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Towards a model first year experience – a staff perspective

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The University of Tasmania (UTAS), like many of its mainland counterparts, is increasingly paying attention to issues of transition and the student first year experience. One initiative, the First Year Teaching Forum, devotes a day to staff (academic and general), from all campuses, to meet together to consider, discuss and pose solutions to first year issues. In 2008, staff attending the forum were allocated to interdisciplinary teams and asked to draw on their own experiences to propose models for first year at UTAS. The resulting models have been analysed to outline the major themes that emerged with a view to identifying initiatives and strategies that could be considered for future implementation.

Keywords: first year experience, orientation, transition

Introduction

“Students are at their most vulnerable in the first year in terms of their likelihood of academic failure and they are most at risk with respect to a range of potential social, emotional, health and financial problems” (McInnis, 2001, p. 106).

In 2001, Richard James edited a special edition of *Higher Education Research & Development* dedicated to the theme of the first year of higher education. In doing so he outlined the increasing focus on the first year experience (FYE) as a subfield of higher education research, and as a “central organising point for student support and development within universities” (James, 2001, p. 101). Eight years on, the FYE is still very much on the agenda for the higher education sector, and in much the same ways.

Attention to the FYE in Australia in the last decade has included national surveys and research reports (e.g., Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; McInnis & Hartley, 2002; McInnes, James, & Hartley, 2000), documenting of institutional responses (e.g., Ballantyne, Todd & Olm, 2007; Burnett, 2006; Cameron & Tesoriero, 2004; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001) and case studies presented through various fora such as dedicated conferences and journals, as well as more broadly in the higher education literature. A recent impetus to this field was the awarding of a senior Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) fellowship to Sally Kift for the project *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and enhance the first year learning experience in Australian Higher Education*. Adopting a case study approach, Professor Kift has interrogated good practice exemplars through expert commentary and theoretical frameworks in order to arrive at a set of ‘Guiding Principles for a Transition Pedagogy’ (ALTC, 2008; 2009). A recent forum (February, 2009), convened as part of this program, drew 450 participants, highlighting its relevance, impact and currency (ALTC, 2009).

The international situation very much mirrors the Australian picture with respect to efforts to enhance student success and reduce attrition. An excellent summary can be found in the recent report on the FYE out of the Higher Education Academy (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Drawing on the international literature, the UK report identifies a number of factors as critical in enhancing the FYE:

- an institutional commitment to student learning, and hence to student engagement
- proactive management of student transition
- treating the curriculum as an academic milieu, and also one in which social engagement is fostered
- choosing curricular structures that increase the chances of student success
- placing an emphasis on the first-year experience (including the provision of resources)
- systematically monitoring and evaluating student achievement, and acting on the evidence thereby collected
- academic leadership (Yorke & Longden, 2008, pp. 4–5).

With such significant (and ubiquitous) attention given to the FYE, it is tempting to ask why it remains an issue demanding of so much consideration, and why so many stakeholders (students and academic staff) are finding it so problematic. This question is clearly beyond the scope of this paper; however it would be remiss not to acknowledge that issues of FYE sit within the complex milieu of the higher education sector. Growth and expansion agendas of institutions, multi-campus and cross-campus teaching, increased use of eLearning, casualisation of the academic workforce, academic workload models, increasing diversity of student intake and voluntary student unionism all impact upon the FYE. The changing economic circumstances and resultant increase in students undertaking paid work (Krause et al., 2005; McInnes & Hartley, 2002) is also a complicating factor.

Like a number of its mainland counterparts, UTAS has experienced many of the issues that have impacted on higher education more broadly and the FYE specifically. Having actively pursued a strategic growth agenda in recent years, the 10,863 commencing students in 2008 has more than doubled from the 5,350 commencing students in 2001 (UTAS, 2009). Coupled with this growth has been a more open and inclusive entrance policy for many courses, resulting in an increased diversity of the first year intake. It is also interesting to note that UTAS, the sole university in Tasmania, has a significantly higher rate of access for students from low SES and rural backgrounds than the national average (Le Grew, 2008).

Over the past five years a series of initiatives have been undertaken at UTAS to enhance the first year experience. Early contact with potential students begins through a systematic approach to engagement with the secondary and senior secondary education sector and with the broader community through information and open days. Once students have applied for entrance there are information days, acceptance sessions and a dedicated enabling course (UniStart) offered both face-to-face and online to introduce students to tertiary literacies. Following commencement there are faculty and school orientation events; a program of student workshops and individual appointments offered through the central teaching and learning unit; dedicated student advisors in each faculty and; advisors specifically appointed to support students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In addition to these programs, there are also bridging courses that are tailored to prepare students without pre-requisites for specific first year units and a more generic University Preparation Program (UPP) for students who do not meet traditional entry requirements. Peer-to-peer programs also operate, including the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) and mentoring out of

individual schools and centrally through Student Services. In terms of staff support, many schools have designated first year coordinators who meet regularly, there is a Student Transition and Retention Taskforce and each year a dedicated forum is held to consider the FYE. Yet, despite these significant initiatives, issues around assisting first year students remain, with many academic staff questioning university entrance policy, resourcing and availability of centralised support.

Considering the institutional context, the annual UTAS First Year Teaching Forum in 2008 was seen as an opportunity to provide academic staff and other stakeholders in FYE with:

- an insight into the national perspective (through a keynote address given by Professor Sally Kift, Senior Fellow ALTC)
- an explicit outlining of support currently available at UTAS, and
- an opportunity to hear from, and question, key leaders in the FYE at UTAS: Pro-Vice Chancellor Teaching and Learning, Director of Policy and Planning, Deputy Head of International Services, Chair of the UTAS Admissions Committee, President of the Tasmanian Student University Union and a senior representative of the UTAS College initiative.*

*The UTAS College Model involves developing and implementing more effective pathways between UTAS and Tasmanian Senior Secondary providers (Le Grew, 2008).

The forum attendees, predominantly key first year staff, were then asked to develop their own ideal models of the first year teaching experience for reporting back to the Student Transition and Retention Taskforce. It is these models that form the subject of this paper.

Methodology

The First Year Teaching Forum held in 2008 was attended by 80 UTAS staff comprising 50 academic staff from 19 schools and 30 staff from faculty or central units. Following the morning program (outlined above), attendees were allocated to eight interdisciplinary teams of eight or nine, including both academics and staff who worked in central units. Each group had representatives from at least four schools. Participants were asked to draw upon their own experiences to propose an ideal model for first year.

In proposing their first year models, groups presented their ideas through a brief oral presentation and a summary or visual representation on butchers' paper. Each group was recorded during the report back, with their permission. The report back recordings were summarised to capture key features of the model, and the written notes were used to supplement and support these summaries. This constituted the data for the analysis of the models. The authors then read through the summaries and categorised the models according to their main, or underpinning ideas.

Results

Although interpretations varied, and included visual representations, each of the eight groups produced a model that could be described under the categorisation outlined in Table 1 (with number of groups whose models fell within each category in parentheses).

Table 1: Summary of the categories.

Category	Underpinning ideas
Pre-assessment/Pathways (2)	Students should undertake some pre-assessment and following this should be guided into appropriate pathways.
Orientation (1)	Emphasis should be placed on orientation to the University and individual course and study requirements.
Pastoral care (1)	Emphasis should be placed on pastoral care of individual students and systematic/dedicated follow through on student issues.
Teaching and learning (3)	Enhancing FYE requires a commitment to quality teaching and learning experiences.
Connections (1)	A systematic approach is needed that draws together different elements of FYE to enhance both the students' academic and personal life at university.

Two groups proposed models that were assigned to the *Pre-assessment/Pathways* category and shared a number of key features, beginning with an emphasis on pre-assessment for diagnostic or hurdle purposes. Depending upon the outcomes of this pre-assessment both models proposed either direct entry to UTAS or pathways that included University Preparation Program (UPP) or bridging courses into specific discipline areas (or a combination of both). Both models explored the idea of making pre-assessment and the resultant pathway a compulsory step, at least for some students. A second feature of both models was the idea of 'taster' courses to give experience of particular units or discipline areas prior to enrolment. Both models also saw support programs such as UniStart as being essential tools for student success, with one group also naming 'just in time' strategies for student assistance as also being important. The second group added one further element to the model that involved sharing of practice amongst staff.

In the model focussed on *Orientation*, the emphasis was on early introduction to the university and to the skills and experiences that would help students succeed. Although the model did include an element of pre-assessment and provision of pathways for students with identified 'gaps', the major initiatives included: early outreach into senior secondary schools; a dedicated first week to familiarise students with expectations and to allow them to develop strong networks; engaging and motivating experiences in the first week; academic mentoring; peer learning and; active personal contact between staff and first year students.

The *Pastoral care* model proposed that students should have access to more individualised attention to develop both their academic and information literacies and suggested monitoring (and enforcing) attendance in face-to-face courses or engagement in online courses. In keeping with the pastoral theme, a centralised system for students at risk or those requesting special consideration was proposed, together with ownership and follow up of student issues until completion. Building relationships through early contact was seen to be important, with greater integration between university and schools followed by initiatives to promote student engagement from the letter of offer. One strategy suggested to support this was the production a package that could be sent to all beginning students. The package would include an orientation video and key information about relevant contacts, common concerns and normal reactions to university life. This model also looked at spacing transition – not having it all occurring in the first week thereby reducing 'overload' and encouraged development of opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

Three groups described models where the emphasis was on enhancing the students' *Learning and teaching* experiences. The first group in this category declared they had focussed on teaching practice. They believed an important element was the 'happy teacher' motivated to teach first year students, interested in curriculum and prepared to continuously monitor and evaluate it. They talked of embedding generic skills into the curriculum (such as critical thinking and writing) but having a coordinated approach. This group also saw benefit in having a coordinator of first year across the institution in order to have a 'bigger picture' of all the opportunities for learning. They were also seen as being key to the facilitation of cross-university networks and being able to identify and address common issues. Provision was made for leadership through the learning and teaching centre reaching out to faculties, and the group's model also highlighted the desirability of organised fora for staff to hear from students about their experiences.

The second group in this category also led their presentation with a declaration that they valued quality teaching and learning. They shared, with the previous group, an emphasis on promoting a more coordinated approach across the institution and schools through leadership (a director of first year experience and coordinators in each school were proposed). As well as considering a 'happy first year teacher', they considered what made a 'happy first year student', listing identification and support for knowledge gaps (including in literacy and numeracy); equitable allocation of resources; course roadmaps; feedback on assessment; good facilities; and creating learning experiences outside the classroom as potentially contributing strategies. This group also saw benefits in having more interaction with first year students to workshop issues, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of teaching programs with a greater integration and sharing across academic units.

The third group included in this category did not see themselves as arriving at a model *per se* but described an underpinning principle of mutual responsibility. The four cornerstones they identified, however, can be seen to be primarily concerned with broader issues of teaching and learning. These were: to make expectations and requirements explicit and upfront; to maintain a student-centred approach but encourage emphasis on partnerships and shared responsibilities between stakeholders (staff, professional bodies, university and community); to make the curriculum work better and to critically evaluate current assessment practices for relevance and appropriateness; and to develop and implement culturally inclusive curricula to address student diversity.

The model categorised as being under the *Connections* category was represented by a Venn diagram with the student experience at the centre of intersecting circles of academic staff, support services and students. The group described the model as being centred on a series of desirable student outcomes at the end of first year. These were personal (enjoyable experience, establish a network of peers, to want to continue, and 'feel like university is for them'); academic (make a logical academic argument, understand connections between concepts/subjects, inform future experiences) and logistical (understand and confidently access uni infrastructure – policies, resources, IT, support). The strategies that were proposed to facilitate this were to have an O-week that did not require a choice between academic and social activities; dedicated first year lecturers and tutors; provision of engaging and motivating learning experiences over the first few weeks – giving students a snapshot of where they are heading, academic mentors and; active structures for consulting with students.

Discussion

In considering the models as a collective, it is evident that, despite differing emphases, there were many recurring themes. All groups gave consideration to developing students' academic skills, although this came through most strongly in the two *Pre-assessment/Pathways* models. The relatively narrow focus of these two models is interesting and, given that participants were asked to devise models drawn from their own experiences, may reflect staff in this group having experienced a number of students who are less prepared for tertiary study.

Interestingly, as the mechanisms of support and pathways proposed by the groups already exist at UTAS, it appears that the crux of these models is to ensure that prospective students are made aware of them, and encouraged to take them up where they are appropriate. This dual role of the institution and the student to make pathway choices to maximise outcomes has been previously recognised (Brennan, 2001). It could be argued that, with a relatively high number of students coming from low SES or rural backgrounds and hence likely to be first in family at university, the need to ensure students' decisions are empowered through information and dialogue is even more crucial in Tasmania. In this way, the *Pre-assessment/Pathways* models support the ideas raised in the *Orientation* and *Pastoral care* models for early contact and individualised advice.

Turning to the models in the other four categories, a consideration of 'academic, social and personal' (Tinto, 1987) can be clearly seen to varying extents. Traditional orientation in the sense of familiarizing students with the university environment (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001) was present in some form in each model, although more fully developed in the *Orientation* and *Pastoral care* models. Integrating social networking opportunities with orientation activities, as well as engaging 'tasters' from schools, were ideas that were picked up in more than one model. Interestingly, two groups expressed a concern that currently school-based or unit-based introduction or orientation activities and O-Week activities (run predominantly by student groups) often occurred in the same week limiting the effectiveness of either by forcing students to choose attending one over the other.

Attention to the personal dimension was most strongly expressed in the *Connections* model – this group wanted students to believe that 'university is for them' – and one of the *Teaching and learning* models espousing 'the happy student'. However, the *Pastoral care* and *Orientation* models also considered this dimension through advocating the developing of strong relationships between students and staff from early contact. Another aspect of the personal dimension could be seen as helping students make connections with future pathways and opportunities – or assisting in the development of a sense of purpose and direction (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). This too was picked up in several models.

The idea of building relationships with both peers and staff was explicit in four of the models and illustrates an understanding of the important social dimension in transition and as a support for tertiary study. This has been well documented in studies of the first year experience (e.g., Krause, 2006; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Yorke & Longdon, 2008). Use of peer-to-peer learning strategies and mentoring programs, again strong in the models, has also been shown to be an influential factor on both student success and retention (Martin & Arendale, 1994; van Meer & Scott, 2008).

The models were all strong in considering academic issues. The notion of embedding key academic literacies in first year units, or having access to extra support in order to develop

these, was raised in each model. Although some models looked at this from the point of view of student learning support – three of the models (from the *Teaching and learning* and *Connected* categories) described a need to develop students more along the lines suggested by Krause (2006) – that is, in assisting them to gain the skills necessary to making the transition into tertiary study; “learning how to learn in higher education settings” (p. 7).

Given that the keynote address was subtitled *A transition pedagogy for a mass sector*, it is interesting that there were no models that named curriculum development or pedagogical reform as an underpinning driver. However, aspects of the models picked up on these ideas through suggestions such embedding of academic literacies, providing engaging and authentic activities early in the first year experience, reviewing assessment and feedback and giving students some insight into where study in the discipline area may lead. There were also broad references to curriculum in four models, one advocating a need to ‘make the curriculum work better’, another two with respect to assisting students make connections between units. There were also calls for a greater integration between what is happening in curriculum units and other initiatives around transition and orientation. The case for strong leadership to enable this integration was made by several groups, calling from designated and recognised roles dedicated to the FYE.

In a number of models there was a strong sense of the importance of good teaching practice through advocating promotion of student engagement, provision of authentic learning experiences (that go beyond the traditional lecture), interrogation of assessment practice and engagement in ongoing evaluation of teaching and learning. Indeed, in many ways these suggestions, together with those related to curriculum, dovetail with an integrated transition or transition pedagogy espoused by others (e.g., Kift, 2008; Krause, 2006).

In terms of identifying strategies that would enable the enactment of these models, almost all of those suggested have been, are currently, or are planned in the near future for UTAS. For those undertaking leadership in the FYE, a major challenge therefore seems to be to ensure that successful initiatives are communicated, broadly implemented and steps taken towards making them sustainable.

Conclusion

This is a small and somewhat opportunistic study with considerable limitations in terms of generalisation. However, it is argued that by introducing a staff voice into the body of research and into shaping responses at institutional level, the capacity for all staff, not only those in central units supporting first year students, to gain ownership of the issues and resulting initiatives is greatly enhanced. Indeed, Tinto (1987; 1998; 1999) argues that successful responses to FYE issues should be university-wide with consideration of the specific university context and, importantly, should involve academics.

The models proposed at the First Year Teaching Forum reflect much of what is known from the literature as being important to enhance the FYE, and supported much of what is already being implemented at UTAS. However, the passion for continued emphasis on the FYE, displayed by the staff present at the Forum, clearly signalled there remains work to be done at UTAS. From our perspectives as academic developers, the spotlight on enhancing learning and teaching practice was heartening, as was the enthusiasm for student engagement. Nevertheless, the challenges of integration and coordination of first year initiatives in this multi-campus university, for both central units and schools, remain, and a holistic view of the

transition process must be taken into consideration. This view necessarily involves all the dimensions of student experience, and ownership of FYE issues by a broad sector of the institution, as borne out from Australian CEQuery data.

“Students’ total experience of university – not just what happens in the traditional classroom – shapes their judgements of quality, promotes retention and engages them in productive learning” (Scott, 2006, p. vii).

Revisiting the work of Krause (2003), three strategies were advanced for “progressing from the level of passionate and innovative...to informing and driving institutional policy and decision making” (p. 5) in terms of the FYE. These were: “coordinate” (within the institution); “communicate” (with stakeholders) and “connect” (with students) (Krause, p. 5). Creating spaces, such as the First Year Teaching Forum, for ongoing dialogue, sharing of and reflection on current practice and to provide the opportunity for stakeholders to create networks, propose and plan initiatives, is therefore seen as a very important step at this institution.

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