students to make a successful transition into higher education. The program responds to a number of key considerations in the 21st century higher educational 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 which provide academic skill development and important contextual knowledge (sustainability and cultural intelligence) for university and beyond. The units are taught across disciplines, cater for large numbers and are offered internally and externally.

Students are required to complete one academic literacy focused unit, either CUC100 *Academic Literacies for Exploring Sustainability* (for humanities students) or CUC106 *Design and Innovation: Communicating Technology* (for technology, science students). The second unit all students complete is CUC107 *Cultural Intelligence and Capability*. (See Attachment)

RATIONALE

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 its high number 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.) 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. The distinctiveness of our demographic compared to other Australian universities is illustrated in the following Figure 1. While we can expect non-traditional and online students to have increased at all universities post Bradley the extremely high percentage of external and mature age students set CDU apart.

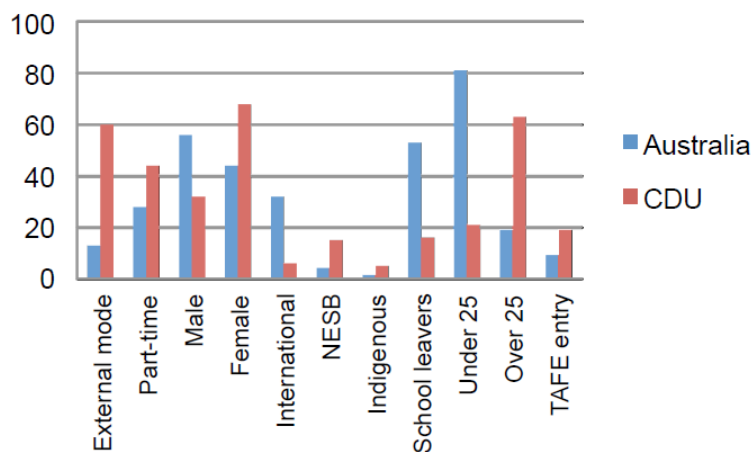


Figure 1. Breakdown (%) of first-year Higher Education enrolments in Australian universities compared with CDU for 2013 (James et al, 2009, DEEWR, 2010 & Charles Darwin University, 2013).

DESCRIPTION

The Common Unit Program aims to:

- Develop students' practical academic skills, including: critical thinking, reading, researching and writing
- Provide an induction into broad theoretical and practical aspects of university culture
- Build an understanding of the environmental, economic and cultural complexities and challenges facing modern society
- Introduce and develop graduate attributes, including practical skills and citizenship skills

Our underpinning learning and teaching philosophy embodies first year learning principles for supportive, flexible and developmental pedagogies and recognises that:

- First year is highly challenging for most students
- Students learning is enhanced by teachers who show flexibility, patience, empathy and respect
- Learning should be scaffolded with enough challenge and enough support
- Being available and giving constructive, informative feedback are essential aspects of learning

In responding to our diverse cohort and our brief to provide students with core university skills and knowledge upfront, the common unit program has adopted a range of exciting and effective innovations. These place the program at the vanguard of best practice for improving the first year experience. These innovations include:

An overall program design that references changing educational climates

"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 feel you and your subject have given me an extra edge and confidence." (CUC100 Student, 2011)

The program design has responded to the challenges of changing educational climates in its overall guidelines and management by:

- Establishing the program as a compulsory measure for all first year students (n= 2000+).
- By designing a multidisciplinary program whereby students from all disciplines learn together and teaching staff (25+) are drawn from all disciplines, we expose students to the multidisciplinary nature of professional life.
- Embedding graduate attributes in learning objectives, content, and assessment to build the students' awareness, motivation and graduate capabilities from the first year of their study.
- Providing all CDU students with a multidisciplinary introduction to essential knowledge for our times *sustainability* and *cultural intelligence*.
- Ensuring a staff/student ratio of maximum 1 to 25 so that students' individual learning needs can be supported
- Establishing best practice pedagogy for first year learning through:
 - A systematic approach to course development and review including the input of expert curriculum designers
 - Providing staff with clear guidelines and professional development in learning and teaching for this cohort

Assessment and learning tasks that are designed to enhance engagement

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. Each requires them to consider and respond to real world scenarios. For example: CUC106 assessments are designed to model processes and genres students would utilise when managing projects in the workplace: a proposal report, an oral presentation and a technical report. CUC107 students present a proposal for improving cultural safety in a particular real world scenario. Assignments in CUC100 are designed to each represent a stage in planning researching and writing a discursive academic essay. Assessment descriptions for the units articulate explicitly for students the purpose, relevance and real-world authenticity of assessments enhancing motivation and purposefulness of these (CHSE 2009).

An 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 assignment 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.

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.

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.

Adequate scaffolding to ensure all students can engage meaningfully with course readings and assignments

“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 scaffolding 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 task. We also provide scaffolding to assist students understand the readings and to take notes to use in their own writing. 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 (2004). The value of this is reflected in SELT comments such as:

“[The unit] definitely prepares you for reading texts and understanding essay writing,” and

“[Having] two teachers helps the students to get a much better understanding of the topic / reading of the day and helps in breaking down of the information. All our Teachers do a wonderful job and make me as student want learn, even when I’m uninterested” (Survey, S.2 2016)

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.

Classrooms design that caters for diverse student needs, cultures and learning styles

Learning spaces reflect culture and affect experience. 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 Engineering and IT initiative, incorporate all of the above capacities.

Classes are co-taught, better allowing teachers’ capacity to work individually with students. 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 learning materials and tools as they learn. 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, discussion and application of concepts and skills; thus there are numerous opportunities for students to engage with learning in different ways. Students overwhelmingly support the value of the E-Learning spaces for fostering diverse learning, as reflected in the following comments:

“...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 coming years” (CUC100, S.1, 2010, SELTS).

“Lecturers are really supportive and individual attention they give was really helpful for students, [e]specially for me being an international student” (CUC100 S.2, 2015, Casuarina).

“The teaching staff are extremely helpful and more than willing to spend time with you whenever you come across difficulties. The environment in class always felt very inclusive and culturally safe” (MyView CUC107 S1, 2015, Casuarina).

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 [with] 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, Collaborate (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 supportive approach and a 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 a supportive approach 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 (2017):

“This semester has been a struggle for me in many respects and your willingness to help and genuine concern for my education has made reaching out for help when it's needed not feel so scary. I was skeptical about this unit before beginning it but can truly say that it has developed me as a student in many valuable ways. Thank you.” (Student S.1, 2017) 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.”

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. 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 plus each year) and teaching staff (15-20). Some of these strategies implemented by the management group 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
- Professional development for teaching staff in: first year pedagogy, working with students from other language backgrounds, managing plagiarism, feedback and marking, co-teaching effectively.
- Tools for 21st century learning including: Tablet PC, wireless-enabled classrooms (E-Learning studios) for internal students and options for video streaming, blogs and Collaborate (CDU's live, virtual classroom environment) for external students.
- Mechanisms to ensure at-risk students are identified and referred to support tutorials early in the semester.
- Improved scaffolding of learning materials to support external at-risk students.
- Further strategies for confidence building through social support mechanisms.
- Staff induction to promote an understanding of student diversity and consistent formative, experiential and inclusive approaches to teaching in our E-Learning studio classrooms.
- Clear provision and dissemination of options for recognition of prior learning.
- Mechanisms for improved input from schools through membership of the CU review teams and management group meetings.

IMPACT

The Common Unit Program plays a vital role in easing the transition of 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. These objectives are captured in policy and practices developed by the program management and embodied in the program manifesto on our website: <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/commonunits/index.html>.

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”.

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 mechanism (MyView), additional internal surveys and unsolicited commentary and an internal investigation into the impact of the program. These findings are discussed below:

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,) 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 (2011) indicate that students who complete the Common Units are twice as likely to go on to complete their course. 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 2003).

MyView student evaluation 2016 indicates an overall common unit average score of 3.17 on a scale of 1 to 4 above the university average of 3.15. Against the global question, *Q. 8 Overall, I rate this unit as excellent*, the common units rated significantly higher than the university average:

<i>Q. 8 Overall, I rate this unit as excellent</i>			
CUC100	CUC106	CUC107	University
3.44	3.16	3.31	3.11

An impact across disciplines through a multidisciplinary approach

For students

Our 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: personal reflections, mind maps, an annotated bibliography; a discursive essay; a technical report; PowerPoint presentations; a multimedia analysis and online discussion. Students work in multidisciplinary teams to complete the assignments, thus sharing disciplinary interests and viewpoints. Through these experiences, they 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 also exposed to a range of disciplinary perspectives from experts.

For teaching staff

Through the systematic approach to PD and collaborative teaching practice, co-teaching in Common Units has extended benefits for staff and the wider institution as it considerably enhances disciplinary teaching practice and strategies for working with diverse students. Teaching teams for the three units are variously drawn from Psychology, Education, Philosophy, Sociology, Indigenous studies, Engineering, IT, Environmental 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.

Because classes are co-taught staff are exposed to different teaching styles and incidental peer review. As one staff member summed up “...this team teaching [in CUC106] can be considered as 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). And from another: “My co-teaching experience with CUC100 has enhanced my classroom management, collaboration and communication skills as well as prompted deeper self-reflection of my pedagogical practice. Through this self-reflection I also believe that teaching and learning within a discipline would be enhanced by implementing effective co-teaching strategies that better address the diverse learning needs of students at CDU” (CUC100 Tutor and Lecturer, Environmental Science).

An impact on sustainability education pedagogy worldwide

While sustainability has become an increasing priority for universities, integrating the concept of sustainability across higher education curriculums and ensuring all university students engage in the sustainability discourse is a challenging task for educators. Interdisciplinary learning has been identified as a key pedagogy to facilitate Education for Sustainability (EFS) and has been advocated through a number of Higher Education EFS frameworks, both in Australia (Phelan et al., 2015) and internationally (UNESCO, 2014). However, the common picture here and internationally is that EFS is more likely implemented within a single discipline rather than through interdisciplinary programs (Coops et al., 2015), and that interdisciplinary learning is not a common pedagogy (Christie, Miller, Cooke, & White, 2013; Sustainable Campus Group, 2013).

CDU is unique amongst Australian universities in providing education about sustainability to all of its undergraduate students through the newly developed compulsory common unit (CUC100 *Academic Literacies for Exploring Sustainability*) which use the topic of sustainability as a conduit for academic skill development. By effectively marrying EFS pedagogic frameworks with an experiential literacy one around 3 themes: ‘Define’, ‘Explore’ and ‘Explain’, the unit develops sustainability knowledge, competencies and attributes as well as key academic literacies. Students undertake reflective assignments which scaffold towards a discursive essay in which they examine and argue a position on a real-world sustainability issue, as well as how these interdisciplinary perspectives could enable sustainable outcomes. Student feedback for the unit affirms its effectiveness as one student explains:

“Having to actually think about sustainability from a holistic view was interesting. Especially understanding the consequences as the world around me swallows all it can in a throw-away society, where everyone is trying to better each other. I felt I learned academic skills as well as a new appreciation of the world around me. Thank you “ (Student S.1 2016)

And another

“Each assessment task helped me a lot to develop my understanding about sustainability, and I learned a lot writing essay. And tutors were very helpful, kind and patience. I hope they won't change in helping students. (Student S.1 2016)

This highly innovative initiative for achieving two important CDU strategic priorities (transformative skills and learning) and values (Sustainability) provides a model for other universities, many of which are exploring ways to expand the reach of sustainability education as a matter of priority. Since its introduction in 2016 the unit has achieved average Student evaluation scores of 3.27 out of 4, higher than all three common units and higher than the university average of 3.15.

An impact on school curriculums through enhancing students' readiness for university

CUC100 Academic Literacies for Exploring Sustainability - adaptation for Senior Students

Since 2010, our academic literacy unit CUC100 has been adapted for Darwin's Essington Senior College's Year 12 terms and each year up to 35 students from the college enrol in CUC100 on campus. This initiative represents an exciting opportunity to improve the transition between schools and tertiary learning, preparing senior school students with an understanding of the culture and requirements of university. At the same time, successful students enter university with one subject already completed.



Embedding specific academic literacies through SACE subject Research Project B

Another project for building senior school students' academic literacy involves a partnership between NT Senior Schools and the Common Units to utilise the SACE subject, Research Project B (RPB) as a vehicle for building academic literacies. While the subject is a rich and challenging one that requires students to engage with community issues, think critically and creatively and research, write and reflect on their learning, this partnerships ensures that there is a strong synergy between academic literacy skills taught as part of RPB and those at CDU. This initiative helps to improve students' readiness for university and provide an option for advanced standing for one of CDU's academic literacy Common Units. RPB students enrolling in CDU courses are encouraged to apply for a credit transfer for CUC100 or CUC106. As supporting evidence for the application they need to provide:

- Copies of their written assignments for Research Project B
- A presentation (in person with power point) outlining their project and findings to a CDU Expert panel.

Through workshops designed to share academic literacy resources and teaching approaches between RPB teachers and Common unit academic literacy experts, the teaching of academic literacies is becoming more firmly and consistently imbedded in RPB. Students groups also attend research workshops at the university library and are given access to discipline experts for advice on their projects.

In 2016, 40 students attended the university campus to present their RPB findings to CDU experts. This group has successfully achieved advanced standing for the literacy common units. Senior teachers who participated are enthusiastic about the benefits of this project in introducing students to the university expectations and environment, and signaling to students that university is an inviting and accessible option. One teacher reported “My students' were particularly impressed with the beautiful campus and library and relieved that university lecturers were friendly and approachable.”

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