MANAGING A LARGE TEAM OF TUTORS IN FIRST YEAR PSYCHOLOGY – John McLean

**University:** University of Queensland  
**Faculty:** Social and Behavioural Sciences  
**Subject:** Introduction to Psychology: Physiological and Cognitive Psychology (PSYC1020)  
**Coordinator:** John McLean (john@psy.uq.edu.au)  
**Size:** 800-1000 students, Semesters 1 and 2  
**Year:** 2001

PSYCH1020 (in its various forms) has been running at the University of Queensland for many years. PSYC1020 coordinated by Dr John McLean and PSYC1030 (Introduction to Psychology: Developmental, Social & Clinical Psychology) coordinated by Dr Virginia Slaughter are both first-year courses and are “carbon copies” of each other, in that their structure and organisation are the same. The Course Administrator Peter Gauci is involved equally in both courses and most students who undertake one subject also enrol in the other. However for the sake of this case study, only PSYC1020 will be discussed.

John has been involved as Course Coordinator since 1990 and together with Dr Slaughter (see report on this web-site via Resources) has played a leading role in the development and design of the course. He has developed an enthusiastic team-approach to tutoring and course coordination and hence, his management of full-time and sessional staff will be a focal point of this case study.

A brief overview of teaching modes and assessment will be followed by a description of John’s coordination and team teaching practices.

**PSYC1020: Teaching modes and assessment:**

The teaching team responsible for delivering this course is as follows:
- 3 lecturing staff (including the course coordinator)
- 1 Course Administrator
- 10-12 tutors (including 3 lead tutors)
- 3-5 general staff involved

Lectures and tutorials/laboratories are used as the primary teaching and learning activities. Lectures are delivered in two streams; each stream has two 1-hour lectures per week (each individual lecture is presented 3 times a week). Approximately 400 students attend per lecture. The delivery of a total of 24 (x3) lectures over 12 weeks is shared amongst the 3 lecturers.

**Tutorials**  
Students attend one 1-hour tutorial per week. Although no formal record of attendance is made, tutorials are compulsory, as attendance is necessary in order to complete certain assessment items. Tutorials are highly interactive and an upper limit of 25 students per group is set. Tutors are given comprehensive tutor training when they begin (discussed below). Tutorials are used for multiple-choice revision exercises, clarifying lecture and other course material, as well as discussing, collected and disseminating assessment tasks.

**Assessment**  
The assessment for this course involves 4 different modes: a 1000-word essay (20%), a lab report (9%), research participation (6%) and 2 multiple-choice exams: mid-semester (20%) and end of semester (45%).
Both multiple-choice exams are computer marked and essays are marked by relevant tutors. Research participation is optional – students may choose to forfeit the 6% or undertake alternative assessment which consists of reading and summarising reports on related experiments. However most students choose to take part in the research.

The lab report is a very abbreviated version of a psychological research report and is based on data generated and collected during tutorials in Weeks 9 and 10. Research methods are discussed in both lectures and tutorials.

As with the lab report, the essay allows students to develop some academic writing skills and demonstrate their understanding of lecture materials, readings and journal articles. Students can choose 1 of 2 topics and time is devoted in tutorials to discussing and explaining essay writing.

Learning materials
The course outline is an essential part of the course and includes details of the 2 set texts - Psychology (Maitlin) and Writing for Psychology (O’Shea), as well as a lecture schedule and content, suggested weekly readings, and details about assessment. It also includes comprehensive information about how to ‘navigate’ your way through 1st year Psychology such as “what to do if…”, and “Suggestions for approaching your learning”.

The course web-site also allows students to access the course outline as well as other useful information and learning material such as:

- lecture OHTs/PowerPoints (full notes are intentionally not provided)
- tutorial materials
- assessment results
- announcements (posted on the home page)
- standard School forms (special examinations applications etc)
- bulletin board
- research sign-up
- links (to relevant and useful web-sites)

The course web-site is administered internally by the Course Administrator Peter Gauci. According to Peter, the web-site has been a major success in 2001 in that, among other things, it has significantly reduced the number of student enquiries and requests for forms, results and lecture notes. For further information about the site, email peterg@psy.uq.edu.au

The teaching team
Since the mid-90’s first-year Psychology at the University of Queensland has undergone some significant and drastic changes to its organisation and structure. School resources were redistributed to allow for the creation and maintenance of a tutorial program in first-year (prior to 1995 only lectures and large ‘movie’ sessions were offered, with no small group sessions at all).

New tutors and weekly meetings
A team of tutors was recruited and trained, and presently all new tutors to the School of Psychology are inducted through the first-year tutorial program which also serves as the tutor training program. All new tutors must teach into first-year before moving into later-year teaching roles. Much of the training takes place during weekly meetings with experienced “lead” tutors, the Course administrator (who was a tutor for a number of years himself) as well as the course coordinator. At these meetings, the group discusses assessment requirements and standards, common mistakes made by students and content issues as well as giving and receiving feedback. New tutors are paid to attend all lectures.
Every week each tutor is required to construct 2-3 multiple-choice questions (MCQs) based on that week’s lecture topic. These are then emailed to the lead (senior) tutors who use these to construct a 6-7-item MCQ quiz for weekly revision in tutorials. The MCQs allow students to practice and revise for both the mid-semester and final exams. This process also fosters consistency of teaching, as every tutorial group in the course receives the same quiz each week. These quizzes are also posted on the web-site each week after tutorials.

**The course administrator**

Peter’s role includes a mixture of academic and administration duties. According to the course coordinator his role is pivotal in the course’s organisation and management. Students can contact Peter with queries regarding assessment, course materials and research participation. His role also includes student advising, administering the web-site and coordination and timetabling of exams. His academic and teaching background mean that he also takes a lead role in recruiting and training new tutors, attending all tutor team meetings and taking individual tutorials in cases of tutor absence.

**The benefits**

The introduction of tutorials and employment of a course administrator has not surprisingly required a redistribution of School resources. This process has taken several years beginning with initiatives on John’s part such as approaching the then Head of School to deliver some of the first-year lectures as well as establishing an undergraduate Peer Assisted Learning scheme which ran for two years before the tutorial program was implemented. Despite its ‘long time coming’, the outcomes of this process now include many significant benefits.

The first-year tutorial program and tutor training program mean that students are now able to get to know other students in small interactive groups. Furthermore, the marking of written assessment (the lab report and essay) is now possible, meaning students are developing writing and reasoning skills previously untaught and untapped.

Failure rates have slightly decreased due to the accessibility of staff and possibly the increase in student motivation brought about by improved staff-student and student-student interaction.

Another significant effect of the changes to first-year Psychology have been increased retention rates and increased participation in second-year, with more students choosing to major and minor in Psychology.

**Conclusion**

Recent international benchmarking (by Virginia Slaughter) has shown the redesigned and restructured first-year Psychology program at the University of Queensland to be among the best first-year Psychology programs in Australia and internationally. Members of the teaching team in first-year Psychology have fostered interdependence, teamwork and effective communication, resulting in a flow-on effect to students.

According to John, being part of a small and stable lecturing team is ideal for ensuring peer-support as well as “peer scrutiny”. In the past, larger and less committed lecturing teams have been more problematic. Furthermore, having lecturers deliver block lectures according to topic areas and to their interests seems to enhance both student and staff enthusiasm for the subject.

In closing, the decision to approach management for extra support and funding for the first-year program has proven beneficial to both students and to the School in many ways. In addition to the benefits mentioned above, student ratings and positive feedback have also improved. The current structures and processes in place enable and support the lecturers and tutors in showing their genuine enthusiasm for
the subject matter. While students rarely comment directly on the structural aspects of the course, the fact that these structures do help overcome the challenges of size and bring staff and students together in a positive learning experience is noted and appreciated. As one student writes:

*(John)* shows enthusiasm for his work and relates well to students.

And another:

*His teaching style makes you want to come back week after week.*