



American University of Ras Al Khaimah AURAK

Evolving University Freshman Transition Course at AURAK, UAE: A Case Study

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Session Overview

- **Higher Education in United Arab Emirates (UAE)**
- **About American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK)**
- **Background and Literature review on first year support**
- **First Year Seminar Models**
- **Origin of Freshman Transition Course at AURAK**
- **UNIV 100 Course Highlights**
- **Evolution of Course over the semesters**
- **Course Assessments results**
- **Impact on Institutional Development**
- **Students Reflections and Feedback**
- **Concerns and conclusion**



Higher Education in UAE

- Provision of quality higher education in the United Arab Emirates began shortly after the establishment of federation (1971) with the inception of the first university in Al Ain city, the **United Arab Emirates University (1976)**.
- In 1988, the first four **Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT)** were opened (now 12 campuses across UAE) as second set of federal institutions.
- From 1995, **several international universities opened branch campuses** in the Emirates like Wollongong University, Middlesex University, Michigan State University and many more.
- In 1998, **Zayed University** was opened for women with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.
- **Segregated education** stills exists at federal universities.



American University of Ras Al Khaimah





AURAK: Some Facts and Figures

Size of Institution: Small (Currently, 580 students, 70 faculty and 50 staff members)

Geographical Location: Ras Al Khaimah emirate (northern part of United Arab Emirates)

Nature – Undergraduate programs (20) and Graduate programs (4), Government funded

Mission – Teaching, Research and Community Service

Typical First Years –Different levels of university readiness, culturally diverse (40 nationalities), age range (17-19 years of age), males and females, mostly first generation to join university, diverse school background. Majority of students are **non-native English speakers**.

Medium of instruction - English

American model of education



Freshman Support at AURAK

- Specific student characteristics at our university demands **support during all major transitions** during their university life.
- Although in last 6 years, AURAK has taken many steps to improve student success, and smoothen their overall transition experience, one of most salient one has been to adopt the **University Freshman Transition course (UNIV 100)**.
- The University Freshman Transition Course at AURAK offers information and support about university life, keys to be successful and helps them develop a relationship with faculty and academic advisors as soon as they join university .

Literature Review on First Year Experience



- Providing ‘Orientation’ to Freshman is common in UAE but only a handful of universities offer first year experience seminars, according to my knowledge.
- The initiation of our UNIV 100 course stems from the theory that student involvement and connectedness to the institution is vital to student success (*Astin, 1999; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989*).
- “First –year/ student success seminars are remarkably creative courses that are adaptable to a great variety of institutional settings, structure and students” as suggested by *Barefoot and Gardner (1998)*.
- Empirical data also suggests that frequent student-faculty contact both in and out of the classroom is a major factor in student motivation and involvement (*Chickering & Gamson, 1987*).

First Year Seminars Models (NSFY, 2006)



- **Extended orientation seminar (most common)**
- Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections
- Academic seminars on various topics
- Professional or discipline-linked seminar
- Basic study skills seminar
- Career development seminar



Origin of Freshman Transition Course at AURAK

- Course proposal was submitted during the times of George Mason University, Ras Al Khaimah Campus, Year 2008-09.
- Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and Commission of Academic Accreditation in UAE requires universities to offer a seminar based course during the first year.
- Debuted in **Fall 2012 as University Freshman Transition (UNIV 100)**
- Aims is to ensure student's smooth transition from secondary school to university life, improve student's engagement, and also to assist students understand the essential purposes of higher education.



UNIV 100 Course Highlights

- UNIV 100 **Extended Orientation Seminar type**
- Capacity of each section is **30 students**.
- UNIV 100 course is applied to the **General Education (GE) credit**.
- Meets the **core competency of University Life** under the GE Program.
- **Requirement for degree completion** and must be taken in the **first semester**.
- So far, only **S or U** (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) letter graded, non- credit bearing course and carries **one credit**.
- **266 students** have enrolled in this course over a period of five semesters.



UNIV 100 Course Highlights (Contd.)

Instructors

- **Full time faculty**
- Teaching this course is part of their **regular teaching load**
- In past, few **guest lectures were delivered by university staff** belonging to student affairs, IT, Library. For staff, the course was an extra responsibility which they could mention in their Annual Performance Report.
- Starting Fall 2013, **more than one section** has been offered simultaneously in a semester and taught by **different instructors**.
- Course coordinator provides **faculty training** to new instructors which lasts for half a day. Faculty meet on a monthly basis to review the course delivery and any other issue.



UNIV 100 Course Highlights (Contd.)

Administration

- The course is housed in the **Office of Academic Affairs** at AURAK.
- The course is regulated by the **Humanities and Social Sciences department** .
- Director of Teaching and Learning Center, a full time faculty, was appointed as the **UNIV 100 coordinator** in 2014 after the recommendations of UNIV 100 committee.



Basic Content in UNIV 100 over the Semesters

- Exploring Your Purpose for Attending College
- Information Technology and Information Literacy
- Academic Advising
- Student Life
- Learning Styles and Strategies for Learning
- Time Management
- Note Taking
- Plagiarism
- Working in groups and teams
- Examination skills



Evolution of UNIV 100 over the Semesters

Students enrolled: 27

Additional Topics: Preparing for university, university experience, goal setting, listening in class

Assignments: Weekly schedule, advisor meeting, outside event report, Journal report

Students enrolled: 122

Additional Topics: College readiness, transitioning to university, reading to learn from college textbooks, learning to study, comprehend and remember, AURAK Honor code

Assignments: New student workbook, Journal report, Faculty Advisor meeting, weekly schedule, faculty member interview, outside event report

Students enrolled: 180

Additional Topics: Student's Rights and Responsibilities, University Policies, Academic policies.

Assignments: Using electronic database to conduct research, Academic advising.

Action research: College readiness, Learning styles



Students enrolled: 34

Additional Topics: Same as previous semester

Assignments: Interview a faculty member, organize a competition to select university mascot, preparation of weekly schedule, faculty advisor meeting, outside event report

Students enrolled: 73

Additional Topics: Same as previous semester

Assignments: Component of class participation was added and faculty interview was removed.

Action research: College readiness



UNIV 100: Student Learning Outcomes

Students would be able to

1. transition successfully into the university environment and adapt to the responsibilities of university life
2. develop an academic plan to help them achieve their personal and academic goals at university
3. have an understanding of the rules, regulations and policies of the university and to locate such information in the *Catalog* and *Student Handbook*
4. seek the help of the support services and resources at the university when required
5. use the strategies of effective study habits to achieve academic success
6. develop appropriate interpersonal skills to work with other students and interact effectively with their instructors.

Course Assessment Results: Spring 2014



- Data was collected from 73 students in 4 sections at the end of semester.
- **Course assessment revealed that approximately 75% students were able to achieve CSLOs based on student's achievement levels.**
- The course had contributed **86 %** towards the achievement of General Education Program learning outcomes.
- Based on student achievement levels, it was realized that there is scope of improvement in further developing this course.



UNIV 100 Committee Recommendations

UNIV 100 committee met in Summer 2014 to evaluate the course.

Instructors who had taught the course were the members.

The committee made the following recommendations:

1. Make the course credit bearing
2. Integrate in- class assignments to measure SLOs
3. Delete assignments that do not address a SLO
4. Refine the student learning outcomes.
5. Appointment of UNIV 100 coordinator to ensure consistent delivery of course in every section.

Revised UNIV 100 will be offered in Fall 2015.



Course Assessment Results: Fall 2014

- Data was collected from **84 students in 3 sections** at the end of the semester.
- **Course assessment revealed that approximately 85% students were able to achieve CSLOs based on student's achievement levels (an increase in 10% from Spring 2014).**
- The course had contributed **86 % towards the achievement of General Education Program** learning outcomes in recent course assessment.



Impact on Institutional Improvement

Action Research: College Readiness Survey, Learning Styles of first year students

Data on College Readiness was collected from **106 students in Fall 2014**.

Areas of Readiness/Stress	% of Students
Academically self- efficiency	0.1
Time management skills	37
Academic stress	57
Writing skills	29
Note taking skills	18
Classroom Attentiveness	7
Test taking skills	11



Impact on Institutional Development

- Various **university wide programs** have been established such as Teaching and Learning Center, Peer Tutoring Program, English Writing Center as the university grew and based on our student's needs..
- **Personal and Career Counseling Office** reached out to first year students.
- **Research based and improved orientation programs** for smooth transitioning.
- An opportunity to build **partnerships and collaborations** between faculty, student affairs and academic affair professionals across campus.
- **Instructional development** of Faculty.
- Better **positive perception of students** among Faculty and Staff.
- **Increased utilization of university services and participation by students** in university life.
- 'Learning communities' is something we are working on at the moment.



Possible Course Evaluations in Future

(Cuseo, J, 1991)

Type of Student Assessments to evaluate Student Outcomes

I. Student Retention Outcomes

Persistence to first semester, first year, sophomore year and to degree completion

Time taken to degree completion

II. Academic Performance Outcomes

Grade point averages attained at the end of first term and beyond

Student satisfaction with the university

Total number of first year students in good academic standing

Total number of first year courses passed

Total number of first year courses completed with a grade of C or higher

Students who qualify for the Dean's Honor list.



First Year Student's Reflections

Enriches the freshman students with information that we need to know, it makes us more familiar with the rules of university. Also helps us to organize our time as it extremely hard because of the difference between school and university expectations.

It made me understand university life much better, learn about clubs and activities and even helped me be successful in other courses.

Very easy and helpful course. Helped me to better understand what to do and whom to approach if I face any issues in the campus.





End Semester Student's Feedback

Ideas about how to improve the course

More interactive activities in the class.

Trips outside the campus to understand the UAE culture.

Invite a faculty member from each major to have more detailed information sessions.

Primary criticism of the course

Number of assignments are more.

It should not be compulsory course for degree completion.



Advice to students who are currently taking UNIV 100

As reported by Students

- Focus on the course
- Take the course seriously since it is not useless, in fact, a very helpful course to shape the university life.
- More active in class participation
- Attend the classes regularly
- Provides opportunities to closely know and work with the peer group and know many faculty.



Challenges Faced by Instructors

Academic dishonesty was evident.
Low level of English competency meant that students could not access the curriculum. Poor assignment production.

Students never took the course seriously. Quality of assignments was not up to the mark. Student attendance was not high. However, course evaluations reflect that students appreciated the course.

Poor attitude towards course, poor attendance meant missing in class writing activities, cultural differences among students led to considering plagiarism as non offensive.

Poor student attitudes at the beginning of the semester, however, as they understood the importance of the course, most of them showed positive response for this course.

Concerns at Present



- In our institution, there is conflict between the opinions of faculty and administrators regarding this course. **Should the course be used to assess the core competency of 'University Life' to assess the General Education Program?**
- More data needs to be collected in future to evaluate the course effectiveness and satisfy the concerns of decision makers. First step has been decided and approved by the course committee which is to conduct a **web-based survey** regarding the student's experience with the course.
- The course has been used in the past to fill in the Professor's schedule in order to fulfill their teaching loads, therefore, **professional development workshops needs to be more intensive** and should be organized before the start of each semester.
- Upper limit of **class size is 30 students** which is on higher side.



Conclusion

AURAK has taken baby steps to smoothen the transition of students in the university and must take further steps from time to time in order to further develop, refine and expand this initiative.





Activity 1

- Introduce yourself, your country, institution, role at the university: With the person sitting next to you.
- Does your institution have any form of Freshman Transition seminar, Course/ Program? Discuss its type.
- Which topics do you think are very important for a freshman transition course to address?

10 Minutes with your neighbor



Activity 2

- Create and design an ideal first year transition activity to develop learning communities among the students.
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this activity?
- How would you address the issue of buy-in from the first year students and rest of the student body in your institution in order to develop the learning community?

20 minutes in group of 3-4



Any questions?



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