Embedding an institution-wide capacity building opportunity around transition pedagogy: First Year Teaching and Learning Network Coordinators

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Abstract

A First Year Teaching and Learning Network was established in a regional university with a strong focus on distance education for a very diverse student cohort. The purpose of the Network, which consisted of a Coordinator in each of nine schools, was to support staff teaching students transitioning into tertiary education. The paper explores the theoretical bases of the structure, its current method of operation, its impact so far, and future plans. The development of the Network illustrates how a university can consciously embed opportunities for staff to take ownership of transition pedagogy and thus encourage widespread capacity building amongst their peers. The experiences of the Network in its first two years provide a case study of how institutional support for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, in particular scholarship around capacity building, can be used as a mechanism to promote both staff and student engagement with transition pedagogy resulting in a shift from a second generation approach towards a third generation approach to transition.

Introduction

Students transitioning to university are vulnerable to early withdrawal and disappointment but their unique needs are now well documented and increasingly researched (Nelson & Clarke, 2014) although the complexity of the transitioning phase is yet to be fully understood (Chesters & Watson, 2013). Support structures and pedagogical programs have to be purpose-planned, comprehensive, flexible and diverse, as well as tightly integrated, coordinated and managed (Gale, 2009; Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson, Kift & Clarke; 2008; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2010). A university-wide response to transition must take into account discipline differences, cohort differentiation, pace of learning, and educational background of the students; but at the same time it is also necessary to build capacity among staff so they can support transitioning students more effectively. At the University of New England (UNE), Australia, the needs of transitioning students are more complex than most, a fact that has ramifications for the institution and its staff. Therefore, UNE created the First Year Teaching and Learning Network (FYTLN) in an attempt to embed a flexible, discipline-appropriate and institution-wide engagement with transition pedagogy. The key to the Network's success is its relevance for both staff and students.

In this paper, the authors discuss the context, conception and implementation of the Network and explore whether the Network, as a change agent, has contributed to opportunities for university staff to take ownership of transition pedagogy and thus encourage wide-spread capacity building amongst their peers. This process, using Kezar and Eckel's (2002) framework for institutional change, can serve as a bridge between an existing second generation approach and the evolution of a third generation approach to the first year experience.

Institutional change

It is a broad truism to say that the higher education sector worldwide is faced with an array of difficult challenges. What has been popularly termed the "massification" of education is just one of them (Beerkens-Soo & Vossensteyn, 2009, p. 3). This development has resulted in "the university" losing its elite education label and becoming more realistically an institution of higher education for a wider student audience, many of whom struggle to engage with the expectations of university learning. The role of the university teacher has never been more important to ensure student success and to reflect the increasing demands of the academic profession. Boyer (1990), the intellectual father of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) explains: "Challenges on the campus and in society have grown and there is a deepening conviction that the role of higher education, as well as the priorities of the professoriate, must be redefined to reflect new realities" (p. 3) Inherent in Boyer's articulation of the professional academic work environment is the need for universities to pay more attention to supporting staff in their teaching and to take an institutional approach to the impact of SoTL.

When Hutchings, Huber and Ciccone (2011) revisited Boyer's initial proposition of the nature of academic work and his advocacy of SoTL, they did so by exploring institutional up-scaling. The thrust of their argument was that if SoTL was to make progress and become a greater force in the reformation of the academy, then

institutional support was essential. Through a set of eight recommendations, they advocated a greater institutional, as opposed to individual, engagement with SoTL in order ultimately to improve student attainment (Hutchings et al.).

Institutions change. Sometimes they do it radically and sometimes incrementally (Campbell, 2004). The process of institutional change can be subject to a number of variables that determine the way in which an institution evolves and the constraints acting upon factors which promote change (Andrews, McConnell, & Westcott, 2010). A comprehensive change affects numerous offices and units across the institution, touching upon values, beliefs and structures. It is deep, intentional, and occurs over time (Eckel, Hill & Green, 1998). Research has demonstrated the utility of cultural and social cognitive theories in illustrating complexity and in showing the ambiguity, context-based nature, and human aspects of the change process (Collins, 1998).

When implementing change, successful institutions put in place the following change strategy framework (Kezar & Eckel, 2002):

- Senior administrative support: support provided by individuals in leadership positions in relation to value statements, resources, and/or administrative structures;

- Collaborative leadership: involvement of all individuals during the different stages of the change process;

- Robust design: a design that is clear to individuals and is flexible enough to be able to adapt to new opportunities that may arise;

- Staff development: opportunities offered to individuals to learn new skills or knowledge related to the change;

- Visible actions: advances in the change process that are noticeable to individuals, and that help to ensure that they know that the change is still important and is happening.

Jabri (2004) argues that rather than assuming that change management has to be decided and communicated top-down, organisations should promote more possibilities for change by empowering all participants in the change process, with communication and participation being the driver of change.

UNE, in responding to Hutchings et al.'s (2011) recommendation that SoTL is most effective when part of an institutional approach, introduced the First Year Teaching and Learning Network as a change agent. This process aligned with Kezar and Eckel's (2002) framework of successful institutional change and Jabri's (2004) call for participant empowerment. This paper suggests that a nuanced implementation of Kezar and Eckel's framework is one way to replace a fragmented and uncoordinated approach to transition with one that is more interconnected, more institutionally aligned and sustainable.

The importance of the first year

The fundamental importance of the first year experience of tertiary students in supporting their long-term success and satisfaction was clearly articulated in Australia in 1995 in the *First Year on Campus* report (McInnis, James, & McNaught, 1995). The authors stressed the first year as a point of particular student

vulnerability to "external pressures" (p. 7) as they moved into a new and unfamiliar form of education. The pressure of external factors is in no way lessening for today's students. *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009* report (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010) indicated that more first year students are finding it necessary to work part time while they are studying and are spending fewer hours physically on campus. The McInnis report also highlighted a need for negotiation between the expectations of students fresh from the secondary school system and curriculum and the expectations of academics—a tension which has persisted long beyond the original study (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2009). Transitioning into tertiary study entails adopting the conventions, language and practices of a significantly different educational culture (Gale & Parker, 2011) and a recognition on the part of academics that the absence of this knowledge cannot simply be seen as a shortcoming of the individual student (Lawrence, 2005). Given the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) Act of 2011, which requires universities to demonstrate the achievement of threshold standards by their students (Guest, 2013), the foundational aspect of first year has taken on new significance for universities as well as their students (Thomas et al., 2014). It is critical that institutions take the necessary steps to successfully integrate their students into a tertiary academic culture (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014).

The impact of these factors is all the more pronounced due to the ongoing pursuit of a more socially inclusive model of tertiary education by the Australian Government (James et al., 2010). Students who are the first in the family to experience university study will grow in number as tertiary education is increasingly perceived as a necessity (O'Shea, 2014). The changing nature of the student body and the role of the university necessitate change at an institutional level, particularly in terms of the first year experience. First year is a period ripe with potential for excitement and growth but also for confusion, alienation and dismay (Richardson, King, Garrett & Wrench, 2012). In particular, students face new demands that they demonstrate their independence as learners in an educational context that is often replete with assumed and tacit knowledge (Haggis, 2006). Ideally, first year when supported by appropriate curricula and pedagogy can become a period in which students have the opportunity to develop the skills and understanding that allow them to operate effectively within this new context (Kift, 2009). Leese (2010) suggested that successful transition management is particularly important in the empowerment of students without familial university experience.

UNE institutional context

The first year context at UNE is an unusually complex one. UNE is a regional university with twin traditions of distance education and on-campus teaching. The diversity of prior experience of commencing students is very broad and this is reflected in the range of knowledge (Oughton, 2010) and cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2004) students bring to their university experience. Students may be school leavers or mature aged coming from rural, regional or overseas locations, and be studying part or full time. Currently, 80% of UNE's students are based off-campus, studying via online and flexible study modes. The flexible delivery mode of teaching and learning at UNE means that

on-campus and off-campus students enrolled in particular units study together.

This snapshot demonstrates that the concept of "transition to first year" for UNE students is a complex one: the contexts and backgrounds that they are transitioning from, and the experience and knowledge they bring to bear on their first year experience, are extremely varied. First year pedagogy and support for the first year experience have to be sensitively designed to meet the needs of the whole range of first year students, and to enable the development and integration of a first year learning community.

First Year Experience and First Year Experience Group

Wilson (2009) introduced the concept of "generations" for first year experience (FYE) research and practice. The *first generation* approaches focus on co-curricular initiatives such as student learning support, orientation and social and enrichment programs. *Second generation* approaches focus on curriculum-related activities, "the core practices of education (e.g., teaching quality, course design, etc.) [with] common examples including engaging course and assessment design, formative assessment tasks, and community building in the classroom" (Wilson 2009, p. 10).

Third generation approaches are whole-of-institution partnerships, where first generation co-curricular and second generation curricular approaches are seamlessly integrated. Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) explained how, by using the third generation approach, the FYE at a large Australian institution became "everyone's business". It was noted that very few universities had an institution-wide, coordinated and coherent FYE policy

and practice. Rather they had a "piecemeal" approach where first year initiatives were often developed and implemented by individuals or small groups; and were not linked across the institution (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005, p. 89). In an extensive literature review, Nelson and Clarke (2014) observed FYE initiatives often stalled at these first and second generation approaches, not progressing to the third generation approach.

Prior to 2010, UNE fitted into this category of stalling at the first to second generation approach, but in an attempt to achieve a whole-of-institution approach, a FYE Group with membership open to both academic and professional staff was created in 2011. The Group was funded to initiate a range of measures in order to kick-start the institutional approach. One of the activities of the FYE Group was the establishment of the First Year Teaching and Learning Network (FYTLN) as a professional development initiative.

First Year Teaching and Learning Network

The First Year Teaching and Learning Network (FYTLN) was created with the aim of improving the first year student experience by increasing awareness of first year pedagogy among academic staff and coordinating activities related to first year teaching across the university. A FYTLN Coordinator was appointed to each of nine schools but the duty statement was quite broad, allowing each Coordinator to interpret the role within the context of their school. Specific needs to be addressed were identified by Heads of Schools, through student and staff surveys, and academic fora. Funds were allocated to each Coordinator for the development and implementation of projects and to help

encourage SoTL among academics. Some of the funds could be used for time release in recognition of the increased workload associated with the Coordinator's role. The range of projects implemented by the Coordinators was diverse but can be categorised into seven activities represented in Figure 1.

Facilitating curriculum development:

Network Coordinators provided leadership in helping to redevelop first year units to better serve the needs of students and
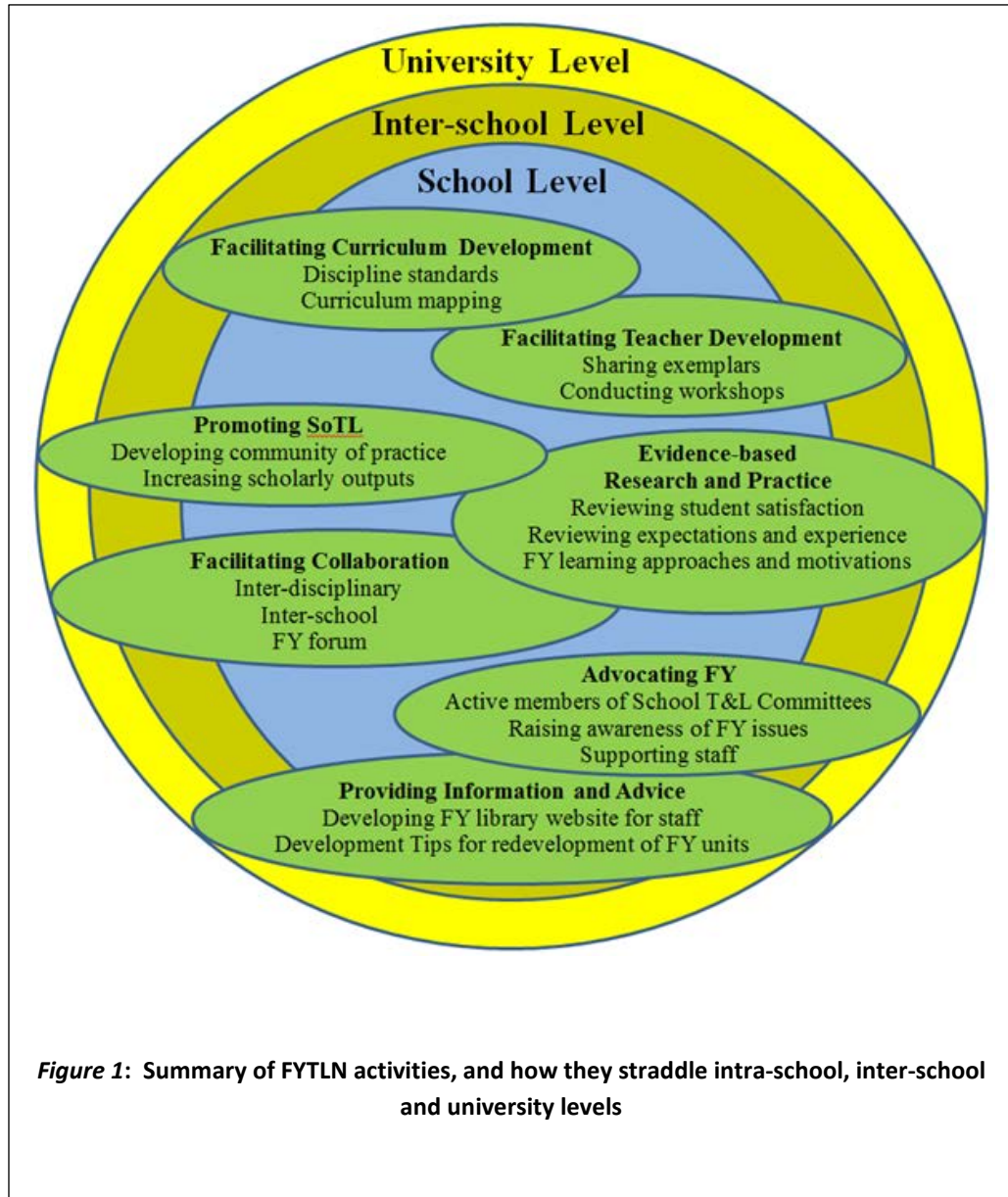

Figure 1: **Summary of FYTLN activities, and how they straddle intra-school, inter-school and university levels**

academic programs. In these actions, the Coordinators focused on how best to help students make a successful transition to university studies and also prepare for upper-level units. For example, a practical guide to the incorporation of research awareness and research skills into first year Arts units has been developed. This draws on the work of Kift (2009) and Brew (2010).

Facilitating teacher development:

Network Coordinators facilitated teacher development in both pedagogical and technical matters related to first year teaching. For instance, one Coordinator facilitated a workshop on the use of learning analytics to develop interventions aimed at students at risk of failing (Kennedy, Ioannou, Zhou, Bailey, & O'Leary, 2013). Another Coordinator provided a model of teacher self-development by filming their teaching, distributing it to all staff teaching first year in the school, and requesting feedback. The Coordinator subsequently informed staff of specific teaching improvements made as a result of the experience. Some colleagues subsequently used video-recording for purposes of self-improvement.

Providing information and advice:

The Coordinators, along with four members of the FYE Group, produced a set of tips for the redevelopment of first year units in the online environment. This document built on the work by Kift (2009), and after university-wide consultation, it was distributed to teaching staff and educational developers for implementation. At the request of the Coordinators, a university librarian created a library web site of online resources with information relevant to teaching first year. One school Coordinator extended those resources by providing an annotated bibliography of research on transition pedagogy specific to each of the varied disciplines within that school. The Coordinators provided other advice on an ad hoc basis, for instance, sharing with staff a way to provide students with links to web sites that support the development of academic writing skills and consulting on the development of assessment tasks.

Facilitating collaboration:

Coordinators developed joint collaborations within the Network and also facilitated collaboration amongst their peers. They convened a university-wide FYE forum at which staff were encouraged to discuss issues relating to first year teaching, and organised other opportunities for staff within and across disciplines and schools to explore transition issues. Coordinators from different schools collaborated on a number of projects, resulting in refereed journal and conference publications (e.g. Clark et al., 2013; Malouff, Reid, Wilkes & Emmerton, 2015; Reid & Wilkes, 2013) and a successful national Office of Learning and Teaching Extension Grant application. In one inter-disciplinary project, academics from fifteen disciplines across two schools participated in a forum to discuss the development of quantitative skills in the first year science curriculum. Although the lack of communication between scientists and mathematicians regarding quantitative skills is well documented (e.g., Orton & Roper, 2000), feedback from this forum was very positive, with many of the participants identifying the opportunity to establish links with peers from other disciplines and schools as one of the highlights.

Evidenced-based research and practice:

Students face challenges when making the transition to higher education and often there is a mismatch between student expectations and experiences (Brinkworth et al., 2009). At UNE, Coordinators designed and implemented surveys of first year students and staff relating to their expectations and experiences, with the aim of improving the transition to first year, taking into account differences for on-campus students and those studying at a distance. For instance, in one school, research was conducted to determine students' perceptions regarding the social presence of Unit Coordinators in the online environment. In another school, students' approaches to learning and motivation to study were investigated, leading to more relevant examples being included in unit material. In the Sciences, the identification of gaps in students' assumed knowledge led to the implementation of a project to help develop quantitative skills. Coordinators also performed ongoing analysis of data routinely collected by the university about first year units, such as the attrition rate and student ratings of satisfaction to inform a discussion around continuous teaching improvement.

Advocating for first year:

The creation of the FYTLN Coordinator role in each school made the point that the university values first year instruction. Coordinators have advocated for first year in several ways, including raising consciousness by regularly drawing attention to first year issues in school meetings and workshops. Coordinators have become integral members of school Teaching and Learning Committees. They have lobbied for rapid solutions to problems in the online teaching platform, by encouraging online teaching instructional design consultants to focus on helping the development of first year units.

Coordinators also advise on the construction of transparent and rigorous marking rubrics; and offer help to staff teaching first year with regard to cases of student academic misconduct and plagiarism.

Promoting SoTL:

McKinney (2006) defines SoTL as "systematic reflection and study on teaching and learning made public" (p. 38). Network Coordinators have encouraged and modelled scholarly activities related to teaching and learning, and communities of practice in SoTL have developed within the Network and between schools. Furthermore, Coordinators have sought funding (internally and nationally) for projects related to the FYE. They have encouraged, mentored and supported other academics to become involved in SoTL, resulting in literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, successful grant proposals, publications and conference presentations related to first year teaching and learning.

Discussion

The future of the FYTLN and its ability to lead discussion in the transition space is assured only while there is institutional support. This includes financial support to implement projects and facilitate professional external networking. The most important thing however, is the acceptance of the Coordinators by their schools and discipline colleagues as the first point of contact for matters relating to first year. Ideally what needs to happen in the future is for more exploration to take place around the institutional context of first year. This is where credibility will be gained and this is where institutional support again will prove essential.

Hutchings et al. (2011) have called for institutional endorsement as the way to ensure increased uptake of SoTL. At UNE, the evidence of the FYTLN demonstrates the validity of this proposal. The Network has been able to promote SoTL in clear and definable ways. The literature around transitioning students informs the Network's practice and the Network has prioritised the wider dissemination of this literature. As the Network's activities increase awareness of the first year experience in all its contextualised complexities, younger academics, in particular, are introduced to the benefits of applying the techniques of scholarship to their teaching practices. The Network is an ideal example of what can be achieved with genuine and ongoing institutional support. Moreover, when we look at the recommendations of Kezar and Eckel (2002) for effective change in institutions of higher education, the FYTLN meets all of the criteria.

1. Senior administrative support: The Network's parent body, the FYE Group, was a sub-committee of Academic Board Teaching and Learning Committee. Therefore the Network from its inception was supported by university administration at all levels. Heads of Schools endorsed applications from staff to become Coordinators, and initial funding was supplied by the Pro-vice Chancellor Students and Social Inclusion. In order for this model to reflect a genuine shift to the third generation level, the Network needs to be embedded in general funding processes and not rely on "special" funding or the changing whims of senior managers.

2. Collaborative leadership: The Network practised distributed leadership. Although reporting to the FYE Group, the Network selected its own chairperson annually. Each member led initiatives within their school but also drew support from each other and often collaborated in activities. There was a determined effort among all members to pursue individual initiatives while, at the same time, securing a collective vision. Each Coordinator was responsible for raising the profile of first year pedagogy across the university by working within their own school. This approach achieved considerable success because the Coordinators were able to offer staff new opportunities for professional development around first year pedagogy. Some staff embraced these opportunities; others did not. Champions have been created through the FYTLN but the success of the Network still hinges on the strength of individual participation. This would suggest that the evolution to a third generation approach is still a work in progress.

3. Robust design: The plan for the Network was clear and simple but flexibility was built in so that each Coordinator had enough opportunity to respond to the needs of disciplines in their schools. Furthermore, the Network continued to function effectively even when Coordinators were replaced, or new Heads of Schools were employed. This means that the Network was seen as relevant and robust but not rigid.

4. Staff development: Capacity building was integral to the model. Coordinators supported each other, supported their discipline colleagues and learnt from each other. This was

probably the most important element of Kezar and Eckel's (2002) model as applied to the Network. Capacity is not achieved overnight but must be consistently built up and genuinely supported. Each Coordinator increased their own awareness of first year pedagogy and, in turn, contributed to the understanding of their colleagues. This is a cascading pattern of slow growth but has the potential for long-term sustainability.

5. Visible actions: each Coordinator was responsible for introducing projects into their schools so that colleagues saw visible outcomes of their work. An important role for the FYTLN was profile building and this was achieved by the visibility of projects and the peer training that resulted from conference participation and other scholarly activities supported through the Network. Building the profile of the FYTLN will be critical to the incremental change process so that the demonstrated advances continue to be acknowledged for their institutional impact.

Although only operating for two years, the FYTLN has already shown evidence of having considerable impact. Tangible outputs are quantifiable. They include traditional peer-reviewed papers and conference presentations, projects designed to track and develop key skills in first year units, curriculum products, meetings, fora and collaborations. The impact of these outputs will be ongoing as the concepts embodied in them gain more traction with a wider audience. However, the main impact of the FYTLN is far more difficult to quantify, because it relates to changing attitudes, making professional connections and giving support. Fundamentally, the Network has raised the profile of first year teaching across the university as a whole as well as within individual schools. Because the Coordinators are now seen as the people charged to consider and improve first year teaching, they have become a recognised source of developing expertise. By supporting each other with purposeful conversation, collaboration around projects and the exchange of ideas, the agency of the Coordinators is constantly building. This agency to promote awareness of first year pedagogy has been given institutional legitimacy with the formal inclusion of the Coordinators on school Teaching and Learning committees.

Importantly, the establishment of the Network makes a clear statement that the university supports first year students and is engaged in actions to ensure that best practice is employed and disseminated across the university. The existence of the Network and the work of the Coordinators have helped to highlight a range of issues related to the complexity of the first year experience at UNE. First year teaching needs not only to support school-leavers and mature aged students who are new to higher education but also to support those first year students who arrive well-informed after many years in the professional workplace or have completed higher education in another field. The constant process of discussion and adjustment generated by the Network has provided a foundation for innovative design that is both robust and flexible. The particular nature of our institution means that we are able to push current understanding of what it means to transition within the pedagogical environment of distance education. Because the Coordinators explore first year pedagogy and familiarise themselves with the current thinking in transition literature, they are well placed to lead their

colleagues in developing strategies to respond to the complexity of the first year experience. In this way, the impact of the Network is ongoing and evolving as new conversations are had and new issues explored.

Conclusion

UNE, in responding to the recommendation of Hutchings et al. (2011) that SoTL is most effective when part of an institutional approach, introduced the FYTLN as a change agent. This process aligned with Kezar and Eckel's (2002) framework of successful institutional change and Jabri's (2004) call for participant empowerment. The FYTLN Coordinators have become an integral part of UNE's response to the complexities of its transitioning students. The institutional recognition of the Network has permitted Coordinators to act collectively and individually, but always with support. This, in turn, has given them opportunities and credibility to implement the transition agenda and to break down school and disciplinary silos. The coordinated approach of the Network, has not only strengthened its impact but also sent a very strong message to all staff that UNE values the role of SoTL in informing best practice developments in teaching and learning. The capacity of the individual Coordinators, the members of their schools and the students enrolled in first year units is steadily being built by the Network's focus on research-informed pedagogy. UNE has not yet reached a third generation status, but the Network has demonstrated that it is possible to have an institution-wide approach to transition that is flexible enough to accommodate a huge diversity in both student needs and discipline requirements. It is not enough to rely on individuals or a single initiative to drive change. There has to be institutional

recognition and support behind collective action.

Acknowledgements

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