

Honest reflections: big ideas and real life experiences of a new first year BA

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In 2009 the Bachelor of Arts Degree at James Cook University, a regional multi-campus institution in North Queensland, Australia, was flagged by the Vice Chancellor for “deep attention.” This paper showcases the work undertaken as part of the university-wide curriculum refresh to improve the first year experience at JCU. It surveys and reflects upon the uptake of research undertaken by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and the Deans of the Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) in their joint report *Nature and Roles of Arts Degrees in Contemporary Society: a National Scoping Project of Arts Programs across Australia* (Gannaway and Trent 2008) in the design and implementation of new first-year core subjects designed to aid with transition, retention, skill-building, and cohort-identity in the Bachelor of Arts Degree.

Keywords: Bachelor of Arts Degree, Curriculum Design, First-Year Core Subjects

Background

While once the foundation stone of a university education, the Bachelor of Arts degree has lost its prominence in a contemporary profession-focused, employment-centred tertiary landscape in which students face rising tuition costs. Difficulties in marketing the degree had been signalled across Australia with the landmark closure of the BA degree at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2007 with reasons cited as heavy financial losses in traditional arts courses, lower enrolments, high attrition rates, poor performance, and low entry cut-offs, all of which were perceived as “hardly unique to QUT” (Gannaway and Trent 10). This landmark decision to close down a humanities program at a major Australian university triggered a new reflectiveness about the BA and its role in the contemporary university and in society, which subsequently led the Australian Learning and Teaching Council to launch a nation-wide scoping project with a view to establishing a high-level, multi-pronged discipline support strategy for the Arts and Social Sciences in Australia. Under the auspices of DASSH (The Deans of Social Sciences and Humanities), the ALTC report that emerged from this study, *Nature and Roles of Arts Degrees in Contemporary Society: a National Scoping Project of Arts Programs across Australia* (Gannaway and Trent 2008), stimulated fresh interest in all aspects of the BA and provided universities with rich data with which to re-evaluate their own approaches to Arts education.

One of the broad principles of the larger project from which this report emerged included inculcating a culture of good teaching and learning across the disciplines and identifying common approaches that assist student learning. The project as a whole sought to identify major strengths, challenges, capabilities and examples of best practice across the higher education sector in Australia. As a participating institution in this scoping project, James Cook University worked through its curriculum refresh alongside ALTC lead investigators

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Emerging out of the broader context of a university-wide curriculum refresh, in which the Arts degree at James Cook University was flagged by the Vice Chancellor for “deep attention,” to address the intensified challenges of delivering an attractive and robust arts degree in a regional university in an industrial mining and natural resources economy in North Queensland, a core team of academics with extensive experience and intensive interest in teaching came together. These academics were assembled from across a breadth of disciplines that teach into the BA at JCU on its two major campuses in Cairns and Townsville to address the need for a coherent approach to these challenges. A two-pronged approach emerged from this curriculum refresh to address, firstly—at the freshman level—with the transition from school to university and to make the BA more attractive to prospective students, and secondly—at the senior-student level—the need to provide a clear direction out from the degree into career pathways or further research opportunities. In view of the 2009 refresh, this team concentrated on developing a more coherent approach to first year, to be followed up in 2011 with developing a capstone experience for this cohort of students as they progress toward graduation.

The Need for a Coherent Approach to First Year

Difficulties in marketing the BA degree to Australian students have been found by the ALTC to affect students’ feelings of “disenfranchisement, purposelessness, and a lack of coherence” even amongst enrolled students (3). Furthermore, most academics who teach into the BA program are specialists in their own discipline, and do not view themselves as teaching primarily into the “Bachelor of Arts” but rather as archaeologists, or anthropologists, literary critics, or historians, for instance. From the student perspective, rather than perceiving an intrinsic logic in their disciplines, a lack of coherence can be the result, particularly in the pre-disciplinary stages of a “highly modularised” (6) generalist BA degree. The ALTC report repeatedly cited the flexibility of the Arts degree, the Lego-like structure allowing students to tailor it to suit their own interests, and at JCU these include history, cinema, politics, anthropology, literature, archaeology, social work, psychology or criminology. Academics who teach into these disciplines seem to believe that their own specialty areas maintain an internal coherence but the report noted that this is often not the case from a student perspective, and more needs to be done to guide students through the degree and show them coherent pathways. As the Report noted, the generalist model

can create an effect of appearing disjointed and uncoordinated, as there is frequently little or no clear sense of progression. This is made increasingly more complex by the lack of engagement with program coordinators and advisors in enrolment processes that are increasingly relying on technology to structure course outlines. (7)

Further, the report noted that

[m]ost Bachelor of Arts programs are comprised of a range of units on offer. They are highly modularised and are generally open to a range of students at a range of year levels...this is a challenge to cohort identity (6).

Thus the ALTC report has confirmed that students often lack the ability to navigate through the pathways of the BA that academics had supposed were internally comprehensible. Paired with the lack of a obvious, navigable pathway through the BA and the lack of a clear path to employment prospects beyond the BA, these feelings of ambiguity about the value of the arts

therefore critically impact students' views of the degree when they are making choices about whether to go forward beyond first year and the sampling of first-years subjects they have partaken.

Attrition and retention were highlighted as areas of concern for the BA across the sector, and the need to address curriculum at the first-year level was flagged as a way to structure coherence for the BA student and develop a sense of cohort identity. Another issue that has been signalled by the ALTC as hampering the BA students' progress through the degree is the presumption by academics that critical research and writing skills are in place for first year students and the accompanying focus on discipline-specific content in subjects at the expense of skill-building. However, lower entrance marks for students entering university have signalled a need in the sector to work harder to build into the first year critical academic literacies on which they can scaffold the rest of their degree. To compound the difficulties of ensuring these skills are robust in the first-year cohort some students with lower socio-economic status or who are first-generation in university often require more intensified skill-building while others who have already learned some of these skills in high school can be left bored and disengaged when more time needs to be spent with them to inspire and excite students about the prospects of the BA and its "big ideas." Further, the siloing of academics in their own disciplines increases the risk that when research and writing skills are taught, they are tiresomely duplicated in other subjects or that a scattered approach across the first year leaves critical gaps in skill building. A more coherent approach to imparting these first year skills and addressing the particular needs of BA students is thus required. A number of universities that have been involved in the ALTC project have begun to incorporate first year core subjects in order to address these issues, based on the conclusions reached by the ALTC report that "some central core tertiary literacy skills are better placed in a single uniform unit. This is based on the belief that core courses support the development of a cohort identity" (Gannaway and Trent 6). With this in view, James Cook University introduced their set of first-year core subjects in the Bachelor of Arts degree in 2010.

These first-year core subjects (sometimes referred to as gateway subjects) thus have several roles:

- creating a marketing niche in a highly competitive higher education market
- establishing cohort identity and a sense of the distinctiveness of the BA program
- building social and academic communities
- identifying and supporting students at risk
- teaching core academic writing and research skills
- exciting and inspiring students and showing them pathways through the BA
- shining light on research and career prospects
- and incorporating best practice pedagogy.

The Profile of the First Year Student at James Cook University

One of the major challenges to providing a unified approach to first year is to tailor transition strategies to the diverse student cohort—a major issue for JCU as a regional university. James Cook University is part of the Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRUA) network of affiliated universities including Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe, Murdoch, and Newcastle, which are drawn from all five states of Australia and which were founded during a period of higher education expansion in the 1960s and 70s. This association distinguishes JCU and its affiliates from the longer established Group of Eight universities—also known as the "sandstones"—which are loose correlatives of

the longer established, metropolitan, larger and prestigious “Ivy League” universities in the United States, as well as from the technical colleges that have recently acquired university status (affiliated as the Australian Technology Network) and the universities which have been granted accreditation since 1970 (the New Generation Universities). JCU and the IRUA institutions all offer a comprehensive disciplinary coverage and represent a strong commitment to research, but they tend to be smaller and more regional than the Group of Eight.

At JCU, the Bachelor of Arts degree offers majors in Anthropology, Archaeology, Communication and Cinema, Criminology, English, Environmental Studies, Geography, History, Indigenous Australian Studies, Journalism, Languages, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, and Writing. A number of joint degrees are also offered for students who wish to pair their Arts degree with a professional degree such as Business, Education, Law, and Social Work. Paired with this diverse offering within the degree, the students at JCU come from diverse backgrounds. James Cook University is a multi-campus institution with approximately seventeen thousand students enrolled in internal and external delivery modes. Ten thousand students are enrolled at the undergraduate level on campus with a growing number of students (approximately three thousand, currently) enrolled in external study. Three hundred students are enrolled at the first year in the Bachelor of Arts on the Townsville, Cairns, and Singapore campuses as well as in external mode. While the Townsville and Cairns students specialise in a range of disciplines, the students from Singapore enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts mainly major in Psychology. Students in each of the major campuses—Townsville and Cairns—also come from distinct backgrounds. Cairns is a tourist destination in tropical Far North Queensland and its student demographic tends to comprise of a larger proportion of mature-aged students and students from families of a relatively high-range socio-economic background, often (if school leavers) with at least one parent working in a profession or (if a mature-aged student) seeking to establish a career-change or to enrol in university after remaining at home to raise children. Townsville is a garrison city with a highly transitory population of military service personnel and their spouses as well as a high-proportion of middle-income families working in the mineral and resource sector, defence, or government. The Townsville campus also attracts a high proportion of mature-aged students and a higher proportion of students from lower socio-economic and Indigenous backgrounds than other metropolitan universities. In addition, both campuses service a large population of rural students from North Queensland who attend JCU and live in the residential colleges on campus, as the next closest major university, the University of Queensland, is thirteen hundred kilometres away. The majority of students at JCU are first-generation in university. The challenge for unifying this diverse cohort of first-year Arts students, then, is that they come from a range of backgrounds and represent a vast array of skill-levels.

A further challenge to unifying this cohort is that, unlike North American universities which offer a generic first year within a four-year degree, the three-year Bachelor of Arts in the Australian university is more open and flexible to student choice; while a defined number of credits must be taken in the first year to progress to the second-year level in the degree no first-year subjects are prerequisites for these second-level subjects in the Arts degree, and this compounds the need to create required first-year subjects to ground the Arts experience. JCU also offers mid-year entry, and thus students who enter their first year part-way through the academic calendar represent another cohort of students in their first year who need to be integrated and upskilled while their peers are simultaneously stimulated and offered refreshers in core first-year proficiencies. Offering core subjects in the first (as well as third capstone)

year at JCU in the BA allows us to unify this group of students, build and strengthen their core skills, and to define the specific value a JCU BA emphasising both its capacity to open up the world and to allow students to engage with more defined issues of relevance to their region in tropical North Queensland (regional, tropical, Asian-Pacific, Indigenous components).

Showcasing What We Did

A number of BA models at other universities have been identified: the generalist model, the socially engaged model, the professional model, the apprenticeship model, and the focused model (where Bachelor of Arts, for instance, is instead a Bachelor of Justice Studies or a Bachelor of Arts (Sustainable Development), as another example).

Because of the natural pairing of academics appointed to work on these two first-year core subjects, it soon emerged that we have two distinct streams in the BA at JCU: the socially engaged model (comprising majors in anthropology, criminology, Indigenous Australian studies, geography, political science, and sociology) and the generalist model (comprising majors in archaeology, cinema, English, and history); to a certain extent the professional model is in limited offering in the Bachelor of Arts at JCU (journalism, languages, and psychology). As a result our team produced a suite of two core subjects that can be taken independently of each other and in any order in the students' first year. **BA1001: Time, Truth, and the Human Condition** is a generalist subject that urges students to reflect on the human condition in a historical survey and **BA1002: Our Space—Networks, Narratives, and the Making of Place** is a socially engaged model that urges students to reflect on their global and community connectedness, to develop an awareness of social responsibility, and to empower students to make a difference for the good with their education.

In professional degrees, the ALTC report noted, there is often a highly structured program with little opportunity for electives, training students in highly specialised skills. While this is not the nature of the BA for the most part at JCU, the students in the generalist and socially engaged streams of the BA we offer often lack the cohort identity possessed by students in more professional degrees who are being prepared for a particular vocation. The challenge for JCU's BA then is to develop a sense of cohort identity without losing the sense of freedom and general transferability available to the generalist and socially engaged student.

The core subjects – **BA1001: Time, Truth & the Human Condition**, and **BA1002: Our Space: Networks, Narratives & the Making of Place** – were developed around the ‘big ideas’ of time and space with a view to exciting and engaging students by framing concepts that will recur throughout their studies, with a view to offering stimulation, cohort identity, as well as core skills.

BA1001 focuses on Time, or more precisely, thinking about truth as a function of time, introducing students to the concept of an episteme and to the institutions and philosophies that have shaped ways of knowing about the world. Students are encouraged to consider how notions of truth are constructed and how various paradigms or ways of knowing evolve, compete, and come into conflict in various times and places. Although both subjects were purposely designed as pre-disciplinary, this generalist subject introduced students to lecturers in English, History, and Archaeology and developed core research skills working closely with faculty librarians to develop “Lib Guides” and technical staff to develop a user-friendly online tutoring Blackboard interface. **BA1002** focuses on how we come to make sense of our sense

of space and place, examining place not as a static entity on a map but rather as a product of networks in the social, political, economic, and natural world. This subject is designed to appeal to the socially engaged student, and to highlight a pathway through the BA that encourages students to consider how the world is connected, and their own connection to the world via social, virtual and global networks. This subject also encourages students to make connections between everyday life and academic ideas, to tailor their degree to their own interests, and to be able to adapt to the ‘super-complexities’ of the modern world (Barnett, 2004 cited in Gannaway and Trent 12). As it was important that each subject stand alone, as approximately one-third of students are mid-year intake, and therefore have not completed **BA1001** prior to undertaking **BA1002**, the second-semester subject reviews and enhances key skills taught in **BA1001** such as how to locate scholarly sources, write an essay, develop an essay outline, work in a team to present findings, and how to provide professional peer feedback. Together, the subjects are designed to form a pair of foundational subjects for the BA, to give students a sense of the course as distinctive and coherent. Each subject was taught initially in 2010 in Townsville, Cairns & external-online: BA1001 in semester one, and BA1002 in semester 2.

In curriculum design, the BA cores at James Cook University have drawn from Kift et al’s “Six Principles for First Year Curriculum” focusing on transition, diversity, purposeful curriculum design, engagement, assessment, evaluation and monitoring. These principles emerged with an eye to the model of the Imaginative Curriculum Project, a project of the UK Higher Education Academy given special prominence in the ALTCT/DASSH report, and praised for its articulation of learning outcomes with structured learning processes and assessment. This model emphasises a clear presentation of learning content, how and when it is to be learnt, and how and when learning is meant to be demonstrated, all in the context of an underlying educational philosophy meant to empower the student with critical literacies to transition successfully between high school and university and from first year to their second year and broader degree, to expose them to the range of big ideas they will encounter in the arts degree, and to engage student participation and connectedness.

Critical skills cited by the DASSH project as part of the BA generalist education are also targeted in the BA cores: these include problem solving, critical thinking, understanding the human condition and how society operates, an education in cultural awareness, researching effectively, learning to use university based ICT technologies like databases and online tutorial forums, exposure to several different genres of professional and academic writing, including essays, peer review, and reflective journaling, professional presentation skills, creative thinking, and teamwork.

The key attributes and skills specifically articulated as essential an Arts degree by the ALTC/DASSH report were prominent—critical thinking, communication (written and oral); independent thought; and social awareness (6). And in response to the infrequency with which Arts programs cited problem solving, teamwork, creativity and innovation (9), the design team worked hard to implement these graduate attributes in the first year, too. In the **BA1002** presentations, for example, students were encouraged to “brand” their teams, as part of the criteria for a professional look for presentations, but also with a view to developing cohort identity. Students creatively used music clips, incorporated skits, and even wore costumes in their end-of-term presentations and in many cases these achieved both goals. Students in **BA1001** produced poster presentations as is common in the social science side of our BA and were encouraged to be visually creative in these displays. A student display and

presentation day with prizes given for best poster and highest grade in the subject became a highlight of that subject and also contributed to a cohort identity and sense of belonging.

Because the rural and regional attrition rate is known to be higher than in metropolitan universities (and JCU falls into this category), both of these subjects were front-loaded with intensive sessional support as well as using key faculty and liaising to build strong networks for students and faculty between their disciplines, the BA cohort, Teaching and Learning support, and faculty librarians. Online students proved to be the most time-intensive to manage as external retention rates are of particular concern: sessional staff were employed to personally contact and keep in touch with the external cohort.

Inclusion of Student Voice

Another outcome of the BA scoping study was the recognition that the student voice is often missing from curriculum design (9).

At JCU student focus groups were consulted at the planning, implementation, and review phases of designing these cores, which ran in two semesters in 2010 for the first time. Focus group interviews with BA students were intended to highlight components of the program that required improvement with a view to student retention and recruitment. Some of the most interesting recommendations in terms of transition included:

- That we embed dedicated sessions on library use, effective writing, time management, researching, etc into the BA subjects
- That students need social and support networks to succeed in their studies, and subjects should facilitate the development of these networks
- That information for first-year students should be easy to find

All of these recommendations were included in the curriculum design process. As well, student feedback was gathered mid-semester and at the end of each semester's delivery in order to allow the teaching and design team to respond swiftly to perceived difficulties and challenges.

Challenges and Rewards

One of the greatest challenges to developing cohort identity in the first year of Arts at JCU is a culture of low attendance largely centred on its Townsville campus, but also to a lesser extent on the Cairns campus. At JCU this cohort of students balances employment demands to keep up with the rising cost of living and tuition, and our mature-aged students increasingly balance family and work demands, too. Many of the first-generation university students and Indigenous students also face ongoing family demands that interfere with their ability to attend class regularly. While classes were recorded after live delivery to enhance learning for **BA1001**, it was found that posting lectures online in vodcast form facilitated and further exacerbated this attendance problem, and in **BA1002** the online and vodcast content was limited to better effect, as well. The teaching team was also made smaller in **BA1002** as it was found that too many lecturers rotating into and out of the subject was confusing and also detracted from our ability to form a cohort identity.

Student feedback also told us that implementing these required first-year subjects for the first time was difficult when there had been no culture of these required cores previously in the university. Although we took many opportunities to "sell" the concepts of these subjects to

the students, student feedback told us that there was a residual hostility in some students to the fact that they now “had to pay \$500 [per subject] to take two new subjects” when their peers in second year had faced no such requirement. This attitude was paired with another greater challenge, this being the difficulty of pairing the requirement to keep these subjects coherent and engaging (we called this the “fruit”) as well as to integrate tutorials on research, writing, and critical reading, (which we called the “bran”). Some students found that they wanted more bran, and some more skilled students wanted more fruit.

In the end, what made **BA1002** successful was two of its greatest features: 1. Making the subject ultimately about “the student”—showing them pathways into essays, research-projects, and further study that take up their own sets of interests and life-experiences, and explaining to them how the BA, when done right, does just that—takes personal experience and integrates it into a world of scholars and professionals who are also engaged professional and personally in these same subjects and areas of research. As students understood that the core subjects were less about imparting to them what we as academics thought they should know, and more about empowering them as next generation scholars to follow their interests but to use the skills we teach them to navigate through academia, a tangible sense of empowerment and cohort identity began to develop.

The next step will be to revise and develop these subjects in order to further capture this developing sense of empowerment in BA students at JCU, both to adjust assessment to allow them further to take up their space in the university, and to allow them to chart their personal interests and map out where these interests might lead them to later options in the BA. Altering the format to allow more class discussion and tutorial time and less lecture time will also be attempted in subsequent delivery to facilitate this. A further set of challenges emerged: disciplinary tribalism amongst teaching staff had to be overcome amongst academics, and when this was done successfully new research affiliations and joint projects emerged, including a \$10,000 interfaculty research grant between an anthropologist and literary critic who worked together on **BA1002**. Finally, the online delivery will continue to require intensive efforts, with a view to front-loading staff to continue to work intensively to contact and maintain communication with students enrolled in the external mode of delivery.

Clear Benefits

While the data is still being compiled, early indicators show that retention rates in our first year at JCU have risen considerably even in the first year of delivery of these new first-year cores. Student focus and consultation in the curriculum-building process, throughout the delivery, and in the follow-up interviews have helped to establish a new emerging culture of consultation and connectedness between and amongst students and staff in the Arts degree at JCU. When surveyed on their favourite thing about the new subject, many students cited the lecturer or their tutorial leader. Students also appreciated that they were being taught core skills on which to scaffold their degree, with over 50% of students surveyed responding that they felt this subject was relevant to their entire degree and over 75% of students surveyed responding that this subject was honing their academic skills, such as critical reading/thinking, and researching. Seventy percent of students surveyed in BA1002, our social responsibility subject, agreed or strongly agreed that they were beginning to understand how they could use academic ideas to make a more informed analyses of issues they encounter in everyday life, and a whopping 65% of them responded that they were having fun. In our first-run of our first-semester subject, students felt that the tutorials and the lectures did not seem to coalesce, but staff were able to attend to this worry and by the first-run of the second-semester core

subject, 75% of the students felt the tutorial activities were clearly related to the lectures and the assignment. Almost 90% of the students responded that they were given the opportunity to ask questions in a supportive and non-threatening environment in their core subject, and 82% said they were encouraged to actively engage with other students and subject materials. Sixty-three percent of students felt they were given clear guidance in lectures and tutorials about how to approach their assessment tasks but only 5% ticked here that they “strongly agree” with this statement, and thus more work will be done to refine these core subjects and their delivery in their next delivery. A further benefit of front-loading the first year experience at JCU in the Faculty of Arts is that it has allowed the university to bring its casuals and sessionals more fully onboard to become more integrated into the academic and university community.

The Future

One major outcome of the BA scoping project by the ALTC/DASSH was a concern about employability of BA graduates. As a similar study in British Columbia cited by the ALTC report pointed out,

Our main conclusion is that graduates from applied education programs experience a more rapid integration into the labour market as compared to graduates from liberal arts programs. (cited in 9)

The ALTC report confirms that BA graduates have been found to experience a delay in finding their niche in the job sector (9) and the perception that unemployment and student debt looms on the horizon for a BA graduate is intensified in resource-rich North Queensland, where demand for nurses, engineers and lawyers clearly outstrips demand for Arts graduates. Capstone subjects at the end of the BA are in development now to be rolled out in 2012. These are with a view to “looking forward, looking back”—reviewing the learning that has occurred across the BA and refining future directions for further study and employability, which we feel will help the perception of the BA degree for new students facing big choices upon entry to university.

Concerted attention on the part of the teaching team at James Cook University to our needs to provide pathways into and through the BA as well as to brand the BA with a sense of distinctiveness and cohort identity has resulted in a team of researchers who have now developed an effective working relationship across the disciplines, and as such they continue to engage in curriculum discussions, looking back and forward to how to improve the BA experience for our next set of first year students, and as our students progress toward graduation.

The ALTC/DASSH report remarked perceptively that a strength of the BA, as well as its weakness, is its flexibility, and its ability to adapt to changed demographics, needs, expectations in the student population and in the tertiary sector at large. Since the BA does not respond to any professional body this “means that he programs can change relatively rapidly” (9). Continuing to consult the student voice at JCU at all points of development and implementation of these new first year cores and their future capstones has allowed us to continue to rapidly refine the BA experience. As these first year cores become more established at JCU, and as these students progress into their final year capstone in 2012, a clear sense of what JCU offers that is distinctive is hoped to emerge. But more importantly, a clear sense of what a JCU Arts grad does in the world is hoped to emerge not only out of the new first year generalist and social-engagement cores, but also in facilitating our graduate’s

entry into the workplace and continuing to consult their voice as we do so. The challenges are great for a regional university such as James Cook to continue to validate the Arts experience in Australia, but the early reports show that this work is not without clear benefits, too.

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