# First Year Experience (FYE)

This guide has been designed to provide some specific, practical tips that can help you in supporting students in your unit to improve their “First Year Experience”.

## Background- What is it about?

* 20% of students leave ECU before completing their degree. (ECU Annual Report 2011);
* The cost of attrition is estimated at $14,000 (domestic) and $17,000 (international) per student per year (FYE Discussion Paper- Curriculum 2012). There is also an associated social and educational cost to the student of forgoing a tertiary education;
* In 2015, ECU can expect a considerable drop in student numbers from the school half year intake cohort that graduates from secondary school. This makes it even more important to consider how to minimise attrition rates by maximising support for students and increasing the number of students who continue on with their study;
* Students may choose to leave if they aren’t supported during the transition that occurs in first year;
* FYE is about all aspects of a student’s transition into university including their social and academic experience; and
* ECU attracts students who traditionally would not have elected/or been able to enter university. They may be the first in their family to go to University. These students can be most vulnerable in their first year.

## This guide looks to provide:

* some practical support for the design of a first year unit; and
* some teaching ideas for staff involved with first year students

## Key features of a unit designed for FYE (Kift (2009))

* Transition;
* Design;
* Diversity;
* Engagement;
* Assessment; and
* Evaluation and monitoring.

## Transition

Students will arrive at university with differing background experience and knowledge of universities and how they work. Therefore the first year (and first semester especially) needs to include opportunities for students to learn about the university and how to negotiate the university experience.

Examples

* A Unit Coordinator wants to know how well prepared students are to undertake his unit and the course. By knowing this, he will be able to pitch his instruction at the right level and better meet his students’ needs. Prior to commencement of the unit, he sends an email with a questionnaire to students asking them about why they have chosen the course and about their other commitments. Students are asked to bring their responses to their first tutorial. Tutors then spend some time discussing with students the study time required for success at university. Students are asked to consider their obligations and create plans that will assist them with a study/life/work balance.
* In a Nursing unit, the Unit Coordinator sends an email that has an initial reading related to the unit content, attached. It asks students to read the article and prepare some thoughts about it so that they have common ground for discussion when they arrive in the first week.
* Students in a Journalism unit are all sent texts the day before the first tutorial expressing an enthusiasm about getting started, including the class number and time, and advice about getting there a little early to help find a parking spot.

## Unit Design

The design of the unit needs to be such that skills and content are developed sequentially. Learning outcomes need to be ordered sequentially from foundational skills and content through to more complex skills and content. These outcomes should also be checked to see that they align with assessments and support the development of both a student’s academic and employability skills.

See these resources to assist you:

* <http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources/guidelines-to-construct-a-learning-design-sequence>
* <http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources/accessible-information-design>
* <http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources/academic-factsheets/assessment>
* <http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources/how-to-do-it-guides/using-blooms-taxonomy>

Example:

* In a Science course, the Unit Coordinators noted that, well into their second and third year, students are demonstrating poor report writing skills. To help overcome this, the Unit Coordinators of first year units met and looked at the individual skills (research, referencing, structure, style etc) associated with writing a report. Each Unit Coordinator then picked the concept they felt most comfortable teaching and agreed to incorporate it into their unit.

See also our “How to do it Guide” on research Informed teaching available at:  
<http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources/how-to-do-it-guides/research-informed-teaching>

## Diversity

The ECU policy on diversity states

“At ECU the curriculum will acknowledge, respect, value and accommodate diversity in the student cohort”.

Diversity can be in the form of student background, learning styles, purpose for attending university, ability, gender or ethnicity. Many students come to ECU with multiple special needs. In 2011, more than 3000 students, classed as being from an alternative equity group, enrolled at ECU. Units and teaching should embrace this diversity in students.

Example:

* A Unit Coordinator in a business unit has noticed that mature age students tend to have significant knowledge about the content, gained through extensive work experience. She has also noticed that these students tend not to mix with younger students. To better tap the experience of the mature age students, to help them engage more with younger students and to foster inclusivity, she asks the mature age students to lead a short session at the start of a tutorial about their best and worst experiences in working in business. These short tutorial beginnings also provide students with a clearer idea of what it can be like working in the field and help them decide if this is something they would like to do.

## **Engagement**

It is important to design learning activities that will actively engage students in learning. It may mean looking for alternative means to the more traditional methods of delivery

Examples

* *A Unit Coordinator in an Engineering unit recognises that declining numbers of first year students are attending lectures, and numbers continue to decrease over the semester. To help overcome that she introduces a Question of the Day. A question is placed on the board at the start of the lecture and she asks students to answer by a Twitter feed at the end of the session. The winner, drawn at random from the correct answers, is announced at the start of every new lecture.*
* A Unit Coordinator in a Speech Pathology unit uses the Think, Pair, Share technique throughout his lecture. He asks students questions regularly, asks them to work in pairs to develop an answer and then to feedback to the rest of the group. For more information about Think, Pair, Share please use the following link:[*http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/alex/thinkpairshare.pdf*](http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/alex/thinkpairshare.pdf)
* In an Education unit, the Unit Coordinator asks students to lead the tutorial by posing at least one question each about the readings. This gives the students a sense of responsibility and ownership over the learning as well as giving them an indication of the difficulties involved in teaching.

## Assessment

Assessments need to have some formative aspect and provide specific feedback to students to support them in developing their understanding of both the content and skills involved in the discipline.

See more about this at:  
<http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources/how-to-do-it-guides/assessment-for-leanring>  
<http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources/academic-factsheets/assessment>

Examples

* In one course, the first assessments students face are all in Week Four and are all essays. Students have complained about this in previous years and there is a noticeable lack of writing quality in the essays. The Unit Coordinators of these units meet to discuss the assessment tasks they are developing for students. The Coordinators negotiate the due dates of assessments to ensure that there is no “clumping” in Week Four. Further to this, there is discussion about the type of assessment and the Coordinators agree that the structure should be altered to include a poster, a podcast, an essay or an annotated bibliography. These assessments each teach different skills, but have common academic writing/research skills involved.
* All first year tutors in one course have received complaints about the differing standards required in writing. Some tutors deduct marks for poor writing - with specific information included in the rubric, while other units do not specifically outline how marks will be deducted for poor writing. The Unit Coordinators met and agreed on a set of criteria for the academic writing standard of student assessment responses. The assessments now use common wording where possible and enforce the university policies of plagiarism, word count and submission protocol.

## Evaluation and Monitoring

Checks need to be in place (formative assessment) to ensure that students are progressing in an expected manner. These checks can be useful to highlights students who have missed deadlines, or are showing signs of disengagement. The Connect for Success program, which aims for the early identification of students who may need additional support, has been established by Student Services. Please contact Student Services for more information about this service:  
<http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/310734/Connect-for-Success-Overview.pdf>

#### Examples

* A Unit Coordinator asks that tutors record attendances, and in Week 3 send through any names of students who have failed to show. These students are then sent an email to check whether everything is okay, to see whether they will be attending and to highlight the importance of continued attendance (For the flow chart - see the link under Teaching Resources).
* In a Communication unit, all students who failed (and those who only just passed) the first assignment, are offered a meeting with the tutor/Unit Coordinator to go through the assignment and determine how well the student understands the feedback provided. Students are asked to reflect on their assignment result before the meeting and suggest what might have had an impact on their assignment. In this meeting, Learning Advisor information is provided, and students are given information about seeking additional academic support. This also ensures that tutors provide adequate feedback.

## Simple, practical tips to support first year students

* Tutors in a first year unit should aim to learn all their students’ names as soon as possible. Some techniques include:
  + for the first few weeks, asking students to say their name before they talk;
  + asking students to take the same seats to aid you in recalling names;
  + having students raise their hand as well as responding verbally when they answer the class list; and
  + wearing name badges to help remind students of your name.
* Remain in class (if it is vacant) or outside to chat with students. If you are in a hurry, ask them to email you to make an appointment or walk with you to your next appointment to continue the discussion. Ask students to post questions on the Blackboard Discussion Board- that way other students can help, or you can answer one question once, rather than twenty times.
* Remind students about your name and continue to write your name and contact details on the board for the first few weeks.
* Encourage students to proactively seek support for any academic, social or personal issues they may be having. Remind students regularly about the extensive services available to them. Prepare a handout containing the location and contact details of these services and consider including them in the tutorial notes and/or lecture slides.
* Include an opportunity every few weeks for students to reflect collectively on their university experience:
  + A few minutes to chat in a group at the end of the tutorial;
  + A journal/ blog can be kept as an assessment task and students can be assessed on their writing skills;
  + Budget for a small amount for food- a few treats handed out in class can help revive students, and students tend to appreciate free food! You can use lollies as incentives or rewards for questions answered correctly, insightful observations or active participation;
  + Include assessment exemplars online in the Blackboard site before the start of semester. Direct students towards these and suggest that they have a look at them when getting ready to start the assessment.

## Further information

More information is available on the Learning Intranet at <http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/curriculum-2012-resources>

If you would like more support you can contact the First Year Coordinators for your Faculty or School.

Please also feel free to contact [CLD](mailto:cld@ecu.edu.au) if you would like more support in teaching students in first year.

## Reference

Kift, S. (2009). *A Transition Pedagogy: The First Year Experience Curriculum Design Symposium 2009* HERDSA News, 31 (1), 1-4. <http://www.herdsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/herdsa-news-311-april-2009.pdf>