

TEACHING ADVANCEMENT AT UNIVERSITIES (TAU)

INSTITUTIONAL PROJECT

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PROJECT TITLE

Towards a Flexible Blended First Year Seminar at UJ

AIM

The First Year Seminar (FYS) is an important *rite of passage* for a first-time entering first-year student coming to university. Traditionally, the FYS has taken place in a face-to-face context at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). However, the context of the Covid-19 pandemic challenged a face-to-face mode of delivery and brought to the fore the potential that a technology-driven initiative can bring to the first-year seminar and experience for the new student at UJ. In 2021, UJ planned for a fully online FYS and in 2022 a flexible and blended FYS programme (i.e. face-to-face and online) that engaged and integrated the first-year experience and overall student success project at UJ. The aim was to offer an FYS programme that is socially just in creating an inclusive programme that enables first-time entering first-year students to become agents of change in their personal and academic journey at UJ.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The First Year Seminar forms part of a broader University Capacity and Development Grant (UCDG project) that fits into the Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI), which ultimately aligns with the teaching and learning (T&L) strategy at UJ. The FYS is well established at UJ. Currently, it is facilitated through the FYS office in the Academic Development Centre and is coordinated by the FYS committee, which is made up of faculty, the college, and support service representatives. Yearly, each stakeholder is included in planning the FYS. An institutional collaborative team oversees the processes and development of the programme that is delivered to approximately 10 000 first-year students annually. In 2022, the FYS was planned for a flexible blended mode of delivery after support for the project and buy-in was received from all Vice-Deans T&L, various committees, and support service divisions. Seven faculties and the college¹ participated in the FYS institutional project. Foundations for this project were well established through the FYS and Student Success Committees, where a good institutional rapport with the FYS Office has already been established.

¹ Faculties include Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment, Faculty of Health Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Science. The college is made up of the College of Business and Economics.

APPROACH

This institutional project team included the First Year Experience Office team, all the faculties and the college, and support service stakeholders at UJ. Our approach for 2022 included flexibility in the mode of delivery and a design that ultimately was underpinned by questions that facilitated developing a socially just FYS programme. We drew on a design thinking process to guide the rethinking and redesign of the FYS for 2022.

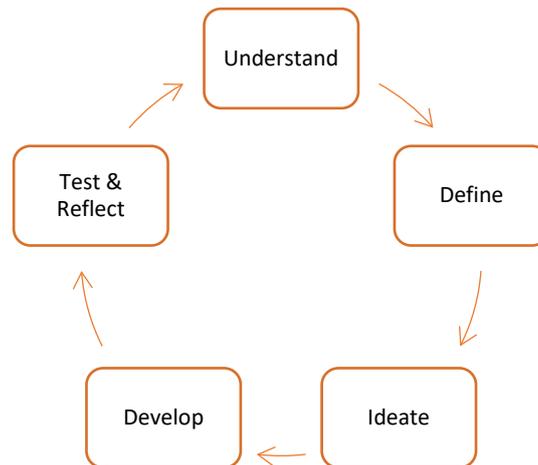


Image 1: Design thinking process for a flexible blended FYS in 2022

This process was guided by five principles:

1. Understand the problem and the people we are designing for.
2. Define the aim and purpose of the project.
3. Ideate by imagining a socially just FYS programme.
4. Develop an inclusive and accessible FYS programme.
5. Test and reflect on the mode of delivery and rethink if necessary.

Throughout this process, we created a space for dialogue through a reflective journey that enabled the opportunity for transparency, but also allowed for marginalised voices to participate in the creation of the programme. The team asked critical questions about the inclusivity and accessibility of the FYS, ensuring a process that empowers students in their academic and personal journey at UJ. This process also empowered the development of the FYS as students' voices were acknowledged by the faculties/college and service stakeholder representatives who reflected on their experiences and shared student feedback.

By January 2022, we redesigned eight online FYS modules (one per faculty/college) which were complemented by face-to-face (f2f) opportunities. Each faculty/college blended the FYS programme to suit the needs of their respective students. This journey was guided by continuous reflection throughout the design and development process.

ACHIEVEMENT AND CHALLENGES

At the first FYS committee meeting (March 2022) we collectively reflected on the experiences, challenges, and successes of the FYS in a flexible blended mode of delivery. Each faculty/college was encouraged to share experiences on their flexible blended first-year seminar journey between January and March. Successes across the faculties and the college were summarised as follows:

- The value of an online and f2f mode of delivery that allows for inclusivity of all students.
- Late registration students could still participate online even though f2f sessions were completed.
- The online module allowed for communication with all students at any time in the term cycle.
- Some faculties integrated the FYS into the T&L curriculum by drawing on tutors as mediators in the first-year experience process.
- The college called upon student mentors to guide this process.
- Some faculties (Education and Health Sciences) utilised both online and f2f to meet the varied needs of students in the lifecycle of a semester.
- The faculties and the college drew on innovative technologies to engage the first-time entering student in becoming part of the UJ community.

Furthermore, UJ did not take a blanket approach, so the extent to which the flexible blended model was incorporated, differed across the faculties and the college. The faculties/college with large student numbers opted for a dominant mode of online delivery and smaller faculties preferred contact with less reliance on the online mode of delivery. The online FYS modules were used in three ways: (i) to communicate with first-time entering first-year students and share support stakeholder resources/details with students, (ii) to engage with students on their first-year experience and allow feedback to guide support, and (iii) to share faculty/college FAQs, important processes and administrative information with students.

Challenges are illustrated in the data collected from the learning management system where the FYS modules are housed. Feedback from the data indicates that 75% of first-time entering first-year students accessed and participated in their respective institutional modules across the faculties and the college. Although this percentage is only indicative of the first-quarter participation, efforts are continuous and the data does not represent the interventions taking place in a contact mode. Although participation in the online mode of delivery is promising, the committee is raising important questions on the value of support to first-time entering first-year students and the importance of a feedback loop in the ongoing delivery of the programme in 2022. Critical engagement in the necessity of 'presences' of the FYS and the further integration of the programme into the teaching and learning processes of the faculties, college, and institutional support stakeholders need attention.

The ultimate challenge lies in the process of integrating the FYS into the teaching and learning curriculum within the faculties/college. For successful integration, faculty/college administration and support stakeholders need to closely align. Although

the foundation has been laid for the development and delivery of the FYS, a lot more work is required to integrate various processes across the institution to allow for a more holistic FYS programme. However, the process has come a long way in the rethink and redevelopment of the programme that is responding to the changes in context/s. The value of spaces for dialogue in the continued development of the FYS promises the growth of the programme, keeping the students and their success at the heart of the project.

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