

Sustaining an institutional first year experience strategy: a distributed leadership approach

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Abstract

Sustainable first year experience (FYE) strategies require systematic approaches that engage academic and professional staff across the institution in improving the student experience. This paper describes a distributed leadership approach to implementing a FYE strategy aimed at improving student success and retention. The approach involves coordination at central and faculty levels, along with university-wide and faculty learning communities for academic and professional staff, first year grants and resource development. The paper outlines the range of activities and analyses them in terms of criteria for distributed leadership, including involvement of people, supportive processes, professional development and availability of resources, combined with the values of trust, a culture of respect, recognising a variety of change inputs and collaborative relationships (Jones et al., 2012). Evidence from coordinator reflections based on these criteria and values is used to illustrate the aspects of the strategy that are working well, and those that need attention.

Introduction

Student engagement within the curriculum is necessary but not sufficient for successful student transition (Kift & Nelson 2005, Tinto 2010, Thomas 2012, Zepke 2013, Nelson 2014). Broader institutional strategies are also required. This paper uses a distributed leadership framework to analyse the implementation of an institution-wide, systematic First Year Experience (FYE) strategy. The strategy has engaged academic and professional staff across the university in sustainable improvements that support student transition. Over the past four years, it has contributed to improvement in first year students' learning and experiences across undergraduate courses, engaged more than 360 academic and professional staff and gained a university award. This paper will report on the distributed leadership approaches and outcomes of the strategy for the institution, staff and students.

UTS first year experience Strategy

The UTS FYE strategy aims to support transition, retention and success for first year students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds, within a philosophy that good practice for these students is good practice for all students. It was designed in the context of the Bradley recommendations (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) for increasing participation in university study, particularly for students from LSES backgrounds, and has been funded since mid-2011 by the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program as a part of the UTS Widening Participation (Retention and Success) strategy.

The strategy is guided by a framework based on third generation first year policy and practice (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010), including the ideas of transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009). Transition pedagogy involves the intentional development of first year curriculum based on

the principles of transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring. With a focus on UTS needs, the FYE strategy evolved through 2011-2012 through collaboration between a central management team (strategy owner and FYE coordinator) and a FYE advisory group that included representatives from all faculties, learning centres, Student Services, the Library, Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, student administration, marketing and the Equity and Diversity unit. The aim of the group was to collaborate on identifying needs and priorities, and build alignment and engagement between a curriculum-focused approach and existing co-curricular student support strategies.

Formal leadership of the FYE strategy evolved further in 2013, with the engagement of faculty-based academics known as the First Year Transition Experience (FYTE) coordinators. These positions were funded by the HEPP project for two years (one day a week at level B academic) with reporting lines directly to the Faculty and informal reporting to the central unit. From 2015, the faculties are providing ongoing funding for the roles.

In the current strategy, the central FYE coordinator leads and supports the FYTE coordinator group. The team works to support transition through the curriculum and co-curricular practices through facilitating a series of interlinked activities, which include:

- A university wide FYE community of academics from all levels and professional staff with face-to-face learning forums on good practices in supporting students in transition, resource sharing, collaborative working, an email list and online resources (FYE coordinator in conjunction with FYE strategy owner);
- Development of local FYE communities of practice within faculties to provide similar opportunities for collaboration and sharing (FYTE coordinators);
- Provision of annual FYE small grants to enable academics and professional staff to develop and embed transition practice in the curriculum.
- Provision of further resources to support subject teachers, including tutors and demonstrators, in ways to implement transition pedagogies in classroom practice.
- Faculty-specific activities, led by the Faculty coordinators, addressing the specific needs and contexts of each Faculty.

The communities, grants and resourcing have facilitated distributed leadership of the FYE strategy across the university. The formal leadership roles of the central and Faculty coordinators are complemented by the informal leadership of grant recipients and learning community participants, who influence their peers to improve FY practice. The next section provides an introduction to distributed leadership approaches and how they can facilitate cultural change and engagement in strategic, institution-wide first year experience programs.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership involves collaboration around shared activities, in which individuals are recognised for contributing diverse forms of expertise (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012; Jones, Harvey & Lefoe, 2014; Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2008; Gronn, 2000). Within a teaching and learning university context, Jones et al. (2012, p.2) describes it as an “*emergent leadership concept relevant to the culture of the education sector as a whole*”. It is most influential by shaping “*perceptions of identity, participation and influence*” (Bolden et al., 2008). It involves informal academic collegiality and autonomy alongside formal management roles and aims to create shared and active engagement for sustainable improvements (Gosling, Bolden & Petrov, 2009). This view aligns with Ramsden’s view that leadership is distributed and enacted through “*how people relate to each other*” (1998, p.4).

In distributed leadership, synergies occur when individual leadership capacity is strengthened through peer acknowledgement of expertise, within an open culture of sharing, trust and respect, and collaborative partnerships between academics, and between academics and professional staff (Jones et al., 2014). Collaboration between staff leads to achieving common goals, along with opportunities for influence, feedback and reflection. Distributed leadership is most effective when it involves people from all levels, and thrives within institutions with an open culture. A flexible approach to the use of resources, such as time, space and finance is needed to establish diverse partnerships, large networks and rich collaborations.

Jones et al. (2012) have created a framework known as the Action Self-Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) for Distributed Leadership (p.76) that embeds a set of criteria for the development of distributed leadership and an associated set of dimensions and values. The intersection of the criteria and values creates a matrix of actions. The four key criteria that they identify are: people are involved; processes are supportive; professional development is provided; and resources are available. Critical values are: a context of trust, culture of respect; changes recognising a variety of inputs; and relationships based on collaboration.

In this paper, these criteria, values and actions have been used to analyse the UTS strategy, and provide evidence of its success in influencing staff and the institutional culture.

Analysing the FYE strategy through the lens of distributed leadership

The analysis took place in two parts. Firstly, the project owner and coordinator collaborated on benchmarking the components and activities of the strategy, using the 6E conceptual model of distributed leadership (Jones et al., 2014, p.423). This led to an initial analysis of the strengths and areas for improvement of the strategy, with one aspect then presented to a national benchmarking workshop. Secondly, they collaborated with the faculty FYTE coordinators on completing Jones et al.'s ASERT matrix (2012) and using it in a group discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy. Data from anonymous evaluation surveys on the FYE forums were also included in the analysis. In the following section, the strategy is described and analysed using the ASERT distributed leadership criteria.

Criterion 1: People are involved

Consistent with a distributed leadership approach, the UTS FYE Strategy involves people at all levels: senior academic sponsorship, central coordination, the faculty FYTE coordinators, participants in central and local learning communities and grant recipients. Students are involved through participation in grant projects and evaluation, with some participating directly in the forums. The university-wide FYE community is continually growing, with 396 current members comprising approximately 280 academics, 80 professional staff, 11 students and 25 pathway institution representatives. This has grown from the original 15 members of the FYE advisory group in 2011. Members include academics from all levels from Associate Deans and professors to casual tutors; professional staff members range from directors to student support staff from units including the library, student counselling and academic support. More recently, school and TAFE teachers have been included in the community, following interest in the UTS FYE forums.

A second level of community and influence is within the faculties. The FYTE coordinators have influenced conversations around the FYE with subject coordinators, heads of school, casual academics and program leaders, and have developed contextualised, faculty-based approaches to influencing staff to buy-in and support student transition. Along with

facilitating local communities of practice, their approaches have included: reworking Faculty student orientations; supporting tutor development; supporting the development of FYE grant applications and encouraging strategic applications; developing peer mentoring schemes; improving pathways; building collaboration across the curriculum; and using data on student retention, success and satisfaction to argue for curriculum changes. They were also mentors for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds who were enrolled based on their school principal's recommendation and not their entry score.

The key distributed leadership features of these communities are the sharing of practice and influencing of change through informal practices of collaboration and engagement. The communities actively build relationships and provide opportunities for academics to collaborate and network. One coordinator described the implementing practice in her faculty as: *'It was the practices achieved through the first year grants that provided the stimulus to change practice, and to see the potential of changing practice, and culture'*.

The FYTE coordinators are also influencing first year curriculum designs. As one FYTE coordinator stated *"Whilst on program planning groups, I see my role [as the FYTE coordinator] to ensure transition goes beyond week 1 activities and that it is embedded throughout the year"*. Using feedback from workshops with casual academics and from the student community, the same coordinator advised on curriculum changes to enhance student successful transition into the discipline. Students benefited from this two-way facilitation for practice change, as indicated by these responses:

I really appreciate you taking seriously the issues we raise as students. You are very supportive and encourage involvement, which means a lot, as it is very easy to just pass through the university system as a "number"(student #1)

Thank you again [...] for your time and for being so welcoming and encouraging of us as new students to get involved and feel as though we are able to contribute to the university experience. It means a lot to many of us! (student #3)

Criterion 2: Processes are supportive

As in many universities, the UTS learning and teaching culture is undergoing change to support learning for the future, where students learn to manage their own learning from first year with class pre-work, goal setting and reflective practice, alongside classroom practices that are interactive and collaborative, set within a context of professional preparedness. Student numbers are also rising. Processes therefore need to support students, academic and professional staff to engage in changing practices.

Within the FYE strategy, there are a number of processes that support staff to change practices. The communities have been discussed above, and the grants directly support practice change. The process for applying for and reporting on grants has been made as simple as possible, with support provided, as many grant holders, especially casual academics, are unfamiliar with grant application and administration processes. The central coordinator has facilitated workshops with finance staff for grant holders and provides regular monthly spending reports to enable conversations on the running of the grant. Support is also provided for recruitment of project assistants and for report writing.

Faculty coordinators provide mutual support through their FYTE coordinator community of practice. They meet regularly as a group with the central coordination team and most

meetings include a wider group from professional student support groups (library, student engagement, peer assist coordinator, and senior equity management). The reflection that occurs in these meetings draws in local expertise and builds university-wide collaboration. Sharing of emergent approaches is underpinned by a context of trust and culture of respect, and changes have input from all coordinators and participants, independently of seniority (FYTE coordinators include a HEW project manager, a contract lecturer, a Professor and a Director of Students along with lecturers and senior lecturers) or formal leadership roles. The Faculty coordinators have commented on why they think the approach works:

At the start, working with the FYE central team firstly and then with the faculty associate deans secondly enabled the practice to be more focused on commonly agreed practices, without having been siloed by faculty requirements. Having established academic buy in (through the grant interest and curriculum redesign) and with the associate deans support and encouragement, the culture change has been sustained with the establishment of a first year group supporting student transition. (FYTE coordinator 1)

Working with a common set of principles (transition pedagogy) and having the experience of FYE grants to embed these principles, provide a strong foundation and direction. (FYTE coordinator 2)

Criterion 3: Professional Development is provided

Both the forums and the grants aim to support academics and professional staff to implement transition pedagogies to support transition for the diverse cohorts of commencing undergraduate students and change curriculum in ways aligned with First Year Curriculum Principles (Kift, 2009). Through the development of an open and sharing culture, the forums provide informal professional development that recognises the expertise of individual academics and professional staff members in interpreting and implementing these principles in different settings, and acknowledges their leadership in first year practice change. The value of the forum in supporting professional development is evident in these quotes:

Being in the FYE community of practice has provided theoretical and practical applications for law academics to develop their teaching practices and to introduce creative and authentic learning opportunities for first year law students. The depth of collaboration within the FY community of practice is a great example of the effectiveness of the UTS Model of Learning. (Faculty academic)

I have participated in most of the FYE events, and have been able to adopt ideas shared within the community to other contexts, and have also heard other academics talk about the value of the exposure to ideas and initiatives from other disciplines. (Academic developer)

In several cases, such dissemination of ideas created new collaborations and new grant applications in other disciplines. For example, a mastery-learning approach from mathematics was adapted by academics teaching first year programming. In both subject areas, student pass rates improved significantly from previous semesters, from around 60% to 90%.

Networking for both professional staff and academics also provides opportunities for professional development that go beyond the forum events and build ongoing relationships, within a culture of change, respect and trust:

Through the FYE Forums I've been able to establish working relationships with UTS staff involved in Flipped Learning, Graduate Attributes and IML which have become central to my work; through these connections I've been able to identify other opportunities to disseminate resources I've been working on and to receive feedback and support on my own practice. (Professional staff)

The local faculty communities of practice also provide professional development opportunities, through faculty workshops and forums. These have proven particularly useful for casual academics to develop their sense of place within the FYE community, contribute to the embedding of transition pedagogies and share practices with continuing academics and professional staff. Casual academics feel supported through these faculty workshops, as demonstrated here:

I just wanted to say how much I appreciate your holding the workshop. I did not go away empty handed, but with some useful ideas for helping my students to a more constructive attitude and for encouraging better participation. Your experience in education is most valuable to us all. (Casual academic)

There are also opportunities for the FYTE coordinators to develop leadership skills for formal positions as well as the skills of informal influencing and mentoring. The coordinator of one faculty found it difficult to get traction with academic colleagues to extend transition work that was already established. She encouraged casual academics to consider FYE grants, developed a new core first year subject based on transition principles and reflective practices, and organised a workshop on student resilience. She encouraged the casual academics to apply for teaching and learning awards, and two received citations. Her mentoring of the schools' recommendation entry students aligned with her formal role as director of students and was very successful. As a result, she has expanded her research on these practices, along with providing support for students and changing the first year curriculum.

Criterion 4: Resources are available

The FYE small grant scheme provides resourcing of between \$500 and \$4000 for initiatives that embed transition pedagogies in the curriculum. The small amounts of money provide both an incentive for academics to make sustainable changes, and opportunities for recognition. The first grants were awarded in September 2011, with 14 projects involving 19 academics and one professional staff. As a result of the influence of the FYTE coordinators in their faculties, the number of grant applications has more than doubled (although funding has not increased, so funding per grant is typically smaller). In the 2015 round, 30 grants were awarded, with 103 staff involved and many grants involving partnerships between faculty academics, casual academics, academic developers, language and learning specialists and/or professional staff. In total, 105 FYE grants have been awarded involving 71 subjects from across all Faculties and 157 academics, casual academics, and professional staff.

While the FYE grants are an explicit form of resourcing, there is also a small amount of resourcing for FYE forums (catering and facilitation) and for faculty based activities. Other resources include an online resource site and FYE community email list, and classroom resources such as a tutor guide framed on transition pedagogy within a UTS context (Sparks et al., 2014), and university-wide and faculty-based workshops on successful student transition.

Strengths and weaknesses of the strategy: a collaborative analysis

Using the ASERT matrix (Jones et al., 2012) during a group meeting, eight of the FYTE coordinators rated their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy and its implementation, and then discussed the ratings. The ratings used traffic light codes: green, the component is working well; yellow, some aspects working well; and red, needs attention. The resultant pattern is presented in Figure 1. Cells coloured green, yellow and red represent the agreement of 6 to 8 respondents with this rating. In some cases, there were differences in the coordinators’ perspectives. Where half of them rated an item green and the other half yellow, the cell is coloured light green. Where there was stronger disagreement, with half giving a red rating and the other half green, the cell is coloured orange.

Criteria for Distributed Leadership	Dimensions and Values to enable development of Distributed Leadership			
	Context of trust	Culture of respect	Changes that recognise a variety of inputs	Relationships based on collaboration
People are involved	Expertise of individuals is used to inform decisions	Individuals participate in decision making	All levels and functions have input into policy development	Expertise of individuals contributes to collective decision making
Processes are supportive	Informal Leadership is recognised	Decentralised groups engage in decision making	All levels and functions have input into policy implementation	Communities of Practice are modelled
Professional development is provided	Distributed Leadership is used to build leadership capacity	Mentoring for distributed leadership is available	Leaders at all levels proactively encourage distributed leadership	Collaboration is facilitated
Resources are available	Space, time and finance for collaboration are available	Leadership contribution is recognised and rewarded	Flexibility is built into infrastructure and systems	Opportunities for regular networking are supported

Figure 1: Faculty FYTE coordinator reflections on the Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool (ASERT) for distributed leadership (Jones et al., 2012, p.76)

The dimension of *relationships based on collaboration* was considered to be working well (green) by the coordinators for all four criteria (people, process, professional development and resources). This is significant, as the FYE strategy is driven in the main by ‘bottom up’ engagement with first year student success and achievement, and its implementation involves networks, collaborative practices, communities of practice, and expert contributions to collective decision-making. The criteria of *people are involved* and *processes are supportive* were rated as the strongest, with coordinators agreeing that all or many aspects of these were working well.

For some faculty coordinators, the *professional development* area needed work. In general they perceived that their expertise was recognised in the context of their faculties, and noted trust in their expertise from their colleagues. There was less agreement on whether there was adequate mentoring or proactive encouragement of the distributed leadership process within the faculty. Some comments indicated that the informal process is working well, but others focused on formal leadership and mentoring from the senior management within the faculty. The comment was made that: “*some [colleagues] still want leadership from the top only; in particular, intensive teachers and support staff are impacted here*”

The *resourcing* of the grants and funding for community of practice events was valued by the coordinators. However, the flexibility of infrastructure and systems such as the finance system, a new staff recruitment system, and the compliance processes that drive these systems, were seen as in need of attention. It is clear, for instance, that institutional systems designed for the management of large grants and faculty budgets are difficult to adapt to the context of \$1000 grants and grantees with limited time.

There were some overlapping themes between the reflections of the central and faculty coordinators. The central coordinator completed the matrix separately and prior to the eight FYTE coordinators, whilst at the 2014 National Distributed Leadership Benchmarking workshop. Both identified that relationships based on collaboration and the context of trust were well established. However the central coordinator identified other areas that worked well, such as the informal leadership used to build leadership capacity. This was evidenced through the very strong collaborations between the FYTE coordinators, a growing number of FYE grants across all levels (professor to casual academic) and the inclusion of professional staff collaborations. A culture of respect that encourages individual participation and reward and recognition from within the faculty and in the wider FYE community is enacted.

The central coordinator also identified that the implementation of policy and influence on policy change needs sustained attention, as not all first year curricula or all first year academics are influenced or impacted by the FYE strategy. Next steps will include encouraging Faculty coordinators to participate in policy review working groups, as well as using top-down committee processes to embed transition principles in key policies such as those related to student assessment and curriculum design.

Final reflections and conclusion

This paper has aimed to demonstrate that sustained engagement and embedded curriculum practices that support student success across an institution can be managed through distributed leadership. This enables top down strategies to combine with emergent informal leadership and uptake in a systematic approach to support the FYE. Critical to this approach is the involvement of faculty coordinators who provide links between the central strategy and the academics at the coalface, and the empowering of academic and professional staff at all levels. Through the faculty coordinators, and guidance from the central unit, considerable interest in FYE strategy is now evident in curriculum practice.

There is evidence that the strategy is being successful for both staff and students. The UTS FYE strategy has now engaged more than 360 academics and professional staff across the university in implementing sustainable practices to support student transition, success and retention. Overall pass rates for commencing students from LSES backgrounds have increased significantly since 2011, and there was a significant increase in the pass rates of all commencing domestic students from 2013 to 2014. LSES students are being retained at a

slightly higher rate than all domestic students, in the context an increase in the LSES cohort from 10% to 12% of the domestic cohort between 2011 and 2014.

Change enacted through the distributed leadership of the FYE strategy relies on influencing, persuading and inspiring rather than only on managing. It recognises expertise and develops collaborative relationships that are built on trust, respect and a willingness to accept change. Academics and coordinators alike provide evidence that they feel supported to make changes within the complex university environment that they work in. These practices recognise that leadership is distributed through the leadership team for the FYE strategy (central and local), the grant recipients and collaborators, who present in forums, and the others who participate in communities to share expertise or assist in developing resources.

While distributed leadership values these informal processes of influence to bring about change, it also requires support and recognition from formal leaders. Jones et al. (2012) found that managerial approaches that proactively encouraged distributed leadership were more likely to engage academics in change processes. This points to the importance of engaging formal leaders, such as heads of school, who may vary in their enthusiasm for both the FYE and local informal leadership. Recognition at this level is seen as crucial for supporting local leaders, such as the Faculty FYTE coordinators, and enabling them to influence local practice.

Along with fostering local engagement, a distributed leadership approach also needs to engage with the structures and processes of the university. In the case of the UTS strategy, this is being achieved by senior executive sponsorship by the DVC (Education and Students) and by making strong use of student retention and success data and presenting this, along with the strategy and approaches, at the university Teaching and Learning committee and Academic Board. The effectiveness of the strategy in improving student transition experience is acknowledged by Associate Deans, including the Chair of University Teaching and Learning Committee:

I am in a position to compare course and subject performance reports from all faculties each year. It is patently clear to me that the FYE project, and its multi-directional strategies, which include a dedicated university wide FYE Coordinator, FYE Transition Coordinators and FYE grant recipients in each Faculty, now play a vital role across the university. The project and its many parts combine to identify and target a range of issues that can adversely affect first year students, while also proposing a battery of practical solutions to those issues. Time and time again, encouragement, support, dedicated spokespeople, and well-directed and funded interventions have combined to turn the first year experience of students around across all faculties.

As the quote indicates, an integrated and systematic strategy built on the principles and values of distributed leadership can engage people widely across the university and have a positive influence on first year student experiences, retention and success.

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