

A Collaborative Multi-faceted Approach to Address the Gaps Between Student Expectation and Experience at University

Addressing the mismatch between student expectations of university and their experiences once they commence has important ramifications for student satisfaction and, ultimately, retention. By bringing together all three universities and a number of secondary schools in South Australia this project will make a substantial contribution to this important issue. By gathering the opinions of students, school teachers and lecturers of first year students all points of view will be explored. It will then be made all the more relevant by tracking students as they progress through their transition year and comparing university entrance scores with student expectations, experiences and university grades including transfers and attrition drop-outs. This thorough analysis of transition will make it the most comprehensive investigation of its type. Furthermore, the creation of an interactive university expectations and experiences website, school visits by both academic and professional staff, and possible changes to university orientation activities will help to disseminate the findings of this work to the people who really need it most: potential and commencing university students. In light of the recent Bradley Review – and the Deputy Prime Minister’s response that ‘by 2025, 40% of Australian 25 – 34 year olds will have a bachelor level or above education’ and that ‘by 2020, 20% of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level should be from low socio-economic backgrounds’ (DEEWR, 2009) – our research is both timely and essential in ensuring these new students succeed at university.

PROJECT RATIONALE AND OUTCOMES

The university that students expect is radically different from the one they find upon entry. This is graphically illustrated by the results of our recent student expectations (Crisp et al., in press) and experiences (Brinkworth et al., 2008) surveys carried out at the University of Adelaide, and a similar study conducted by a group member from the University of South Australia (King and Thalluri 2006; Thalluri and King, 2009). The issues raised by the surveys, particularly relating to the student expectations of receiving high levels of feedback, regular access to lecturers, the high levels of their external commitments and the amount of study they expect to do, are issues of great relevance to all higher education institutions. The responsibility for learning is also an important factor as it changes from secondary school, where teachers and even parents take on responsibility for learning, to university where the responsibility is passed to the student. The transition to university can be linked to core university issues such as student retention and satisfaction and as such has a major financial influence on the functioning of our institutions. The issue of how students fare once out of secondary schooling is of interest to a number of high schools wishing to evaluate the preparation they provided to their students. Furthermore, the students themselves need to understand what will be expected of them once in tertiary education in order to correctly evaluate it as an option post secondary school. This project aims to develop a framework to facilitate a more informed and targeted transition from secondary schools to university.

Rationale

Preparation for university: The secondary system. The role of secondary schooling is broad, in preparing school graduates to be active members of the community, to enter either the workforce, vocational or tertiary education, and in some cases preparing students for extended periods of unemployment. There has been increased scholarly concern in recent times that secondary schooling is not adequately preparing students who want to attend university for entry level courses; linked with a perception that this has led to falling university standards (Trotter and Roberts, 2006). A 2004 survey of over 2000 Australian first year students at nine different institutions revealed that despite enhanced efforts to bridge the gap between school and university over the previous decade, some 60% of first year students did not feel school adequately prepared them for university study. Around a third of all commencing experienced an early reality shock when they received their first semester marks and they were lower than expected (Krause et al., 2005). According to another study, this sizable minority have difficulties once they begin university courses (McInnis, 2001a).

Outside the universities themselves there is also the serious problem of many elite high schools regarding senior schooling as simply a means of ensuring their students obtain entry into university. Pressure on some secondary school teachers to get students into university results in both narrowed opportunities for students to take control of their own learning and heightened student expectation of assistance, creating unrealistic expectations of what students will encounter once in tertiary education. This may lead students from schools with a culture of such

circumscribed teaching performing well at university entrance exams but struggling academically once in the less structured environment of tertiary education (King and Thalluri 2006; Birch & Miller 2007).

Transition: University perspective. The process of transition from secondary school to university is a major concern for the tertiary sector globally as demonstrated by the extensive (and rapidly expanding) literature from many countries including the US, UK, Japan and Russia (McCarthy & Kuh 2006; Marland 2003; Ono 2007; Tolstova 2006). The Australian literature reflects scholars' concerns - across a broad range of disciplines - about a very real gap in students' skills between high school and university, and relates some concerted efforts to ease the transition process for first year students. For example, Macdonald (2000, p.7) noted that although moving 'from secondary education to university has never been easy, in recent times the problem of the transition has become more acute'. This, he argues, is due to changes in sources of university funding and has resulted in a fundamental power shift: from the university to a larger and more diverse student body upon which universities are more dependant financially than was the case 20 years ago (Macdonald, 2000), a shift that is possibly leading to high failure rates among first year students (Johnston 1997). In the past, universities have assumed firstly, that students entering first year programs have completed a good general education at school and, secondly, that they have come from families and social environments which will have equipped them with the cultural capital to fit comfortably into the lifestyle and expectations of university (McInnis, et al. 1995). However with the massification of higher education there is a large increase in the diversity of the student population, with many students entering the sector from non-traditional backgrounds.

The first year experience is especially relevant as it impacts on attrition and thus on university funding, which is often tied to the number of enrolled students. Furthermore, an Australian initiative - the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (DEEWR, 2008) - rewards universities for excellence in learning and teaching, tightly linking this to attrition rates. Previous work (DETYA, 2000) suggests that of all students entering Australian universities one-third fail to graduate and of those students who withdraw from their programs over half withdraw in their first year. Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) note that it is students' initial experiences on campus that influence their persistence in higher education. Negative experiences can lead to students failing their courses and discontinuing their programs (Peat et al. 2001)

In 2006, the average attrition rate across Australian universities was 18.5% (Go8, 2009); thus, as McInnis (2001a, p.106) states, 'first year is a priority since it is now recognised that attrition is costly for both individuals and universities'. Accordingly, the literature reflects a shift in priority: from analysis of this changing student body in the 1980s (Hester, 1982) to suggesting ways in which the experience of transition can be eased. Ternel (2000) identified a 'mismatch' between individual learning styles and university teaching methods in mechanical engineering. Furthermore, Hagan and Macdonald (2000, p.65) pointed out that the university's expectation of students to 'adjust immediately to a different style of teaching and learning was part of the problem' of transition to university.

Several strategies have been suggested for making the transition easier: Krause (2001) established that the first written assignment, particularly with effective and timely feedback upon it, can promote better integration in text-based courses. Leveson (1999) found small group work to assist accounting students. A study at La Trobe University found structural equation modelling helpful in identifying the characteristics of successful students in health sciences (McKenzie and Gow, 2004) and collaboration between computing and IT proved effective at Monash University (Hagan and Macdonald, 2000).

While high rates of student admittance into university are desirable, it is also important to retain students once enrolled. Studies from the UK, US and Australia show that retention rates, especially after first year, have been an important issue for many universities for at least the last two decades that remains unsatisfactorily resolved (Betts & Morrell, 1999; De Rome & Lewin, 1984; Johns & McNabb, 2004). New students come to university knowing that the experience is going to be different from secondary school, but when asked about specifics they actually do not really expect differences in many key areas including: feedback, access to staff and the effect of outside commitments on their study (Crisp et al., in press). When their new experiences do not meet initial expectations, higher student attrition rates are the likely result, which in turn may have financial ramifications for the host university.

Professor Sally Kift's ALTC Senior Fellowship (2006-2009) has specifically sought to reinvigorate the sector's approach to enhancing the critical first year undergraduate student experience by harnessing cross-institutional partnerships between academic and professional staff, focussed on curriculum engagement and preparation for that engagement. In this work, curriculum has been conceptualised very broadly to encompass the 'totality of the student

experience of, and engagement with, their new program of tertiary study: in its entire academic, social and support aspects; focussing on the educational conditions in which we place students' (Tinto, 2009, p2). It also includes the co-curricula opportunities offered (outside the formal curriculum) with which students are encouraged to engage (Kift, 2009). The term 'transition pedagogy' has been coined to express this broader view of curriculum and the intentional design of learning, teaching and assessment approaches. These factors inform its enactment in ways that acknowledge the reality of the external contextual life factors and mediate that entering student diversity in preparedness and cultural capital. The concern is that if universities do not harness the curriculum as the academic and social 'organising device' in this way – as the 'glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together' (McInnis, 2001b, p.11) – student take-up of otherwise disparate and piecemeal efforts to support their first year experience (Krause et al., 2005) will be left to chance and remain on the periphery of the engagement core (the curriculum), rather than contextualised to learning success in the discipline, and the reality of just-in-time student support needs. We intend to capitalise on this work by ensuring the project team has a good mix of both academic and professional university staff; thus ensuring a tight interaction and ready communication between the two in order better deliver transition pedagogy at all levels. Furthermore, the addition of secondary school teachers to this research will expand the work on transition to include a critical, but often neglected, demographic and provide a more holistic view and an avenue for earlier intervention (i.e. at the secondary level).

Foundation studies. Given the transition difficulties so evident upon entry, we recently ran a number of surveys of students commencing tertiary education at the University of Adelaide in order to further elucidate them. Conducted over a number of calendar years during Orientation Week students from all faculties were asked what they expected in a number of areas such as workload, feedback on assignments and access to teaching staff. Interestingly, while students responded that they thought studying at university would be different to high school, they consistently indicated that their expectations of access to teachers, response times for work and reviewing of drafts, was the same as high school (Crisp et al., in press). This suggests that while they knew there would be a change they did not really appreciate the nature of the change, nor were students sufficiently cognizant of the more ambiguous expectations and demands placed on them compared with the more structured environment of high school.

Another pilot study (Brinkworth et al., 2008) reported in more depth on results from two of the student groups in the original surveys: those entering university to study either Humanities or Science. We investigated the extent to which these first year students' expectations were met and considered their responses alongside their lecturers' views, with particular focus on feedback. A similar study conducted at University of South Australia (King and Thalluri 2006) demonstrated that students had unmet expectations in regards to their new academic learning environment. They had difficulty managing the self-directed nature of the majority of the learning tasks and often felt socially isolated in this new environment.

Student responses in our pilot studies aligned with previous findings that a successful transition was not solely due to academic ability, but depended also on personality factors as contributing to first year student success (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000, Thalluri and King, 2009) and an ability to make a rapid adjustment to a learning environment that requires greater autonomy and individual responsibility than students expect upon commencement. A central understanding from the data was that commencing students readily acknowledge that enrolment in university is a big step and will be characterised by big changes in the way they are treated and viewed by their teachers and peers. However, our later survey made it clear that the expectations of students were not matched by their experiences, or the expectations of their lecturers. Student comments relating to the amount and timing of feedback, for example, indicated that over 90% of commencing students expected to get feedback on drafts with only 10% of teachers providing such, something that may produce significant disenchantment (Brinkworth et al., 2008).

Although there are a number of reasons for student attrition: difficulty in completing assessment tasks, poor matches between course and goals, dissatisfaction with teaching methods, social isolation, and financial hardship (Long et al., 2006), much research points to a significant gap between the needs of students and existing support structures within both universities and high schools (King and Thalluri 2006, Thalluri and King, 2009). The results from our pilot studies suggest that educating students in greater detail about what to expect at university and educating academics about the skills students have and do not have would assist with transition.

This initial research showed that expectations and experiences are not very different between different faculties within a single university; however institutional differences (i.e. Go8 v. ATN v. IRU), other student divisions (e.g. mature students v. school leavers, independent v. government schools, media v. engineering) and the perspective of

secondary school teachers remained unexplored. For this reason, a collaboration consisting of representatives from the three tertiary institutions and a number of high schools within South Australia representing the three secondary school sector (public, independent and Catholic), as well as an external evaluation group, will expand this pilot work to cover these missing factors.

Purpose of the project

This project will allow our pilot research to be grown from the previous involvement of just two faculties at one university to all of the faculties at all three South Australian universities plus a significant number of diverse high schools in the state. The three universities collaborating on this project also represent the 3 main types of universities within Australia: University of Adelaide (Go8), University of South Australia (ATN), and Flinders University (IRU). The funding is necessary to enable four major actions that have the ability to shed new insights into student transition:

- 1 The comprehensive generation, processing and analysis of quantitative data on the transition from high school to university throughout the state in 2010 and 2011;
- 2 The ability to match student university entry scores (TER) and performance scores (GPA) with student expectations of and experiences at university across South Australia;
- 3 Enhancement of transition programs within each university, including the production of common tools such as a website to discuss experiences and expectations from the view of students, teachers and lecturers as well as high school focused literature and transition related school visits;
- 4 Study of the broader applicability of this new approach to other high schools and universities in Australia.

Long et al. (2006, p.126) cite the comments of one university student who did not re-enrol in second year: '[I would have continued if] the change from high school to university was smoother. The difference was too intimidating and extreme from the comfort I experienced from high school'. Our **hypothesis** is that by passing on some of the details to high school students of the differences that they will experience upon commencing university study, we will make them better prepared for the transition. Furthermore, by making university lecturers more aware of student expectations they will be in a better position to accommodate them. Our project seeks to inform students of the realities of university life to better facilitate the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

The **aims** of this collaborative multi-faceted project are to:

- 1 Provide a common forum for the distribution and discussion of ideas by bringing the three main groups working on transition (secondary school teachers, university academics and professional staff) closer;
- 2 Expand our pilot studies to all areas at all three universities in the state as well as the secondary school sector;
- 3 Understand the interaction between a students university entrance score, expectations of university, grades at university and their experiences during first year;
- 4 Better prepare students for transition by directly communicating the results of the study with secondary school teachers and students as well as those involved in transition at the tertiary level;
- 5 Develop working relationships between the academic, administrative and support areas of universities and high schools to seamlessly and coherently support students in a coordinated fashion in their formative university year;
- 6 Produce an evidence base for the expectations and experiences of students during transition and utilise it to supplement current high school and university transition strategies (e.g. personal learning plan, future SACE, Orientation Week activities).

By using the four survey targets - new students, continuing students, lecturers of new university students and high school teachers - this project will more fully cover, and provide much needed knowledge to, a less intensively addressed area of transition. This information will then be used to conceptualise changes in teaching practice and to increase awareness at all levels (high school and university, student and teacher) of the differences between the high school and university learning environments. The project also seeks to identify and address current social, cultural and academic transition issues. Furthermore, given the universality of these issues, as identified by the pilot study, the findings will be applicable non-discipline specific academic cohorts. This project will add a new facet to the important area of transition. From this project we anticipate six useful and distinct outcomes and six important deliverables.

Outcomes

- 1 Incoming university students will be better prepared for what they will encounter upon commencement and be more aware of what university staff expect of them by having a closer alignment between their expectations of university life and the experience they will have once there;
- 2 High school and university staff will better understand the different expectations of students;
- 3 High school teachers will have a better understanding of what students should expect if they elect to go to university;
- 4 Transition programs currently run by the member universities will have a well defined base-line upon which to construct a number of new activities to complement existing ones;
- 5 School and university staff and students will have a better understanding of some differences with, and what to expect at, the different universities in South Australia;
- 6 Closer working relationships between high school teachers, university academics and university professional staff;
- 7 A number of lecturers of commencing students will modify their curriculum to better account for student expectations.
- 8 A better understanding of how a student's predicted academic potential (as measured by their TER), expectations and experiences interact to produce university results (e.g. attrition, GPA, transfers).

Deliverables

- 1 The framework, and feedback from initial implementation, for a school outreach program where academic and professional staff will have the opportunity to communicate with high school students and teachers directly about what life at university is really like;
- 2 Interactive web site with examples and findings from the work. It will also include a space to communicate with others on the issue of what to expect when at university and will be linked to by the ALTC exchange, each of the three universities, as well as the home pages of local high schools;
- 3 Reports for universities and high schools about the findings of the study and what can be done to better align the expectations and experiences of students;
- 4 A more informed series of university orientation activities aimed at addressing the mismatch between student expectations and experiences more effectively;
- 5 Flyers and pamphlets for high school students describing life at university with particular reference to the areas identified by the work as having a disconnect between experiences and expectations.
- 6 After the project's completion, peer-reviewed articles by the members involved on the issues of expectations and experiences will be accepted for publication, and related national and international conference presentations will be made.

APPROACH

A strong theoretical framework

There are four aspects that demonstrate this project has a strong and appropriate theoretical framework:

- 1 The project forms part of a current wider discourse on transition pedagogy in Australia (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Kift, 2005; Nelson, et al., 2006; Kift, 2008; Kift, 2009) that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts.
- 2 While it is recognised the expectations of commencing university students are formed during secondary schooling, our preliminary research has shown there is currently little interaction between university staff (both professional and academic), high school teachers and high school students in this important area.
- 3 The project's main pilot study was accepted for publication in *Higher Education* (Brinkworth et al., 2008), a major international journal on issues of general interest to the global tertiary education system, and is itself based on well-founded work and addresses a well-articulated need as evidenced from our previous work (Crisp et al., in press).
- 4 The project seeks to invigorate the sector's approach to enhancing the critical first year undergraduate student experience by harnessing cross-institutional partnerships between academic and professional staff,

focussed on curriculum engagement and preparation for that engagement. Furthermore, the interactions with high schools will empower both teachers and students with a better understanding of what university will really be like.

The project team's premise is that, in all their diversity, and acknowledging their multiple identities and changing patterns of engagement, it is within the first year curriculum that commencing students must be engaged, supported, and realise their sense of belonging. In this way, the curriculum has an important role to play in first year transition and retention. Specifically of relevance to our project is the development of a better understanding of the mediating effects of commencing student's prior expectations, and the impact of the diversity in both their preparedness and cultural capital, on performance.

Considered, coherent and appropriate strategies designed to achieve the project outcomes

The key elements of the strategy are to:

- 1 Adapt our pilot questionnaires for applicability to new contexts (high school teachers, wider university community);
- 2 Evaluate the degree of the success of the approach based on student experience questionnaires and high school teacher and university lecturer surveys;
- 3 Match results of student expectations and experiences with their university entrance scores and grades during first year university;
- 4 Identify other high schools and universities across the country that may benefit from the approach and liaise with them to match it to their own individual circumstances.

The results from this project will complement - and not necessarily replace - existing institutional practices, and will provide both internal and external benchmarking. It will also supply a unified framework for identifying and addressing mismatches between expectations and experiences. The survey framework (http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/evaluation/expectations/2006/Psyche_Fye.pdf) already exists from our previous study (Crisp et al., in press) with changes to address other target groups in our follow up study (Brinkworth et al., 2008) and needs only minor modifications for adaptation to secondary school teachers and other tertiary institutions.

To evaluate the success of these strategies we will elicit feedback from reference groups in order to achieve more qualitative data that will be possible from the mass surveys. The universities will conduct follow-up surveys in the third year of the project (once the ALTC funded phase of the project has finished) to determine the effectiveness of the school visits, orientation changes, web site and various literature. If successful we should be able to determine to what extent unmet expectations contribute to lower than expected GPAs, unhappiness with a student's selected program and/or attrition and remedy it by providing realistic descriptions in a timely manner.

This project involves the following activities:

In year 1 the project team will:

- 1 The full project team (consisting of academic and professional staff from the three tertiary institutions as well as representatives from local high schools and CSIRO) will agree on new questions for the survey and how questions will be rephrased for each of the four targets: new university students, continuing university students, lecturers of new university students and secondary school teachers. The questions will cover a number of areas including perceptions of workload (both students of staff and vice versa), previous family university experiences, outside commitments, hours worked, support provided, reasons for selecting/continuing courses and the use of 'non-traditional' teaching styles/aids. We will also gather key demographic data from respondents to facilitate controls for sampling bias across and within the universities;
- 2 Survey commencing students at the three universities in the first weeks of the academic year in order to obtain their expectations of university. The timing of these surveys will be such that some currently existing transition programs may have been delivered or commenced but little experience of the realities of university life will have been formed;
- 3 Survey teachers of senior high school (yrs 11 and 12) to obtain their expectations of students. This will be done by attending a number of events including Career Counsellor Events, SASTA and MASA

conferences/workshops, getting teachers who go to the CSIRO on school trips to complete surveys and by directly approaching teachers during school training days and the like;

- 4 Surveying lecturers, tutors and practical demonstrators of new university students to obtain their expectations of students. This will be done by going to tutor and staff meetings and having the project members in each university approach them directly;
- 5 Survey continuing students (1st and 2nd year follow-up survey) during second semester to determine their actual experiences of first year;
- 6 Undertake multivariate analysis of the data to establish covariance between demographic data, past academic performance, attitudes to study and academic outcomes at university;
- 7 Use the survey data to adjust and complement existing university transition programs (currently carried out, in part, by project members) so that they can better address mismatches between staff and students as well as the expectations and experiences of students;
- 8 Set up a university independent website with summary data regarding the survey's results, transition program guidelines, vodcasts/podcasts of staff and student interviews to assist with public dissemination of knowledge.

In year 2 the project team will:

- 1 Add information gained from the first phase to the ALTC exchange in order to inform and get input from the wider educational community;
- 2 During normal university orientation, implement the modified transition programs including updating transition lectures, pamphlets and guides provided to new students;
- 3 Survey new university students during the first weeks but after the majority of the transition programs have been delivered to determine any changes in the expectations of students after our initial intervention;
- 4 Approach secondary schools and disseminate findings to students and teachers including focus groups for interested students, pamphlets and the address for the website for further information;
- 5 Communicate the results to secondary teachers who attend the universities for skills days;
- 6 Resurvey continuing university students and lecturers during second semester to see if information provided to the staff resulted in altered student experiences and/or staff expectations of students;
- 7 Collate the new results and modify the statistical models to account for the longitudinal trends in the data;
- 8 Create academic outputs (conference talks, journal papers) covering the project in order to engage the wider academic community, including attendance at the First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) Conference.

An approach that is aligned with the commitments of the ALTC

The project addresses ALTC Priority 1: Research and development focussing on issues of emerging and continuing importance, namely the transition between high school and university. As indicated in the rationale, issues of transition are a major concern to multiple stakeholders, yet the relationship between the way educational institutions prepare students for the realities of tertiary study and university retention/attrition rates is as yet under-researched. By understanding the expectations and experiences of students, and the expectations of the staff involved, and linking this with student outcomes we will better be able to say how much of an impact this has on retention and what can be done about it.

Plans for dissemination of the successful strategies and outcomes

Hunt et al. (2002, p.345) argue orientation to university life frequently involves 'a didactic process in which those in-the-know teach the uninitiated'. In contrast, we hope to demonstrate through our results that a more proactive and earlier interventionist strategy would be more effective in terms of retention and reducing student dissonance. More than just a survey, we will deliver important and timely information to all stakeholders.

This project will increase both the scope and depth of our pilot work by expanding into other faculties, universities and the secondary sector. It will contribute unique knowledge to a very important area of concern. It will also add to existing university structures and programs by providing a complementary facet to accompany the social programs (mentoring, hosting) that the various state universities already offer.

- 1 An outreach program will be created whereby university academics and professional staff will visit associated high schools to share the findings of the research directly with staff and students. As such, within the dissemination context of the ALTC Grants Scheme, the project works within an ‘information provision’ frame work that upscales and embeds innovations within an existing context. As the project team includes academic and professional university staff as well as representatives from the secondary sector we will achieve closer interaction between these groups than may have previously been the case.
- 2 By directly targeting secondary school students and teachers via school visits, university lecturers and policy makers via internal committee meetings, and having professional staff on the project team, we will ensure the information is shared and understood by all of the relevant parties. Professional staff involved with transition at the universities have a working relationship with many of the local high schools and can incorporate the findings into the message they give to prospective students.
- 3 A website will be developed to provide a one-stop shop for those interested in the transition process; be that as a participant or as an aide to that participation. It will include reference to material from a wide range of sources as well as the results and subsequent understanding gained from our study. Data and other material demonstrating the key differences between high school and university will be available for download and reproduction.
- 4 Furthermore, the external committee will ensure rigorous oversight as well as providing an avenue for national dissemination at forums such as the Australian International Education Conference and the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

VALUE/NEED FOR THE PROJECT

Usefulness of the project and its outcomes

Poor transition from high school to university is a major concern, and one that poses significant academic, social, emotional and cultural challenges for students moving between secondary and tertiary learning environments. Our project is of immediate interest to those who teach first year students and those who design degree programs for such students. Moreover, our proposed intensive partnership role between professional and academic staff is crucial, especially in facilitating the seamless mediation of expectations in the period prior to and during first semester (student recruiters in particular demonstrably have a role to play in the first year experience and expectation setting).

In a wider context our project is of interest to secondary educators who prepare students for admission to tertiary institutions, universities looking to increase retention rates, employers of graduates and, of course, to students and their families. Lower levels of university completion and higher levels of withdrawal in first year student groups are frequently attributed to a lack of ‘academic preparedness’ (Thomas, 2003). If students feel that they are prepared for study at tertiary level, and, crucially, the institution provides academic support if and when required, then a greater sense of academic and social inclusiveness is initiated. Moreover, successfully reducing early attrition rates and stabilising enrolments permits a more efficient allocation of resources as well as providing improved return on the institution’s investment (Martinez, 2003). Our pilot project highlights that the gaps between expectation and experience on issues such as feedback and teacher availability need to be identified and addressed more quickly. If this were the case then there would be a positive effect on student retention, not least because many first-year students who identify academic reasons for their discontinuation in tertiary education largely fall into two groups: those faced with poor quality teaching and/or those with inadequate or poor interaction with teaching staff (Long et al., 2006).

The project also allows systematic interaction between three distinct university types:

- 1 an Australian Technology Network University (ATN: University of South Australia);
- 2 an Innovative Research University (IRU: Flinders University); and
- 3 a Group of 8 Research Intensive University (Go8: University of Adelaide)

As the above three types of universities represent all students in South Australia and approximately 62% of all Australian university students (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002), the project evaluation at the university level will be of great significance to the Higher Education sector in Australia. Furthermore, the flows and exchanges between the three partner institutions promise to be a collaborative initiative of real significance. The project team anticipate that the approach will be customisable and transportable, and that the information tailored

accordingly so any university can adopt and apply it at appropriate occasions during their orientation activities. This in turn may be ultimately influential on policy and funding regimes for Australian universities and elsewhere.

Utilisation and advancement of existing national and international knowledge relevant to the program

The project is closely associated with, and builds on the outcomes and learning of, Professor Sally Kift's work at QUT. (See the articulation of a research-based 'transition pedagogy' on the ALTC Exchange at www.altcexchange.edu.au/first-year-experience-and-curriculum-design and the outcomes from a 2009 First Year Experience Symposium at www.fyecd2009.qut.edu.au/resources/). Specifically, her Fellowship has sought to reinvigorate the sector's approach to enhancing the critical first year undergraduate student experience by harnessing cross-institutional partnerships between academic and professional staff, focussing on curriculum engagement and preparation for that engagement. A major outcome for her work has been the development of a guiding philosophy (a 'transition pedagogy') for intentional first year curriculum renewal. Our project will incorporate several of these developments and initiatives. The very fact that universities have dedicated units and programs for transition also highlights this area as being of prime importance. The difference with our project is that it will attempt, through consultation and involvement of all parties, to deliver a range of outcomes and deliverables that will inform not only future delivery processes and content at universities but also information given to high schools about university. A major addition to previous work will be the involvement of the secondary sector and the students themselves as well as university staff. By having teacher input to the project group from the beginning and by canvassing the opinions of school teachers, new university students as well as university staff we will have a complete picture of transition. This picture will be made all the more useful through the incorporation of student potential (university entrance scores), performance (university grades) and outcomes (transfer, drop-out or continue) to go with their self-reported expectations and experiences.

Strategies to assess the scalability and sustainability of the project

This present study will determine whether the results from our initial pilot project can be reproduced across numerous academic areas and universities, as such efficiency is most likely to enable to continued usage of the approach. In Year 2, surveying new university students during the first few weeks (and after the delivery of the majority of transition programs) will determine any changes in the expectations of students after our initial university only interventions.

Mid-term follow up, as part of the research of the Project Manager and Liaison Officer, will determine the success and applicability of the approach, the level of further incorporation as well as retention and attrition rates across the partner institutions. Any correlation between the implementation of the approach and a drop in attrition rates would provide the Higher Education community with a compelling reason to incorporate the approach in all aspects of transition pedagogy.

The most accurate measurement of the usefulness of the project will be the retention rates and student satisfaction in the third year (2012), after the initial data has been collected in the first year (2010) and the school visits performed in the second year (2011). Since the ALTC does not permit a project to continue on past the second year there would be no way to measure the ultimate success of this project. As such each of the member universities have committed to continuing the orientation week surveys into the third year.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

There are 6 main groups of people to be involved in the direction of this project, each with a different roll to play.

- 1 The two project leaders will ultimately be responsible for the progress of the project and will be intimately involved in the oversight and main progress of the work. They will also oversee the work of the project manager and liaison officer as well as all the tasks associated with team members.
- 2 The team members will be responsible for the co-ordination of the tasks within their respective institutions including survey collection from staff, students and teachers where appropriate. Other tasks include assisting with generation of survey questions, attending group meetings, hosting group meetings, cooperating with the external review panel to ensure the project is/was performing, going into schools to talk with teachers and students about the findings of the project and assisting with the production of publications and conference presentations.

- 3 The project manager will oversee the co-ordination of the project on a day-to-day basis, to ensure timelines are met, including those associated with production of assessment criteria, data generation and transmission, setting-up virtual and face-to-face meetings and workshops, ensuring effective communication between the other parties, managing the budget and yearly project progress reports. The project manager will be appointed as 1.5 day per week, to ensure regular monitoring of processes and that project outcomes and deliverables are realised.
- 4 The liaison officer will be the most hands-on of all the project members and will be responsible for carrying out many of the project requirements. This person will assist with orientation week surveys and will be the main person collecting the surveys from lecturers and continuing students during the year. They will also be the main person collecting responses from teachers and will spend a significant portion of their time in the second year going to high schools and communicating with staff and students the main findings of the research.
- 5 The main role of the associate members is to assist with the distribution of surveys. The large group also ensures a wide range of opinions are canvassed when generating and analysing the results of the surveys. Since the associated members cover the range of stake-holders in the project (lecturers, professional staff and teachers) their attendance at meetings and contribution to ‘virtual’ discussions will be invaluable to the project.
- 6 The evaluation committee will be responsible for ensuring the project meets its stated aims. The committee will contain independent observers based both locally and externally who will provide the project with the best possible overview.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

There are two phases to the evaluation strategy that draw on the ALTC’s Evaluating Projects Resource. They are designed to ensure:

- 1 Correct and complete information gathering of student, teacher and lecturer views. This was done, in part, with the use of the pilot study (Brinkworth et al., 2008) and the identification of a number of questions that needed to be altered. However there will be an on-going quality assurance performed in collaboration with the project leaders, the project manager, the liaison officer and the team members.
- 2 The project meets its stated outcomes and deliverables. In order to do this an external evaluation committee has been set-up. The evaluation committee will be headed by Professor Sally Kift. As Prof Kift is not based in South Australia she will be able to provide an independent view of the project. In order to assist Prof Kift in this task Dr John Willison has agreed to be the local contact for the evaluation committee.

Aspect of Project to be Evaluated	How Evaluation will Occur
Project conceptualisation and design.	The Project Leaders, the Team and Associated Members, and the Evaluation Team will provide early feedback and advice on conceptualisation and design at an initial face-to-face meeting. The consultative process will continue as action learning cycles throughout the life of the project.
Ongoing development of literature review and theoretical knowledge base.	The Project Leaders and the Team and Associated Members will have access to all literature and theory relevant to the project and will evaluate that knowledge base, providing comments and suggestions.
Correct and complete information gathering of student, teacher and lecturer views	The information from each target group will be gathered and analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively via the questionnaires devised and administered by the project team.
Adjustment and complementing of existing university transition programs	PSOs and Transition Officers at focus universities will co-ordinate any changes in practice.
The project’s website.	The external Evaluator will assist in assessing the website’s efficacy which will be gauged on its access by the sector and its success in communicating project developments.

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