# REPORT ON THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE PROJECT

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15. APPENDICES
1. BACKGROUND

In February 1999, the Vice-Chancellor expressed concerns that the University was not necessarily attracting the brightest first year students. He reiterated the intent expressed in the University’s Plan (Goal Number 1) that the University should pay more attention to attracting top students and that all students should be provided with a good course experience once they are here. Positive impressions would be fed back to family, peers, former teachers etc. The emphasis was to be on school leavers, in recognition of the fact that they form the vast majority of first year students.

In operationalising the University’s Plan through the Teaching and Learning Operational Plan, Professor Ramsden Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) set as targets:

1. To provide programs to ensure effective transition from school to university by developing new orientation programs and a student at risk program based on international best practice. Also to develop a scheme for visits to schools by outstanding lecturers.

2. To develop and implement methods for enhancing the first year experience and to communicate the resulting improvements to prospective students, parents and teachers. This is to be done through the establishment of a project to identify problems in the first year experience including problems experienced by equity target group students and the implementation of solutions. Also by the development of means to make known positive effects of project to prospective students etc, especially in selective state schools.

Professor Cram, as Chair of Academic Board, with Dr Margaret Edmond (Student Services), Professor Sherrington (Dean, Faculty of Education), Dr Bill Adams (Registrar) and Professor Ramsden subsequently met to discuss the actions required for a University-wide First Year Experience Project. Further meetings took place between Professor Ramsden and the Acting Director of the Institute for Teaching and Learning, Dr Angela Brew. Dr Mary McCulloch (ITL Lecturer) and Frank Phillis (ITL Research Assistant) then met with Professor Cram. Dr McCulloch was subsequently present at a meeting of the Committee of Deans where the First Year Experience project was discussed. Dr Brew met with Deans individually in the latter part of 1999 and raised the issue of what initiatives were being undertaken to enhance the first year experiences of students. In January 2000 Dr Christine Asmar subsequently had a meeting with Professor Cram. Dr Asmar also had several meetings with Dr Margaret Edmond, with whom a close working relationship was established.

A number of key concerns emerged in these meetings. These included the identification of some problems and of a number of topics on which more information was needed as well as some suggestions for action.

Some of the problems identified included:

• how to ensure that the experiences of all students in the first month of lectures are positive;
how to reduce the current focus on covering course content, and instead encourage staff to focus on how students progress in their academic training – and on not letting students simply ‘sink or swim’;

there was a recognition that teaching staff had a direct responsibility for the quality of their students’ learning experience, and that (given the traditional culture of the institution) there was a need for staff development to enhance awareness of this responsibility and to provide them with relevant support;

there was too big a break from school to university;

academic demands were seen as separate from rather than embedded in the social experience (Arts);

There was a need for more information in relation to:

how to promote a genuinely student-centred approach on the part of staff;

how to find out more about student perceptions, rather than just looking for problems;

how to obtain examples of good practice in first year teaching and arrange for these to be shared across the university;

whether statistical information on at-risk students could be obtained;

whether faculties with particular problems in progression rates could be identified and supported;

whether the Summer School played an important role in terms of students’ transition into first year;

whether comparative data in relation to other universities was obtainable.

Suggestions for improving students’ experiences in the first year included:

the experience of students in science would be a good place to start in terms of sharing good practice (Science);

mentoring and buddy systems could play a part;

assessment was important;

students needed to be able to find out more about support services (Engineering);

the experience of all first year students should be improved, and there was no need at present to focus on sub-groups possibly at risk;

all academic units with large first year classes should have designated First Year Coordinators, (Professor Cram to raise the subject with units which do not);

ITL-SRC collaboration could help to spotlight student areas of concern within departments, and find ways of dealing with them through Heads (Professor Cram was willing to help to resolve any hot spot’ problems which emerged in terms of things like inadequate teaching spaces);

there was a need for a Forum for people across the University to discuss the issues and workshops targeted at key areas such as the transition to university study;

one of the ITL’s workshops planned for June should deal with the issue of teaching in large first year lecture classes;

the Academic Board’s column in Uni News to be used to publicise the project.

2. AIMS OF THE INSTITUTE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING PROJECT

In response to concerns expressed, the emphasis on improving students’ experiences in their first year is a University-wide initiative being advanced on many fronts. This report focuses on the work undertaken within the Institute for Teaching and Learning.
However, it has not been possible to keep the work carried out in the ITL entirely separate. Nor is it desirable that this should be so. It has been considered beneficial from the start to work collaboratively. An integrated approach has been adopted and references to several other initiatives are made in the report. In making recommendations (see Section 11) suggestions for the University, for Faculties and Colleges as well as for the work of the ITL have been made.

In the latter half of 1999 the Institute for Teaching and Learning undertook a strategic planning exercise which involved not only setting strategic and operational goals for the Institute but changing the way of working to focus on clearly defined projects. The plan was designed to further the aims of the Teaching and Learning Operational Plan, drawn up by Professor Ramsden as mentioned above. The aims of the Institute for Teaching and Learning First Year Experience (FYE) project as enunciated in the Institute’s Strategic Plan are:

1. To investigate the experiences of students in the first year;
2. To document good practice in support of students in their first year as well as areas for improvement;
3. To provide a staff development program to address improvement needs in the First Year Experience.

3. SOME ISSUES IN THE LITERATURE

Funded by the office of the PVC (Teaching and Learning), Frank Phillis carried out a literature review which was published in the Interim Report from the project (Appendix 1) and also in the November 1999 issue of Synergy (Appendix 2). The following points were identified in that literature:

- students entering tertiary education for the first time are increasingly diverse;
- academic staff’s expectations of new students’ abilities and knowledge are often unrealistic, and some students discontinue as a result of pressures arising from this mismatch;
- having a sense of purpose and a belief in one’s ability is related to student commitment and satisfaction;
- students are prepared to take responsibility for their own learning, provided that they feel supported (academically and socially) by the institution;
- students whose learning takes place in learning communities rather than only (or mainly) in large classes are more likely to persist and to succeed;
- finally, and related to the above, students’ sense of being socially and academically integrated is a critical factor affecting persistence and success.

Later in the project the literature review was extended. Other literature, including North American sources, revealed more evidence of the need for both social and academic integration for students in transition to tertiary education. Findings from influential studies such as that of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), and the investigations done by Burmeister and O’Dwyer (1996), White (1999), Twale and Sanders (1999), Pascarella et al (1996) and Beasley and Pearson (1999) give particular emphasis to this aspect of the student experience. In their research at Monash, Evans and Peel (1999) found that ‘motivated and “academically and socially integrated” students generally achieve higher marks, all other things being equal’.
As McInnis and James (1999) point out: ‘School leavers in particular had typically experienced the close monitoring of their performance by teachers, parents and peers… For many, the decline in attention at university was an abrupt jolt.’ It has been suggested in the media (The Australian, 2/2/00) that students in large, elite institutions such as the University of Sydney are especially likely to feel alienated. In this context, the research indicates that students’ social and academic interactions with their peers are a crucial dimension of their learning environment, strongly related to the likelihood of their persisting and succeeding within that environment.

In terms of the notion that students’ problems can largely be dealt with by enhancing student services, Peel’s (1999) research suggests that it is only by mainstreaming programs into the everyday life of universities, in teaching and learning environments as well as in student support services, that such programs will be effective for transitional students.

The ITL project team’s expectations of what first year students require in order to persist and succeed were based on the literature search referred to in the Interim Report, and were further reinforced by other international research on the subject. Similar considerations informed the choice of data collection methods and the focus of such investigations. This focus is in line with the fact that the perceived quality of the teaching has been found in studies such Evans and Peel (1999) to be a very important component of the first year transition experience. At the same time, however, Evans and Peel (and others) had noted the importance of such aspects as orientation activities, access to information, and the need for both social and academic transition.

4. SOURCES OF DATA AND METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

Retention Rates
The University’s Statistics Unit has provided figures on retention rates in 1997-1998 on the Camperdown Campus of the University. Concern about these rates was one factor leading to the initiating of this project.

Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ)
In the second semester of 1999, at the instigation of the PVC (Teaching and Learning), all undergraduate students of the University were surveyed by the ITL regarding their course experience. This survey was initiated to contribute to one of the University’s Performance Indicators for teaching. However the survey also provided very valuable data on first year student experiences.

Students were required to supply their Student Identification Number in order to record their responses. Items were largely taken from the Course Experience Questionnaire, and the instrument was referred to as the Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ). A copy of the questionnaire is attached as Appendix 3. In addition to 31 items relating specifically to the students’ teaching and learning experiences, a further 18 items dealt with support services and administration. All these items were closed-ended, with a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’. The students also had space to answer an open-ended question in each section by writing in comments if they wished.
The data were analysed by year of study and included a separate category for Commencing First Year students (see Table 1.). Data relating to ‘Commencing First Years’ and ‘All First Years’ (by College, Faculty and Degree/Course) were made available in December 1999 at the web site http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/sceq/ Except for the reports on National Comparisons (which are password-protected), all the reports are available in various formats to the entire university community, including students. Copies of the hand-written responses to the open-ended questions are available to Deans.

A total of 3,636 first year students responded to the survey – a response rate of 52% (the response rate for all students was 50%, with the total number of returns 13,530). The high response rate means that the data constitutes a sound empirical resource for faculties to identify areas of specific need in improving student learning. At the recently-established First Year Coordinators’ meetings, for example, a high degree of interest in the findings has been demonstrated, although support in analysing and acting upon the implications of the data is often required.

In this report reference is made only to data on the teaching and learning issues. Analysis of the data relating to students’ responses regarding support services has not been an ITL priority.

**Interview and focus group data**

At around the same time as the SCEQ survey was being administered across the University as a means of collecting largely quantitative data from the whole undergraduate population, the ITL began administering its own survey questionnaire specifically designed to explore issues relating to the FYE. The ITL questionnaire (see Appendix 4) yielded some quantifiable data and a considerable amount of qualitative data. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 160 first year students on a number of campuses. Of that number, 35 students (about 22% of the total), were resident in colleges on campus. While the results reported in relation to the college students are useful, particularly in what they reveal in relation to the role of social networking and personal interactions in enhancing the first year experience, the Interim Report on the survey noted that ‘it is possible that college students are systematically different from non-college students’.

Alongside the questionnaire-based interviews, 7 student focus groups were conducted, two of which were within residential colleges. The findings from both the questionnaire survey and the focus groups are suggestive rather than definitive, since although it was initially anticipated that a ‘stratified random sample’ would be selected, such sampling was not actually implemented. Moreover, it is not clear that the same questions were asked in all focus groups. Nevertheless, the value of both sets of data lies in the fact that they explore some dimensions not covered specifically in the SCEQ, as well as lending a human voice to the description of the students’ experiences. The qualitative data do appear to reinforce certain central themes in the literature (see Section 5 below).

It was anticipated that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection, plus the range of issues covered in those investigations, would provide a holistic and comprehensive picture of the FYE. A number of other sources of data
and inputs (see Section 6 below) provided further information on issues and potential solutions.

5. FINDINGS

University data on retention rates
The University’s figures on retention rates in 1997-1998 for the Camperdown Campus showed that 15.6% of commencing students did not re-enrol in the following year – a total of 858 students on the main campus alone. What is not known is the reasons behind such students’ withdrawal, or which groups might be over-represented within the withdrawals. The Faculty of Health Sciences report on their 1997 survey of first years students looked at the reasons why 25% of students considered discontinuing, finding that ‘emotional health’, followed by ‘financial reasons’, ‘physical health’ and ‘wanting to change course’ were the main reasons cited. This led the Faculty to conclude that ‘the problem is not associated with course content/presentation’, although respondents in that survey were offered only a limited range of response options, none of which related to (for example) pressures such as academic workload. Given that the same survey found that 48% of surveyed students found their workload too heavy, it is possible that there is a connection between such issues and the students’ ‘emotional health’. Further research is required on this subject. A project to investigate these issues in specific faculties such as Arts is now under way.

SCEQ data
Table 1. contrasts the results (on 5 key factors plus an item on overall satisfaction) for ‘Commencing First Years’ with those for ‘All other students’. It will be noted that a greater proportion of first years appeared dissatisfied than the proportion of students in other years (which is what other studies such as McInnis and James (1999) lead one to expect), but the differences are actually very small.

Table 1. Responses of Commencing First Year Students compared to All Other Students (1999 SCEQ)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCEQ factor scale responses*</th>
<th>Commencing First Years** (N=3636)</th>
<th>All other students (N=9894)</th>
<th>Commencing First Years (N=3636)</th>
<th>All other students (N=9894)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree (%)</td>
<td>Agree (%)</td>
<td>Disagree (%)</td>
<td>Disagree(%)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good teaching</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear goals and standards</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate assessment</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate workload</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic skills</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes:
* The SCEQ is based upon the items included in the nationally administered Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). These items have been shown to load upon the five key factor scales given in column one, with the addition of a single item relating to overall satisfaction.
** The ‘Commencing First Years’ category includes all students whose first student ID number at the University was issued in 1999; who were not repeating first year; and/or who had not previously enrolled at the University. The category includes students who had been enrolled at other universities prior to enrolling at the University, but not those who had changed courses at the University since enrolling in an earlier year.
*** On the 5-point Likert scale used in the questionnaire the options ranged from ‘Strongly agree’ through ‘Agree’ to ‘Neutral’ and then ‘Disagree’ and ‘Strongly disagree’. The percentages in the table are obtained by combining ‘Strongly agree’ + ‘Agree’ and ‘Strongly disagree + Disagree’. Because of the number of students who chose the ‘Neutral’ option (not shown), the percentages given here do not add up to 100.

Commencing students expressed positive responses about many aspects of their courses, such as being intellectually stimulated (75.4%), learning to work in a team (48.2%), knowing what is expected (48.6%), sharpening analytic skills (60.1%), feeling confident about unfamiliar problems (47.2%), being stimulated to learn further (60.6%), benefiting from information technology (56.5%), developing problem-solving skills (52.3%), not being questioned only about facts (41.3%), having teachers who make subjects interesting (50%), improving writing skills (50.5%), developing ability to plan work (58.8%), being in contact with researchers (43.7%), and importantly - being satisfied with overall course quality. (65.6%). On all these items over 40% of the students expressed either strong agreement or agreement.

Considerable numbers of new first year students, however, seemed less satisfied in their responses to a number of other issues, including feeling a lot of pressure (51.3%), having a heavy workload (33.4%), not knowing the standard expected (36.4%), not being given time to understand (36.2%), only receiving marks or grades as feedback (58%), being unable to comprehend due to the volume of work (49.4%), not being clear about staff’s expectations (36.6%), staff not putting time into commenting on their work (47.4%), and finding it hard to discover what is expected in the course (34.4%). Over one third of students expressed negative opinions on all the above issues, ie either Strong agreement/Agreement or Strong disagreement/Disagreement, depending on how the statement was worded.

The five-point scale provides a central category, ‘Neutral’, which attracted large numbers of responses – as many as 47%. Adding these responses to ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’ provides the measure of ‘Broad Agreement’ which is useful in supporting the University’s marketing of itself as a place where most students have a genuinely positive experience. The interpretation of this measure, however, needs to be handled with care.

It might be thought that the popularity of the ‘Neutral’ option is due to students’ fear of being identified. This is unlikely to be the case, however, since the guarantee of anonymity was made very clear to all respondents before they were asked to complete the survey. Moreover, in the Health Sciences survey the ‘neutral’ responses were at exactly the same level as in the SCEQ, although their students were not asked for their ID number.
A full printout of the Detailed Report relating to Commencing First Year Students’ responses to individual questionnaire items is attached as Appendix 5.

**Interview data**

Tables 2–5 set out the responses from the first year student interviews conducted in late 1999. The responses were all in answer to closed-ended questions. Students could choose more than one response, so the ‘n’ represents responses, not individuals.

**Table 2. Why did you choose to study at the University of Sydney? (n=276)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Course</th>
<th>Prestige</th>
<th>Improve job prospects</th>
<th>Friends studying here</th>
<th>Close to home</th>
<th>Parental influence</th>
<th>Industry relevance</th>
<th>Not my first preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. How did you find the information that you needed to make a decision to study at The University of Sydney? (n=310)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UAC Courses/ Careers Day</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Teachers or careers advisers</th>
<th>Word of mouth</th>
<th>University web site</th>
<th>O-week</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Visit to school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>102</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings in Tables 2. and 3. indicate that this group of students was primarily motivated by the availability of particular courses (as advertised in the UAC), although the traditional prestige of the institution is also a factor, as is the perception of job prospects aligned to particular courses. It is also clear that persons close to the students were both an influence on student’s choice of institution and a source of information regarding that institution and the courses available within it.

**Table 4. What were some of the challenges or problems you faced as a new student at the university? (Intrinsic n=263, Extrinsic n=270)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrinsic factors</th>
<th>Taking greater personal responsibility for work</th>
<th>Adjusting to different teaching styles</th>
<th>Coping with the workload</th>
<th>Loneliness</th>
<th>Adjusting to large classes</th>
<th>Language difficulties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extrinsic factors</th>
<th>Lack of feedback on assessment</th>
<th>Finding way around campus</th>
<th>Enrolment day difficulties</th>
<th>Organising timetable</th>
<th>Access /availability of tutors &amp; lecturers</th>
<th>Financial Hardship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses relating to problems and challenges seemed to fall naturally into two categories – ‘intrinsic’ factors relating to the students’ own characteristics and capabilities, or factors over which they had some degree of control; and ‘extrinsic’ factors over which they had much less control. It will be seen in both cases, however, that issues directly connected with their experience of teaching and learning are very
important to them, although the sheer size and complexity of the institution is also daunting.

Table 5. What particular aspects of University life do you find enjoyable? (n=523)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities to meet people</th>
<th>Developing new friendships</th>
<th>Independence/personal responsibility</th>
<th>University events</th>
<th>Course/Subjects in course</th>
<th>Clubs and societies</th>
<th>Academic Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>115</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The personal dimension of the students’ experience emerged in Table 5 as a priority area in terms of what they enjoyed about University life. Interestingly, although the need to take greater responsibility for their work was seen as a challenge (Table 4), developing the independence needed to cope with that challenge is seen as an important source of satisfaction in Table 5.

In addition to the above closed-ended questions where respondents had to select from alternatives already provided, the interview questionnaire contained an open-ended question relating to what students had found helpful in facing the challenges. The percentage distributions of the 141 responses to that question were as follows:

Table 6. What did you find helpful in facing the challenges? (n=141)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friends and peers</th>
<th>Personal resources/personal growth</th>
<th>Positive interactions with staff</th>
<th>Other sources of support</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Nothing was helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While reliance on one’s own resources, and on interactions with staff were both seen as helpful, the results in Table 6. show that it was friends and peers who were seen as the single most important source of support in helping students face the challenges. Although the need for this kind of integration of the academic and the social is certainly a recurrent theme in the literature, it must be borne in mind that the presence (in the cohort) of students who were resident on campus may have influenced the overall findings. The findings could also be seen as suggesting, however, that the first year experience would inevitably be enhanced if ways could be found to replicate for all students the kind of interpersonal networking and support readily available to college students.

Focus groups
The issues raised by students in the 7 focus groups on the FYE conducted in 1999 broadly reflect and give verbal expression to the findings presented above in Tables 2-6. The full report on the focus group material is attached as Appendix 6 and the quotes reproduced below are indicative of the overall findings.

In the focus groups, as in the interviews, opinions were expressed regarding the influence of both course availability and the perceived employability of graduates from certain courses, in relation to why the University was chosen. As in the interviews, family and friends were seen as important influences in the decision. The
UAC guide was seen as helpful, but responses to the academic information available (or not) on Open Day were mixed:

I went to the Open Day last year and asked about courses and things and they just looked at me blankly and said “What are you talking about, you’re here to look at the grounds, aren’t you?

It would have been nice perhaps, dare I say, maybe when you enrol, to get some information about... these more academic issues you are going to have to face.

Students such as those in Nursing and at Yooroang Garang, who had their own orientation program, were positive about it:

We had two weeks here, orientation and that stuff so that was like a bit different, we got around Uni, had different lectures with different people and stuff, so that was like a better sort of thing... so there was an advantage in that.

Students in residential colleges were well aware of the comparative advantage they had over other, non-resident students in terms of being able to benefit from supportive networks, especially vis-à-vis senior students:

And everyone helps out if you need notes and stuff, you always... there’s seniors and stuff that have done the course before.

Loneliness and confusion in the first weeks were a widespread problem:

You’d go and line up in a queue for 3½ hours to get your name, and then you’d realise you’ve made a mistake. It’s hell.

I remember the first week just being really annoyed with the place because it’s big.... I just spent ages running around but having no one really do anything about my problem.

Students were often unclear about what was expected of them:

I didn’t know what to expect in my workload... nobody actually says how hard it is, how much work is expected, what is actually expected of you so that was a bit fuzzy.

Learning independent study habits was a major challenge for many school leavers, but information technology could be a help:

I found the whole lecture thing weird because I was used to your teacher writing up notes and you copy it into your exercise book. But in lectures they just splurt out all this stuff and I’m so glad there’s the Web because if it wasn’t on the web, I’d really be lost.

Feeling that staff care about their progress is a major motivating factor:

These people have taken a personal interest in my work. I mean you wouldn’t expect that. It’s been... yeah it’s motivated me, it’s also given me the confidence to ask them questions and that’s something that has really helped me a lot.

Students recognised the value for their learning of student-student interactions:
I actually had to do a tutorial presentation with some people out of my tutorial and I didn’t even know their names or anything... That’s a bit sad, when you don’t know the people who you do actually have courses with.

Just getting to know people and if you can work together and get study groups going, summarising notes...

The focus group comments highlight the importance of personal interactions and networks, suggesting that to encourage all students to engage in such interactions can only enhance their first year on campus. Such interactions, however, should not only focus on the social dimension, for the focus group responses clearly indicated that students perceive a need for early integration into academic life, together with the need to have expectations made clear by staff early in the year. Finally, when staff (and the institution) are perceived as projecting a generally caring image, students’ initial responses and commitment appear likely to be greatly enhanced.

From the findings cited above it will be seen that most of the issues highlighted by the data from the SCEQ, interviews and focus groups correspond to what has already been learnt about the FYE in a number of other studies both in Australia and overseas.

6. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND INPUTS

The project is multi-faceted and covers all campuses. It is therefore a challenge to ensure that all sources of data and all information relating to initiatives have been comprehensively accessed. The summary below sets out the sources of data known to the ITL at the time of writing ie, in addition to the data and findings cited above.

University-based investigations
As the project proceeded it became apparent that a number of units and individuals within the University had already investigated aspects of the FYE. Among those investigations (several of which are mentioned in the Interim Report) are:

- Faculty of Health Sciences have invested considerable resources in investigating the first year experience, and have found that the reported experiences of their student body largely reinforce what has been ascertained in other studies. A copy of the survey questionnaire plus results from the latest study in the Faculty can be accessed at: http://www.cchs.usyd.edu.au/fyer/
- A number of resources were developed for the Faculty of Science Transition workshop based on investigations by Mary Peat and James Dalziel. A synopsis of all their work on this subject can be found on the ITL web site.
- In 1999 the Faculty of Law carried out an audit of first year teaching. The College of the Arts similarly undertook an investigation into the demographics of first year experiences of students and the Conservatorium conducted a series of focus groups looking at students experiences
- Karen Scouller from the Learning Centre has carried out research over several years into the experiences of students in transition which has resulted in a number of publications (listed on the ITL web site).

Vice Chancellor’s Forum
The Vice-Chancellor’s one-day Forum on Teaching on 3 November 1999 focused on the First Year Experience. Craig McInnis from the University of Melbourne was the
keynote speaker, and a number of other speakers from within the university community, including Paul Ramsden, also addressed the forum. Examples of good practice were shared and specific issues were addressed in afternoon workshops.

Outcomes from the Forum included the following:

- Feedback from participants indicated that many people felt it was extremely useful to meet and share strategies with colleagues from other disciplines and other campuses. In response to the feedback from participants the ITL subsequently set up monthly meetings of First Year Coordinators. (A summary of the feedback can be found in Appendix 7).
- A.A. Charry, a lecturer at the Orange campus, sent the ITL a position paper written in response to the Forum titled ‘Challenging the First Year Learning Paradigm at the University of Sydney: Is it possible?’ (see Appendix 8). A copy of the paper, which called among other things for the abolition of exams and a de-emphasis on lectures, is being placed on the ITL’s web site.
- Papers and materials from the Forum were placed on the ITL web site as a resource for staff.

November workshops on FYE

As a follow-up to the VC’s Forum the ITL included the FYE in its November workshop program. On 15 November 1999 a half-day workshop was held on ‘Students’ experience of large classes in the first year’, followed by another half-day workshop on ‘Transition: School to university study’. Both workshops, which were attended by 15 staff and 13 staff respectively, were facilitated by ITL staff.

First Year Coordinators

In response to feedback from the VC’s Forum in November, the ITL emailed Deans and Heads in February 2000 asking for the names of their First Year Coordinators (FYCs) and proposing that regular meetings would provide a useful forum for sharing strategies and providing collegial support. There was a high level of support for the idea, and the first meeting was held at the ITL on 15 March. It was decided that meetings would be held monthly thereafter. The atmosphere is informal (‘bring your own lunch’) and participants share information and strategies for enhancing the FYE, facilitated by ITL staff. Importantly, both academic and non-academic staff attend. Specific outcomes from the meetings are detailed under Dissemination Strategies below.

Student Services and SWOT

The ITL was represented in the working group which helped plan the SWOT (Sydney Welcome, Orientation and Transition) initiative targeted at first year students. It was agreed in the group that transition initiatives should not only involve student services and social activities but that an integrated approach should be adopted which will include academic integration issues as well. The SWOT meetings themselves involved academic and non-academic staff.

SUPRA (Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association)

Graduate students employed as tutors and demonstrators are often allocated first year students to teach. It is recognised that, for first year students exposed to very large lecture classes, the tutor/demonstrator plays an important role in determining the nature and quality of student learning. As a result of discussions on this issue between
Christine Asmar and Kate Stenner (SUPRA President,) the ITL has been working to help develop the teaching skills of the tutors (and other new teachers), by means of the programs listed under Staff Development below.

**SRC (Students’ Representative Council)**

Christine Asmar also met with Natasha Verco, SRC President, to discuss various issues in connection with enhancing the FYE. Among issues discussed were the need for flexibility in teaching practices to accommodate increasing student diversity; the benefits of year-long peer-support systems; the need for a common lunch hour on the main campus to encourage student interactions; and the possibility of collaboration between the SRC and the ITL to work on teaching and learning problems (and solutions) within departments early in semester.

Some staff in the University appear to feel that the current SRC’s role could be more positive in relation to teaching and learning issues. As one Dean mentioned:

> Many of our plans to support and orient first year students were disrupted severely by the activities of the President of SRC who seemed to have unsettled a number of students and raised their anxiety levels.

The ITL approach has been to attempt enhanced cooperation rather than marginalisation or exclusion.

**Web-based sources of data**

One of the outcomes of the initial literature search was the collating and annotating of a number of useful URLs for those wishing to explore issues connected with improving the FYE (see Interim Report, Appendix 1). This list is being placed on the ITL web site as a resource for staff.

7. **STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

From the ITL perspective, staff development is clearly a crucial component of the project, but the opportunities to carry it out on a large scale, and in an ongoing way, are currently limited.

**Forums and workshops**

The VC’s Forum and the two workshops held at the end of 1999 served to raise awareness of the FYE issues and begin a process of sharing strategies and establishment of networks. The participation of high-profile figures such as Craig McInnis was particularly appreciated. Feedback from the events was cycled into planning subsequent staff development activities. Two further workshops are planned for June 2000 – one replicating the November workshop on the transition from high school, and the second one focusing on how to enhance student learning in the context of large first year lecture classes.

**SCEQ data**

The SCEQ data provides Faculties with a valuable source of data to identify areas of need or dissatisfaction in relation to how first year students experience teaching and learning in their degree courses (although not at the level of units of study). It also gives feedback on aspects of their courses where students are generally satisfied. Whilst indicating where a problem might exist, however, the data cannot help to
identify the nature of or reasons for that problem. The SCEQ data is already being referred to in faculties’ Teaching and Learning Plans, as well as providing the impetus for a number of new initiatives. The data has strong implications for staff development work: for example, at the April meeting of First Year Coordinators held at the ITL (see below), the university-wide figures on first year students’ views of the feedback they receive from teachers prompted the group to consider ways of improving how such feedback is given, and to make that the topic for discussion at the May meeting. In addition the SCEQ figures are regularly referred to in the ITL’s staff development programs as a matter of routine.

**First Year Coordinators’ Meetings**

The ITL’s meetings for First Year Coordinators, which arose out of participants’ feedback from the November sessions, are a focal point for staff development. The discussions in those meetings have already led to some successful strategies being shared by experienced teachers with their more junior colleagues. One issue is that attendance at the meetings is on a voluntary basis, and there is currently no way of ensuring that key people attend. The Chair of the Academic Board has indicated an interest in attending, which may provide a useful impetus. Suggestions for easy ways to enhance the first year experience are not being confined to that group, but are being collated by the ITL for wider dissemination through the University (see Dissemination Strategies below). In addition, a wide range of materials is continually being made available on the ITL’s web site as a permanent resource for all staff.

**New staff teaching development**

Training new staff in effective teaching is related to improving the learning of new students, since it is the former who often end up teaching the latter. The ITL’s three-day New University Teachers (NUT) program (run for the first time in March 2000) may well provide an ongoing model for this kind of staff development.

A number of successful initiatives in staff development have already taken place since the initiation of the project, and several more are planned beyond June 2000. ITL staffing limitations, however, mean that a systematic, university-wide program of staff development is difficult to implement at this stage. In monitoring the initiatives submitted by faculties and departments (see Section 8 below) it became apparent how much work still remains to be done in raising awareness of what is pedagogically sound in approaches to first year teaching, and what is not.

**8. FACULTY AND DEPARTMENTAL INITIATIVES**

An electronic survey of strategies being used to enhance first year teaching was carried out in April 2000. Respondents were asked to indicate the names of the Faculty/School/ Dept and the teaching staff concerned and to describe the strategies employed or planned to enhance the first-year undergraduate experience/process/ and to comment on the strategies. The information received has been compiled in a table (see Appendix 9) which is to be made available on the Institute’s Web site. The report below summarises and comments upon key findings. The recommendations arising from this survey are to be found in Section 11.

Responses were received from 11 faculties and a number of Schools and departments as follows:
Pre-enrolment and Enrolment strategies
Pre enrolment strategies included staff being available to answer queries before enrolment, information about orientation activities being given in schools visits and a specially designed pre-enrolment program (in Yooroang Garang). The fact that pre-enrolment was barely mentioned in the survey responses suggests that this is not conventionally seen as an area where students’ first year experiences can be enhanced. Staff development is clearly needed to extend staff thinking to include awareness of this stage. Similarly, there were respondents who mentioned strategies to enhance the enrolment process. This is also an area where development could be fruitful.
Strategies at the time of enrolment included giving out a letter of welcome, providing Unit of Study information, and having staff available to answer queries. One Head of department personally enrols first year students. Some Schools and departments give students a Welcome/ Information booklet containing information and advice; a practice which could usefully extend to all students.

Orientation events

In the responses there was a general lack of awareness that orientation should take place throughout the year. Only the Faculty of Nursing and Yooroang Garang mentioned that they had a specially designed transition to university program throughout the first year. The Faculty of Arts is in the process of planning one. A number of areas have a one or two day transition program at the beginning of the year and some have a half day or one/two hour orientation. Sometimes these are accompanied by a social event (see below). Parents may be invited to orientation events but no respondents mentioned other family members (important where there are mature-age students). These responses indicated there was generally a minimalist approach to orientation although the number of planned events suggests that awareness is growing across the University.

In some areas careful attention to the needs of students was indicated in additional initiatives which could usefully be followed. Two departments (Department of English School of Communication Sciences and Disorders) mentioned that they programmed one or more orientation slots in class times. Meetings to sort out problems half way through Semester 1/ early in Semester 2 and an additional orientation at the beginning of Semester 2 were other useful strategies. In the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders the first year coordinator attends all functions for first years and, in the Faculty of Nursing, staff wear name badges for the first two weeks of semester.

Teaching strategies

Responses in relation to teaching strategies tended to focus on elements of teaching which are indicative of good teaching practice and which should be a matter of course for all students, not just special initiatives for first year students. For example, many of the respondents indicated that they used practical, activity-based group teaching and provide collaborative learning opportunities.

Some areas had paid particular attention to the development of the first year curriculum, for example, the use of Problem Based Learning in first year in Computer Science. In a few areas there were opportunities for students to participate in substantial practical experiences such as field studies, dramatic performance etc. and opportunities for first year students to participate in a research/inquiry project was mentioned in relation to the Program for Classical Civilisation. These initiatives are particularly commendable.

The use of information technology to enhance students’ learning experiences was also mentioned in a limited way. Information was put on course web sites in some departments although this was not widespread. It may be that this was simply not viewed as a relevant strategy. The recording or taping of lectures including PowerPoint slides being available on WWW was mentioned in two areas but it is not clear how these are used or whether they enhance students’ experiences. In some
areas, IT interactive teaching is used and this may include a web based ‘chat room’/discussion opportunity.

Teaching organisation
Many of the developments to enhance students’ first year experience were aspects of the teaching organisation rather than the teaching per se. For example the choice of teaching staff was mentioned (use of younger staff, use of the best/most experienced lecturers and/or the use of guest lecturers/professionals/community leaders). Again many of the strategies were exemplars of good teaching practice which should occur anyway, for example, making sure lecture room equipment is functioning and up to date, making sure the course is efficiently run, including the provision of course materials to all students, tutorial numbers kept as small as possible, reduction in class time to make way for independent study or to do other things, students divided into advisory groups etc. In the Faculty of Engineering high achieving students are streamed.

Study skills advice and assistance
A deficit model of study skills advice was evident in many areas. Courses to teach basic maths and computing skills and/or advice on areas where students are traditionally weak eg. basic chemistry, project management, and/or voluntary extra study skills based tutorials were available in some areas. Identification and counselling and/or a remedial program for students at risk was carried out in a number of departments but was not widespread. One or more study skills workshops/seminars were included in the course during the first year in some departments and schools and in a few cases this extended to providing information on/advice on approaches to studying. Elsewhere, students were encouraged to go to the Learning Centre/Maths Learning Centre etc. Some, but by no means all, faculties provided students with an orientation to the library.

The teaching of study/generic skills integrated into the course was mentioned only by Yooroong Garang and the Faculty of Rural Management and planned in the Faculty of Economics and Business. Given that the University’s policy on generic attributes has been in operation since 1993 this is also disappointing.

Provision of advice tailored to individual students’ needs
Emphasis was frequently placed on the importance of friendly staff and good staff-student relationships. The availability of a first year coordinator/Associate Dean for first year students or the Head of department indicating availability to see students was widespread and the availability of individual consultation was frequently mentioned as important. The School of Communication Sciences and Disorders is planning to provide a coordinator to track and advise non-standard students. In the School of Chemistry there is a ‘Duty’ tutor, while the use of senior students as mentors was mentioned in several areas. Staff-student liaison committees and groups were mentioned in some areas and the importance of electing a first year student representative stressed.

Assessment strategies
While some general improvements in assessment strategies including increased variety were mentioned and the importance of early and fast feedback on progress was recognised, the use of innovative or supportive assessment strategies to enhance the
learning of first year students was not widely mentioned. Strategies that were used included diagnostic testing, the use of practice exercises and quizzes including trial exams and tests with feedback. There was some use of web based assessment including providing feedback and limited use of self- and peer assessment techniques. There is clearly a great deal more that can be done in relation to the use of assessment to enhance the first year experience.

Social events
Social events are important to the transition to university study and yet while a number of faculties and departments did stress the importance of this, this was not universal. It may be that some respondents did not see this as relevant. Some of the social events are specially organised by the Faculty, School or department. In other areas they are organised by students in later years. In some cases there are opportunities for first year students to meet students from other years. It would seem that all new first year students should be offered the opportunity to be inducted socially into the university and to meet other staff and students informally. The importance of integrating the academic and the social has not been universally recognised across the institution.

Comments
Many of the strategies mentioned reflect good practice in teaching and learning which should be happening as a matter of course in all units of study. Strategies marked with an asterisk in the table which forms Appendix 9 should be implemented right across the university in all first year units of study (see also Recommendations in Section 11). There are a few examples of excellent initiatives in some areas and these have been highlighted in italics in Appendix 9. Particularly commended is the overall strategy used in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, where the course leader has commented:

*It is interesting to me that much of what we do and needed to do is not content/academic based as such. It has more to do with how people are acculturated to the institution, how they feel comfortable and supported and able to progress, and not lost, depressed and intimidated by the institution, Making expectations explicit is a big thing. (Linda Hand)*

A number of problems have also been mentioned, in particular the provision of services for students at the Cumberland Campus. In addition:

*The most important impediment to a better first year experience is the culture within the University that first year students are unimportant. A few words and a few dollars – projects to enhance the first year experience – will not address that. Continuing the enrolments of students in units beyond the resources (human and material) for effective teaching reinforces the unimportance of first year teaching. Teaching resources are not infinite against demand. (Michael Jackson)*

9. DISSEMINATION STRATEGIES

A range of dissemination strategies have been and are being implemented to ensure individual staff, departments and faculties are aware of the issues in and outcomes of the FYE project:
Synergy
In November 1999 a special issue of the ITL publication Synergy was devoted to the FYE, with contributions by Paul Ramsden, ITL staff and a number of academics involved in successful and innovative approaches to first year teaching. A copy of this issue is attached as Appendix 2.

Workshops and forums
As mentioned earlier, two workshops and a VC’s forum were held in November 1999 to focus attention on the FYE. The two workshops will be replicated in June 2000. If there is a perceived need to maintain the staff development momentum in this way, further workshops will be held in November. As feedback from past sessions has shown (see Appendix 7) a major benefit of such university-wide meetings is that people come together to share strategies and establish networks across the University.

FYE web site
The ITL web site on the FYE (http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/), accessed through ‘Courses and Programs’ to ‘First Year Experience’, provides a starting point for staff concerned with the first year experience. The site was set up in early 2000 and at present contains information about coming events such as the First Year Coordinators’ lunch time meetings (including any resources generated from those meetings), the Vice-Chancellor’s Awards for Outstanding (first year) Teaching, ITL workshops, scholarly activity (conferences) and links to recent research, reports and publications. Also available are resources from the 1999 Vice-Chancellor's Forum and a link to the SCEQ web site.

Future developments will include an annotated list of web based resources located outside the University of Sydney, the purpose of which will be to provide a link with other institutions who are researching the first year experience; and a searchable database containing information on all current FYE initiatives in the University, based on the information obtained in the context of this report. It is planned to set up the database in such a way that people can add or update their own initiatives as described on the site.

First Year Coordinators’ (FYC) Meetings
The FYC meetings have been described above in Section 6. They constitute an important avenue for the dissemination and sharing of good practice (see next point). Staff from units such as the Student Centre and Information Technology Services attend as well as academic staff.

‘Tips for First Year Teachers’
The FYC meetings are a forum for the collection of suggestions as to easy, practical ways to facilitate the transition of first year students. The first set of such tips, ‘edited’ by ITL staff, will be fed back to the group at their May meeting and will also be circulated to departments and faculties. The tips will be put on the ITL web site and included in the resources given to new academic staff. It is anticipated that there will be several sets of such tips.
‘Finding Help for Your Student’
An example of the integrated approach advocated in this report is the production of a brochure, to be placed on the ITL web site and also produced in print form, entitled Finding Help for Your Student. This resource for staff is being written by Christine Asmar with considerable input from Student Services and the Learning Centre in particular. The thinking behind it was that staff allocated to teach new students need to be fully aware of sources of support for students in order to advise them appropriately and thus aid their transition to university life.

Peel’s (1999) institutional strategies
The August 1999 DETYA report on Transition from Secondary to Tertiary: A Performance Study contains among a very useful list of institutional strategies put together by Mark Peel. These strategies will be introduced at a future FYC meeting as one avenue to disseminating them within departments and faculties and supporting the implementation of the strategies relevant to particular contexts.

Vice-Chancellor's Awards
In May 2000 it was announced that the Vice-Chancellor’s Special Awards for Outstanding Teaching in 2000 would be targeted at First Year Teaching. The substantial material and non-material incentives, together with the publication of explicit criteria by which the excellence of such teaching would be evaluated, serve to emphasise in a significant way the University’s commitment to this area of teaching. The web site relating to the awards is: http://www.usyd.edu.au/su/personnel/corporate/teaching_awards.html

A link to the ITL web site has been set up.

Uni News
Lawrence Cram has offered to make available to the project the Academic Board’s column in Uni News in order to publicise the main issues and approaches currently on the University’s (and the ITL’s) agenda in connection with the FYE. It is anticipated that this Report, once finalised, will provide the essence of such an article.

Database of Faculty and Departmental Initiatives
The information on Faculty and Departmental initiatives which was collated in connection with this report (see Section 8 above) will be edited and set up on the ITL web site as a data base which can be searched by those accessing the site. Subject to ITL resourcing capacities, the data base will also be set up in such a way that it can be updated/added to by those accessing the site, as an ongoing staff development resource.

Report on FYE (May 2000)
Finally, this report itself may well form part of the ITL’s dissemination activities, possibly by being placed on the web in edited form.

10. CONCLUSIONS
The project aim of investigating first year students’ experience in this University has been completed both by means of interviews and focus groups. In addition, data from the Students’ Course Experience Questionnaire has been used to add further findings.
The investigation has also covered relevant sources in the literature. The findings are detailed in earlier sections of this report.

The second project aim was a) to document good practice and b) to identify areas for improvement. The first of these has been achieved within this University by collecting the information set out under Section 7 and in Appendix 7. Examples from other institutions have been, or will shortly be, made available on the ITL web site which has been set up to disseminate findings. Informed by the findings from the investigations mentioned above (see Section 5), work on identifying areas for improvement is well under way. The Recommendations below directly address issues in b).

The third project aim of providing staff development has been achieved on several levels and in several forums (see Section 7). Further activities and initiatives planned for the rest of 2000 are detailed in the Recommendations below.

On the most fundamental level, the conclusions to be drawn from the project so far point to the following broad needs:

- support for the FYE project to be visibly maintained at senior levels;
- enhancing responsibility at both Faculty and Department level for improving the FYE, with particular emphasis on student-centred approaches to both teaching and administration;
- inculcating a similar sense of responsibility at the level of individual academics;
- collaboration between academic and non-academic units to ensure an integrated approach to enhancing the student experience;
- enhanced collaboration between staff and students to address student needs;
- sustained initiatives in staff development to develop the skills of first year teachers and coordinators.

Successful transition begins the moment the student first has contact with the University. The survey of initiatives being undertaken to enhance first year experiences of students indicated that this realisation was not widespread. There is a need to extend academics’ ideas of the arenas for action in this regard beyond the actual teaching and learning experiences, to orientation, and prior to that, to pre-enrolment and enrolment strategies. In this regard, both academic and general staff should be involved.

On the other hand, it appears that some academics in the University view the first year experience as a matter only for student services and see it as quite unrelated to the teaching and other activities that they themselves engage in. Again, extending the arena for action is required and staff development is needed to change fixed attitudes.

Many of the strategies faculties and departments say they are using to enhance the first year experiences of students are examples of good practice in teaching and learning. This is commendable but many strategies do not go far enough. There is a widespread need to extend staff thinking at all levels about what is required for a successful first year. This indicates a need for staff development going beyond anything the Institute for Teaching and Learning has the resources to provide. There is an urgent need for funding to support an intensive staff development program targeted
at the departmental level and to provide incentives for academics to work in particular areas of development.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Student experience
On the basis of the findings of the survey of faculty and departmental initiatives, the data from ITL surveys and the literature on the first year experience, the following are recommended as essential to students’ first year experience and should be expected in all areas of the university:

1. Pre-enrolment and Enrolment strategies
   - Staff available to answer queries at and, where possible, before enrolment
   - Information about orientation activities given in schools visits
   - Welcome/ Information booklet available at enrolment (may include letter of welcome from the Dean)
   - Unit of study information available at enrolment
   - Academic Information available in O Week

2. Orientation events
   - Specially designed transition to university programs throughout the first year to include:
     - One or two day transition program at the beginning of the year
     - Orientation slots in class times
     - Staff wear name badges for first two weeks of semester
   - Meetings to sort out problems at intervals throughout the year

3. Teaching strategies
   - All students should have expectations for what and how they are to study made clear at the outset
   - All students should have the opportunity to engage in group teaching and practical activity based group teaching and collaborative learning opportunities
   - Students; should be given every opportunity to interact with each other even in large classes and lectures
   - All students should have an opportunity to participate in substantial practical experiences such as field studies, dramatic performance etc., and / or to participate in a research/inquiry project
   - Course Information should be available on a web site in all courses

4. Teaching organisation
   - The best/ most experienced lecturers should teach first year
   - Guest lecturers/ professionals/ community leaders and recent graduates should be involved where possible
   - The course should be efficiently run, including the timely provision of course materials to all students
   - The availability of library resources should be checked prior to the commencement of the course and communicated clearly to students
   - Tutorial numbers should be kept as small as possible
5. **Study skills advice and assistance**
   - Teaching and assessment of study/generic skills should be integrated into all courses
   - Opportunities for students to participate in courses to teach basic skills should be provided
   - Identification and counselling/support programs for students at risk, in areas where students are traditionally weak should be available
   - All students should have library orientations/tutorials
   - All students should be informed of the services provided by the Learning Centre/Maths Learning Centre etc.

6. **Provision of advice tailored to individual students’ needs**
   - The possibility of individual consultation should be available for all first year students
   - Staff should be friendly, treat students as adults and foster good staff-student relationships
   - There should be a first year student representative on the staff-student liaison committee
   - A first year coordinator/Associate Dean for First Year Studies should be available to assist students (possibly deputised by ‘duty’ tutors)

7. **Assessment strategies**
   - There should be fast and early feedback on progress
   - Practice exercises and quizzes should be available including trial exams and tests with feedback
   - General improvements in assessment strategies to include variety and flexibility should be made with first year students’ needs in mind

8. **Social events**
   - All students should have the opportunity to participate in social events specially organised by the Faculty, School or department and/or in collaboration with student organised events and activities.
   - First year students should have the opportunity to meet students from other years socially within the faculty or department.

**Recommendation 2: General**
An integrated, university-wide approach should be adopted through the appointment of a full-time, senior academic coordinator to work with faculties and departments and central services on improving students’ experiences at first year level. Such an appointment should be for at least a year and preferably two years. Such a person should preferably be capable of carrying out staff development work themselves, as well as working directly with the ITL and other central services and faculty administrations.

**Recommendation 3: University**
1. The emphasis on enhancing the FYE should be publicly maintained at a senior level so as to ensure it does not drop off College, Faculty, Departmental and School agendas.
2. A steering group should oversee the project at the highest levels. This should report to Academic Board. The Coordinator should report to the steering group.

3. Initiatives in faculties and departments should be funded from strategic initiative funding distributed on a competitive basis.

4. Existing barriers between academic and non-academic staff inhibit an integrated, effective approach to dealing with FYE issues. Any committee set up to deal with FYE issues should include academic staff, general staff and student services people.

5. Planning for the first year on campus should not only involve student services, but should actively involve teaching staff in all departments and faculties – once again the integrated approach.

6. Ways should be found (with Student Services, who are keen on the idea) to actively involve staff in students’ orientation/welcome, rather than just leaving it to services people.

7. Involve students (not just SRC), and give them a voice eg. bulletin board/discussion forum (NB SWOT did not include them in meetings, though acknowledged that they would have liked to)

8. Planning the first year on campus for International Students should not only involve the ISSU in terms of services, but should actively involve teaching staff in all departments and faculties, as well as the ITL.

**Recommendation 4: Faculty**

1. Faculties should encourage groups of staff to set up problem solving groups (Quality Circles) to work on particular issues. Groups should be eligible to apply for Strategic Initiative Funding to work on a particular identified initiative. Groups might be whole departments or small groups of several concerned staff, academic and/or general.

2. Identifying students early when they are in difficulty remains a priority although large first year classes pose a particular difficulty. Diagnostic testing of students prior to/soon after commencing courses is desirable even though there are serious resource implications. The provision of ongoing support eg. language skills for those diagnosed as in need is essential.

3. Students with learning difficulties should not be labelled as deficient and any programs set up to support them should be described in terms such as ‘academic skills development’ rather than ‘remedial classes’ etc.

4. Heads of Department should ensure that academics represented in groups set up to address issues of the experiences of students in their first year should include those with expertise in teaching and learning issues, (such as graduates from the ITL’s Graduate Certificate in Higher Education.) It is unlikely that current staff at the ITL itself can fully service such a need, and there has been a notable lack of
such expertise on the part of departmental or faculty representatives in many forums.

5. Ensure every faculty and department has a First Year Coordinator. Upgrade the status of Coordinators eg. calling them ‘Director of First Year Studies’ or Associate Dean First Year Studies or something similar, to send a signal of the importance of the issue.

6. First year undergraduates, encouraged to enrol at the University because of its reputation in research, should be exposed to the leading researchers who represent that reputation. They should have opportunities at an early stage to engage in inquiry.

7. Senior experienced teaching staff should be engaged in first year teaching, where possible. Teaching should not be delegated to junior and/or inexperienced staff.

8. Graduate students are mostly international fee-payers. Faculties should be encouraged to take more responsibility for their welcome, orientation and integration into university life at both the academic and social levels.

9. Some SWOT initiatives should be developed for the small student numbers (about 100 undergraduates) enrolling in Semester II.

**Recommendation 5: Institute for Teaching and Learning**

1. Initiatives such as the ITL’s NUT (New University Teachers) three-day program, successfully trialed in March 2000, should be expanded to provide professional development opportunities for all new tutors and lecturers. The question of whether accredited programs should be made mandatory has resource implications but should be given active consideration by the University.

2. The monthly meetings of First Year Coordinators currently being organised by the ITL should be maintained and extended as this is a valuable means of enhancing awareness of issues and formulating/sharing strategies.

3. The findings of the survey into current initiatives and strategies should be put on the Institute’s web site as a searchable database, and set it up so people can add their strategies to it. The ITL should publicise this initiative when it has been done.

4. The Institute for Teaching and Learning should continue to liaise actively with the SRC on teaching and learning issues, eg. try to activate the idea of consulting with students in departments about problems early in semester, and helping with liaison between students and heads of department, especially in terms of translating student problems into workable solutions.

5. The ITL should continue to be involved in planning the SWOT program for 2001.

6. ITL staff should, in collaboration with the First Year coordinator (see Recommendation 1 above,) visit all departments to tell them of the teaching and learning recommendations mentioned in this report.
7. The Institute should encourage the publication of successful FYE initiatives in the internal and external media.

8. The ITL should provide support to the development and implementation of strategic initiative fund projects and to the formation of groups to work on identified issues.

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13. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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14. LIST OF APPENDICES

1. Interim Report (Phillis and Brew, 1999)
2. Synergy (special issue on the FYE), November 1999
3. SCEQ questionnaire (1999)
4. ITL interview questionnaire (1999)
5. Detailed SCEQ Report for all Commencing First Year students (1999)
7. Summary of feedback from Vice-Chancellor’s Forum, November 1999
9. Table showing Strategies used in Faculties, Schools and Departments to Enhance the First Year Experiences of Students (May, 2000)