

# **Transition to and through the first year: Strategies to enhance the student experience**

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## **Introduction**

The subject of the first year experience has received growing attention over the past decade in Australian higher education. At enrolment time, around February or March each year, newspaper articles abound with advice for students entering university. Every university in the country boasts some kind of first year support for students, whether in the form of 'orientation to university' activities, or more substantial transition programs.

While much emphasis is usually placed on transition *to* university, relatively limited attention is given to the issue of transition *through* the first year. When the hype of orientation subsides and the initial sources of good advice disappear, what can be done to enhance the quality of the student experience through the first year? This is the subject of the present paper.

## **Common misconceptions about the first year**

To frame discussion of these issues, I propose to challenge five common misconceptions about the first year in higher education. These are:

1. the first year begins at enrolment
2. once we orient students, the task is complete
3. the first year experience is homogeneous: one size fits all
4. first year issues are student support issues
5. first year enrollees evolve into engaged university students just by being part of the university environment.

## **Challenging misconceptions with evidence-based practice**

### ***Misconception 1: the first year begins at enrolment***

Typically, the university experience is deemed to begin when students arrive on their campus to enrol. Increasingly we are realising that this narrow view of the first year fails to take account of the many factors that shape student aspirations and expectations regarding university study prior to enrolment. In the case of under-represented groups in higher education, such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, or those who are first in their family to attend university, the first taste of university should begin in the early years of primary school, if not before. The first year of university is, in fact, the culmination of years of socialisation and shaping of an individual's views about whether or not university study is something to which they can and should aspire.

As part of targeted institutional equity initiatives, many Australian universities have active programs of outreach into communities that are typically under-represented in higher education. These include rural communities, indigenous communities and the like. Some programs involve regular visits to schools – both primary and high school – in efforts to introduce the idea of university study to students who may never have aspired to do so. Other programs involve working with careers advisers to inform them of scholarships and support available to students entering the first year of university. The most successful of these programs involve an integrated approach, with student representatives (ambassadors), student

support staff and academic staff working together with university recruitment personnel, where appropriate, to present a holistic view of the university experience. Current students should be encouraged to play a significant role as mentors and guides for younger students considering the option of university study. Student support staff are key sources of information for students and their parents about such matters as housing and financial options. Academic staff play an important part in bridging the gap between school and university study. They may provide discipline-specific information, or they may talk more generally about teaching and learning styles at university. In this way, a more seamless and representative picture of university life is depicted for students who may never have set foot on a university campus or considered it a viable option.

Awareness raising, expectation shaping, and aspiration building activities thus begin well before enrolment day. In addition to making personal contact with individuals, their schools, families and communities, universities may adopt more active marketing strategies via brochures or websites. This is particularly the case for the recruitment of international students. However, many universities are also adopting an approach of non-institution-specific aspiration-raising activities as part of a socially responsible approach to encouraging students from disadvantaged and under-represented demographic subgroups to consider the option of university study, no matter what the institution.

This more expansive view of the first year experience, as something that takes root in the lives of future students well before enrolment day, has significant implications for institutional priorities and activities. It means targeting under-represented groups in your university and developing medium- and long-term strategies for reaching young people in such groups in a variety of ways. Importantly, it also involves planning for student transition to the first year by drawing on the expertise of the whole learning community, including current students, academic and support staff, and other key players.

### ***Misconception 2: once we orient students, the task is complete***

It is true that orientation programs play a very important part in introducing students to each other, to university staff and to the campus. In the national study of the first year experience (Krause et al., 2005) we sought student feedback on the perceived impact of orientation programs on their experience and sense of belonging within the university community. Almost half of the first years believed that the orientation programs they had attended provided them with a good introduction to the university. Somewhat fewer students (40 per cent) felt that these programs helped them to develop a sense of belonging in the university community. Perhaps more concerning is the view of a quarter of the students sampled that the orientation programs did not play a role in helping them to feel that they belonged at university.

Institution-level orientation programs are most successful if accompanied by department or faculty-based initiatives designed to support students within their disciplinary subgroups. In addition to providing orientation programs, institutions can enhance students' engagement with learning by ensuring that they receive adequate advice about subject choices, thereby working to ensure that students find themselves in courses about which they are well informed and prepared. The majority of students were satisfied with the subject choices they had made. However, one-third said they did not receive helpful advice in this respect and a quarter were dissatisfied with the range of subject choices they had at the start of their first year. If students perceive that they have been well advised academically and feel satisfied with their choices, they are more likely to be committed to their studies and academically engaged. Table 1 provides a number of other indicators of student engagement with the university. A fuller discussion of this table can be found in the full report, available online.

**Table 1 Indicators of student engagement with university, 1994-2004 (% of students)**  
(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609; 2004, N=2344)

		Disagree		Agree
I was given helpful advice when choosing my subjects/units	2004	34	33	33
I am satisfied with the subject choices I made this year	2004	12	27	61
I was satisfied with the range of subjects/units from which I could choose this year	2004	25	26	49
I feel like I belong to the university community	2004	16	33	51
I really like being on my university campus	2004	12	28	60
I really like being a university student	1994	8	18	74
	1999	7	19	74
	2004	8	17	75
I am not particularly interested in the extra-curricular activities or facilities provided	1994	44	28	28
	1999	43	31	27
	2004	37	31	32* <sup>1 2</sup>

\* significant at .01 \*\* significant at .05 <sup>1</sup> Denotes significant change 1999 to 2004. <sup>2</sup> Denotes significant change 1994 to 2004.

These indicators challenge the notion that successful transition is achieved through orientation activities alone. Transition is an ongoing process of developing an identity as a university student, of engaging with peers, staff and the university community. This takes time and must be carefully planned through coordinated efforts within academic departments and student support units, not to mention the student union organizations that play such a critical role in engaging students in sporting and club activities and the like. Ideally, an institution should encourage discussion among staff across these areas as a way of encouraging a seamless transition experience for students.

### ***Misconception 3: the first year experience is homogeneous: one size fits all***

It was once the case that the phrase 'first year experience' was used to depict a relatively common set of experiences characterising most students entering higher education. Over the past decade, the massification of the sector has meant that the first year is experienced in diverse ways by diverse groups of students. A one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and supporting students in the first year is far from adequate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century generation of university students.

To challenge this misconception, I will provide a brief sketch of what the research tells us about the varied experiences of three demographic subgroups in higher education: students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, mature age students, and international students. Data are drawn primarily from the national study of the first year experience (Krause et al., 2005).

#### ***i. The effects of socioeconomic background***

There are continuing social disparities in the access to and participation in Australian higher education. Australians from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are far less likely to participate in higher education than Australians from higher or medium socioeconomic backgrounds. These imbalances have persisted despite a national equity policy framework and the sustained efforts of universities in offering a variety of access programs (Coates & Krause, 2005). For the first year project we explored whether or not there were any patterns of student response according to their socioeconomic background, though we were aware that the available data on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds shows that while access rates are lower, students once enrolled have broadly comparable rates of success, retention and completion (James et al., 2004).

The 2004 first year experience data were analysed using the postcode definition of socioeconomic status (SES). There were many demographic differences between the high and low SES groups. The high SES students were disproportionately male and the low SES students were disproportionately female. As expected, parental education levels were significantly higher for the high SES group compared with the low SES group. Students from low SES backgrounds in the sample were more likely to be the first in their family to attend university. The high SES students were more likely to be enrolled in combined degrees and to have paid their Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) payments at enrolment (as opposed to opting for deferred payments).

There were differences in the patterns of part-time work across the SES groups. The high SES students were the most likely to report that part-time work was their main or only source of income (39 per cent, compared with 24 per cent of low SES students). Overall, 67 per cent of high SES students were undertaking paid work of some kind, compared with 60 per cent for low SES students. A high proportion of the employed students reported that the work allowed them to afford extras. This was more likely to be the principal motivation for high SES students (84 per cent reported this), whereas the low SES students were more likely to indicate that they worked part-time in order to meet their basic needs (68 per cent). The low SES students were more likely to indicate that money worries made it difficult for them to study.

Students across the SES subgroups reported similar levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and expressed similar levels of enjoyment with their university experience. Nevertheless, the lower SES students were more likely to say that they had difficulty comprehending the material and had difficulty adjusting to the style of university teaching. They were also more likely to report that their parents had little understanding of their university lives. The value of committing time and resources to academic transition throughout the first year is undeniable. Students, particularly those for whom the university culture is alien, need to be oriented to the disciplinary conventions as well as the learning and teaching styles that characterise the culture of universities. These issues are discussed further in the next section.

### ***ii. The influence of age***

For the first time in 2004, the transition experiences of mature age students in the first year were reported in some depth. These students emerged as a highly satisfied group on the whole. They typically received higher marks than their younger peers, and were slightly more positive about the way university had met their expectations. They tended to have strong clarity of purpose and were more likely to seek assistance from staff. However they typically kept to themselves at university and were less interested in extracurricular activities than were younger students.

The 19 year old school-leavers were more likely to be of higher socioeconomic background. The students 25 years and over were more likely to be the first in their family to have attended university. Predictably, the older students were more likely to be enrolled part-time and more likely to be enrolled by distance education. The attitudinal differences across the age groups were marked. The older students were very focused on their study. They indicated clear sets of goals and expressed fewer concerns about motivation to study. They also expressed high levels of satisfaction with their study and indicated they enjoyed the intellectual challenge of their courses. Table 2 summarises some of the main areas of contrast in the attitudes of school-leavers and mature-age students (25 years and over).

**Table 2 Comparison of the attitudes of school-leavers<sup>a</sup> and mature-age students (25 years +)**

School-leavers (age 19 years) are more likely to:	Mature-age students (age 25 years and over) are more likely to:
Be marking time while they decide their future	Have a strong clarity of purpose
Find it difficult to get motivated to study	Be motivated to develop talents and to be confident they know the occupation they want
Skip classes	Find their course stimulating and get satisfaction from studying
Wish to change courses	Find lectures stimulating
Have made close friends at university	Seek assistance from staff and believe they are receiving helpful feedback
Work collaboratively with other students and borrow notes from others	Be strategic about managing their workload
Like being on campus and be active in extracurricular activities	Keep to themselves at university and be uninterested in extracurricular activities

<sup>a</sup> school-leavers are those who successfully complete high school study before making the transition to university.

The responses of the older students indicated they were strategic students who often worked independently. They were far less likely to borrow course notes than their younger peers, and were less likely to engage in collaborative study. Mature-age students were less likely to report that they used web-based resources and were more likely to report that they kept to themselves at university (39 per cent compared with 26 per cent). Overall, students aged 25 years and over emerged as a highly satisfied group. They expressed strong satisfaction with their courses and believed they were receiving helpful feedback from their teachers. Mature age students were also a highly engaged group. They emerged as a group with clear goals, they worked consistently, they enjoyed the teaching and learning process and the challenges associated with it.

Nevertheless, the relative lack of social engagement with peers in the learning community among mature age students is a reason for close monitoring of this group. Despite the positive learning experiences and strategic self-analyses, mature age students also have a tendency to feel disengaged from social networks on campus. During times of stress, uncertainty or self-doubt, such connections become a particularly powerful means of building resilience (Krause, 2005). Collaboration with peers in academic contexts is also an important means of developing problem-solving and team-building skills, and of cognitive skill development. If these experiences are largely missing from the mature-age student experience, this is a cause for concern.

### ***iii. The unique experiences of international students***

The threefold increase during the past decade in the proportion of fee-paying overseas students has been one of the most significant changes to occur within the Australian higher education system. The patterns of the responses of international students to the first year survey reflect numerous concerns that have been raised during recent years associated with student adjustment, academic progress and the overall quality of their university experience.

The signs of academic stress experienced by international students during their first year at an Australian campus are unambiguous:

- the international students were significantly less likely to indicate that orientation programs helped them make a good start to university (in part a possible sign of problems caused by arrival times near the start of the academic year);
- forty per cent of the international students reported they had difficulty comprehending course material compared with 21 per cent of domestic students;
- close to half of the international students were receiving grades lower than they had expected;

- the international students reported considerably more discomfort in participating in class discussions (31 per cent compared with 20 per cent — a finding related to differing pedagogical expectations and experiences); and
- 46 per cent of the international students found the workload too heavy, compared with 30 per cent of domestic students.

Overall, 56 per cent of international students found the academic standard higher than they expected compared with only 39 per cent of domestic students. One of the worrying signs in the 2004 dataset was the apparently lower level of social integration of international students. Fewer international students reported feeling part of a group committed to learning (46 per cent compared with 56 per cent of domestic students), and fewer experienced a sense of belonging (35 per cent compared with 52 per cent of their local peers). Fewer were confident that a staff member knew their name and fewer believed staff took an interest in their progress. Generally, the international students were more critical of the teaching and, significantly from a policy perspective, 46 per cent of the international students reported that university had not lived up to their expectation (compared with 27 per cent of domestic students).

A far larger proportion of the international students said that their families were their main source of income, and international students were more likely than their domestic counterparts to report they felt pressured by financial commitments (40 per cent compared with 23 per cent). This finding may indicate that international students were particularly concerned about the financial commitments their families had made on their behalf. Certainly, parental expectations figured more highly in the thinking of international students than they did for domestic students. The distinctive experiences of international students once again draw attention to the importance of considering the complementary roles of both social and academic experiences in contributing to the quality of the first year.

#### ***Misconception 4: first year issues are student support issues***

In some universities, the first year experience is seen as an administrative issue that is best addressed by student support staff and a range of social activities during the first week of the students' encounter with the university. Notwithstanding the vital importance of students' social experiences and the support services available to them, transition to first year should first and foremost be viewed in terms of academic transition. As we have seen, students from low SES backgrounds are more likely than their higher SES peers to comment on the difficulty of adjusting to the university style of teaching. They also report that their parents have little understanding of what study is all about. In many cases, this can be attributed to the fact that students from low SES backgrounds are more likely to be first generation students, some of whom also come from rural areas where going to university is a relatively uncommon path to pursue. Similarly, international students studying in Australian universities for the first time comment on the mismatch between their expectations and the reality of university study. They refer to difficulties they face in adjusting to the learning and teaching styles and assessment requirements in Australian universities.

These are issues of profound importance in the first year. They point to the significant role to be played by academic staff who need to scaffold student learning and adjustments to the demands of study during the first year. This is not to diminish the importance of student support staff and learning advisers – ideally they should be working in partnership with academic staff. For instance, some academics invite learning skills advisers into their lecture theatres to provide strategies and advice on preparing for the first major assignment. This is a critical milestone for first year students and often assignments can be a catalyst in students' decision-making about whether or not they are suited to university study (Krause, 2001). Resources from as many quarters as possible should be gathered to support students at this phase, but the academic staff member is pivotal to making this happen.

Student support staff and faculty or department-based transition officers may also assist by helping to establish student study groups and peer-assisted learning programs. The partnership of student support and academic staff is vital as a vehicle for supporting student transition during the often-challenging first semester of study and, where possible, into the second half of their first year. Students need to learn

how to learn in higher education settings. This takes time. They also need to be supported as they come to terms with vast amounts of disciplinary knowledge and sources of information, such as online databases. While many orientation programs point students in the direction of these resources in 'introduction to university' sessions, it is not until students really need the information (typically around week 5 or 6 of semester), that the advice becomes meaningful. Moreover, this development of academic skills is best developed and supported over time, in disciplinary learning contexts.

The role of academic staff in supporting effective transition experiences cannot be underestimated. A responsive first year curriculum, custom-designed learning resources, and supportive approaches to teaching and assessment are just some of the keys to a successful and top quality first year experience.

***Misconception 5: first year enrollees evolve into engaged university students just by being part of the university environment***

The word 'engagement' functions as both a noun and a verb. It is the latter denotation that is sometimes overlooked in discussion of student engagement at university. The outcome of engaged university students is one to which all universities aspire. To achieve this end, one must consider how and when students have opportunity to become engaged. The first year establishes the foundation for success in this regard. It is certainly not the case that by turning up or logging on, students will naturally become engaged as a university student. Universities need to examine all dimensions of the institution to determine how best to facilitate engagement.

*Engaging with academic staff*

One way to enhance student engagement in the first year is to promote connections between students and academic staff. It is gratifying to note an increase over the past decade in the numbers of first year students who regularly approach academic staff for advice (see Table 3). In the 2004 national first year study, we added a survey item intended to serve as a simple proxy for students' sense of personal connectedness to those who teach them at university. Two-thirds of students were confident that at least one teacher knew their name. It is perhaps a concern that one-third did not share such confidence towards the end of their first year at university.

**Table 3 Indicators of student engagement with academic staff (% of students)**  
(1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609; 2004, N=2344)

		Disagree		Agree
I feel confident that at least one of my teachers knows my name	2004	23	11	66
I regularly seek advice or help from academic staff	1994	49	30	20
	1999	50	31	19
	2004	36	35	29** <sup>1 2</sup>

\* significant at .01 \*\* significant at .05 <sup>1</sup> Denotes significant change 1999 to 2004. <sup>2</sup> Denotes significant change 1994 to 2004.

*Engaging in the learning environment*

Another important factor contributing to students' engagement with learning and with peers and academics is the fostering of an environment in which students participate actively and develop a sense of belonging in both small and large group settings. Such opportunities manifest themselves in many ways, but opportunities to ask questions and contribute to group discussion are particularly conducive to engagement. Just over one-third of first year students say they frequently participate in class discussions or raise questions in class. The majority of students, however, do so infrequently or not at all. Similarly, making class presentations does not feature as a significant activity in the experience of the majority of first year students.

Further opportunities for fostering engagement in the learning environment both in and beyond formal classes include

- organising peer learning and study groups that extend interactions beyond classroom walls;
- ensuring that students have a point of contact within their academic department or faculty when they need course advice;
- scheduling department-based barbeques or equivalent social events to build a sense of community with peers and staff in the disciplinary area of study; and
- using online resources, such as forums, to encourage online interaction. Guidelines and groundrules for their use should be carefully planned and communicated so that the purpose is clear.

### **Concluding thoughts and strategies**

There are, indeed, many misconceptions about the first undergraduate year and the diversity it represents. To be fair, these misconceptions may once have been legitimate beliefs in an era when the student population was less diverse and students faced less complex issues and challenges than they do today. Many universities have now developed orientation programs that support the transition of first year students to higher education, but the process cannot stop there. The next stage in the development of integrated and sustainable first year support initiatives is to monitor the needs and experiences of students from diverse demographic subgroups, particularly those from equity groups.

Monitoring and data gathering should, in turn, inform targeted initiatives to enhance the quality of the first year experience for all students, including those most under-represented in higher education. The data should inform ongoing discussions across the institution about the implications for enhancing the quality of student learning and support.

Four strategies to guide ongoing discussions and planning associated with enhancing the transition to and through the first year are:

1. Consider the first year as a continuum, commencing well before enrolment and involving a process of aspiration-building and expectation-shaping, particularly among under-represented groups in higher education. Include all stakeholders in such community outreach: students, academic staff, student support staff and university recruiting staff, where appropriate.
2. Plan transition programs that extend well beyond initial orientation events to support students through the first semester and beyond. The goal is to build student independence and support networks as part of an integrated academic and social transition experience. Devise ways to remove the scaffolded support progressively over the first year to ensure the development of student independence.
3. Establish a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating the quality of the first year experience, with a particular focus on analysing and responding to demographic subgroup differences in your student population. This may take the form of surveys, focus group discussions, or one-to-one interviews by email or over the phone. Aim for a range of approaches to avoid survey fatigue. Once you have collected the data, ensure that you have strategies in place to respond to it. Consider the implications of your findings for policy and practice across the university. Importantly, plan for ways in which you will give feedback to students on your findings and how you have responded to their input. This is critical for establishing a reciprocal relationship of trust between students and the institution.
4. Develop strategies to support both academic and social transition in the first year. This will involve collaboration between academic staff and student support staff. It will also necessitate curriculum review activities to ensure that all dimensions of the curriculum, including assessment, are appropriately designed to:
  - scaffold student learning with a view to developing increased independence;

- provide early and ongoing feedback on progress through a range of formative and summative approaches;
- introduce students to your disciplinary culture, the language, conventions, and ways of knowing and learning in the discipline. Make tacit knowledge in this regard as explicit as possible to facilitate successful academic transition;
- support students at key milestones in the first year, particularly during stressful periods such as when assignments are due;
- connect students with their peers to foster collaborative learning and a sense of belonging to the learning community.

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