Transition @ UB – A Collaborative Approach

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The University of Ballarat has a unique higher education commencing student cohort. On a biannual basis the commencing student cohort is surveyed during the first week of lectures. The return rate is 76.6% of all on campus commencing students and the major findings were:

- 57.6% of respondents identified that neither of their parents had completed a university degree;
- 83% originated from a population of 120,000 or less; and
- 63.3% of respondents believed commencing tertiary studies would place pressure on them financially.

As the demand for higher education places increases, the University of Ballarat has committed itself to ensuring that students are supported during their first year, through a comprehensive university wide transition program.

The First Year Transition Program has become an on-going initiative of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic and Research), the eight Higher Education Schools, Accommodation, International Student Programs, Library, Aboriginal Education Centre, Equity and Equal Opportunity, the Student Association, Students and Student Services. The committee utilises critical reflective processes in achieving the following four aims:

**Transition@UB Aims**

- To improve the quality of both social and learning experiences for all students enrolled in first year at UB.

- To foster a research culture in schools and sections designed to document, evaluate and communicate the transition experiences of first year students mediated by initiatives in teaching, learning, curriculum development and assessment.

- To establish a coordinated and centrally supported university wide approach to the issue of transition for first year students.

- To have a positive impact on student attrition rates from UB higher education courses.

**Successes of UB Transition Program**

The aims of the Transition Program has been achieved through a unique committee structure because of the agreed demarcation of duties. The Committee is a collaborative group of academic, general and support staff and students of the UB community. The
structure has ensured that the student experience is reviewed holistically and the students well-being is realised both academically and socially. As a result of this collaborative working group, the following has been achieved:

*Increasing engagement of students in educational institutions and breaking down social isolation for new students*

- The ongoing support of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor as chair of the committee, and as an advocate for the work of the UB Transition Committee in senior forums has enabled recommendations of the UB Transition Committee to be implemented across the higher education sector.

- The appointment in each academic school of a First Year Co-ordinator (academic) and a Student Liaison Officer (general) to provide students with various points of contact for advice and support.

- The appointment of a full time Learning Support Coordinator located in Student Services.

- The appointment of 100 paid mentors for all first year students over a six week period. Each mentor is responsible for a group of 15 first year undergraduate students.

- A two day mentor training program is held prior to Orientation week, introducing mentors to their first year co-ordinators and student liaison officers to plan the events for the first six weeks of semester.

- Scheduled weekly meetings for the student to meet with their mentor.

- The on-going use of mentors as ambassadors for university events such as, Enrolment, secondary school visits as well as campus visits and Open Day.

- The establishment of an employment service.

- Representation of the Transition Committee on the Recruitment Committee and the Open Day Committee, to develop outreach activities for secondary schools and develop transitional training sessions within recruitment activities.

- An assessment task is conducted for each first year student by week four in a nominated unit, to assist in the identification of students at risk, and to provide early feedback.

*Examining orientation processes in relation to first year performance and the role of the Student Association in the first year experience*
• Combining the Orientation Committee and the Transition Committee.

• A reduction in Student Association alcohol based activities. An increase in student supported events which included a pancake breakfast, lunchtime entertainment, campus orientation team activities “The Amazing Race”, free movie nights, free BBQ’s and an outsourced performance by “Unismart”, a New Zealand based company, on the issues of transition.

• Orientation week was redesigned to include sessions where mentors were part of the structured sessions. This supported the development of groups and addressed the potential for student isolation when attending university for the first time.

Evaluation

• Evaluation of activities were conducted through surveys and focus groups which included staff involved in the program, the first year students and the mentors.
• Statistical analysis was conducted to review the attrition rate in comparison to previous years.

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<th>Loss as a % of total commencing cohort</th>
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<td>Period 2 Loss</td>
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<td>Period 2 is between the first day of first semester and 31st March census date</td>
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<td>Period 3 Loss</td>
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<td>Period 3 is between 1st semester census date and Academic penalty date</td>
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<td>Total Loss periods 2+3</td>
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Conclusion

It is the contention of the authors that a collaborative approach across the university with support from senior management has inherent advantages. The potential for this collaborative approach to cater for individual differences within the higher education schools has always been seen as an important component at UB. This feature of the UB program has ensured that a “one size fits all” approach has not been imposed and this has been done with the deliberate intention of encouraging ownership of the program by each academic area.

Having buy-in from all support areas in conjunction with the teaching and learning components of transition has enriched the information and broad picture available to the UB Transition Committee. This has been done to ensure that Transition is not looked
upon as a problem with new students that we need to “fix”. Transition is a process that can be facilitated.