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Improving student transition by working with academics' conceptions of the student experience: academic development for organisational change

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A whole-of-university approach to student transition is essential, and academics' understanding of the realities of the student experience is fundamental to any such efforts. However, a review of the literature suggests university transition activities may overlook or gloss over the kind of academic development needed to shape academics' understandings of transition and thus to effect meaningful organisational change. This paper reflects on work done by one academic development unit to assist academics to improve their students' transition to university. Analysis of three different initiatives forms the basis for discussion of ways academics think about student transition, and ways academic developers can work with these understandings. The paper concludes with considerations for academic development practice that can make a contribution to a university's approach to student transition. For academic development to make a systemic difference to the experiences of students entering university, it needs to encourage, support and validate academics' active, evidence-based understanding of and response to the student experience.

Keywords: academic development, first-year experience, learning readiness, organisational change, student-centred teaching, student experience

Student transition: What has academic development got to do with it?

Student transition may be defined as the process students go through to become ready to engage in learning as they move into new educational contexts - for example, school-leaver to first-year university student, vocational program to higher education degree, education in one cultural and language setting to another, campus-based to work-based learning.

University support for student transition is characterized by a range of activities designed to foster such learning readiness. This university support is made more complex by the increasing diversity of the student population in higher education, including the US (Carey, 2005), the UK (Wingate, 2007) and Australia (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnes, 2005). Universities need to be systematic about using strategies that respond to such diversity and result in improved student persistence among all sorts of students.

There is a recognised role for academic development in initiating and designing programmes to support organisational changes needed for improved student transition (Hunter, 2006a; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). This academic development can occur in two key ways. It can engage individual academics to support change in their prevailing conceptions, attitudes and cultures in order to shift towards more student-centred teaching approaches. It can also provide models for change which are contextually appropriate and which are supported by university leaders and managers so whole-of-institution change is more likely to be achieved.

However, specific details about academic development for student transition are not well documented in research or practice. For example, in university planning for transition to first-year university, Kift and Nelson (2005, p. 232) note the need for “a usable practical staff development program” and Hunter (2006b) suggests a range of academic development approaches is required to meet the needs of academics from diverse backgrounds. But despite the increasing body of current research evidence about the student experience, we know little about how to help academics draw student transition practice improvements out of such information. Further, academics have been shown to lack “the time or the inclination to reflect on practice and curriculum as it relates to student non-completion” (Taylor & Bedford, 2004, p. 391). There is a need then for an academic development approach for student transition “that occurs as a consequence of situated social practices”, consistent with collaborative action learning for example, rather than being “event-based” (Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006, p.320).

To better understand what form such an academic development approach should take, this paper explores the capacity of academics to engage with academic development activities focusing on transition, and the effect such capacity has on improvements in teaching to support transition. The paper argues that effective academic development relies on academics having an appropriate set of conceptions about transition and student needs upon which to base their own learning and change. Hence academic development initiatives should include scope for academics to explore and challenge their conceptions of and assumptions about who their students are, about the student transition experience, and consequently what activities will support improved transition.

The paper begins by reviewing and connecting key themes in the literature that underpin this approach to academic development for student transition. Next the paper reports and reflects on three initiatives facilitated by a university academic development unit to support academics to improve the student transition experience. The authors’ own experiences with these initiatives are used to explore triggers, success factors and other considerations in such academic development. The paper concludes with recommendations for ensuring academic development for student transition has outcomes for the individual and the institution.

How does the literature inform academic development for student transition?

Important pointers to successful academic development for student transition can be gleaned from the literature, but often the connections among key themes – factors influencing the transition experience, student-centred strategies and conceptions of teaching – are not made explicit. We consider each of these themes in turn, making linkages that can inform academic development for organisational change in this aspect of university practice.

Factors influencing students' experiences of transition

Before beginning study students' persistence is influenced by personal backgrounds, commitment to the university and the goal of completing the program. Once students begin study additional factors arise such as academic integration, ability to meet academic standards and develop intellectually, social integration and engagement in the social aspects of the learning environment (Braxton, 2000, p. 2). A useful indicator for retention then is a student's sense of belonging and fit (congruence) with the "prevailing attitude, values and beliefs at various levels of the academic system" (Braxton & Lien, 2000, p. 24).

Student-centred university transition strategies

Students new to university undergo a change process in order to achieve learning readiness; a transition to the new learning environment must take place (Hunter, 2006b; Moxely, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001). Presumably, a strong sense of belonging and fit supports a less dramatic change process, and thus student transition is more successful when universities assist students through the change, using targeted resources and support (Hunter, 2006a, p. 5).

Universities can reduce the extent of change students must undergo for learning readiness by changing in ways which make them more familiar and accommodating to students. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2006) call for an "adaptation discourse, in which universities accept and recognize diverse learners' goals and cultural capital, and adapt their mores and practices to accommodate these in a learner-centred way"; that is, the university shifts its practice to achieve students' sense of congruence. They found "learner-centeredness improves retention where students feel they belong in an institutional culture, where they experience good quality teaching and support for their learning and where their diverse learning preferences are catered for" (Zepke et al., 2006, p. 598). A view supported by others (Carey, 2005; see Moxely et al., 2001).

Suggested strategies for universities to adopt learner-centred approaches for improved learning readiness include:

- active learning strategies (Carey, 2005; Trotter & Roberts, 2006) and giving students opportunities to 'learn to learn' (Wingate, 2007)
- comprehensive induction and orientation linking to learning expectations (Carey, 2005; Trotter & Roberts, 2006) and to provision of learning and student resources (Moxely et al., 2001)
- the creation of learning communities (Carey, 2005; Tinto, 1995)
- intervening when students' entry-level skills and knowledge will not support new learning (Levy & Murray, 2003; Martin, 1999).

The success of such university-wide strategies relies on the willingness of a critical mass of academics to engage actively in these initiatives. This in turn requires academics that are able to recognise and respond to the needs of transitioning students. Therefore academic development must first assist academics to conceptualise student transition in a learner-centred way, and then to apply student-centred teaching methods to support it.

Academics' conceptions of student-centred student transition

A pseudo view of student-centeredness may be found in academics' thinking about transition, which emphasizes the need for the student to change rather than understanding the need for the academic's attitude and practice to change to meet the needs of the student. For instance, recent research has found "an essentially student-centred view of non-completion" based on academics thinking that "initiatives to address non-completion should focus on helping

students to change, rather than on changing course design, teaching, or institutional practices” (Taylor & Bedford, 2004, pp. 390–391).

A more genuine approach systemically acknowledges the actual experiences of students and responds appropriately. When applied to academic development, this first requires an understanding that the student perspective of any experience is likely to be different to the academic’s. Specifically, working with ideas of student-centred student transition, involves academics in:

- overcoming a problematised or deficit approach to contemporary student diversity, “examining both their philosophies and policies in relation to diversity” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 13 of 16)
- using teaching strategies contextualised to the student perspective
- “[m]aking their expectations clear and explicit” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 13 of 16), and then
- sharing these meanings of the learning experience with students (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 1992).

Academics with the “most developed conception of teaching as ‘encouraging conceptual change’” (Entwhistle & Walker, 2000, p. 343) are likely to use more genuinely student-centred approaches to learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996, 1997). Academic development of student-centred teaching conceptions requires the provision of opportunities to practice these (Devlin, 2006; Eley, 2006) and reflection on past teaching practices (Eley, 2006; Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001), and may vary according to teaching context (McAlpine, Weston, Berthiaume, & Fairbank-Roch, 2006). Thus, for academics to improve teaching conceptions that underlie student-centred approaches to transition they must arrive at a sophisticated and articulated understanding of the experience of the transitioning student.

Three approaches to academic development for student transition

The work reported here was undertaken by an academic development unit (ADU) in a science and technology Faculty, representing about one-third of the teaching activity of a major Australian university. The authors had project management, unit management and executive academic development roles respectively in this ADU, whose work overall aimed to align academic development with institutional strategies and priorities, to collaborate flexibly with academic teaching teams, and to pursue outcomes that improved student learning. The three examples here represent a small strand in the full range of student-transition-related work of the ADU, but serve to illustrate a variety of approaches to and outcomes from working with academics and their thinking using situated social learning.

An in-context intervention strategy for ‘at risk’ students

This section tells the story of how an individual academic came to see his role in accommodating the students’ personal understanding of the learning experience as critical to the students’ academic outcomes.

An undergraduate degree program leader had indicated concern about low first-year student retention rates in this program and relatively high numbers of students identified ‘at risk’ at the end of their first semester. (‘At risk’ is a formal determination where a student has made unsatisfactory academic progress.) A number of teaching improvements in this degree program had been implemented in the past; however, no specific initiatives for at-risk

students had been tried apart from referral to a university learning skills unit, which had not resulted in significant change.

The ADU project manager was invited to collaborate in developing a new approach where students' learning readiness would be developed within the context of their degree program. The program leader identified a number of factors hampering students' learning readiness; including:

- lack of motivation
- lack of a personal alignment with the program goals
- little insight into the reasons for poor academic performance
- poor study skills
- lack of social integration into the program
- inability to be pro-active, independent learners and to seek assistance when required.

An intervention program of one-hour voluntary sessions for groups of 'at risk' students was proposed for the first five weeks of second semester. Developing this program involved exploring the degree program leader's understanding of these students' current learning experiences and possible improvements. For instance, the program leader knew students had been exposed to the concept of learning styles in a single orientation session presented by the learning skills unit, yet had not contextualized learning styles or made them meaningful for students within their actual degree learning experiences; this became one of the activities in the intervention program.

The intervention program was designed to build a social learning context, reflect on existing hurdles to learning, experiment with alternative approaches to learning, and make better use of available support resources. Each of the five one-hour sessions included a discussion of a specific study skill, a reflective activity for problematising existing learning strategies and considering new ones and an opportunity to review and discuss an aspect of the syllabus from the previous week's degree classes.

The intention was for all academics teaching first-year students to co-facilitate these sessions to ensure a discipline-based perspective (Wingate, 2007). However, similar to Wingate's finding, these academics were reluctant to "teach more than subject knowledge" (p. 396), so the degree program leader ran the entire intervention program.

Outcomes

In terms of outcomes for the 'at risk' students, all five voluntarily attended every session and all completed their second semester courses successfully. Furthermore they continued to pay informal visits to the program leader's office subsequently.

During and following the initiative, the program leader and the academic developer held regular feedback and reflection sessions. The program leader was surprised at the success of the initiative and may have assumed students were 'at risk' because of their innate traits rather than chiefly for want of learning skills and social development opportunities within the degree program.

From an academic development perspective, the most significant indication the initiative supported improved academic engagement with student transition was the change in the program leader's attitude. Developing and running the intervention program provided a new

way of engaging with students and understanding their different perspectives, as well as new insights into the benefits this could have for teaching. The program leader subsequently became a champion of transition initiatives and other academic development projects within the Faculty.

The evident success of this initiative suggests there would be merit in extending aspects of it to the first semester of the next academic year's transition program for all first-year students in this degree, with the aim of reducing the 'at risk' group for that year. This would entail greater engagement by all academics teaching first-year, to share the load, whilst at the same time it could significantly enhance social learning in context for students and academics in the degree.

A cross-discipline community of practice for transition support

The ADU set out to create a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002) that would bring together academics representing the ten Faculty Schools and ADU staff to discuss and jointly address student transition issues. Schools nominated a representative including directors of teaching and learning, degree program coordinators or early career academics; most had specific student transition responsibilities within their School.

In the first year, despite ADU efforts to convene meetings, the idea of a self-organising cross-disciplinary approach failed to gain traction amongst the School representatives and the Transition Support Network (TSN) did not get off the ground. In the second year the ADU successfully took a different approach, coordinating a series of four structured forums on specific themes. The ADU derived transition themes from TSN members' concerns and the group decided on four priorities: the first-year experience, articulation from vocational to higher education, the transitions of international students and students of non-English speaking backgrounds and student orientation.

To begin each transition forum academics, recognised by their peers for having tackled student transition issues, presented their own experiences of actively supporting students through transition and this was followed by discussion and questions. Most presenters explained how important it was to understand their students' concerns and issues first and how they became aware of these by actively seeking student feedback. Only then were they able to respond in ways that enhanced their students' experience, often building on enhancements over a number of years.

Outcomes

The new approach to the TSN was worthwhile based on better than expected attendance at each forum and on participant feedback collected. The two major outcomes reported by TSN members was the need to explore their students' experience of transition through gathering student feedback and that common transition experiences existed across disciplines.

That the TSN was successful in the second year after the failed first year may be due to a number of factors. The more structured model used in the second year may have been a better match with what academics felt their academic development needs to be; for instance they may have needed to hear from others before they were comfortable to share their own experiences. Also, the relevance of the TSN may have become clearer to academics as they were exposed to and gave thought to the Faculty's transition priority over time. Further, by the second year of the initiative relationships between ADU staff and academics in the

Schools had strengthened and the trust necessary for collaborative academic development initiatives (Elton, 2003) had started to form.

The TSN concluded its second year with a commitment to continue, but interestingly the themes of interest to the group had become more differentiated and more outcomes-focused than those of the first forums. It seemed as if the group was developing a more sophisticated and self-sustaining approach to its own academic development based on growing grassroots leadership in learning and teaching initiatives. From an academic development perspective this initiative demonstrates that a facilitated community of practice, focused on agreed priority themes, was able to identify shared experiences which then created greater shared meaning within the community.

An interactive poster about the first semester experience

This initiative offered a way to generate low-risk and low-effort interaction with the ADU about transition, amongst academics less likely to participate in more structured student-transition-related academic development activities. It took the form of an interactive poster entitled *The first semester: A time of many firsts* (Wahr, 2006), displayed during a day-long Faculty learning and teaching forum. This aimed to give academics an opportunity to reflect on their understandings of the first-year student experience in terms of types, timing and intensity of student experiences.

The interactive poster used 46 cards, each describing a likely first-year student experience, for example, 'the first time I answered a question in class', 'the first time I received feedback on a piece of assessment', 'the day I arrived in Australia' and 'the first time I went out with other students from my class'. Participants placed the cards on a week-by-week timeline of first semester at the point where they thought the experience would occur. Academics participated during breaks in the day's program. Up to eight academics participated in the task at a given time, either by placing cards on the timeline or by discussing the activity with others.

The interactive poster activity was repeated three times over the day. Each time the timeline was completed it showed the majority of the cards clustered within the first two weeks of the semester. In some instances, academics reported some cards did not apply to their students (for example, the card which read 'the first time I had an accident in the lab'). The card which read 'the day I arrived in Australia' was often placed at week 2 of semester suggesting academics had observed international students experiencing difficulties in starting the semester alongside their local peers. In general, the academics chatted and joked whilst participating, appearing to enjoy working in casual groups to complete the activity.

Outcomes

Academics' comments which arose from the activity and discussion provide insights as to how they understand transition. Whilst some academics found the timeline as expected, a number of others expressed surprise and commented they had underestimated the intensity and the demands of becoming a university student. They commented on the number of new experiences in the first few weeks, the personal significance of these new experiences, the competing nature of personal and academic experiences and that those new experiences continued across first semester. Significantly, many academics commented they could and should adjust their teaching to accommodate the student experience as they now better understood it.

These responses to the activity and the resulting discussion demonstrated that academics' perceptions of student transition might be significantly different from the actual student experience, in several respects. Their understandings might be idealised (possibly influenced by how they remember their own university experience), rather than reflect the actual experience of current students. They might understand a 'limited' student transition experience focusing on study-related experiences only and might not consider the broader student experience. They might not be fully aware of the emotional intensity students might be experiencing. Finally, they might assume that because students have met the academic prerequisites for a course of study they are 'learning-ready', when in fact this might not be the case and proactive transition initiatives might help many more students.

The peer-based, cross-discipline discussion during the activity suggested it prompted these academics to reflect on their students' first semester experiences. This may have challenged some academics' understandings about the student experience; for others it may have confirmed theirs. Either way, the discussion indicated the activity effectively engaged these academics on the subject of their understandings of the student transition experience as a necessary precursor for them to be able to make meaningful changes to their teaching and other ways of engaging with students. From an academic development perspective this suggests initiatives that put academics 'in the shoes' of their students, and which are visual, low-key and fun and relate transition to the learning and teaching cycle, may prepare academics to change their practice.

Academic development for systemic improvement in student transition

These three examples enlarge the picture of how academic developers can work to improve academic engagement with student transition and may advance theory and practice in this area. Our experience in these academic development initiatives supports the argument that academics need to explore their understandings and assumptions about the student experience to be able to formulate a truly student-centred approach to teaching. It also points the way for academic developers to work with university leaders to create the conditions for this to occur. We now translate reflections on our experience into a set of recommendations that may help to inform the efforts of others working in academic development for student transition.

Formal academic development with academics is needed to improve student transition. Other academic development initiatives and university initiatives may touch on the issues but not in sufficient depth to bring about change. Nor will this kind of academic development occur spontaneously among academics; it must be recognised and documented in academics' workplans and teaching portfolios.

Student transition must be an academic development priority with explicit objectives, programming and resourcing. Academic developers have to do much more than simply help out with short-term orientation programs. Facilitators of formal academic programs for student transition need a sound understanding of the conceptual bases of the work and must be able to describe its aims and outcomes.

Academic development must create opportunities for academics to construct new understandings of the student transition experience. Academic development initiatives need to acknowledge existing academic understandings and misunderstandings as the starting point for improvements in teaching practice and ongoing scholarship of teaching.

Academic development needs to create a supportive environment for personal change. An important precursor to facilitating the risky business of academics' conceptual change about student transition is an academic development track record of trusting relationships, sustained support, professional integrity and confidentiality.

Peer learning about student transition must be a key part of academic development. Putting the onus onto academics within teams and across functional areas to reflect critically on the diversity in their collective attitudes and beliefs about transition can be a powerful part of readying them to change their practices.

Academic development for student transition needs to be flexible and customisable. There are 'academic development moments' in the history of the university and the life of a School. Just-in-time initiatives in formats that take advantage of working with academics when they are most likely to give their full attention are likely to be most effective.

Academic developers need to use their insights into the academics perspective on the student experience to alert university leadership about what is required to improve student transition. This includes informing academic development strategies but also ensuring issues are addressed appropriately in other aspects of institutional learning and teaching strategies and policies.

Conclusion

For academic development to make a systemic difference to the experiences of students entering university, it needs to encourage, support and validate academics' active, evidence-based understanding of and response to the student experience. This paper has identified guidance but also gaps in the literature on academic development with respect to student transition, and has offered examples of improving academic understanding and practice through various academic development initiatives. Our experience is deliberately varied approaches to academic development with the common element of starting from academics' conceptions of student transition can make a difference to academics' ability to improve the student experience. In order to develop truly student-centred academics, academic development initiatives need to take much more account of upstream factors affecting academics' engagement in thinking deeply about the student experience, thus enabling them to better empathise with students of today. This aspect of academic development warrants further evaluation and research with respect to transition and other aspects of student-centred teaching.

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