

Staff Experiences in the Victoria University's First Year College during the Transition to Block Mode Teaching

Humberto Oraison^a, Loretta Konjarski^a, Janet Young^a, Samuel Howe^a, Andrew Smallridge^a

Corresponding Author: Humberto Oraison (bert.oraison@vu.edu.au)

^aFirst Year College, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

In 2018, Victoria University created a new First Year College and moved from a 'traditional' university structure (i.e. 12-week semesters, with students studying four units/subjects concurrently) to an intensive 'block' model, where students study one unit at a time for one month. One hundred academic staff (76% full time and 24% part-time) were asked to complete a staff experiences questionnaire (15 items including demographic, close-ended and open-ended questions). Mixed methods analyses revealed high levels of staff satisfaction mixed with concerns about workload and staff pressures. Variations between 2018 and 2019 staff responses indicated that despite improved overall satisfaction, staff were concerned about awards and recognition, involvement in management decisions that affected them and support to conduct their role. As such this paper extends the literature that examines academic models and tertiary staff satisfaction feedback and experiences.

Keywords: staff satisfaction, wellbeing, academic transformation, higher education

Introduction

In 2018, Victoria University (VU) embarked upon a transformative and innovative approach to delivering higher education (i.e. tertiary) in Australia (Victoria University, 2017). VU set about developing and implementing the VU First Year Model (FYM), and this was supported by the creation of a multidisciplinary First Year College (FYC). During 2018, the FYC delivered 160 first year units/subjects with more than one hundred academic staff (educators) using the FYM, which encompasses block-mode teaching, supported by student-centered, learning and highly engaging three 3-hour weekly workshops (McCluskey, et al., 2018). The workshops comprise 'hands-on' activities and replace the traditional lecture/tutorial delivery. The carefully designed assessments are completed during the 4-week block and replace the traditional exam format. Each unit was underpinned by transition pedagogies including curriculum principles that address unit design, diversity, assessment and evaluation (Kift & Field, 2009; Kift, 2015) and engaging activities.

The curriculum and units in the first year across all disciplines were completely redesigned and re-developed to be highly engaging, blended (in person teaching supported by online accessible learning resources and activities) and student-focused within the block model. Many of the principles of the VU Model and the FYC were designed by embedding the ideas of transition pedagogies (Kift & Field 2009; Kift 2015) to facilitate students' passage from school to university life and later to employment. Staff worked in 'multi-disciplinary teams' to design and

create 'block ready' units that could be taught and assessed within 4 weeks maintaining the integrity of the content. It was an ambitious and exciting initiative that has resulted in increased student engagement, experience, grades and retention (McCluskey, Weldon & Smallridge 2019). The success of the FYM within first year units has led to its future implementation across all years of undergraduate courses at VU, beginning with second year units from 2019 and third year in 2020.

The First Year College

The FYC is a multi-disciplinary college that has approximately 100 staff from all disciplines. The reporting lines are multidisciplinary and the offices were randomly allocated, and some of these were by several staff, to ensure an inclusive approach remained. In developing the units for delivery prior to the commencement of the teaching year, a multidisciplinary team approach was adopted and staff from all disciplines supported and assisted each other in the planning of units, assessments and student-centered engagement activities. The multi-disciplinary approach and the establishment of a new college with a common goal has led to some positive culture change within VU (McCluskey et al., 2018). As the staff questionnaire (teaching academic and administration staff) results indicate, there was a sense of belonging and collegiality that was deemed important to most staff. The FYC also set up some expectations that further developed the unity through a common Final Friday. This Final Friday has become a highlight of FYC where all staff are welcome and look forward to engaging with their peers. On the final Friday of each block of teaching there is an all-staff meeting to celebrate the block that was, highlight academic teaching staff achievements (e.g. appointments, awards, publications, grants etc.) inform staff of upcoming key events/dates and administrative issues and set the schedule for the next block. This first includes finalising all student grades for each unit, reviewing the unit with each teaching team and finalising all student grades with a member of the senior leadership team in our learning management system online to be published and released to all students on the following Monday.

Psychosocial indicators of staff satisfaction

Sidik et al. (2017) conducted a cross-sectional study measuring staff satisfaction with 1042 staff in a Malaysian university. A survey was utilised to measure six dimensions: leadership, staff involvement, workload, self-development, working environment and communication (Filiz, 2014). Findings indicated a moderate level of staff satisfaction.

University staff may suffer from high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress related illness compared to general population samples (Winefield & Jarrett, 2001; Mark & Smith, 2010). Gillespie et al., (2001) found that work overload, time pressure, lack of career prospects, poor levels of reward and recognition, fluctuating roles, poor management, poor resources and funding, and low student interactions, expectations and job security, lack of communication, inequality, and lack of feedback were associated with stress in universities in the UK. Winefield and Jarret (2001) reported that 43.7% of university staff had high levels of anxiety and depression in a sample of over 2000 Australian university employees. In addition, these authors found strong associations between efforts, demands, control, supports and rewards, and depression, anxiety and job satisfaction and between coping and attributional style. Rewards, social support, job control, and positive coping and attributional

Behaviours (determined by personal perceptions) were associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety and high job satisfaction. It was also found that university staff were more likely to claim that workplace conditions had caused, or made an illness worse, and were twice as likely to complain of stress or anxiety and depression-related illnesses (Winefield & Jarrett, 2001).

Mark and Smith (2010) found strong associations between the traditional variables of efforts, demands, control, supports, rewards and depression, anxiety and job satisfaction and between coping and attributional style. Traditional university roles have gradually evolved from a primary focus on knowledge delivery with subsequent increased pressures, performance expectations and workloads implications for academic staff (Houston et al., 2006). The position profile of academic staff has traditionally comprised duties apportioned across the three areas of teaching, research and administrative services. In New Zealand, reforms have been implemented to link universities to enhanced national economic development and to make universities more accountable to government; students as customers; and the general population (Houston et al., 2006). University staff reported concerns with excessive workloads, unbalanced rewards systems and lack of support. However, staff appeared to be satisfied overall and willing to continue working for the university (Houston et al. 2006).

In a study across 17 universities and nearly 9000 participants, Winefield et al., (2003) found high levels of psychological distress and depression (particularly in academic staff) while the overall level of satisfaction was moderate and there was an overall dissatisfaction regarding promotion, management, salary and work conditions. These authors also found institutional differences in academics' levels of satisfaction, being higher for those working in 'older' universities compared with those working in 'newer' universities. In addition, the findings confirmed an increased level of distress compared to previous studies, higher stress levels for academic staff compared with non-academic staff and five key factors contributing to higher stress (insufficient funding/resources, workloads, poor management and reward/recognition and job insecurity).

Evaluating staff satisfaction through the transformation and beyond

Given the relentless degree of changes in the academic world and the well-demonstrated pressures to emotional wellbeing experienced by academic staff, the advent of the FYC prompted VU to conduct a yearly staff satisfaction questionnaire to monitor and gather the views of the staff during this transformation. Job satisfaction has been defined as "the extent to which people like or dislike their jobs" (Spector, 1997 p. 2). Mudrak et al., (2018) explored the relationship between the academic work environment and staff wellbeing amidst concerns of the global deterioration of working conditions and increased workloads. This study utilised the theoretical framework of the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) theory, using "comprehensive evaluation of key characteristics of the academic work environment and their relationships with multiple dimensions of faculty well-being" (Mudrak et al., 2018 p. 326).

Previous research has found that academics report high levels of job satisfaction despite issues with job demands and other stressors (Lacy & Sheehan, 1997; Catano et al., 2010). In one of the earliest academic staff evaluation studies, Herzberg et al., (1959) described a multidimensional model of job satisfaction that includes separate and distinct work related variables. Pearson and Seiler (1993) found academics were generally satisfied with their work environment but dissatisfaction came from specific factors such as management style, development opportunities, colleagues, being appreciated, autonomy, physical environment, work-life balance, and wage (Chung et al., 2010).

An exploration of the day-to-day experiences of academic staff is therefore an important consideration; given the implications on psychological and physical well-being, this is particularly relevant in the context of a newly created college and with significant changes in pedagogical approach (Bates et al., 2014). The current mixed method study explored these issues by adopting a questionnaire with a Likert Scale and open-ended questions to academic staff within the FYC at VU, to assess the extent to which the implementation of the FYC and Block Mode of Teaching may have affected their experiences as academic staff working. This is the first-known study of its kind to explore these issues since the introduction of the FYC and Block Mode of Teaching.

Specifically, two research questions were developed: (1) To what extent has implementation of the reforms changed academic staff's day-to-day experiences of teaching? (2) To what extent has the Block Mode of Teaching affected academic staff's job satisfaction?

Methodology

Participants

In March of 2018 and 2019, FYC staff were invited to relate their experiences in the newly implemented FYC. The staff of the FYC consist of 76 fulltime and 24 part-time academics; 45 Academic Teaching Researchers (ATRs, scholars combining teaching and research activities) and 55 Academic Teaching Scholars (ATs, scholars mainly focused on teaching). There was a 30% participation rate in 2018 and 48% in 2019. Responses were anonymous and therefore is not known if the same participants responded in both years.

Materials

The FYC developed a context specific questionnaire on staff satisfaction and experiences that was inspired from previous research (van Saane et al. 2003, Sidik et al. 2017). We sought to identify what had worked well for teaching staff, together with the key challenges faced in delivery within the newly created FYM. The questionnaire consisted of 18 items, including three open-ended items that allowed staff to respond in their own words about their work environment, successes and challenges. There were two demographic items; "*What is your role?*" and "*What is your employment status?*" and thirteen quantitative items answered with a 4-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4) (see Table 1).

Procedure

Every ongoing (full & part time) member of staff was contacted by email by the Dean and invited to complete a questionnaire via an online link. Quantitative data collection consisted of an online questionnaire conducted through a self-administered online survey tool- Survey Monkey. Staff were advised of the voluntary and confidential nature of the questionnaire as well as the approximate length for completion (20 minutes). The Human Resources Department at VU was responsible for the collection and collation of the data and subsequently reported to the FYC Dean in 2018 and 2019. Researchers obtained a full copy and transcript of the findings of the two questionnaires following a request to the Dean of the FYC.

Inductive Content Analyses

The inductive content analysis procedure (Patton, 2002; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) involved a series of steps designed to create a hierarchy of themes. The first stage in the inductive content procedure was the identification of raw data themes in participants' responses to the three questions asking them to provide comments about work environment, what worked well within their immediate work area, and some things that could be changed or improved. Raw data themes sharing explicitly similar meaning were subsequently grouped into higher order themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final stage of the procedure involved a grouping of higher order themes, expressing a similar idea, into a general dimension. In instances where higher order themes could not be meaningfully grouped into a more general theme, the higher order theme was carried forward independently.

All steps in the inductive content analyses were scrutinised by two of researchers who were knowledgeable in qualitative research methods. Any discrepancies between the two researchers in the identification and organisation of raw data themes, and subsequent grouping of higher order themes, were discussed. The two analysts consensually validated discrepancies and the findings of the content analyses were tabled as they related to strategic themes that emerged (Patton, 2002).

Results

Quantitative Responses Staff responses to a set of 10 questions about the FYC and work environment are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Staff Responses Relating to the FYC and Work Environment for 2018 and 2019*

First Year College (FYC) Agree – Strongly Agree Answer	2018	2019	Variation %
I am proud to tell people where I work	86.21	91.49	5.28
FYC motivates me to go above and beyond in my role	86.21	85.10	-1.11
I can see myself working in the FYC in 2 years’ time	82.76	89.36	6.60
I am very satisfied with my current job	72.41	87.23	14.82
I have confidence in FYC leadership team	93.10	87.23	5.87
I know what is expected of me at work	93.10	91.70	-2.40
I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right	93.10	87.24	-8.86
I find my day to day work challenging and interesting	100	91.49	-8.51
In the last ten days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work	96.20	65.95	-26.25
I am given the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect me	82.76	65.95	-16.81
At work, all my colleagues are treated with respect	96.35	87.23	-9.12
I feel that I have the necessary support I need to perform successfully in my role	88.89	82.22	-6.61
I feel I am coping with the new block model	86.21	84.45	-1.76

*The percentage of agree (3) and strongly agree (4) staff responses to each question out of a possible 4 point Likert-scale are reported alongside the percentage variation between years.

Table 1 shows positive and negative variation with a particularly large negative variation in relation to recognition and praise. However, there was a marked increase in job satisfaction levels.

Qualitative Responses

Three key themes were identified in staff responses in relation to their work environment. These themes are listed in the following table together with representative quotes.

(i) General Comments about the Work Environment

Teaching staff were also given the opportunity to provide comment about their work environment. Key themes and representative quotes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Staff general comments about work environment.

Key Themes 2018 & 2019	Representative Quotes 2018	Representative Quotes 2019
General satisfaction levels	<i>I am very happy with the roll-out of the FYC. I really like Andrew's (dean FYC) style, involvement and positive nature. I work with a team of Academics, ATs and sessional staff, it is a good team of hard working and considerate staff</i>	<i>Love the people I work with and the opportunities that I am given.</i>
	<i>I have never worked in such a positive university environment! On my first day, I called my wife (who is also an academic) and said, "I don't work at VU anymore, this is a different university!"</i>	<i>This is how it is meant to work. I hope other colleagues are getting as much enjoyment out of this workplace.</i>
Motivation	<i>A positive work environment that motivates me is a great feeling</i>	<i>The FYC is a really good working environment because of the professional staff are great to work with and we have a diversity of disciplines which makes for a more interesting workplace.</i>
Personal growth	<i>Starting from mid-2017 when I was involved in developing the block units, the work environment has been active, motivating and encouraging. I have been working with VU for more than 10 years. For the last nine months, I have such a positive feeling that I have never had before. I feel that I am now employed by a different VU.</i>	<i>I love my job and I am grateful for all the opportunities the FYC has provided for its staff.</i>

In an inductive content analysis process recommended by Patton (2002) and Braun and Clarke, (2006), three key themes were identified in staff responses to what was working well within their immediate work area. These themes are listed in the following table together with representative quotes.

(ii) What Worked Well for Teaching Staff within Immediate Work Area

Table 3. What worked well for teaching staff within their immediate work area.

Key Themes 2018 & 2019	Representative Quotes 2018	Representative Quotes 2019
Team Work and Collegiality	<i>The team work of our teaching team, always positive and willing to share ideas and be open to other ideas. I believe the student results will be exactly what we would have expected from a successful roll-out of First Year Model, engaged students improving their skills and providing vibrant classrooms, as opposed to sleepy lecture rooms</i>	<i>The teamwork and cooperation with teaching team members is working very well.</i> <i>A good relationship with your co-workers and admin staff.</i>
Student-focussed Approach	<i>Small class sizes. Active learning, Which is dependent on unit-knowledgeable staff... I think the materials are much more engaging, and it is great to be able to get to know the students by spending so much time with them each week.</i>	<i>Engagement strategies are working well, and there is student satisfaction.</i>
Critical Support for Teachers	<i>Having direct and highly approachable contact with the management of FYC. The support is second to none! ... Bravo for the project manager, the college senior management team and all the college support staff to manage such a large and new army of teachers.</i>	<i>Administration is managed extremely well in FYC, we have a close, supportive, open environment to work.</i> <i>Level of genuine support and a desire to meet goals of FYC is frequently evident. I like that I have autonomy to do my job – I feel confident that we are making positive changes.</i>

(iii) Opportunities for Improvement

In an inductive content analysis process recommended by Patton (2002), Braun, and Clarke (2006), the following key themes were identified in the teaching staff’s responses to things that could be changed or improved.

Table 4. Tell us about some things that could be changed or improved.

Key Themes 2018 & 2019	Representative Quotes 2018	Representative Quotes 2019
Clarify selected policies	<i>Clear policy for student extensions so we know what to tell them is the process.</i>	<i>Class size capped to 30. Bring back the hour break between sessions so as to enable a half hour lunch break. Typically students like to see their lecturer after class.</i>
Clarify ATS, ATR and Unit Convening roles	<i>Currently it feels like the ATR and ATS do the same job all round except the ATS does double the teaching and marking and is paid less money.</i>	<i>Too much pressure currently on ATS staff.</i>
Review professional development activities	<i>Professional development is readily available however, with teaching and marking and clashes with timetable it is very difficult to attend and contribute on a deep level.</i>	<i>The FYC is full of potential, but we have to work to achieve potential. We can enhance our teaching and our scholarship if we accept the need to keep changing, and enhancing our organisation and operation.</i>
Build communications and interaction with senior college	<i>Lines of communication and a healthier relationship between the Discipline (Senior) College and the First Year College.</i>	<i>Work on bridging the divide between the FYC and senior college. Possibly workshops on change management, inclusiveness, team building and effective communication.</i>

Reallocate office space	<i>Look at getting office space for people, putting people with the groups they are working with so they can collaborate easily.</i>	<i>Not having individual offices means that we have nowhere to work where we can be focused and not be interrupted. Having common spaces to foster a sense of belonging.</i>
Review scheduling of blocks	<i>A break between every second block rather than 16 weeks straight of teaching.</i>	<i>Timetabling should be able to provide the same classroom for full-time staff for am and pm classes so that the half hour turnaround time in packing up, moving to the next class and setting up can be used for a lunch/toilet break. For the timetabling team to see where staff's offices are located and to timetable classes to be within this vicinity to prevent any accidents from carrying teaching resources across the campus.</i>
Review scheduling of complementary activities	<i>Some students complained about the timetable clashing and limited</i>	<i>No comments</i>
Allow enrolment into multiple blocks	<i>I think students should be allowed to select 2 units in a block, say block 6 and block 7.</i>	<i>No comments</i>
Review workloads	<i>The workload is unsustainable. I have one day to mark 60 assessments. Even if each one took 5 minutes that's 5.5 hours of marking per week. Everything needs to be self-marking if we only have one day to get it back to them. The FYM means that we have less time to mark and provide meaningful feedback.</i>	<i>The University needs to improve pay and reduce workload so that conditions in relation to pay and workload are comparable to other universities. Transparency in workload and management of it needs improvement.</i>
Leadership Support	<i>No comments</i>	<i>The FYC is the best thing that's happened at any university for many years, not only for students, but for staff. Having</i>

		<i>a Dean who is open, available, approachable and who has your back, helps to make it an even better workplace</i>
Administration support staff		<i>Head of operation – administration) has been fantastic in doing the best she can to accommodate the timetabling and fulfil the requests of the staff.</i>

Discussion

This study examined staff response to the implementation of the FYC and Block Mode of Teaching at VU, specifically how the reforms impacted on staff day-to-day activities, experiences and job satisfaction.

Reforms' impact on academics day-to-day experiences

Workload implications was the primary challenge for all staff in the transition to block mode teaching with increased teaching contact time, faster turnarounds required for marking and continual updating of the learning management system online spaces compared to 'traditional' university teaching. Every unit delivered in 2018 in the FYC was developed by academic staff following the principles of success developed by Kift and Field, (2009). Using these principles in conjunction with developing engaging three-hour workshops was certainly a challenge and many staff worked up until day one of the semester. This was successful through the collaboration between a great number of staff as indicated below. It was a time of great innovation and discussion of pedagogy, engagement and assessment. The strategic key themes emerged from this study such as 'workloads', 'staff recognition' and 'opportunities for professional development' are consistent with previous literature that have identified workloads, rewards and opportunities as general concerns for academics (Pearson & Seiler, 1993; Chung et al., 2010). In addition, academics appeared to be greatly challenged by work demands during times of major changes and transformation (Bates et al., 2010)

Whilst there were many successes in the implementation of the FYC and the FYM, there were also many challenges. Major organisational change operates at many levels including process, structures, systems and institution-wide obstacles (Marshall, 2012). While the primary focus of the FYC and the FYM was to make the curriculum student-centered, while remaining authentic and engaging, the shift to block mode-teaching delivery has had wide reaching effects. Studies have demonstrated that universities that induct their students into the university culture, and teachers who support students in their transition to learning both new academic skills and their discipline environment, significantly improve the retention, success and satisfaction of students (Wilson 2009). Academics recognised the benefits for students and quality of teaching while reporting the additional demands on the work practices to achieve this success. To this end, the teaching staff are importantly positioned at the 'coalface' to identify the challenges, consult with

management, and subsequently implement changes that will continue to ‘rewrite’ best practice in the delivery of tertiary education (Lacy & Sheehan, 1997; Catano et al., 2010).

It is noted that a number of initiatives have been implemented since receiving information from the teaching staff in the 2018 FYC questionnaire. The second most frequently cited issue was the allocation of individual office space for staff who clearly and vocally expressed their preference for individual space compared with open and shared working stations (Gillespie et al., 2001). Baldry and Barnes (2012) reported that academics in Scotland and Australia preferred an “owned and controllable workspace’ (p. 243), opting for individual spaces despite pressures from institutions towards open spaces due to economic benefits. In 2019, there were still concerns about teaching and office space and, in particular, with shared office spaces as opposed to individual office spaces (Bates et al., 2014).

Staff also highlighted the uniqueness and innovative nature of the FYC ‘student-focused approach’, welcoming the new pedagogical direction with more engaging and active learning techniques (Kift & Field, 2009; Kift 2015; McCluskey et al., 2018). Finally, staff valued management and administrative support as a pillar that was critical for the team and collegiality of the college. Management was praised for ongoing training and support but, not unsurprisingly, there were some comments that indicated some expectations from staff were not entirely met (Pearson & Seiler, 1993).

Staff were given the opportunity to comment on ‘things that could be changed or improved’. Comments generally related to practical aspects of the role and day-to-day challenges. There were themes identified in 2018 that were no longer raised in the 2019 questionnaire (e.g., scheduling of student support activities and student enrolment into multiple blocks). Some of the issues appeared to be more generic to the university and in the context of the enterprise bargaining agreement that was taking place through 2019. Staff stated that workloads were sometimes ‘excessive’ and there were some aspects of the timetabling needing further modifications. These included overall teaching allocation, scheduling of breaks between classes on the same day, teaching two different units to two groups within the same one-month block and issues with class room allocations on the same day. These concerns appear consistent with those identified with academics across the world in other studies in Malaysia, Australia and United Kingdom (Sidik, et al., 2017; Winefield & Jarrett, 2001; Mark & Smith, 2010; Gillespie, et al., 2001).

Impact on job satisfaction

The thematic analysis of a second open-ended question targeting: *what worked well for teaching staff within their immediate work area?* elicited a strong support for ‘team work and collegiality’ in both 2018 and 2019. This was the strongest theme identified with 19 participants expressing higher levels of satisfaction in 2019.

The results from the FYC in 2019 suggested the teaching staff have, in the main, embraced, endorsed and appreciated their involvement in the block-teaching model. Notwithstanding, the teaching staff have highlighted that the rollout of this student-centered transformative initiative must continue to evolve (Kift & Nelson, 2005).

A comparison of the 2018 and 2019 data indicates a substantial increase in the levels of staff participation (30% to 48%). A possible explanation may lay in the desire of staff to voice their opinions on the direction of the FYC given its direct impact on their work satisfaction, wellbeing and career progression. This increase may indicate that staff felt that their suggestion in 2018 had received a satisfactory response from management.

In the terms of positive variations from 2018 to 2019, the largest increase was in relation to the level of staff satisfaction with their current job. There were also moderate increases in regards to pride about working in the FYC, expectations to be working in the FYC in the next two years and confidence in the Leadership team. There were 13 satisfaction indicators and 11 of them received a rating above 82%, thereby endorsing the FYC and the work environment. These results appear encouraging with higher levels of satisfaction than reported in previous research (Mudrak et al., 2018; Mark and Smith, 2010). Overall, staff reported high levels of satisfaction ranging from 66% to 92%. Further strategic themes identified were ‘team collegiality’ and ‘critical support for teachers’. These themes may account for the general levels of satisfaction and in particular, the high percentage of support in the qualitative data for questions such as, ‘I am proud to work for the FYC’ and ‘I am very satisfied with my current job’.

Two indicators decreased in 2019 and received only a 66% endorsement. These indicators were award and recognition concerns and being involved in decisions that concerned staff. This is in marked contrast with all other indicators. These findings are consistent with Gillespie et al., (2001) who found similar concerns with staff in universities in the UK. Winefield and Jarret (2001) found that, in Australia, academics’ concerns about rewards, job control and job satisfaction were associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression. A possible explanation for the variations may lie in the fact that 2018 was an extremely dynamic period of transformation (from lecture format in semester terms to workshops format in monthly block terms) into a new uncharted environment in the Australian academic context. 2019 was a more settled period with reduced opportunities for interaction with management and colleagues and the provision of recognition and praise. In the same manner, the results of this study coincide with Chung et al. (2010) that, despite high levels of satisfaction, academics reported dissatisfaction with the level of appreciation received. As reported earlier, Herzberg et al., (1959) outlined a multidimensional model of job satisfaction with different variables and this study results were consistent with this model’s approach as there were increases and decreases for different dimensions in 2019.

Staff reported high levels of satisfaction while having concerns about workload and rewards, these results are similar to those found by Houston et al., (2006) but differ from Mark and Smith (2010) who reported a strong association between job demands and rewards and staff satisfaction and wellbeing.

Qualitative responses identified in a thematic analysis of quotes from staff are consistent with the quantitative data. Three key themes emerged from the responses for 2018 and 2019 under the banner of *general comments about the work environment*. Firstly, there were comments about general satisfaction levels that reflected high levels of satisfaction and included words like “positive” and “love the people and work environment”. Secondly, staff reported high levels of motivation stating that the work environment and the discipline diversity were motivating and interesting. These reports are consistent with the answers to the quantitative questions about motivation. Finally, staff indicated that the changes provided opportunities for *personal growth* and recognised the professional opportunities in the new environment. There were no noticeable differences between 2018 and 2019 in this area. These results differ from

Winefield and Jarret (2001) as this study's results appear to indicate a high level of wellbeing in contrast with the UK findings.

Overview of the Findings

While the staff appear overwhelmingly supportive of the FYC and its pedagogical underpinnings (Kift & Field, 2009; Kift, 2015; McCluskey et al., 2018), there were some practical procedural changes that required ongoing adapting to the evolving circumstances.

In response to both the 2018 and 2019 questionnaires, the management of the FYC has minimised the allocations of teaching across two university campuses and different units within the same block for the same academic. In the same manner, breaks between classes on the same day have typically been increased from 30 to 60 minutes and there is a week non-teaching period given to all staff and students every two blocks. Some of the issues that were generic to the university have been addressed by the endorsement and signing of an enterprise agreement between staff and university management (e.g., clarification of roles expectations, workload requirements, salary and conditions).

Management has implemented additional initiatives in response to staff's concerns and suggestions. These included a FYC Wellness committee, Women in FYC group, a review of roles and responsibilities of ATS and ATR staff, a review of workload allocation across the year, access to professional development to support teaching staff and one-on-one meetings with the Dean for each teaching staff member.

While many Australian academics and institutions support the concepts and philosophy of transitional pedagogy, only VU has adopted institution-wide reforms and transformation in this area. This has entailed a strategic whole-of-institution suite of transition activities, including curricular, co-curricular and administrative support functions that are mediated through "the organizing device of curriculum" (Kift & Nelson, 2005, p. 232). As reported above, this transformation has impacted on day-to-day activities of academic staff increasing their work demands and workloads.

Limitations and Future Research

The 2018 and 2019 questionnaires did not seek to fully explore staff wellbeing and psychological health (but rather staff experiences and job satisfaction), which limit the richness and extent of these findings. Another limitation is the response rate, which, despite a significant increase in 2019, remains at less than half of potential respondents. However, the dual nature of the two questionnaires, and the congruency between qualitative and quantitative data, add credibility to the findings and further add strength to formulate recommendations based on these outcomes. Given the considerable insights gained, it is recommended to continue adopting a questionnaire on an ongoing yearly basis. It is also recommended that measures of staff wellbeing and psychological indicators are included in line with international research findings. This will allow expanding on the themes that staff have highlighted, with a closer examination of critical psychological health measures linking to staff satisfaction.

The main application of this research has been that the FYC management has implemented changes in response to the questionnaires' findings. Further, the questionnaires will continue to guide and prompt management decision in order to enhance staff satisfaction levels (Spector, 1997; Mudrak et al., 2018). While these findings have limited generalisability, given the scale, timeframe and delivery of the transformation at Victoria University, other Australian and

international tertiary institutions in times of significant innovation may use our findings to optimise staff satisfaction in times of transition.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present investigation was to examine the findings of the FYC staff questionnaires conducted at VU during 2018 and 2019. These evaluations provide insights into the experiences that VU academic staff encountered navigating through a transformational paradigm shift in how it delivers higher education. Other universities have expressed an interest in this transformation given VU's successes in improved student retention, grades, and satisfaction (Victoria University 2019).

In conclusion, this paper provides readers with a thought-provoking account of high staff satisfaction in a truly different and refreshing academic environment completely new to the Australian tertiary context. The critical significance of high staff health and wellbeing is that it likely materialises in improved productivity, student wellbeing and learning.

Disclosures

No conflict of interest is reported

References

- Baldry, C. & Barnes, A., 2012. The open-plan academy: space, control and the undermining of professional identity. *Work, Employment & Society*, 26(2), 228.
- Bates, E. A., Kaye, L. K., & Blewitt, J., 2014. Exploring the Impact of the Increased Tuition Fees on Academic Staffs' Experiences in Post-92 Universities: A Small-Scale Qualitative Study. *Education Sciences*, 4(4), 229–246.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Catano, V.; Francis, L.; Haines, T.; Kirpalani, H.; Shannon, H.; Stringer, B.; Lozanski, L., 2010. Occupational stress in Canadian Universities: A national survey. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 17, 232–258.
- Chung, K.C., Song, J.W., Kim, H.M.; Wooliscroft, J.O., Quint, E.H., Lukacs, N.W., Gyetko, M.R., 2010. An analysis of the levels of job satisfaction and life satisfaction of the academic staff differ? *Medical Education*, 44, 985–995.
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P., 1996. *Making sense of qualitative data: complementary research strategies*. Sage Publications.
- Filiz, Z., 2014. An analysis of the levels of job satisfaction and life satisfaction of the academic staff. *Social Indicators Research*, 116, 793–808.
- Gillespie, N. A., Walsh, M., Winefield, A. H., Dua, J., & Stough, C., 2001. Occupational stress in universities: staff perceptions of the causes, consequences and moderators of stress. *Work & Stress*, 15(1), 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678370110062449>
- Herzberg, F., Mausner, B., Snyderman, B.B., 1959. *The Motivation to Work*; John Wiley and Sons: New York, NY, USA.
- Houston, D., Meyer, L. H., & Paewai, S., 2006. Academic Staff Workloads and Job Satisfaction: Expectations and Values in Academe. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 28(1), 17–30.
- Kift, S., 2015. A decade of Transition Pedagogy: A quantum leap in conceptualising the first year experience. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 2, 51-86.
- Kift, S. M., & Field, R. M., 2009. Intentional first year curriculum design as a means of facilitating student engagement: some exemplars. In *Proceedings of the 12th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference*. Queensland University of Technology.

- Kift, S., & Nelson, K., 2005. Beyond curriculum reform: Embedding the transition experience in Higher Education in a changing world. Proceedings of the 28th Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia (HERDSA) Annual Conference (pp. 225 - 235), Sydney.
- Lacy, F.J.; Sheehan, B.A., 1997. Job satisfaction among academic staff: An international perspective. *Higher Education* 34, 305–322
- Mark, G., & Smith, A., 2010. Effects of occupational stress, job characteristics, coping, and attributional style on the mental health and job satisfaction of university employees. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 25(1), 63–78. <https://doi-org.wallaby.vu.edu.au:4433/10.1080/10615806.2010.548088>Marshall,
- Marshall, S., 2012. E-learning and higher education: Understanding and supporting organisational change in New Zealand. *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning*, 16(1), 141-155.
- McCluskey, T., Weldon, J & Smallridge, A., 2018. Rebooting the First Year Experience Higher Education. HERDSA (RE) Valuing Higher Education 2018 Conference. Retrieved from: http://herdsa2018.aomevents.com.au/wpcontent/uploads/sites/25/2018_07/HERDSA-Abstract_Book-2018-opt.pdf
- McCluskey, T., Weldon, J., & Smallridge, A., 2019. Rebuilding the first year experience, one block at a time. A Practice Report. *Student Success*, 10(1), 1-15.doi: 10.5204/ssj.v10i1.1048
- Mudrak, J., Zabrodska, K., Kveton, P., Jelinek, M., Blatny, M., Solcova, I., & Machovcova, K., 2018. Occupational Well-being Among University Faculty: A Job Demands-Resources Model. *Research in Higher Education*, 59(3), 325–348.<https://doi-org.wallaby.vu.edu.a:4433/10.1007/s11162-017-9467-x>
- Patton, M.Q., 2002. “Qualitative evaluation and research methods”. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Pearson, D.A.; Seiler, R.E., 1993.Environmental satisfiers in academe. *Higher Education*, 12, 35– 47.
- Sidik, M. H., Hamid, M. R. A., & Ibrahim, A., 2017. Descriptive analysis of staff satisfaction and turnover intention in a Malaysian University. AIP Conference Proceedings, 1842. <https://doi.org/10.1063/1.4982874>
- Spector, P. E., 1997. *Advanced Topics in Organization Behavior: Job satisfaction: Application, assessment, causes, and consequences* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi:10.4135/9781452231549
- van Saane, N., Sluiter, J. K., Verbeek, J. H. A. M., & Frings-Dresen, M. H. W. (2003). Reliability and validity of instruments measuring job satisfaction—a systematic review. *Occupational Medicine*, 53(3), 191-200. <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqg038>
- Victoria University, 2019. Annual Report. <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/annual-report-2019.pdf>
- Victoria University’s Transformational Agenda, 2017. A white paper on the future Of Victoria University. Available from: <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/white-paper-vu.pdf>.
- Wilson, K., 2009. Success in first year: The impact of institutional, programmatic and personal interventions on an effective and sustainable first-year student experience. Keynote paper presented at the 12th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education 2009 Conference: Preparing for tomorrow today: The First Year Experience as foundation.
- Winefield, A. H., Hapuarachchi, J., Boyd, C., Gillespie, N., Stough, C., & Dua, J., 2003. Occupational Stress in Australian University Staff: Results From a National Survey. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 10(1), 51–63. <https://doi- org.wallaby.vu.edu.au:4433/10.1037/1072-5245.10.1.51>
- Winefield, A. H., & Jarrett, R., 2001. Occupational stress in university staff. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 8(4), 285–298. <https://doi-org.wallaby.vu.edu.au:4433/10.1023/A:1017513615819>

APPENDIX

Appendix A – VU Staff Satisfaction Questionnaire

First Year College Feedback

As we approach the end of block one in First Year College, we are seeking your feedback on how it is going.

Your voluntary feedback will provide valuable insights into what is working well, and what requires improvement.

Your responses will remain anonymous, and the survey should take about 8 minutes to complete.

Question Title

*1. What is your role?

Question Title

*2. What is your employment status?

Question Title

*3. FYC - How do you feel about the following:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel proud to tell people where I work	<input type="radio"/> I feel proud to tell people where I work Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I feel proud to tell people where I work Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I feel proud to tell people where I work Agree	<input type="radio"/> I feel proud to tell people where I work Strongly agree
First Year College motivates me to go above and beyond in my role	<input type="radio"/> First Year College motivates me to go above and beyond in my role Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> First Year College motivates me to go above and beyond in my role Disagree	<input type="radio"/> First Year College motivates me to go above and beyond in my role Agree	<input type="radio"/> First Year College motivates me to go above and beyond in my role Strongly agree
I can see myself working in First Year College in two years' time	<input type="radio"/> I can see myself working in First Year College in two years' time Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I can see myself working in First Year College in two years' time Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I can see myself working in First Year College in two years' time Agree	<input type="radio"/> I can see myself working in First Year College in two years' time Strongly agree
I am very satisfied with my current job	<input type="radio"/> I am very satisfied with my current job Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I am very satisfied with my current job Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I am very satisfied with my current job Agree	<input type="radio"/> I am very satisfied with my current job Strongly agree
I have confidence in First Year College leadership team	<input type="radio"/> I have confidence in First Year College leadership team Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I have confidence in First Year College leadership team Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I have confidence in First Year College leadership team Agree	<input type="radio"/> I have confidence in First Year College leadership team Strongly agree

Question Title

*4. Work Environment - How do you feel about the following:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I know what is expected of me at work	<input type="radio"/> I know what is expected of me at work Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I know what is expected of me at work Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I know what is expected of me at work Agree	<input type="radio"/> I know what is expected of me at work Strongly agree
I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right	<input type="radio"/> I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right Agree	<input type="radio"/> I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right Strongly agree
I find my day to day work challenging and interesting	<input type="radio"/> I find my day to day work challenging and interesting Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I find my day to day work challenging and interesting Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I find my day to day work challenging and interesting Agree	<input type="radio"/> I find my day to day work challenging and interesting Strongly agree
In the last ten days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work	<input type="radio"/> In the last ten days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> In the last ten days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work Disagree	<input type="radio"/> In the last ten days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work Agree	<input type="radio"/> In the last ten days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work Strongly agree
I am given the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect me	<input type="radio"/> I am given the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect me Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> I am given the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect me Disagree	<input type="radio"/> I am given the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect me Agree	<input type="radio"/> I am given the opportunity to be involved in decisions that affect me Strongly agree
At work, all my colleagues are treated with respect	<input type="radio"/> At work, all my colleagues are treated with respect Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/> At work, all my colleagues are treated with respect Disagree	<input type="radio"/> At work, all my colleagues are treated with respect Agree	<input type="radio"/> At work, all my colleagues are treated with respect Strongly agree

Question Title

5. Would you like to make any comments in relation to your work environment?

Question Title

6. What is working well within your immediate work area?

Question Title

7. Tell us about some things that could be changed or improved.

Question Title