

**“In the Eye of the Beholder”:
Exploring first year students’ motives for choosing
a particular foundation course.**

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Abstract

This paper reports on a small-scale study involving a survey that explored the motives of students for selecting a first-year foundation course from a number of alternatives. The aim of the study was to collect information that could be used to make improvements to foundation courses. Specifically, we anticipated finding factors that would help us to increase the perceived relevance of these courses, thereby helping to enhance students' engagement in their first year of study. The findings show that four primary factors affected students' choice. These are: student interest in the course; forming an impression of the course; timetabling issues; and, the perceived likelihood of the course engaging the learner. This paper discusses the pedagogical implications of the findings and makes a number of recommendations for good teaching practice. The findings are significant because they help us to ensure that foundation courses are genuinely preparatory for future study success.

Nomenclature note: *Throughout this paper the term "course" is used to refer to a sub-component of a degree "program". At Murdoch these are referred to as "units", but the former term is chosen because it has broader currency both within Australia and overseas.*

Introduction

Several universities require all students to complete 'foundation' courses (e.g. Murdoch University) or 'core' courses (e.g. University of the Sunshine Coast). The justification for this requirement is to provide students with a generic preparation (today) for their learning throughout their studies (tomorrow), and to provide them with skills (today) that relate more specifically to generic attributes of graduates (tomorrow) – such as communication skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking and reasoning skills and so on.

Clearly, such courses are significant for both the universities that offer them, and the students who undertake them. Courses which *all* students are required to undertake inevitably have large enrolments. As such, they account for a sizeable proportion of the university's income. Not uncommonly, this factor can result in a degree of internal competition for student numbers between different faculties who offer such courses.

Foundation courses are also a sizeable burden. For example: the infrastructure needs alone can make organising and delivering them a logistical challenge. Similarly, the teaching teams required to support these courses involve many

individuals. Inevitably, the teaching team consists of a blend of people, most of whom are not full-time, ongoing academics. This results in diversity of expertise, and an imperative for managerial / organisational skill for the course convenor that is not required in smaller courses.

There are also pedagogical challenges that are accentuated in these courses. First, is the range of challenges associated with teaching large classes of students that (for example) tend to make small group interactivity more difficult. Second, the diversity of students in respect of their background, motivation, ability and choice of degree program (etc) makes providing an educative experience that is relevant and engaging especially hard. Third, there is a requirement to ensure consistency between learning and teaching experiences and outcomes when students are taught on different campuses – or in different classes on the same campus. Multi-campus and multi-class teaching is common for foundation courses.

Lastly, but not at all the least, is the range of challenges associated with teaching students who are predominantly in their first year and first semester of study in university.

It follows that foundation courses have a particular role to play, and face particular challenges which are in excess of those faced in other courses. Juxtaposing this analysis with the imperative to ensure students' first learning experiences at university are positive, and to help ensure these students remain in the system, progressing successfully to second year and beyond, allows us to see that there can scarcely be a course that is more important.

With all this context in mind, the small scale study reported here sought to collect information that could be used to make improvements to foundation courses, in particular it aimed to identify factors that would help us to increase the perceived relevance of these courses, thereby helping to enhance students' engagement in their first year of study.

The role of Foundation Courses at Murdoch University and what makes them significant and truly preparatory courses

The importance of understanding more about our teaching of first-year students is an increasingly significant issue stressed by many tertiary educators across all discipline areas. In response, 'What is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is assessed' (James, 2001, p. 81) has been addressed by many academics in new or renewed curriculum designs which increasingly aim to help produce highly desirable graduates. Hart, Bowden and Waters (1999) claim that:

(procedural knowledge) is becoming equally as important as *knowledge of* (conceptual knowledge), and the process of learning is becoming equally as important as the content of learning. In other words graduates need to develop an explicit understanding of their own approach to learning as well as confidence in their knowledge base in order to confidently address higher-order skills (meta-cognitive functions) such as reflective practice and awareness of one's problem-solving capabilities. (Hart, Bowden, & Watters,

1999, p. 303)

To have a chance to 'produce' highly desirable graduates we need to offer learning conditions that help students through their initiation into learning in Higher Education, and secure/ retain them in the system to continue study after the first semester. Hence, one of the first but not last concerns is to accommodate the needs of the first year student such as learning academic (generic) skills.

For over 30 years, the Foundation courses at Murdoch University have used a curriculum design that embeds the acquisition of learning skills within the process of learning. These skills relate to: Communication, Critical Thinking, Social Interaction, Independent and Lifelong Learning, Ethics, Social Justice, Global Perspective and Inter-disciplinarity. All are aligned with Murdoch's desired Graduate Attributes, which are designed to help students to gain employment and achieve success in the workplace. The Graduate Attributes are introduced to students in their first year of study through an interdisciplinary content. In this way students are exposed to other discipline(s) than the main discipline they chose. This might sound like a harsh approach in the first year of tertiary study, however number of reviews and surveys have shown (detailed below) that an interdisciplinary approach successfully prepares first year students for their future studies as well as giving them the lifelong skills that are needed in their subsequent work place.

While interdisciplinarity has been part of the Murdoch's University curriculum for some time, Davies and Devlin (2007) recently pointed out that 'the term "interdisciplinary" has been used increasingly in the rapidly changing context of higher education (Davies & Devlin, 2007, p. 1). Interdisciplinarity, a variant of disciplinarity, can take many forms. Foundation courses at Murdoch University see interdisciplinarity as a capacity to acquire knowledge and understanding of fields of study beyond a single discipline. In practical application this means that students are exposed to more than one perspective on a problem or issue within one context. Hence, for example, Nursing students become acquainted with content from outside their discipline such as history and technology. Consequently this broadens students' knowledge and prepares them better for the increasingly changing world of employment.

Murdoch University is not alone in this approach. The 'Melbourne Model' which offers subjects that provide students with different ways of knowing from their 'home' discipline and that are interdisciplinary in character (Davies & Devlin, 2007) is another example of successful application of interdisciplinarity in tertiary studies.

One of the confirmations of Foundation Courses at Murdoch University being a significant part of the curriculum comes from the Audit conducted by Australian Universities Quality Agency in August 2006. Commendation 9 states: 'AUQA commends Murdoch University for its use of Foundation Courses as a distinctive feature of the educational experience of undergraduate students' (Agency, 2006, p. 38). Further AUQA reported that 'the Panel was able to confirm the educational value of these courses, especially through their adoption of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives' (Agency, 2006, p. 38).

Murdoch's 'Student Survey of Courses' is another mechanism that confirms the

successful and increasingly important role of Foundation Courses in first year of study. The percentage of students who *strongly agree* with the statement: 'It was clear what I was expected to learn in this course' has increased from 18.2% in 2006, to 21.3% in 2007 and finally to 23.2% in 2008¹.

The increased level of student satisfaction together with the AUQA Audit and the adoption of interdisciplinary direction utilised by the 'Melbourne Model' clearly show the Foundational Courses at Murdoch University as being important preparatory courses in the first year of study.

How is this done elsewhere?; The QUT Law Faculty approach

The Bachelor of Law degree at QUT has been recently redeveloped to increase students' engagement in academic curriculum. In 2001 the QUT Faculty of Law undertook a review and redevelopment of its four-year undergraduate Bachelor of Law. The intent was to systematically 'embed an explicit approach to generic skills development' (Kift, 2003, p. 5). For example, the revised program offered an incremental development of the generic skills of written communication through the program.

QUT's quest was to develop a more effective tool 'to overcome the traditional passive disengagement of learners' (Kift, 2003, p. 4). This was achieved by 'integrating skills within the process and content' and by balancing the 'skill development and the content knowledge acquisition' (Kift, 2003, p. 5). Unlike Foundation Courses at Murdoch University which introduce general academic skills within period of one semester using interdisciplinary content, Law students at QUT learn generic skills in incremental stages across the degree using discipline specific content. The generic skills of written communication are taught on three levels across 4 years; Legal Research and Writing in 1st year courses, Equity in 2nd year courses and Advanced Legal research and Writing in 4th year courses (Kift, 2003, p. 5). The success of this curriculum redevelopment is evident in a report by Professor Kift (Kift, 2003).

As can be seen, there are exemplar courses at both Murdoch University and QUT that strive to engage the learner by enhancing the first year experience and ultimately producing better quality graduates. Perhaps the first part of this engagement is to ask the question "What features of a course cause students to engage in studying it at all – by enrolling in it?" It is to this initial question that this paper turns.

Method

This study involved all students enrolled in a first-year, first semester, foundation course at Murdoch University. The course was called *Interaction of Society and Technology*. The total number of students enrolled was 381 at the beginning of

¹ <http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au/eddev/evaluation/survey/res06/foundation.html>
<http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au/eddev/evaluation/survey/res07/FDN.html>
<http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au/eddev/evaluation/survey/res08/foundation.html>

semester. These were divided unevenly among three campuses, with the main campus (at South Street) accounting for the majority 229 (60%), 57 students at Peel Campus, 14 at Rockingham Campus and 81 external students. The course was one of three foundation courses available, although for some students the other options were not viable because of their campus location. In these cases students effectively had no choice and, if they said this, their responses were discounted from the subsequent analysis.

Ethical approval for this study was provided by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee under permit number 2008/206.

Survey

All students were sent a postal survey (Appendix A) with just two open-ended questions. There were:

- 1) Please tell me what factors you considered when choosing this course.
- 2) Which ONE of these factors was the most influential in your decision to choose this course? Please explain in what way it was influential.

The survey was prefaced by a covering letter (Appendix B) that included brief statements about the purpose of the study and about participant consent.

Analysis

A total of 134/381 individuals responded to the survey. This is a response rate of 35% which, given the class size, is adequate for the purpose of this study (Nulty, 2008). These respondents made a total of 295 individual comments. The 134 completed surveys were divided at random into two equal groups for independent transcription and analysis by the two authors. Each person worked independently to determine the themes represented in the students responses. Once this process was completed, the two sets of themes were compared and merged. This process involved identifying where themes appeared to be similar and then comparing the student comments from each of the two halves of the data to determine if the apparent similarity was real. Where the researchers agreed their respective themes were genuinely similar, further agreement was reached on the best wording to describe the merged theme. Where differences emerged, either the two themes were defined in a more distinct way, or some student comments were re-classified (into other themes) according to a revised/refined understanding of the data. To some extent this process was iterative, progressing until both researchers were satisfied that the merged themes accurately portrayed their common shared understanding of the outcome space generated by analysis of the students' responses.

Results

The process above resulted in a total of 15 themes (Appendix 1), some of which were overlapping. To simplify the picture, these 15 themes were grouped and

sequenced into 4 primary factors affecting students' choice of course. These are presented and explained below.

1. Student interest in the course

The single most dominant theme was "INTEREST". A total of 176/295 (60%) comments fell into this category – far more than in any other. "Interest", was however manifested in several ways.

1.1 "Intrinsic Interest" (88/176 comments). Fifty percent (50%) of the comments in this theme clearly indicated that personal and intrinsic interest in the foundation course topic was the most important factor in students' choice. Of these, 31 did not further specify the nature of this interest, whilst the remainder however did. Namely:

35 comments indicated specific interest in the *interaction between technology and society*

15 comments indicated specific interest in *history of technology*

7 comments indicated a specific interest in *history*

1.2 "Relative interest". (39/176 comments). Twenty two percent (22%) of comments in this theme indicated that their interest was simply relative to the other foundation course offerings, selecting this particular course as something that was more interesting than the alternative. While we do not regard this as pedagogically significant, this finding does show the value of making course offerings *appear* interesting. Thus, while other forms of "interest" in this course were influential in motivating students to select it, the popularity of this course was also partly dependent on the perceived relative *lack* of interest in the alternative(s).

1.3 "Strategic, pragmatic or instrumental interest" (38/176 comments). Twenty two percent (22%) of comments in this theme indicated that students' interest derived from the apparent, or presumed, relevance of the course to other courses of study, major or course (program). Thus, this *relevance* suggested to us that students are selecting this foundation course for strategic, pragmatic or instrumental reasons.

1.4 "General Interest". (11/176 comments). Some students simply indicated that the course sounded more interesting without any justification or elaboration.

Subsequent major themes attracted very many fewer comments.

2. Forming an impression of the course

Information about the course was also a factor (20/295 comments, 7%). This manifested in 4 ways:

8 comments noted the importance of information provided *at orientation*.

3 comments noted the importance of information provided *in the course description*

Five comments were made to suggest that a *word of mouth* recommendation for the course (or criticism of the alternative) was influential in deciding to take this course.

3 comments did not specify the information *source*, but made clear that information about the course was an influential factor in their choice.

3. Timetabling issues

On a more procedural level, 21/295 comments (7%) were made about the **timetable** being a factor in choosing the course. Simply, some students found this course to be more convenient than others when considering their schedule – which may include other courses, work and family commitments.

4. Likelihood of engaging the learner

Finally, 16/295 comments (5%) mentioned students' expectation of developing particular skills by studying this course. However, there was no common theme to *which* skills they thought they would develop only the idea that the course would engage them in learning. This same idea was also apparent in 7 other comments that related to the *apparent likelihood that a student would succeed in the course*, and its *perceived level of difficulty*. The comments in this category did little to elucidate why students felt this course was easier than alternatives, but importantly included some comments which clearly conveyed that it would be easier to be motivated to study, and easier to be engaged in learning, when the topics covered were interesting. These students are therefore indicating that there is a link between interest, engagement and ease of study – it's easier to study something one is interested in. Clearly then there is overlap between these ideas and the main theme – "interest".

Among the remaining themes the following are worth mention:

Lack of any alternative was mentioned 25 times. However, this category of response relates to the "relative interest" and "timetable" categories and so adds little to our understanding.

Six comments were made which explicitly mentioned the range and variety of content as a factor in selecting the course. This factor *also* relates closely to "interest".

Each of the remaining themes was derived from comments made by only one or two persons each. They appear in Appendix 3 (Final themes emerging from analysis) for reference.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reported above have implications for the design of foundation courses (indeed all courses), and for the way they are marketed. Overwhelmingly students indicate that if a course is not interesting (or that it does not have the appearance of interest) they will be unlikely to select it. This motive is not as shallow as it might at first glance appear since some students articulated that interest would help them to be engaged in study. As we know, engagement is critical to successful learning outcomes (Biggs, 2006).

The 2005 report *First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings From a Decade of National Studies* identifies that 'first year university students continue to consider both interest-related reasons and job-related reasons to be important in their decision to enrol in higher education (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p. 12). The report further identifies the most prominent item is perhaps 'studying in a field that really interest me': 78 per cent of first years rate this as "very important" in their decision making' (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, p. 12). This type of interest was also foreshadowed by a CSHE report in 1999. It stated that when selecting study preference, 88% of school-leavers were influenced by an 'interest in exploring the area of knowledge' (James, Baldwin, & McInnis, 1999, p. 19).

In addition, other students indicated that the nature of their interest was strategic: they look to see if there are synergies between study of one course and the remainder of their program of study – implicitly they are asking: "How will this course contribute to my learning in the rest of my program of study?" Where students can determine a positive response they are more likely to select the course. This is sensible: it has been argued in respect of curriculum design that the concept of constructive alignment is critical to students' engagement (Biggs, 2006; Meyers & Nulty, 2009 In press).

The way in which students determine if they are interested in a course appears to depend mostly on print information in the form of the course outline. This is augmented by pre-enrolment publicity in the form of live presentations. Word of mouth played a small part too – e.g. recommendations from previous students. The implication of findings in this study are that the information that students are provided needs to convey that the course is intrinsically interesting, aligns well with a range of programs of study, and is likely to lead to longer term study success.

What is surprisingly absent from the students' comments in this study is any apparent concern with the assessment methods to be used in the course. This is surprising because it is this that defines the amount and nature of work which students are required to complete, and because it is this which determines the students' experience of what the curriculum really is (Biggs, 2006; Meyers & Nulty, 2009 In press; Rowntree, 1987; Snyder, 1971). It is possible that this component was not fore-grounded in this study because the nature of the information made available to students did not permit a focus on this aspect of the course design. It is also possible that first year first semester students have not yet embraced the strategic significance of assessment. It would perhaps be prudent to take account of extant literature on this issue rather than read much into the absence of assessment

as an issue for these students. To do this, it is suggested that information about courses include details of how the assessment regime integrates with and supports the learning and teaching strategy in ways that are simultaneously engaging, appealing to a broad audience, and authentic in respect of alignment with broad program objectives.

What can be done?

The findings of this study suggest that there is a potential to redevelop the curriculum design of this course to enhance students' interest and consequently improve their learning.

With regards to the *Student interest in the unit (course)* as the primary factor in choosing a course, the high number of students having an intrinsic interest in the foundation course topics 50% is a clear indication of a solid engagement. The other three expressed interests; relative (22%), strategic, pragmatic or instrumental (22%) and finally general (6%), reaffirm that the existing course design accommodates the students' engagement.

Although all findings of this survey are crucial for improving engagement, the number of students (7%) for whom the factor of 'forming an impression of the course' has affected their decision is surprisingly low. The available information about the course and changes in delivery of the course description will be made accordingly. The live presentation of the course overview that is delivered by the course convenor at Orientation Week will be revised to offer more useful and practical information. The changes will accommodate the fore-grounding of the significance of assessment so that students are clear with what is expected. Giving students such details will help to secure their engagement in learning and consequently their level of retention.

The findings show that a few students (7%) experience some sort of timetabling issues that had impact on their choice. Unfortunately if students make timetable choices based on what is more convenient for their timetable this can not be addressed through curriculum design, unless wholly on-line courses are adopted (something not favoured). Foundation Courses at Murdoch University have timetable priority where no other lecture of a first year course should run at the same time.

Unlike timetabling issues, the last factor affecting students' choice (5%) the 'Likelihood of engaging the learner' can be improved via rethinking and redeveloping the activities between the student and institution. This dynamic interplay between student and institutional activities and contributes to the development of student engagement (Krause & Coates, 2008). As stated numerous times by many scholars, engagement is crucial for surviving first and the consequent years of study at university. The experience of engagement in first year of study, and the level at which the student is interested and participates in learning, underlines the prospect of successful study in coming years. The ways in which we can *get* students interested in courses, from the curriculum design perspective, are numerous. As a direct response to this survey, in the following semester a peer assessment was introduced to promote student engagement in assessment processes. The outcome was a great success. This way of assessing peers' assignments gave students a chance to compare their work with that of others. a benefit from being exposed to

others' ideas and ways of dealing with issues and problems, and resulted in notable improvements in performance on subsequent assignments.

Course surveys targeting specific aspects of curriculum is another way of examining (redeveloping) course design. Such a survey has been undertaken in this course at the end of semester two in 2008, prior to the survey discussed in this paper. In that survey students were asked about the *clarity* of the learning outcomes and the most important aspect of this course for their future studies. The findings confirmed that the learning outcomes of the foundation course FDN115 are clear to the majority of students and that the most important aspect of this course is to learn one or more learning skills students believe will enable them to survive and thrive in future university studies.

Conclusion

This is a small-scale and simple study with some interesting, simple but significant findings. It is proposed that acting on these findings in the design and development of courses is likely to enhance their relevance to students, boost student engagement and subsequently enhance learning outcomes.

Appendix 1



Information Letter

www.murdoch.edu.au

Unit Selection Survey FDN115 Interaction of Society and Technology

Dear student,

I am interested in learning about the different reasons why you (students) chose this particular unit, especially when there are other Foundation Units on offer. I hope to be able to find out about the key characteristics of this course, and my teaching of it, which will enable me to increase its relevance and usefulness, and to be able to make constructive suggestions to other unit coordinators.

With this in mind I'm asking you to answer a couple of simple questions. Whether you do so is entirely voluntary: your participation has nothing to do with the assessment of this (or any other) course or unit. Anything you do say will be used in my research and may be published. There may be findings which will help me to improve this course and my teaching *during* this semester (which might benefit you). One of the unit's aims is to implement changes according to students feedback. This is your chance to contribute and improve everyone's learning experience in FDN115 in this and following semesters.

Participant consent

I have read the information above about the nature and scope of this survey. Any questions I have about the research process have been answered to my satisfaction. By submitting the survey I agree to take part in this research. By submitting the survey into an envelope provided by the tutor I give my consent for the results to be used in the research. I am aware that this survey is anonymous and no personal details are being collected or used by the research. I know that I may change my mind and withdraw my consent to participate at any time up until I submit the survey, and I acknowledge that once my survey has been submitted it may not be possible to withdraw my data. I also understand that all information provided is treated as confidential by the researchers and will not be released to a third party unless required to do so by law.

If you are willing to participate, could you please complete answer the two questions on the document provided. I am happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have on how this study has been conducted. My name is Martina Müller and you can call me in my office on 93602955 or email me on m.muller@murdoch.edu.au. If you wish to talk to an independent person about your concerns you can contact Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6677 or email ethics@murdoch.edu.au

Many thanks for your consideration of my request. The outcome of this research will be in a form of a brief summary which will be uploaded on the unit website for students to read it when the project will be finished, early 2009.

This study has been approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 2008/206)

Appendix 2

Unit Survey

FDN115 Interactions of Society and Technology Unit Selection Survey

Please answer these two questions:

1) Please tell me what factors you considered when choosing this unit.

2) Which ONE of these factors was the most influential in your decision to choose this unit. Please explain in what way it was influential.

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