Managing and Resourcing Large Classes

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In this resource paper it is my aim to discuss the managing and resourcing of large classes from the point of view of a university manager: that is, a Head of School, a Head of Department or a Dean.

In the recent elections held in Australia, the key issue of a ‘hard line’ with asylum seekers who had arrived in Australia not through ‘official’ channels but by paying for illegal transportation, was agreed by both major parties. Voters wanting to express compassion and a moral position based on a rejection of the autocratic regimes in the countries from which these asylum seekers had fled found that neither political group which could form government were expressing a policy or position which would allow them to show their support for such compassion and humanitarianism. Two of the minor parties: the Greens (led by Bob Brown) and the Democrats (led by Natasha Stott Despoya) were expressing such positions. This led me to begin my discussion of managing and resourcing of large classes by asking: What is it that Bob Brown and the teachers of large classes have in common? From my point of view it is clear that they both have the moral high-ground. Just as compassion, humanitarianism and a reduction of suffering are ‘good things’, so the teaching of required skills to new students, providing support to reduce their alienation or aloneness and providing basic knowledge on which they will build the remainder of the degree study can only be seen as desirable. Both the Greens and first year teachers, however, also do not have the power, especially the structural power to achieve the results that they want. The Greens will never be the governing political party that will be setting policies. First year teachers will rarely be the Head of Department or Dean who is responsible for managing and resourcing the teaching of first year subjects. Instead this analogy leads us to some strategies. The Greens use the political influence they have (their capacity to vote in particular ways which will encourage or hamper the governments policies, their capacity to influence those who support them to support or reject government initiatives, including their ability to represent the government’s initiatives in a certain light to their supporters) to ‘deal’ with the government to meet SOME of their ends. In the same way first year teachers can use the organisational processes to negotiate with colleagues and Heads of Departments to better manage and resource the first year subjects taught by the institution.

First, however, let us look at the issue of whether funding (resourcing) is the problem. There is no doubt that Universities are under-funded. The recent Senate Report: ‘Universities in Crisis’ (http://www.abc.net.au/science/news/stories/s378224.htm) note that the funding of Universities is a complex and controversial issue. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that funding per Effective Full Time Student Unit (EFTSU) has fallen from $14,315 in 1995 to $13,983 in 1998 and further falls have been experienced more recently, partly as a result of the reduction in funding ‘over enrolment’ places. In addition the range of tasks that Universities need to perform has increased as activities such as the requirement to apply for research funding, the need to raise additional income, engagement in workshop bargaining from salary and conditions setting, the meeting of quality assurance requirements, and so on take time from academic work in teaching and in research. However, within the parameters of the funding regime, how does the funding of first year teaching occur? In general first year subjects are taught by the School or Department responsible for the discipline (so Physics 101 is taught by the Physics Department, Employment Relations is
taught by the Management School etc). In most Universities these Schools or Departments are funded on the basis of the number of EFTSU that they teach, or that they have taught in previous years or that they are predicted to teach. Different universities have different budgeting arrangements, some more responsive to drops or increases in numbers in individual subjects than others. But the overall calculation can ignore such differences as we get a ‘ballpark’ figure. Similarly, the funding per EFTSU that each University allocates to each Department varies. Many give more funding to ‘high cost’ subjects, such as the sciences. Some give more for overseas or full fee paying students. But again a ball park estimate allows us to examine the overall impacts.

So, to give an idea of the resources available for the teaching of the first year class, let us say that the Department receives $3500 per EFTSU. Let us also say there are 800 students in the first year class so 100 EFTSU (ie each full time student takes 8 subjects (in most universities) across the two semesters of the year so that their enrolment in one first year subject is one eighth of their total enrolment. This allows us to calculate that 800 ‘bums on seats’ represents 100 (800 divided by 8) EFTSU. On this basis there is therefore $350,000 going to the Department budget for the first year subject. Let us say that we are paying a full time level B academic to convene and teach, the salary and on-costs are approximately $70,000 for the year, or $35,000 for the semester (this assumes of course that this level B does no other teaching in the semester, a likely scenario if they have 800 students). On this basis the Department has $315,000 to resource the rest of the teaching of the first year subject (develop resources, employ a full-time level A, employ casual tutors or whatever). Somehow this is never the impression that we get. To be more realistic, of course, students are often part-time rather than full-time and classes of 800, while they exist, are rare, so a more realistic example might be one with a class of 360. Using a divisor of 12 (so half these students are part-time) the income to the department would be $105,000. After paying the level B for the semester, $70,000 would be available for other resources and teaching.

Even at this rate $70,000 pays for a lot of additional support – a lot more than most convenors of large classes ever get close to. So why do these resources not flow to the first year class for which they are designed. What happens to this money?

This is were we go back to Bob Brown and the Greens. The answer is that the issue is one of organisational politics. As a teacher of a first year subject, everyone agrees that you have the moral high- ground. Everyone agrees that first year teaching is crucial and that resources invested at this point are amply repaid during the rest of the degree. Everyone agrees that senior staff should be involved in teaching first year subjects (although junior staff are often good as they are closer in age to the students). As a teacher of a first year subject you have the moral high ground, but not the resources – why not? From a political point of view, there are differing interests, priorities, stakeholders and personalities within the Department or School which come into play to determine that the money is used to support the teaching of small subjects (eg Honours subjects or small elective classes), support the teaching of a wider variety of specialist subjects than might otherwise be offered, support developments within the Department, such as internal research grants, additional scholarships for Honours or even PhD students, support conference attendance and travel of other professional development. All of these are undeniably worthy projects, some of them as worthy as quality first year teaching. A Head of School of Department leading the Unit in a direction such as greater employability of graduates or greater research development will make choices to use their to best meet the needs of the Department overall. In order to feel some of these choices and pressures, an imaginary scenario can be presented.

Let us imagine that you are staff of Brown University (for Bob) in the Dept of Astrolanguages. The Bachelor of Astrolanguages has a large first year class because of
service teaching. ‘Fundamentals of Astrolanguages’ is a service unit for students in the Bachelor of Languages, the Bachelor of Astronomy, the Bachelor of Business and Commerce and the Bachelor of Law as well providing the knowledge base for those going on to your Department’s degree. There are normally between 350 and 500 students in the first year Fundamentals class which provides sufficient funds to the Department to allow the luxury of a few extra electives in the Bachelor of Astrolanguages that help enhance it as a good degree for those who wish to work in the area. Fundamentals is taught by a contract level A staff member.

Let us imagine a meeting of three staff, one of whom is one of the two professors in the Department, one the Head of Department and one level C course convenor of the Bachelor of Astrolanguages.

Descriptions of the three people and their interests follow.

**HEAD OF DEPARTMENT**

You are the Head of the Department of Astrolanguages at a teaching and research University. You are a recently promoted Associate Professor and you have been heading the Department since March this year (2001). Prior to this promotion you have been employed in the University for six years as a senior lecturer.

Your Department teaches an undergraduate Bachelor of Astrolanguages which is a moderate demand course for school leavers. Your first year subject: “Fundamentals of Astrolanguages” is also a service unit for students in the Bachelor of Languages, the Bachelor of Astronomy, the Bachelor of Business and Commerce (one never knows when trade might open up) and the Bachelor of Law. As a result there are normally between 350 and 500 students in the first year Fundamentals class.

Your University has been making strenuous efforts in response to the Research White Paper to increase its research quantum and its numbers of RHD students. Your Department is moderately successful, with some excellent more-established researchers at levels D and E and some good new appointments who are research active and very hungry for research success. Your Department is seen as one of those that can build on its strengths to help the University’s profile and you are of course keen to see your Department prosper in this way.

You, however, are only an average researcher. You have maintained a steady research profile that is satisfactory by any examination, and contributes to the work of the Department, but is not distinguished. Your promotion was awarded principally because of your commitment to teaching and to the development of innovative techniques for teaching astrolanguages. Additionally you are well known as an excellent administrator and ‘organisational citizen’, having been on policy committees and in administrative roles before your appointment as Head of Department.

You are responding to a request from the Course Convenor to have a meeting to discuss teaching allocations for semester 1, 2002. The Course Convenor suggested you call a meeting with one of the Departments two professors, yourself and the course convenor.

**PROFESSOR**

You are a Professor in the Department of Astrolanguages. You have been a Professor with the Department for the past eight years and have been employed by the University for the
last fifteen years. Your Department has been Headed since March this year (2001) by someone who has recently been promoted to Associate Professor. They were employed as a Senior Lecturer on the Department for six years prior to that.

Your specific expertise relates to translation issues surrounding astrolanguages and you have held several ARC Large grants to pursue this research. Previous Heads of Departments have accepted your argument that part of those funds can be used to ‘buy out’ your teaching time by replacing you with casual staff, although you still give several sessions each year in the Honours course and give a block of 6 lectures to the third year class ‘Translation of Astrolanguages’.

You are supervising four RHD students who work well as a team to help you with your research efforts and are a consultant to the Department of Foreign Affairs on issues relating to astrolanguages.

In earlier years you were an adequate and conscientious teacher. You experimented with some of the technological developments relating to assessment methods and to course management, although these did not flow through to your teaching which remained in the standard lecturing/laboratory style. Nevertheless you enjoyed what you did and you have an enormous knowledge base in the discipline. Over the years however the research has taken precedence and the buy outs have allowed you to progress your research considerably. You see yourself as a major contributor to the University’s reputation in research and would be alarmed to see the University’s research endeavours reduce.

You are a cooperative and genial individual. However you are finishing the second year of a three year ARC Large and have recently been awarded your first ARC Industry grant, with the Department of Foreign Affairs which will commence on 1 January 2002.

The Head of Department has asked you to come in to discuss teaching allocations for semester 1, 2002.

**COURSE CONVENOR**

You are a level C academic who is the Course Convenor for the Bachelor of Astrolanguages. In itself this is not a really big degree, but does have a large first year class because of the service teaching component. This subject: “Fundamentals of Astrolanguages” is a service unit as well providing the knowledge base for those going on to your Department’s degree. As an academic yourself, you have been recently recruited to the Department because you are research active and you are seen as helping to increase the research profile. You teach one of the third year electives which is able to be offered because of the funding support from the first year subject. However you are a committed and passionate teacher in your area of research and have taken on the convenorship to increase your activity in the ‘service to the university’ category of work. You are hoping that with your research profile, your good student ratings for your teaching in a second and third year elective subject, and now with this convenorship that you will stand a good chance at promotion in the next promotion round.

However you have recently been receiving feedback that the unit is not going well. It had been convened by a level A academic who had been on rolling three year contracts. However with the industrial award preventing University’s using contracts for continuing teaching, over this last year, the subject was assigned to a level B academic who put his ‘name’ to the subject, and the level A staff member was re-employed casually to run the subject. The casual
level A gave all lectures and was paid an extra two hours per week coordination time. A further ten casual tutors provided the laboratory work for the subject and received their information from the casual level A whenever they were able to make contact.

You have now had the level A come to you to say that the level B will do no work other than to sign the forms to get printing done and sign the examiners return. The casual level A has been made an offer of a continuing position at another local (more teaching oriented) University and has indicated that despite their commitment to your University and the Department they really have no other choice at this time but to accept the offer. Quite a number of student complaints have been received from students saying that their tutors did not seem to know what was going on in the course and claiming that they have been inadequately prepared for the assessment. They are saying they will use this as the basis of an appeal against their grade.

You have asked the Head of Department to call a meeting with one of the two Professors in the Department to propose a new approach to teaching this very important first year subject. Your proposal is that the level E academic should be the subject convenor and that the subject should be designed in conjunction with three of the other continuing staff in the Department, whereby they each teach a block of four weeks each. The level E would provide ‘framework’ lectures at the beginning and end of the subject and a linking lecture between each of the three blocks taught by the other staff. You are also thinking that it would be useful to see the subject developed with some web back-up, and would propose that the level E examine a few web options for support of the curriculum, while the new form of the subject was being developed. You are suggesting that the new design and curriculum be used for semester 1, 2002, although the web back-up might be an option that is available from 2003 on.

You will need to commence this meeting which you asked the Head of Department to call with one of the Professors by explaining the problems with the current teaching approach in Fundamentals by proposing your idea, which is one that neither the HOD nor the Professor know about.

The result of the role play is rarely that the Professor is teaching the first year class. Some responses have been: to re-hire the level A as a continuing appointment (scarcely a response valuing first year teaching); for the Professor to convene the subject but others to teach it; and for the Head of Department to teach the subject. The manager, that is the Head of Department, often feels that they are caught in the middle, feels that they do not have sufficient information and that they are powerless in the situation and feel that they cannot do what they really would want.

It is these feelings which typify the political nature of the situation and the decision making, demonstrating why the allocation of resources to the teaching of first year classes is so problematic. So, having identified the situation as being fundamentally political, the solutions that can be offered in relation to how to improve the managing and resourcing of large group teaching is political also.

Fundamentally there are two categories of solutions to problems of a political nature within organisations (see for example Fulop and Linstead, 1999). These are interventions through the organisational structure and the building of formal and informal alliances. These will be considered in turn.
Organisational Structure

In Universities, the organisational decision making structures consist principally of Committees and/or Boards. School Meetings, School Committees, Faculty Meetings/Committees, Teaching and Learning Excellence Committees, Education Committees are all places to which papers written that explain issues and propose actions/recommendations can be sent. The involvement through such committees in policy setting is one way in which the collective ‘moral high-ground’ can be used to influence the behaviour of individuals at a later stage. In working with such organisational structures, including getting an adequate discussion and debate on the papers that are written, and in ensuring the implementation of policy the following issue, that of alliances, is critical.

Alliances

Alliances, either formal or informal can be key to influencing organisational structure, organisational ‘will’ and organisational politics. The alliances may be internal or external to the School/Faculty/University. Fundamentally the building of alliances involves the finding of a person or people who will support proposed changes. For example, this person may be a support person, such as a senior lecturer or an associate professor in the School who is prepared to support initiatives in relation to first year teaching. Other alliances can come through a staff member of the Academic Development Unit or even Senior Manager who can advance a Committee process or support in Committee meetings.

It is possible to use Internal Teaching Grants, AUTC, Teaching Awards etc to develop grants to develop support.

The industrial union, the NTEU, or the HRM Department of the University itself can be used to support level of appointment (A.6), employment as a fractional rather than a casual plus payment for hours worked as a casual.

While it is possible to identify the sources from which alliances can come, there are no hard and fast rules. Meetings with other first year convenors and teachers, meetings with female staff (as many of those involved in first year teaching can be women), or corridor discussions, can all be sources of information about who within or outside the University can be used to support quality first year teaching. This support is then included in the political process of balancing of stakeholder interest in which the manager resourcing first year teaching is operating. With ‘influential friends’ the first year teacher is more likely to find their needs being able to be met than when they work alone with the support simply of the moral high ground.

My final suggestion is included with a level of hesitation. This is because it may have unintended consequences which I will discuss. Basically, however, again, understanding the matter of managing and resourcing of first year teaching as a matter of organisational decision-making and so organisational politics, it needs to be recognised that managers are seeking solutions. Sometimes, particularly when it comes to the issue of teaching and of teaching at first year level, the level of passion and commitment and conscientiousness of those who work in this area can let managers ‘off the hook’. For example, if casual staff are not paid for student consultation they will often do it in any case out of concern for the needs of the students. If resources (workbooks, web pages) need to be designed and updated, those involved in first year teaching will often take on the additional load required by these activities because they wish to provide a quality learning environment for students. My advice, given advisedly is, do not do it. Do not ‘save’ the system – let it move to whatever
result it needs. If you continue to save and prop up the system no one will ever attend to its deficiencies. I say advisedly, of course, because those involved at this level are often the most vulnerable. Fear of non renewal of contract, fear of lack of repeat work, often places people in a situation where they are not prepared to say no to the apparent job requirements. Hence the decision to refuse to continue to work unpaid or in overload needs to be informed and supported, by some of the alliances mentioned earlier. However, as a manager, needing to demonstrate deficiencies with the system in order to request support from senior managers or to show the inadequacy of the organisational decision making that had been made at other levels (for example the amount of money per EFTSU given to the School) the continual ‘saving’ of the system by dedicated staff created a more difficult political environment for me. Thus, advisedly, I urge you to consider having discussions with your managers about the additional work that is being performed and how to reduce it to the appropriate level, without jeopardising your job or your career.

Overall then my response to you about the managing and resourcing of first year teaching is a simple one. While the University system as a whole is under-resourced, there are still parts of it that receive better support than others. Research training, honours teaching, boutique electives are often far better supported that first year teaching. Getting first year teaching managed and resourced in proportion to its importance within the university system is a matter of organisational decision making and organisational politics. While it may not be desirable that ALL areas of university work is uniformly under-funded, it is a better result than that of having some areas only slightly under-funded and first year teaching dramatically under-funded. From the perspective of a university manager (Head of Department) this is a problem of organisational politics and requires political organisational solutions.

References


Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee (2001) Universities in Crisis, Commonwealth of Australia.