

Abstract

OPTIMISING THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE IN LAW: THE LAW PEER TUTOR PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

DOMINIC FITZSIMMONS^{*}, SIMON KOZLINA^{} AND
PRUE VINES^{***}**

‘One powerful notion that permeates the Law School at the University of New South Wales is that first year law has a significant ‘gatekeeper’ role. The School recognises the importance of identifying students who are struggling in order to offer appropriate social and academic support. Clearly, the vast majority of students are eminently capable of the conceptual work underlying a law degree. Students struggle for reasons other than intellectual capacity, so since 1997 the Law School has supported the Law Peer Tutors program as a way to address these other issues that can hinder students and lead some of them to drop out in first year.

Evidence suggests that this dropping out results from a feeling of not belonging or a general alienation from the culture of university. It appears that students who identify as part of a community remain and progress. First year is therefore a significant time to ensure that students are encouraged to identify as ‘law students’ and see themselves as connected to the academic community in general, and particularly to the staff and students in the Law School. The program is jointly funded by the Law School and The Learning Centre and uses a model of peer-to-peer tutoring to ensure students have a

^{*} Dominic Fitzsimmons is a Learning Adviser at The Learning Centre, and lectures in first year law at the University of New South Wales: d.fitzsimmons@unsw.edu.au.

^{**} Simon Kozlina lectures in the Law Faculty at University of Western Sydney: s.kozlina@uws.edu.au.

^{***} Prue Vines is Associate Professor and Director of First Year Studies, Law Faculty, University of New South Wales: p.vines@unsw.edu.au.

successful transition to university. It focuses on offering academic support, but via its small group structure has a social dimension which helps to tackle some of the reasons identified in surveys of students' decisions not to complete first year. Approximately 150 First Year students and 15 Law Peer Tutors are involved in the program each year.'