REPORT ON THE 1ST NATIONAL WORKSHOP, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE, JULY 8 2001

Being conducted by the University of Queensland

The first of 2 national workshops was convened on July 8, with the majority of project participants in attendance. There were 44 highly accomplished teachers and 24 Academic Staff Developers from 24 universities (including 1 participant from Victoria University of Wellington, NZ). The workshop was run by a sub-committee of the project team; Denise Chalmers, Ron Weber, Doune Macdonald, Debra Herbert, and Rachel Hannam. The team was assisted by Catherine Manathunga (an Academic Consultant at TEDI, University of Queensland) and Carol Nicoll (a member of the Reference Group) who both helped as facilitators.

The aims of the workshop were:
• To create a national network of teachers with expertise and interest in teaching large classes
• To discuss major issues in teaching large classes in a university environment
• To identify methods of good practice across a range of disciplines
• To plan for institutional and/or regional-based strategies for encouraging uptake of best practice in large group teaching.

The workshop consisted of 3 main sessions. In the first session, participants broke into 5 groups (organised prior to the workshop, with a mix of disciplines, universities and teachers/academic developers) to each discuss one of the 5 major issues identified through the literature review and surveys:

• Student issues (eg., motivation, interest, interaction, heterogeneity of needs/backgrounds, students at risk etc)
• Teaching management and curriculum issues (eg., curriculum and course design, staff/tutor coordination and management, tutor/staff training and professional development etc)
• Administration, resources and institutional support issues (eg., teaching and assessment resources, budgeting, space and equipment requirements, staffing, institutional support for large class teaching etc)
• Teaching and learning strategies (eg., managing student inquires, ideas for effective presentation strategies etc)
• Assessment (eg., setting valid/authentic assessment, giving feedback, marking load and management, standardisation of assessment and marking etc).

Each issue area was discussed in relation to questions such as – In what ways does a large class impact upon students?; What other problems do large classes present with regards to this topic?; What have you or your universities done to address these student issues?; What are the effective strategies you have used in this area with large groups?; What are the least successful things you have tried or seen used with large groups?. Main points were then reported back to the whole group.

The second session involved participants breaking into discipline areas, and discussing the important issues for large group teaching in a particular discipline, and the strategies that have been employed, why they worked or didn’t work etc. There were 4 broad discipline groupings (and each could break out into smaller groups if appropriate):

• Business related (accounting, commerce, management, law)
• Science and mathematics
• Social science and humanities
• Economics
For both sessions 1 and 2, all discussions were scribed and sheets collected by the facilitators. This data has been collated and documented in a report to incorporate into the report/s from the literature review and surveys.

In the third session, participants joined together as institutional groups, and brainstormed ideas for an appropriate dissemination initiative for their institution. Regionally related university groups (e.g., Qld, Sydney-based, NSW regional, Victoria, WA) then shared ideas and, if appropriate, planned for collaborative initiatives/projects. First, participants were provided with a brief overview of educational change and the types of strategies that might be relevant for different levels (e.g., level 1 - surface change, relatively easy; use of new and revised materials and activities). This information was intended to serve as a prompt for discussion, and participants were also provided with a dissemination initiative proposal form on which they could document their ideas and proposals (including the goals of the initiative, audience, medium, location, participants roles and responsibilities, budget outline, timeline, and evaluation strategy). Several universities indicated that they would collaborate with other institutions in their region (e.g., UWA, Curtin, Murdoch and Edith Cowan), while a large number of universities intend to coordinate internal activities.

The proposal forms were subsequently emailed to the Academic Staff Developers (or appropriate contact person). Each university/regional project group was required to complete and return the proposal form in order to receive the $1000 contribution towards their dissemination project. The deadline for submitting proposals was August 10.

Project proposals were received from each of the 23 Australian universities: Australian Catholic University, Charles Sturt, Australian National University, Macquarie University, Monash University, Murdoch University, University of New England, University of Melbourne, Deakin University, University of NSW, University of Wollongong, University of Western Sydney, RMIT, University of Sydney, University of South Australia, University of Tasmania, Griffith University, QUT, University of Queensland, Flinders University, Edith Cowan University, Curtin University and University of WA. These last 3 (Western Australian) universities are conducting a cross-institutional dissemination project. The other institutions are conducting university-based projects.

All participants were emailed evaluation forms asking for comments and feedback about the workshop. Feedback was generally very positive with 97% of participants agreeing that the workshop provided opportunities for informative discussion, 86% saying that their time spent at the workshop was worthwhile and 92% saying it helped to create a network of accomplished large class teachers. Session 1 was rated as the most useful session, with 97% of participants agreeing that it was beneficial. Many of the participants also provided positive comments and feedback both on the evaluation forms and by way of informal e-mails.

Suggestions were also made about ways in which the workshop may have been more beneficial for participants. Some of these raised the issue of methods-specific issues rather than discipline specific issues. For eg:

Method-specific rather than discipline-specific small groups may have been more useful ie. lecture-specific, tutorial-specific, wet-lab specific, dry-lab specific large group teaching. Often it is the method of delivery that creates issues, rather than the discipline itself.

Others raised the need to further identify and share effective dissemination strategies as well as suggesting we address ways to encourage senior administration to acknowledge workloads and redistribute resources for large classes. As such, these issues have been incorporated into the program for the 2nd National workshop in November.
Finally, the workshop also offered participants an opportunity to raise issues not directly addressed at the workshop. This was achieved by providing “Burning Issues” forms on which participants could write down their thoughts, ideas or concerns about large class teaching and deposit them in a box. These, along with all field and discussion notes ‘scribed’ by participants and UQ project team members were collected and have been collated and summarised for distribution to participants. This was used in planning for the 2nd workshop in November and to inform future activities for this and other projects.

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