

The Value of a First Year Staff Forum for Faculty and Institutional Development



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What the Forum is:

The First Year Teaching Forum (FYTF) at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) is promoted as an opportunity for staff to engage in discussion and development of the first year (FY) experience at our institution.

- forum for staff
- held annually, since 2006
- includes external Keynote Address, since 2008

The approach

Features

Keynote address

- 2006 & 2007 Forums showed many staff were unaware of the wider context of the issues they raised in discussions and workshops
- external keynote address included since 2008
- provides a national and international perspective on the FY experience
- helps normalise the experience of staff: what they are experiencing in their classrooms and at UTAS is occurring all over Australia

Workshops

- provide opportunity for networking, which is highly valued by staff
- opportunity to 'test' university proposals
- staff can propose actions to the university



Figure 1. FYTF Workshop

Forum themes & approaches

2006: general discussion-based approach to the identification of issues and FY strategy development

2007: groups conducted SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analyses of one of four topics that emerged from the first forum: student preparedness; culturally and linguistically diverse students; resourcing; or staffing

2008: the national and international FY experience and a model FY curriculum. Staff workshoped strategic directions for UTAS

2009: institutional and programmatic interventions for success in FY. Staff discussed FY curriculum initiatives to support students' transition into disciplines and UTAS

2010: students' FY at university as a foundation for their success and as the initial step in the development of graduate attributes. Staff workshoped a *FY and Transition Framework* for UTAS

2011: keynote address and workshops focussed on the ways in which we shape and support students' thinking within the disciplines of their study



Figure 2. Prof. Gary O'Donovan, PVC, Teaching and Learning

Challenges & strategies

Attendance

- high interest and excellent attendance from support services (language and learning support, advisers, library, etc)
- challenging to get good representation of teachers from all schools
- strategies: get endorsement from senior management; target communication with each Head of School; send reminders to schools close to date, especially those with lower registrations

Timing

- never a 'quiet' time for academic staff
- challenging to schedule to avoid clashes with other conferences & responsibilities
- currently held in mid-semester break, semester 2
- strategies: set date early & inform offices of senior management; schedule away from other big teaching and learning events

The outcomes

Attendance & school representation

Location matters:

- average attendance and school representation was higher when the Forum was held in Hobart (largest campus) than when it was held in Launceston (Table 1)
- suggestions for improvement for the Forum that *more colleagues should attend* were only made when the Forum was held in Launceston (with lower overall attendances) (Table 4)

Forum focus on teaching staff appropriate? (Table 1)

- approx 5 to 6% of all UTAS teaching staff attend the Forum
- attendance by staff from central and support areas increasing over time

Table 1. Forum attendance & representation, 2006-2011

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<i>Location*</i>	Hobart	Hobart	L'tn	Hobart	Hobart	L'tn
<i>Total attendance</i>	61	87	69	87	97	75
<i>Percentage of schools represented</i>	76%	83%	42%	70%	76%	52%
<i>Percentage of attendees who were teaching staff</i>	79%	64%	45%	48%	51%	48%
<i>Percentage of UTAS teaching staff attending</i>	8%	9%	4%	4%	5%	4%
<i>Percentage of participants who would recommend the Forum to colleagues†</i>	n/a	n/a	98%	100%	100%	100%
			n=40	n=38	n=35	n=37

Notes. * Hobart is the University's largest campus (53% of total student load), L'ton (Launceston) is the second largest campus (29% of total student load); † n=number of respondents answering the question, data not available for 2006 & 2007

Participant feedback

Overall

- Forum attendees have been very positive about the day (Table 1)

Attendees particularly value (Table 2):

- knowledgeable, inspiring presenters, and
- the opportunity to meet and share practice with colleagues from across the university

Table 2. Best features of the Forum, 2007-2011 (percentages)

	2007 n=64	2008 n=58	2009 n=65	2010 n=53	2011 n=62
<i>keynote*</i>	28	31	43	45	50
<i>networking</i>	45	29	31	28	26
<i>information & inspiration</i>	25	14	15	9	13
<i>group work, being constructive</i>	2	22	9	15	10
<i>all good</i>	0	3	2	2	2

Notes. n=total number of individual comments coded, participants mentioned multiple qualities/aspects;

* 2007=session facilitators, 2011=includes good practice exemplars; data not available for 2006

Suggested improvements to the Forum (Table 3)

- the largest percentage of suggestions for improvement were around organisational aspects of the Forum: the particular style of workshop, length of sessions, recommendations for pre-readings, etc. For example, participants were vocal about their dislike of the SWOT analysis process in 2007
- the desire for more university decision-makers and senior staff to attend was a recurring theme
- changes made to the Forum program (eg., reporting on developments since the previous year’s Forum) in response to earlier feedback has been associated with a reduction in comments about *wanting to see the outcomes*

Table 3. Suggestions for improvement, 2007-2011 (percentages)

	2007 n=98	2008 n=29	2009 n=12	2010 n=15	2011 n=17
<i>want to see outcomes</i>	30	34	25	0	0
<i>more senior managers should attend</i>	11	7	0	33	6
<i>more colleagues should attend</i>	0	3	0	0	24
<i>more practical examples</i>	0	17	0	13	18
<i>organisation (length/style of sessions)</i>	27	31	67	27	24
<i>materials (pre-reading or follow-up access)</i>	0	7	0	7	18
<i>focus of forum (inclusion of professional staff/students, breadth of issues)</i>	33	0	8	20	12

Notes. n=total number of individual comments coded; data not available for 2006

Staff perspective on FY

- the Forums have provided insight into staff attitudes regarding FY and university FY initiatives

Staff unaware of national FY context

- workshop discussions at 2006 and 2007 Forums showed that staff thought rapid growth in numbers and in the diversity of students (especially in students’ prior academic experiences) was just happening at UTAS

Recurring staff recommendations from workshops include improving

- pathways and support for the diverse student cohort
- involvement of senior staff in the FYE
- institutional framework for, and commitment to, FY
- recognition and support for FY teachers



Figure 3. FYTF Poster Session

Staff proposed ‘ideal models of FY’ at the 2008 Forum. The two most common models emphasised (Table 4)¹:

- the importance of quality learning and teaching for FY experiences
- students should undertake pre-enrolment assessment of skills for pathway guidance

Table 4. Categories of proposed ‘ideal models of FY’ (FYTF 2008)¹

Category	Underpinning ideas
Teaching & learning (n=3)	Enhancing FYE requires a commitment to quality teaching and learning experiences.
Pre-assessment/ pathways (n=2)	Students should undertake some pre-assessment before enrolment and following this should be guided into appropriate pathways.
Orientation (n=1)	Emphasis should be placed on orientation to the University and individual course and study requirements.
Pastoral care (n=1)	Emphasis should be placed on pastoral care of individual students and systematic/dedicated follow through on student issues.
Connections (n=1)	A systematic approach is needed that draws together different elements of FYE to enhance both the students’ academic and personal life at university.

Notes. n=number of groups proposing the model

Impact at UTAS

- the FYTF has proved valuable at UTAS for a number of reasons:
 - Forum recommendations have a clear upward channel
 - Forum reports go to Student Transition and Retention Taskforce (START), chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Learning and Teaching, for action
 - Forums have affected UTAS FY strategies
 - staff have made important contributions to planning and shaping UTAS FY strategies, in particular: the *UTAS FY and Transition Framework* was proposed at the 2009 Forum, developed by START, then disseminated at the 2010 Forum. Staff at the 2011 Forum were using the shared language of the framework’s conceptualisation
 - Broadened UTAS staff perspectives
 - UTAS FY staff have been exposed to national and international perspectives on FY



Figure 4. *FY and Transition Framework-Elements of Success*

What we’ve learned:

- staff want institutional leadership in FY
- staff value and need information about the national context of FY
- staff appreciate opportunities for collegial interaction
- FYE needs collaboration between teaching and support staff

¹ From Brown, N., & Adam, A. (2009). Towards a model first year experience – a staff perspective. In *Proceedings of the 32nd HERDSA Annual Conference: The student experience*, 43-51. Milperra, NSW, Australia: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.