Arts and sciences lecturer Ms Laurine Hurley, committed to welcoming new students to ACU National for more than 20 years, is one of five staff to receive Australian Learning and Teaching Council citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning this year.

**Helping first years find their feet**

Avoiding stress

Ms Hurley was noted for her “sustained commitment to enhancing the transition to higher education through improving accessibility to science, peer mentoring and leading the First Year Experience program”.

“Each year more than 5,000 students commence study at ACU National,” Ms Hurley said. They include first-generation university students, non-recent and recent school leavers alike, along with those whose first language is not English.

“Some students find the transition to higher education so daunting and overwhelming that they withdraw, while others fail to reach their potential.

“Students blossom when they feel valued and where it is safe to take risks and make mistakes, and I try to create such an environment in my classes.

“By encouraging students to see that it is acceptable, indeed expected, that they will need assistance in learning the language of their discipline as well as the content, I aim to help them not to feel overwhelmed.

“Most also have jobs to finance their studies, and they don’t realise that they can avoid stress by taking fewer subjects and spreading their load over four years instead of three, for example.”

Optimal learning

Within her own discipline, teaching science for nursing students, Ms Hurley takes care to point out the relevance of material the students need to know.

“All disciplines have their own particular language, but science seems to instil the most anxiety in this regard. This is often paralysing for first-year students, particularly, but not exclusively, for older people returning to study, or those whose first language is not English.

“Using plain English and skilfully explaining technical terms are the best ways to show students that the material is well within their reach. I ensure that I explain the roots and meaning of the language so that students can extrapolate and learn new terms easily.

“As their confidence in the milieu increases, so does their capacity to learn, retain and build on requisite knowledge. Helping students to discover their own optimal learning style, and to accept it as valid, is essential if they are to do as well as they can.”

A ‘joint endeavour’

An Excellence in Teaching Award recipient in 2004, Ms Hurley was invited to share her expertise with colleagues through the 2006 Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning’s teaching skills development through peer observation and mentoring program. In 2007, she was appointed national coordinator for ACU National’s First Year Experience (FYE) program, working with six campus-based local officers.

FYE initiatives include a University-wide Orientation Week program with general and course-specific introductions to higher education as well as social events and academic skills workshops for new students in each semester.

A popular web-based interactive Blackboard site, First Year Connect, makes resources available and allows all new students to overcome geographic and cultural diversity through using a virtual environment, and academic staff are given access to teaching resources tailored to the needs of first-year students.

“My focus as a University teacher for more than two decades has been to listen to, support and encourage my students and my colleagues in the joint endeavour of learning. It is gratifying to know that one’s efforts bear fruit.”