

**REVIEW OF THE COMMON UNITS PROGRAM AT
CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Common Units Program has been intensively scrutinised since its inception, with a range of external reviews and ongoing internal analyses. The University has responded energetically and constructively to recommendations, and demonstrates a strong, genuine commitment to continuous improvement.
- The structure of the Program is now clear and coherent, and the ‘two stream’ framework seems to be successful.
- On paper, the Units represent excellent models of structured courses of study which have been well planned and soundly conceptualised.
- In practice, there are still a few gaps, but student and staff responses indicate acceptable levels of satisfaction with the course experience and outcomes, while suggesting several areas for improvement.
- The quality assurance mechanisms which have been put in place are extensive and rigorous, and still being enhanced.
- The organisation of the program has improved considerably, due in large measure to the dedication and competence of the Team Leader (formerly Academic Consultant), who has also contributed significantly to the conceptual re-working of the Units.
- Acceptance of the importance of the Program in the University community seems to have increased, but there is still some resistance and criticism.
- The main areas in which further work is required are:
 - Standards (ensuring the achievement of baseline levels of the academic literacies which will be adequate for students’ future study)
 - Understanding of the Program among academic staff and students (its goals, curricula and procedures)
 - The greater formalisation of some of the procedures for planning and review (to an appropriate, not overly bureaucratic extent)
 - Staffing (achieving the optimal balance of faculty-based and specialist staff/core and casual staff)

These points are argued in Section 3 of this report and addressed in detail in the Recommendations.

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

Background

The role of the Common Unit Program is to provide the university's higher education students with fundamental skills and contextual knowledge for academic and graduate success by equipping students with a foundation in critical thinking, communicating, researching, information communication technology, and the opportunity to understand the social, cultural and political context for their study and their work. The program is part of an important strategic focus of the university which aims to recognise the unique demography of our student body and the cultural context in which they study as well as the importance of graduate attributes relating to *personal professional knowledge, citizenship and world view*.

Context

Factors to be considered as a context for this review are:

- The previous external review of the Common Unit Program, Baldwin & McInnis (2000)
- The 1999-2004 and 2005-2006 reports on Common Unit Success
- Student Experience of Learning & Teaching (SELT) in Common Units data
- Current staff and student's perceptions of the program through focus groups and interview.
- The Universities Strategic Directions (Futures Framework, Graduate Attributes, Teaching and Learning Operational Priorities)
- The awards achieved by the program for excellence in teaching and learning – Vice Chancellor's Award 2007 and Carrick Citation 2007
- The criteria for proposed application for a Carrick Award for Programs that Enhance Learning 2008
- Other university approaches to common core and graduate skills.

Scope of review

Comment and recommendation regarding the progress and success of the program in view of:

- a The previous external review of the Common Unit Program (2000)
- b The 2003-2006 reports on Common Unit Success
- c Student Experience of Learning & Teaching (SELT) data
- d Current staff and student's perceptions of the program
- e The Universities Strategic Directions (1 in 10 in 5, graduate attributes, Teaching and Learning guidelines etc)
- f The awards achieved by the program for excellence in teaching and learning – VC's Award 2007 and Carrick Citation 2007
- g The criteria for proposed application for a Carrick Award 2008

Timeframe

To be completed by June 1st 2008

1. BACKGROUND

The Common Units Program (CUP) was established at the then Northern Territory University in 1998. In 2000, a review of the Program was commissioned from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. It was conducted by Dr Gabrielle Baldwin (the current reviewer) and Professor Craig McInnis (Baldwin & McInnis 2000). By then the Program consisted of five units, with students required to choose two. The review was strongly supportive of the aims of the Program and commended the energy and creativity which were evident in the development of curricula. It pinpointed some problems with organisation and confusion of objectives and made a number of recommendations. In 2002, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) also made some recommendations, focusing on the relationship of the CUP to the degree courses (AVCC 2002). In 2005, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit suggested the further development of procedures for recognition of prior learning, to accommodate the range of abilities and knowledge of entering students.

The re-named Charles Darwin University (CDU) has shown good faith and strong commitment in acting on the main thrust of these recommendations, developing implementation strategies appropriate to the particular context of this institution.

The Program has also been subjected to regular and rigorous internal scrutiny. A key aspect of this self-examination, which continues at present, is the analysis of attrition rates in the Common Units and possible reasons for these patterns (Tyler and Rolls 2003 & 2005).

In 2007, this commitment and the significant contributions made by members of staff were rewarded with a Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Teaching and Learning from the Carrick Institute.

In the spirit of continuous improvement, the University is still refining its quality assurance procedures in relation to the Program and has commissioned the current review as another source of feedback. The reviewer is in a good position to reflect upon the developments of the last eight years.

2. PROCEDURE

The reviewer was provided with a great deal of written material relevant to the ongoing development of the CUP, its quality assurance procedures and current curricula. She was able to access all on-line course materials on *Learnlink*. In addition, she was provided with material relating more broadly to policies and procedures governing Teaching and Learning at CDU. She travelled to the Casuarina campus of the University for three days of intensive interviews, meetings and focus group discussions. In these, she sought the views of staff currently teaching in the CUP, students enrolled in the Units, support staff and a range of academic staff from different schools. She subsequently conducted several telephone interviews. Those interviewed were very generous with their time and thoughtful with their comments. Those comments will be drawn on throughout this report, without individuals being identified.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 ACTION TAKEN SINCE THE LAST REVIEW

The two most important developments in response to the Baldwin and McInnis review were the appointment of an Academic Consultant (now Team Leader) for the Common Units and the clearer definition and structuring of two key streams in the Program:

- 1) skill acquisition (academic literacies)
- 2) contextual and cultural knowledge

The original review had recognised the difficult issues and debates associated with the conceptual separation of skills from knowledge, but had argued that the organisation of the Program would benefit from a differentiation of emphasis. The authors suggested a structure of a compulsory 'core' academic skills unit, surrounded by a 'suite' of linked electives. This model was implemented in 2003 but, after a year, the strand concerned with 'contextual knowledge' was reduced to a single, regional unit focused on the Northern Territory. The current structure requires students to choose either CUC100: Academic Literacies or CUC106: Design and Innovation: Communicating Technology, **and** CUC107: Northern Perspectives.

This path seems to have been successful. The separation is by no means absolute, as it cannot be – skills cannot be developed in a content-free environment, and vice-versa. But the emphasis in CUC100 and CUC106 is on the development of academic literacies and in CUC107 on the cultural, social, economic, political and historical context of the Northern Territory -- with an approach based on social theory relating to the nature of knowledge.

The appointment of a Team Leader has made a very significant difference. The organisation of the program seems to have been transformed, thanks to the extraordinary investment of time and thought made by the current Leader. She takes responsibility for many different aspects, 'following through' in ways that are essential for an innovative, evolving and somewhat controversial program. Her efforts and abilities are widely appreciated in the University, and the importance of her contribution is indicated by voiced concerns about what will happen if/when she moves on.

3.2 ACCEPTANCE WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

3.2.1 Academic staff

As discussed in the original review, common unit or core curriculum programs generally have a very difficult time gaining acceptance from university communities, especially from academic staff. This resistance seems to spring from a genuine commitment to academic disciplines and a perception that Common Units are wasted

time that would be better spent on more Chemistry or History or other discipline-based study in the students' chosen course. However, at the same time, academic staff often bemoan the lack of preparation for university study they identify in many of their students. So there is commonly a deep ambivalence about the need for and value of programs such as the Common Units.

Generally, there seems to be less resistance to the Program among academic staff than eight years ago – and indeed some strong support from several senior academics who take a broad view of curriculum issues. Those teaching in the CUP feel that the views of other CDU staff have shifted to some extent.

One academic leader talked very perceptively about the need for teaching staff to move away from a sense that they must 'cover' everything essential in their fields, which often means 'going through' it in lectures. He argued the position that educational experts have been putting for some time – that, with the explosion of knowledge in all fields, we must try to develop in students the capacity to learn independently throughout their lives ('learning to learn'). This shift in educational philosophy may be starting to make a difference in staff attitudes. Another encouraging development is the emphasis on graduate attributes, which highlights skills and attitudes as well as knowledge, and encourages both staff and students to think beyond narrow conceptions of discipline knowledge bases. Much work is being done across CDU to embed the graduate attributes in all curricula, and the mapping of these attributes against the assessment tasks in the Common Units is admirably detailed and clear.

Interestingly, there seems to be a widespread feeling that, if the University is to have Common Units, it is 'fair enough' that one of them is a study focused on the Northern Territory. It is seen as appropriate to the distinctive mission of CDU. This compulsory subject now seems to the reviewer to be a more satisfactory model than the suite of electives which was initially suggested.

A second, and quite different, criticism of the CUP was made by several of the academic staff interviewed. They did not question the necessity of the program, but judged that it is not fulfilling its objectives. The thrust of this critique is that students go through the program and still do not know how to write a grammatical sentence, construct an argument or cite references.

In the reviewer's experience, academic staff all over Australia, in the 'elite' universities as much as anywhere, complain a great deal that students cannot write a sentence, and have done so for at least thirty years. This is not to discount the concern at all, but to point out that it can be difficult to judge exactly how much of a problem it is. However, in the interviews, there was general agreement that, because of CDU's history and mission, there are many of its students who are really challenged in relation to language literacy. This point will be returned to later in the report. For now, the important issue is that there is a misunderstanding of the purpose of CUC100 and CUC106, which are concerned with **academic** literacies, not language literacies. The distinction is a crucial one. Major difficulties in writing, reading or speaking English cannot be addressed fully in courses such as these – and they do not attempt to do so in a comprehensive way. Students with language difficulties are advised to select one of the tutors in CUC100 who have special ESL

expertise, and assistance is provided in the textook, *Communicating at University: Skills for Success* (Rolls & Wignell 2007). But some students need more intensive work, which cannot be offered in these subjects. There seems to be a need for this fact to be communicated more clearly and perhaps bluntly to academic staff.

These Common Units should, however, be able to help students develop skills in argument and sound referencing procedures. And they certainly attempt to do so. To take the latter, for example: students are introduced to citation conventions and required to practice them. Apparently some academic staff do not realise that this is an aspect which students cannot avoid. If the students forget how to do this in subsequent years, it does seem unfair to blame the CUP. Perhaps if academic staff were more familiar with what is covered in the Units, students could be referred back to their materials and required to re-master the procedures. One possibility is that some of the students involved may have been exempted from the Common Units without sufficient justification (academics in the faculties do not generally know who has been exempted). Several interviewees mentioned that there are some groups who may 'slip through the net', especially students coming from the VET sector. The reviewer is not in a position to judge whether or not this is the case, but it may be necessary for the system of exemptions to be re-examined.

3.2.2 Students

Students' views of the necessity and value of the program varied considerably. In discussions with them, there was little evidence of resentment at being 'forced' to do the units. There was a mild sense that it would be better to give people a choice, but then several students commented that, if the units were optional, they probably would not have taken them and they are now glad they did. A few students did claim that the units might be fine for people returning to study or those who had come to university through alternate pathways, but that school leavers did not need them, because 'they had done all this at school' (both in terms of academic literacies and knowledge of Northern Territory culture).

It is hard to imagine that this is an accurate self-assessment in most cases. It may indeed be the case that some of these computer-savvy young people are advanced in IT skills at a technical level (although critical analysis of web-based materials is a different matter). But surely all would still have much to learn about academic writing, argument, self-analysis and understanding of the Territory culture. Journal editors would testify that even academics are far from perfect in their referencing procedures.

How is one to convince these students of the necessity for further learning in these areas? As with many educational issues, explicit discussion with students may be useful, spelling out the need for more complex and deeper understandings in higher education. Another strategy would be to conceptualise early assessment tasks partly as a form of 'reality checking' in which students are confronted with the limitations of their current understanding and abilities. This need would have to be balanced against the equally important need to support students and give them confidence. The balance is not easy to achieve and will vary from student to student. But the 'learning

journey’¹ must involve an awareness of all that one does not know or understand, as well as faith in one’s ability to explore. This opens up an issue which emerged in discussions with some staff and students: the perception that the Common Units (but CUC100 in particular) are ‘easy’ subjects which it is difficult to fail if all tasks are completed. This question of standards will be taken up later in the report.

The diversity among entering students is one of the biggest challenges facing CDU as a whole. It is also a source of pride, as the University aims to provide for many groups new to university study. Since literacies (both language and academic) are crucial to the success of these students, it is tempting to imagine an optimal situation in which all students were assessed on entry and directed to programs appropriate to their needs and levels of preparation. One staff member would love to see in place an American system of initial assessment based on an extended writing task, with the results being used to direct students to different kinds of programs, some ‘remedial’ if necessary. It seems very unlikely that, in the current financial environment, this would be possible anywhere in Australia. So, one has to seek workable compromises. The CUP is employing more ‘challenge testing’ to assess students’ abilities and preparation and perhaps this could be extended in time, in conjunction with the greater support for language learning which is planned. There is further discussion of this issue in 3.7.1.

CUC100 certainly attempts to give students as much flexibility as possible, so that those with advanced skills can proceed quickly. The recommendation to students who believe they have advanced skills to complete the unit externally and thus at their own pace seems a sensible response to the diversity of these skills among students, although the accuracy of the students’ self-assessment must still be an issue.

In general, it should be noted that just about all of the students interviewed did think that they had developed some skills in the Common Units, and some were strongly of the view that the program was helping with preparation for university study generally. These latter tended to be somewhat older students. The samples were small and need to be considered against other data, such as the SELT results (including the informative summaries of student comments) and the analysis of reasons for attrition.

3.3 COHERENCE OF CURRICULA

In general, the web sites and course booklets for the three Common Units indicate that a significant amount of thoughtful planning and structuring has gone into these programs of study. Progression through the units is logical and well signposted. Assessment is carefully designed to fulfil the aims, and the assessment criteria are detailed and readily understood. Expectations are clearly established, and the curricula seem to strike an appropriate balance between structure and creativity. A particularly successful development is the linking of the skills units with disciplinary content through assignments. The course booklets could serve as models (and

¹ This metaphor was used in the submission to the Carrick Institute: *Enhancing the Quality and Success of our Students’ Learning Journey through Best Practice in Curricula, Teaching, Assessment, Support and Research*. (The Common Units Management Group 2007)

apparently have done so in some cases), and lend support to the theory that the process of conceptualising and planning programs for external study is beneficial for internal programs as well.

On paper, there seems to be an impressive integration of educational technologies into the units. All units require students to participate in on-line discussion forums, and CUC100 offers a 'Coffee Shop' facility for informal chat and networking. Tablet PCs are used extensively in CUC107 classes and will be introduced into CUC100 in the near future. Some tutors spend a great deal of time responding to students on-line and one commented that, through this communication, she gets to know her external students better than her internal students. It seems to be widely recognised that the successful use of these educational technologies is dependent on a very significant investment of time and effort on the part of teachers. This has implications for staffing which will be discussed 3.4.

Inevitably, respondents reported that there is sometimes a gap between the procedures as set out in course guides and what actually happens in practice (see the following discussion of the individual units). But the coherence and value of the structures which have been developed and refined over time cannot be denied.

It is a sign of the vitality of the CUP that the curricula, which have already been modified and refined many times, are still evolving. The task of re-casting and re-conceptualising the five units which were in place in 2000 into the three current units must have been a very substantial and demanding one. The reviewer's impression is that the program now deserves a period of stability. It is commendable to keep trying to improve aspects of the curricula, such as assessment tasks, range of classroom activities and so on, but any radical revision of the content or structure of the units does not seem called for at this stage. The program is sufficiently established for change to be incremental.

A number of suggestions were made by interviewees about the shape and content of the units, some of which are well worth consideration. The reviewer does not see it as her role to give a judgment on these particular suggestions, although some are reported below. The important issue is that there should be a process for considering and judging any suggestions made by those teaching the course, other interested staff, or students. Different people will always have different ideas about what should be 'done' with a course of study, reflecting diverse educational philosophies. Often they are directly contradictory, and we have to rely on messy democratic processes to come to decisions.

There seems to be broad agreement that relatively informal processes work quite effectively at the moment to deal with comments, criticisms and suggestions from a range of stakeholders. This is largely due to the openness and energy of the team leader ('you can always pick up the phone and speak to her'). While everyone wants to avoid a cumbersome bureaucratic superstructure, it may be necessary to move some way towards formalising several of these processes (see Recommendation 8).

3.3.1 CUC100

This unit has evolved over six years and has been revised a number of times (two major revisions and seven minor revisions). The objectives and structure are now very clear and logical. It seems an excellent idea to start the subject with personal reflection on career goals and learning styles. This provides a meaningful context for development of the various skills of reading and thinking critically, communicating, computing and researching. As mentioned above, the graduate attributes are clearly mapped against assessment tasks and the students are required to reflect upon these attributes in the first reflective piece. (A minor quibble is how satisfactorily students could deal with all the required topics in a 500-700 word reflection.)

There seems to be some dissatisfaction with several of the prescribed readings, including the comment from students that they are too long. Throughout Australia, there is much debate at present about how much students can or should be expected to read, in a culture which seems to be focusing increasingly on images rather than text. The guide for CUC tutors contains advice about what to do if students haven't done the reading in time for a class. This is a perennial issue with no easy answers, but in general it seems dangerous to give students any signal that they don't really need to do the reading to benefit from the class. One tutor has some constructive ideas for building the readings more directly into tutorial activities, in a way which would enhance student participation and require them to prepare. These proposals have been considered by a recent meeting of tutors and are likely to be implemented in second semester 2008. There is also a related plan to conduct all tutorials in rooms where computers are available (as is presently the case with CUC107). Students could then enter their summaries of class discussions in the same session and not have to replicate it with extra discussion group postings.

It is not the role of the reviewer to recommend for or against detailed measures such as those proposed. These involve ongoing issues and challenges which are the concern of those engaged in teaching the course. They are in the best position to make the required judgments. What is important is that they have a chance to thrash out problems and possible solutions together. This seems to happen regularly and productively in CUC100, mostly in moderation meetings, and the evolution of the program owes a good deal to this kind of pooling of experiences. The only question is whether this process needs to be a little more formal (see 3.6.3).

3.3.2 CUC106

This 'academic literacies' unit is an alternative to CUC100 and takes a different approach. It has been offered internally for several years and is being offered externally for the first time in the current semester (Semester 1, 2008). The unit is designed for Science, Engineering, IT and Business students, and, although students from other disciplines are able to choose it rather than CUC100, it seems that very few do so. Some students interviewed seemed not to realise that they had a choice (despite the statements in course information). This seems a pity, as the approach may suit individuals in courses other than those specified.

The central feature of this unit is the design project, which is the focus of all the students' work and the context for their acquiring the academic literacies. A potential

strength – and also a possible problem – is the group work which is organised to include students from a range of disciplines. The group of students who were interviewed seemed to really value the design project and, most unusually in this reviewer's experience, were enthusiastic about working in groups, and with students from different areas of study. This particular tutorial class has been given a lot of assistance in setting up and maintaining their groups by a tutor who was described as 'really good'. (However, it should be noted that, in a general discussion with staff teaching in the Common Units, group work was identified as a problem, because some students seem to really dislike working in this way. A representative from the Teaching and Learning Development Group is now providing advice and materials to assist staff with the management of group work.)

The link with the Engineers Without Borders design competition seems a valuable connection. It presumably gives the students a sense that they are working with 'real world' problems. In the future, CDU is planning to establish its own design competition in association with this unit.

Again on paper the structure of the program seems strong and logical. In practice there seems to be some disconnect between the lecture program and the project-based tutorials. Some students and staff talked about problems with lectures which seemed to have little relevance to particular design projects. The difficulty is obvious – with the wide range of projects, it would be almost impossible to cover all legal or marketing aspects, for example, in one lecture. It was suggested that lecturers should be more thoroughly briefed on what the students are working on. Another source of dissatisfaction was last minute cancellations by some lecturers. It should be noted that the students interviewed did find some of the lectures entertaining, even if irrelevant in their judgment.

One tutor expressed a wish for much closer integration of lectures with tutorials and more structured discussions among the staff teaching in the unit. She suggested there would be considerable advantages if teachers could meet every week to plan some common activities drawing on lecture material and linking it with the projects. This suggestion seems well worth pursuing.

It will be important for those involved in the unit and the Common Units Management Group to scrutinise the outcomes from the first external offering of CUC106, since at first glance the difficulties of organising group design projects at a distance loom large. Staff seem confident that the challenge can be met, but a particular focus this year on the quality of work produced and student experiences would be advisable.

3.3.3 CUC107

This unit builds on one of the original Common Units and seems to benefit from this continuity (and the ongoing involvement and commitment of its co-ordinator). However, it has been developed and refined over the years, and continues to be re-examined. The co-ordinator is currently re-writing the syllabus. Again, the course guide is an impressive document – well organised and structured, with detailed guides to reading and strong links between objectives, program and assessment.

As indicated above, it seems to have been accepted by many staff and students as an appropriate area of focus for all students. Apparently many international students find it interesting and rewarding. However some students seem to have a limited notion of relevance. One commented, 'I'm from South Australia, so it's not relevant to me.' The same student did, nonetheless, say that he found it 'interesting'. On the other side, one student from the Northern Territory claimed that he and others had 'done it all at school'. Looking at the program, it is hard to accept that any more than a few limited sections of the syllabus would be likely to be covered in primary or secondary school – and, as argued above, topics can always be re-explored at a much more sophisticated level.

A strength of the unit on paper is the way it establishes a theoretical framework for the study of the history, sociology and environment of the Territory, starting with understandings of the concept of place and an exploration of the 'contingency of knowledge and truth'. Module 2, on 'People' introduces students to theories relating to identity and representation, cultural change and commodification. Module 3, on Politics, starts with 'theoretical considerations'. This theoretical framework should provide a strong basis for the development of the skills associated with critical analysis and evaluation and the capacity to deal with difference and complexity, skills which are essential to all areas of university study.

There will always be debate about the readiness of first year students to explore these intellectually challenging and complex issues. One tutor argues that they are not ready for them at the start of the unit, and that what are essentially philosophical questions should be deferred until the end (after more familiar, concrete topics are dealt with). Another perspective on the unit (from a staff member outside the program) is that it is not theoretical enough. Again, this is not a matter for an outside reviewer to pronounce on, but for the staff teaching in the unit to debate and decide. It must be said that the levels of student satisfaction for this unit seem to be generally quite good and do not indicate any major problem, as one would expect if the conceptual framework of the course were incomprehensible to students. There were some low results in former years in the external version of the unit, but these do not seem to relate to the syllabus. Nonetheless, it would be useful to discuss this issue of sequence at a meeting of all tutors.

It is very clear that the unit is based on some well-defined ideological positions – philosophical, cultural and political. The designers would argue, I presume, that all courses are, and that the honest approach is to present those assumptions clearly and directly. The corollary, of course, is that students should be allowed, and indeed encouraged, to contest those assumptions and positions, as part of their development of critical thinking skills and a mature personal stance. Those teaching the program are well aware of this, but some students indicated that occasionally they felt that their views were not welcome. As all teachers know, it is probably impossible to achieve a teaching environment in which all perspectives are respected (not accepted or agreed with, but given respect) but it is an ideal to strive for. Again, discussions of this issue by the teaching staff may remind them of the need for the attempt.

The use of Tablet PCs in tutorial/workshops is an interesting and promising innovation. However, there seems to be a little uncertainty about whether all students

are using them as effectively as they might. This is an area which should be carefully monitored.

Several faculty academics commented that they would like to see the unit dealing with South-East Asia, as an important part of the Northern Territory context. This again is a matter for consideration by the team responsible for the curriculum.

3.4 STAFFING

When the Common Units Program was established, the hope/intention was that it would be taught by academics from the faculties. This intention has been realised only partially. It is largely the case in CUC107, where academics from the School of Australian Indigenous Knowledge Systems teach directly within their areas of expertise, but this unit does rely on some casual teaching staff for tutoring. In CUC106, academics from the School of Engineering and Information Technology are involved and they bring a valuable perspective to the program, especially in terms of its relationship to the degree courses. They also provide a useful link to faculty academic staff, which helps to inform them about the Common Units and counter some prejudices. Again, they are supplemented by casual tutors. In CUC100, there are few faculty staff members involved, and the unit relies on a large number of casual teachers. As the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) has commented, it is not a good idea to pressure reluctant staff into this crucial foundation program. Further, it is not clear that all academics would have the required expertise, especially in teaching speakers of English as a Second Language.

Casual staff can bring a great deal to teaching. They are often enthusiastic and interested in innovative developments. However, if a program is highly dependent on casual staff, there can be problems with continuity and consultation. In many universities, casual teachers are paid for a bare minimum of hours, so any time spent advising students or discussing issues of teaching and learning with colleagues has to be unpaid. While many give this time, they cannot be expected to do so for an extended period. The CUP policy seems to be fairer in this regard than many programs, but certain consultative activities are apparently not covered. And there is always likely to be a high turnover of these casual staff, resulting in the loss of valuable course/institution knowledge.

This reviewer is obviously not privy to the budgetary considerations which are involved here, and is also aware of how strained many university budgets are in the present climate. It can be pointed out, however, that two staffing measures would probably be of considerable benefit:

- 1) The payment of casual tutors for more time to meet regularly with their colleagues for planning and review sessions;
- 2) The employment of several more teaching staff in the Common Unit Program in ongoing or extended contract positions, to form a 'core' of teachers with an continuing commitment to the program and the security to contribute substantially to its long-term development.

The second of these measures would also help to address the problem which is evident to all – that of succession when the current Team Leader moves on from this position (whenever that may be). The program is so dependent on her remarkable commitment and ability that it could be seriously damaged by such a change.

The Leader is at present taking responsibility for a wide range of tasks, including even the laborious entering of material onto the website. It would make a lot of sense to free her from some of the lower-level tasks, so that she can expand the creative work of curriculum development and communication with stakeholders, at which she has shown herself very capable. She clearly needs more administrative support. According to other staff, she is also a very gifted teacher, who is not presently teaching because of administrative responsibilities. She may wish in the future to have time also for this.

3.5 STUDENT SATISFACTION

The Student Experience of Learning and Teaching (SELT) system is used at CDU to gather student opinions about their courses of study. The questionnaire is administered on a rotating basis for most units, but in every semester for the Common Units. Given the importance of the program in providing a foundation for university study, this seems a sensible policy.

3.5.1 Results

The results over several years for the Common Units have been satisfactory, with most (almost all) items receiving average scores of over 5 on a 7 point scale. The lowest scores tend to be associated with the items on assessment, especially that dealing with prompt return of work. It has been established by research that students tend to register lower levels of satisfaction for compulsory units than for those they have chosen (Marsh 1987). Given this, the ratings for the Common Units are commendable, though the responsible staff are not resting on their laurels, but would like to see them higher (see the following section).

3.5.2 Response rates

The response rates vary considerably, but generally are lower than one would wish. They are, however, no lower than the response rates for the Course Experience Questionnaire, which, although often criticised for this limitation, is used nationally as a measure of course quality. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) is very aware of this problem and keeps exploring options for increasing the response rate.

3.6 QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

One staff member from the University commented to the reviewer that the Common Units were by far the most scrutinized programs in the University. There is certainly a commitment to continuous review and modification.

3.6.1 Action on SELT results

The SELT results for the University are examined every semester by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) and any low responses are flagged and acted upon, according to a clear and systematic procedure. In the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's recollection, there has only been one such 'flag' for the Common Units, on an individual item. Results are published on the website and are available to all. A recent addition to this reporting system has been a summary of qualitative comments from students, together with a response from those responsible for the unit. This seems an excellent move, drawing suggestions of value from the often rich comments made by students and requiring a constructive response from teaching staff. These responses of staff from the Common Units have been specific and positive, not defensive. For instance the complaints about late return of work have been addressed by reminders to tutors that work should be returned within two weeks and the offer of help with marking if this is proving difficult. CDU is in the process of installing the CEQuery software system, which will allow for rapid, systematic analysis of all written comments. The University should be highly commended for the openness and honesty of this process.

3.6.2 Analysis of attrition rates

Coming from a different angle, the attrition rates are regularly collected and analysed. Two such analyses have been completed so far, and from these have emerged some very useful information. In response to the analysis of data for 2003-2004, the Common Units Management Group held a half-day workshop which produced a range of suggestions, mostly quite specific and focused, for addressing problems of attrition; a number of these suggestions have been implemented (Common Units Management Group 2005). The reviewer suggested to the management that it might be beneficial to 'close the loop' and return to consider progress made on the suggested strategies (some of which, of course, may have proved to be impractical). This was apparently on the agenda for the Group Meeting held recently.

A preliminary presentation of data for 2005-2006 was given to the Management Group in 2007, with the final report pending, and the analysis of subsequent years is continuing. An impressive data base of student outcomes in this program has been established and should certainly be maintained.

3.6.3 Staff review

There seems to be quite a lot of informal consultation among those teaching the Common Units about what parts of the programs are/are not working well. Much of this emerges from discussion in the moderation meetings, when tutors work together to achieve consistency in marking. However, these are not formal review meetings. Informal procedures are often very successful in smaller institutions where all members of staff know each other. But CDU is growing very rapidly, and there may be a need to introduce somewhat more formality. It has often struck the reviewer that many large university courses fail to draw on the experience and expertise of the teachers involved, in not systematically seeking their judgments of the program. A highly efficient way of doing this would be to schedule a 'review meeting' for all tutors in a unit at the end of each semester, after marking had finished. Tutors and

lecturers could evaluate the success of various components, teaching methods and assessment tasks on the basis of their experience, student feedback and the quality of the students' work.

3.6.4 Oversight by Common Units Management Group

The Common Units Program is overseen by a Common Units Management Group, with the following composition:

- Chair, ex officio, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching & Learning);
- Three Teaching and Learning Champions nominated by Teaching and Learning panels from schools not already represented in the working party;
- Unit Coordinators;
- Academic Consultant Common Units (recently re-named Team Leader);
- Coordinator Information Literacy;
- One member of the staff of the Teaching and Learning Development Group;
- A Higher Education student representative.

The Group has a specific responsibility for quality control of the units and seems to fulfil this function effectively, judging from the issues which have been addressed in meetings, such as the reasons for high attrition rates.

Meetings are convened and organised as needed by the Team Leader. Members commented that she is so good at networking that they don't need many meetings. Again, the issue of the appropriate degree of formality arises, as does the question of how much responsibility the Team Leader should be expected to assume. It may be more efficient to schedule meetings well ahead of time and incorporate them into the University Calendar, and to provide more administrative support for the tasks of organizing agendas and recording minutes.

According to the website, the position of student representative is currently vacant. The difficulty of maintaining student representation on committees is well known, but it is desirable that this gap should be filled.

3.6.5 Research into outcomes

The Team Leader is beginning a research project comparing the outcomes (in their degree units) for students who have completed the CUP with those of students who were exempted. This is a valuable extension of the evaluation process in the emphasis on outcomes, to supplement the analyses of student satisfaction. The issue of outcomes and standards is discussed further in Section 4.

3.6.6 Future plans

It was suggested to the reviewer that another source of feedback which may be tapped in the future is the perspective of later-year students. In general, research suggests that students do not change their judgments of teaching programs significantly with time, contrary to popular myth (Marsh 1987). However, given the foundational nature

of this program, it could be very useful to ask students about the extent and the ways in which the units prepared them for later study.

Generally, it must be said that the Common Units Program is very far advanced with its systems for quality assurance, not just on paper but in practice.

3.7 ONGOING PROBLEMS

The previous discussion has identified some areas which could be addressed for continuing improvement of this strong program. Two of these areas involve stubborn problems, which require further elaboration.

3.7.1 Language literacy

There seems to be widespread agreement that the CUP does not and cannot provide a 'fix-all' solution for the difficulties many students have in using English for academic purposes. All universities around Australia are facing this challenge, not just in relation to international students but from some domestic students for whom English is a second language. The reviewer understands that the language support services at CDU are being re-structured and that this process must take into account VET and enabling courses as well as higher education. A recent review of enabling courses made recommendations in relation to this area.

This issue is somewhat outside the terms of this review, but it should be reported that many of those in the CUP and the faculties believe that there is an urgent need for more language literacy support, particularly of an intensive kind. A comparison of the number of specialist staff available for this purpose in other universities would suggest that those involved in this work at CDU are facing a very difficult task. It may well be that, through the current re-structuring, this problem is being addressed.

3.7.2 Standards

A comment was made by an academic that 'you can't fail the Common Units if you complete the work'. Some students also observed that the units were seen as 'pretty easy', especially CUC100. Such perceptions are damaging to the reputation of the units and are likely to undermine students' commitment.²

The reviewer is not in a position to judge whether the perceptions are justified or widely held, but draws them to the attention of management. This is another difficult issue to resolve. The whole question of 'standards' is being uneasily avoided in the Australian higher education system at present. The pretence that standards are uniform across the system will not stand scrutiny, but apparently cannot be tackled.

² Analysis of attrition rates in the Common Units established that 'students who failed had almost invariably not submitted any, or insufficient assessment work and were consequently awarded a failed grade' (Tyler & Rolls 2005, p.4)

It is particularly hard to confront this issue in programs which are designed to support and encourage students. It seems entirely appropriate in these units that students have the chance to re-submit work to reach the required standard. But if some students are being passed with their academic literacy skills still insufficiently developed for further study, it is likely that they will run into a lot of difficulty. This may not be the case at all, and if the perception is inaccurate, it should be strongly contested.

It may be beneficial for the Common Units Management Group to discuss this issue, and, if there are any concerns, to explore strategies for addressing them, such as provisions for repeating the unit, referral for extra assistance and so on.

Another related, possibly mistaken, perception is that some students 'seem to be able to put off doing the units' until near the end of their course, according to several academics who were interviewed, even though the course material states clearly that the units must be taken in the first year. If this is happening, ways of preventing it should be canvassed.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings outlined above, the following recommendations are offered to the University for consideration:

1. That, in the next two years, the Common Units Management Group focus on the issue of standards, to build on the excellent work which has been done on quality assurance procedures. This would involve exploration of whether all students are achieving a minimum standard in relation to the core skills, especially the academic literacies – that is, a standard adequate for their future study. A further focus should be the skill levels of students who are exempted from the program, which could be the subject of an investigation to establish whether they have indeed mastered the required literacies.
2. That attention be given to ways of convincing students entering the Common Units Program that they have a good deal to learn in the areas covered by the units, including those ‘already done’ at school, This may involve discussion of the differences between school and university study, and the explicit introduction of an element of ‘reality checking’ into assessment tasks.
3. That the needs of some students enrolled in the Common Units for intensive work on language literacy be recognised and addressed as part of the general assessment of the need for language support in the University as a whole. Provision should be made in the early stages of Common Units for assessment of students in need of such assistance and referral to appropriate specialist staff.
4. That the Management Group develop strategies for more effective communication to academic staff of the goals and curricula of the Common Units and what they can and cannot be expected to achieve. It is likely that personal visits to school meetings would be more effective than more written material, which is already comprehensive and informative but apparently often unread. It would be valuable to conduct a survey of staff perceptions as the basis for an educational campaign.
5. That the staffing of Common Units be examined, with a view to providing a mix of core and casual staff likely to enhance coherence and continuity, and a mix of faculty-based and specialist staff appropriate to the goals of the program.
6. That more administrative support be provided for the Program, especially for management of the website.
7. That a survey of later year students focusing on perceived outcomes of the Common Units Program be developed, to be administered annually
8. That consultations among staff involved in the Common Units Program be placed on a more formal and structured basis, in the following areas:

- planning meetings as required for coherence in these multi-tutor programs (see the discussion of CUC107)
 - review meetings of teaching staff in each unit at the end of every semester to explore strengths, weaknesses and possible improvements;
 - meetings of the Management Committee which are set at the start of the academic year and provided with more administrative support.
9. That provision be made in the budget for payment to casual tutors attending additional planning and review meetings, as suggested in Recommendation 8.

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