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# RESPONDING TO FINDINGS FROM ATTRITION PROJECT COMMON UNIT MANAGEMENT GROUP WORKSHOP NOVEMBER 2005

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## 1 Introduction

The presentation of the preliminary findings of this report to the Common Unit Management Group took place in November 2005. It was decided that a three hour workshop format for the presentation would be the most useful way for the group to consider the findings as well as consider ways the common units management might respond to the findings to help minimise attrition in common units. Prior to the meeting the management group was sent a workshop outline and discussion paper summarising factors effecting student outcomes with hyper links to a summary of the relevant literature. The session began with an introduction to the project by Professor Charles Webb, a summary of findings by Assoc Prof Bill Tyler and a summary of literature by Nicola Rolls. The rest of the session involved small group discussion on allocated themes and feedback to establish an action plan. This format proved to be a successful way of not only actively engaging participants in the issues and outcomes but also for actively responding to research findings by devising strategies for improving students experience. Interestingly, in the process of considering how we might address the identified causes of attrition, the management group were reassured that, in common units at least, many of these issues (especially relating to teaching and learning in common units) were already being addressed.

## 2 Workshop Format

The workshop was augmented by a handout, received in advance by the management group. This outlined the workshop schedule and included hyperlinked references to literature relating to the five identified areas for consideration in considering university attrition: Student Backgrounds; Student Situation; Teaching and Learning situations; Outcomes; The Institutional Setting. (see Appendix A for a copy of the handout).

The workshop program included the following:

- Welcome and Introduction (Webb)
- Program Outcomes : the Evidence (Tyler)
- Student Response in Context of First Year (Rolls)
- Recommendations from attrition study : Topics for Action Plan
- Discussion Groups
- Feedback and General Discussion of Issues
- Regroup for Action Plan Discussion (form attached)
- Report by Group and Topic – Distribution of Action Plans
- Final Comments (Webb, Rolls)

Because of time limits final discussion and endorsement of the proposed actions from the workshop were scheduled for discussion at the management group meeting following the workshop in Feb 2006.

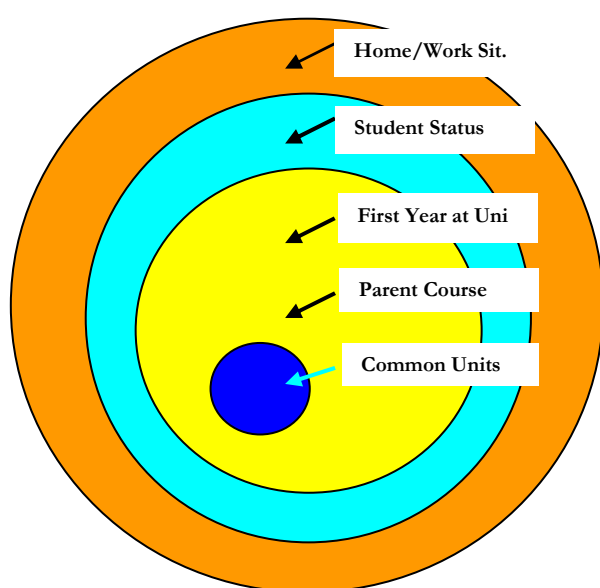
### 3 Summary of Presentation and Discussion

#### The Student Perspective: Common Units in Context

To contextualise the issue of attrition in common units the following diagram illustrates the factors for attrition in common units as being a part of wider range of circumstances. Thus, what the students bring with them in terms of educational and cultural background, socio-economic status, and employment all have significant effects on retention/attrition. Equally influential is their experience in their parent course and the institutional support they receive in their transition year.

Hence the workshop opened with the following question:

*Can the following diagram help us to identify the factors affecting student outcomes in the Common Units?*



#### Program Outcomes : The Evidence

A brief overview was provided of the trends and outcomes identified so far in this study. The *evidence* gathered so far correlating demographic and success rates data was summarised (see Chapter 4) as well as the *trends* in students' responses to satisfaction surveys for common units (see Chapter 3). The potential of effects of *equity issues* in relation to Gender, Age, NESB, Indigenous and Part-time status were highlighted as significant in considering strategies for reducing attrition (see Chapter 2 sections 2.3 & 2.4). The data also revealed *teaching and learning approaches* has having an effect of student success rates especially in relation to: the effects of modes of study – internal/external/online; art-time work, online delivery, teaching methodology and assessment (see Chapter 2 sections 2.4 & 2.5).

#### 4 Issues for Discussion

The workshop participants were divided into four working groups, each assigned one of the following factors for attrition identified from the cumulative findings of common units trends and outcomes as reported earlier in the workshop and from recommendations of the AUQA Review 2005. The working groups were asked to consider how well common units is addressing the factors for attrition, which require addressing and how this might be achieved.

- **Governance:**
  - a. Range and Variety of Choice – within units / between units
  - b. Coordination of Program- Committee, Consultant, Unit Committees
  - c. Teaching and Learning Liaison – staff development, workloads, class sizes
  - d. Resources – labs, room space, library and teaching materials
  - e. Lecturing and tutorial staff recruitment
  - f. Exemptions – Should more be granted than at present?
  - g. Marketing the Common Unit program – contact with similar programs?
  
- **Trends and Patterns:**
  - h. Enrolments – what is the trend? Internal vs external enrolments?
  - i. Early withdrawals – how can rate be reduced?
  - j. Academic Outcomes – why students fail esp. the FA grade? Unit variations?
  - k. Satisfaction – Evidence? How can student response be better monitored?
  - l. Are Common Units more vulnerable to attrition trends and pressures?
  
- **Equity Groups and Student Outcomes:**
  - m. What are the main predictors of student success rates?
  - n. How can equity categories or groups be addressed at the level of instruction?
  - o. Are males students at some disadvantage in Common Units? If so how?
  - p. What can boost Indigenous retention and success rates?
  - q. Is NESB status a barrier? How do overseas students react to Common Units?
  - r. What equity groups may be missed by the official statistical data?
  
- **Teaching and Learning Issues**
  - s. How can program design and delivery best address the pedagogic issues arising from the diversity of student background?
  - t. What are the main obstacles facing external students' completing a Common Unit?
  - u. What are main problems confronted in face-to-face delivery?
  - v. What are the main obstacles confronted by part-time students and how can they be overcome?
  - w. How effective are the support and remedial services for referred students?
  - x. What are some of the technical and pedagogic issues arising from online delivery?
  - y. What is the ideal balance between skills and general education content? How can this be better achieved?

## 5 Discussion Group Outcomes

The outcomes of group discussions were formulated as an *action plan*. Outcomes of the discussion on the four factors for attrition (Governance; Trends and Patterns; Equity and Student Outcomes; and Teaching and Learning) were recorded under the headings:

- **Areas for Concern**  
Areas identified by AUQA 2004, through the report findings and issues that have arisen at management group meetings.
- **Goals**  
The achievement of these goals are seen as a way to address areas for concern.
- **Key Actions**  
How these goals will be augmented.
- **Who**  
Who will be responsible for facilitating the process.
- **When**  
The timeline for realising goals.

## 5.1 Governance

### ○ **Goals**

The goals in relation to governance were:

- Recruitment of staff – the importance of recruiting staff from a range of discipline areas while at the same time insuring staff recruited are committed to common units. Does one lead to the other?
- Professional Assessment/Credit Transfer for common units– given that a reasonable proportion of our students will possess academic literacies skills when they commence their degree through previous study or professional experience it is essential to provide clearly advertised and transparent recognition of prior learning processes. This will in turn promote goodwill towards common units.
- Student involvement – involving students in the management and evolution of the common unit program.
- Dissemination – Insuring information, feedback, evaluations about common units is readily available as part of important PR.
- Range and variety of interdisciplinary units – Examining the possibilities for a greater variety and range of interdisciplinary common units.

### ○ **Key Actions**

The key actions for addressing goals include:

- Integration of CU teaching with staff promotion etc. For example as a way of building staff teaching portfolios.
- Changing the psychology of the process of recruiting staff – more carrot less stick.
- Include challenge testing as an optional way of gaining exemption as well as clearly disseminating options for recognition of prior learning.
- Involving students through the INFORMAL STUDENT GROUP within TLDG.
- Using TLDG networks to promote CU's.
- Checking Carrick institute ideas for dissemination.
- Seek schools input on CU assessments re their relevance to: Professions Grad attributes/ GA Website/portal/resources.
- Develop charts mapping common units with graduate attributes.

### ○ **Who**

The responsibility for facilitating the actions lies with the Academic Consultant Common Units (Nicola Rolls) in liaison with TLDG and Schools.

### ○ **When/Where**

**The timeline for the key actions is:**

- The exemption process as advertised on the common unit webpage will be reviewed by July 2006.
- Graduate attributes charts should be developed for all three common units and put on the website by July 2006.
- Liaison with schools will be staggered throughout the year.

## 5.2 Trends and Patterns

### ○ Goals

The ongoing goals for tracking trends and outcomes in common units include:

- Comparing CU outcomes with other first year core units.
- Exploring the origins of exemptions: course/units/demographics.
- Collecting qualitative data on why students withdraw.
- Monitoring the success of interventionist methods.
- Monitoring of success of students who *have* completed CUC100/CUC106 (the literacies units) vs. those who *haven't*.

### ○ Key Actions

The key actions are to expand the project and funding to:

- Develop focus groups of students and tutors;
- Allocate budget for interventionist measures;
- Experiment with segregated groups as listed in goals;
- Examine effect of different gender tutors on student experience;
- Include gender research on M/F response to teaching modes tablet PC vs. traditional tutorial.

### ▪ Who

Responsibility for actions lies with the Attrition Project team, Dr. Bill Tyler, Nicola Rolls and others involved in the ongoing project.

### ▪ When/Where

These actions should be completed for second stage of the attrition project 2005-2007.

## 5.3 Equity and Student Outcomes

### ○ Goals

The following goals are devised in response to the findings of a high failure rate for Indigenous students and relatively high for students from other language backgrounds (particularly migrants students as opposed to International):

- Identify and provide advice and support to at-risk students.
- Ensure *all* students with low English literacy receive sufficient support.
- Ensure external students from these groups have access to support.
- Continue David Rose Learning to read Reading to Learn project training general and IATAS tutors.
- Increase liaison with student support areas to maximise support options.

### ○ Key Actions

The key action for addressing these goals include:

- Liaise with CUC tutors to ensure at-risk students are identified and referred to support tutorials early in the semester.
- Liaise with Indigenous support area, CAESL (LearnLink) and Access and Equity.
- Develop scaffolding in CUC materials for external at-risk students
- Look at options for providing an intensive program pre semester common unit program for at risk students.
- Look at a range of strategies for confidence building through improving accessibility of materials and other social support strategies.
- Identify initial withdrawals in Indigenous cohort and insure withdrawal paperwork is completed.
- Insure IATAS, Common Unit, International and Study Skills tutors are given scaffolding literacy training.

○ **Who**

Academic Consultant (Nicola Rolls) to liaise with Indigenous support area, CAESL and Access and Equity as well as common unit coordinators.

○ **When**

The timeline for these is:

- Liaison ongoing.
- Withdrawal monitoring ongoing.
- Scaffolding Workshops for tutors S.1 2006.
- Scaffolding Material Development S.1 2007.
- Pre semester intensive prepare for Jan 2008.

## 5.4 Teaching and Learning

○ **Goals**

The following Teaching and Learning goals have been developed in response to the above problems experienced by equity groups as well as discussions regarding the challenges of external and online learning identifies by the literature.

- Investigate different teaching styles – block/weekend teaching
- Maximise tutor support for external students:
- Investigate the potential use of video for external students
- Explore integration of Internal and External modes using tablet pc in face-face tutes
- Utilise meta cognition and meta-learning – as a way to ensure students value CU's and their aims.

○ **Key Actions**

The key actions for meeting these goals include:

- Review the existing levels of flexible learning in CU's and increase if required/appropriate
- Ensure External tutors are providing adequate support by:
  - communicating regularly with students (personal emails/phone calls)
  - providing rapid and comprehensive feedback to assignments
- Introduce Tablet PC for CUC107 internal students.

- Explore options for video streaming.
- Ensure the relevance and context of common units in relation to students general course and graduate attributes is imbedded as part of the learning in each unit.

○ **Who**

Facilitation of key actions is the responsibility of the Academic Consultant (Nicola Rolls) in consultation with unit coordinators and the TLDG.

○ **When**

The timeline for these is:

- Exploration of increased flexible learning technology ongoing for 2006/2007
- External Tutor support should be re-emphasised each semester
- Introduction of Tablet PC's trialled in CUC107 Semester 1, 2006 and introduced in full Semester.2 2006.
- Investigation and inclusion of meta-cognitive approach re common units to by Semester 1 2007.

## **6 Conclusion**

This workshop presentation of the preliminary findings of the 2003/2004 investigation into student outcomes in common units was a successful forum which allowed participants to digest the findings and discuss them extensively in a broader institutional context. In examining the factors for attrition it was reassuring to find that most of these factors are already addressed to a more or lesser extent within the common unit program, however, the forum gave the management group the opportunity to identify where further action and input is required. It was also an opportunity for people to share ideas and innovations to enhance the existing program. It appears the area needing the most attention is liaison with support areas within the university and with schools and the extension of existing interventionist measures for at-risk students. The formalisation of the workshop actions by the management group is evidence of an ongoing commitment by common units to showcase best practise in teaching and learning. Because they include close liaison with the universities Teaching and Learning Development Group and Student Support Divisions the outcomes of this study and workshop will have positive effects at an institutional level.