

An online resource to support first year students' psychosocial and academic transition

Dianne Kirby and Teresa Dluzewska, University Counselling Service
Dr Jill Scevak, School of Education
The University of Newcastle, Australia

This nuts and bolts session outlines collaboration between School of Education academics and the University Counselling Service. A new online resource was developed for commencing students. The "First Year Student's Guide to University Study" offers a framework for engaging students to reflect on their personal, social and academic journeys as they prepare, belong, learn and succeed during first semester. The facilitators will describe the development and structure of the guide and share resource materials. Participants are invited to consider the contribution of the psycho-social journey to student success and the relevance of the guide to their own setting.

Universities are keen to trial new strategies to enhance students' learning experience and their academic success (Burnett, 2006). This nuts and bolts session reports on a project designed to improve the transition experience of first year students in the School of Education at the University of Newcastle. Academics from Education collaborated with Psychologists in the University Counselling Service to develop an online resource that students could voluntarily access prior to their arrival at university and throughout first semester 2010. The "First Year Student's Guide to University Study" invites students to reflect on their personal, social and academic journeys as they prepare, belong, learn and succeed with their studies.

The resource was piloted in the School of Education for several reasons. The School is innovative and progressive and interested in primary preventative strategies to support students' initial transition and equip them to thrive in the tertiary setting. The first year education cohort is large (n = 920 in 2009) and diverse with significant mature age entry from Enabling Programs and a high proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Learning journals in one foundation course have also consistently indicated that students do not feel adequately prepared for university, particularly in regard to their new academic roles.

In addition to university wide transition programs, students have much to gain from the presence of a 'wrap around' learning community at the School level, with School engagement a significant factor contributing to first year retention (Kuh, 2007) and student links at the School level potentially strengthening their attachment to the institution as a whole. Bryson and Hand (2008) suggest "The construction of engagement at each of the locations will affect the other levels in a dynamic manner," (p. 11). The online resource offers new students the social presence of their teachers, more experienced peers and student support staff, a group holding them in mind and demonstrating willingness to guide them through their initial transition. The "feeling of community that a learner experiences in an on-line environment" (Tu, 2000, p. 131) was intentionally created by addressing the student directly in a friendly, supportive manner using ordinary rather than institution centred language. An immediate tone invites the student to engage personally and proactively with the material, their on-line environment and their student role.

Early involvement with the online environment facilitates student engagement and persistence (Krause, 2005b; Krause, McEwan & Blinco, 2009). Shea (2005) recommends that online materials should be student-centred, convenient, efficient and ‘just in time’, reaching out to students so they begin to build a relationship with the institution. The guide includes information, strategies and tips from students and academics as well as links to important resources and access to student support services. Students are encouraged to complete a diary that can be downloaded to record their personal reflections. Their tips, comments and feedback are also canvassed, involving them in the project itself and in research from the outset.

Project development and resource design was informed by theory and evidence from the current FYE literature. Ongoing contact with students, academics, professional staff and administrators was another valuable source of data. The perspective adopted is based on five principles of good institutional practice derived from a decade of Australian first year experience surveys (Krause, 2005a). Krause’s principles highlight collaborative partnerships to produce holistic educational experiences, scaffolding to support student self regulatory and meta-cognitive skills, ongoing monitoring, peer connection and appreciation of the student life cycle and beyond.

Recent meta-analytic path analysis of student emotional, social and motivational controls as mediators for retention and performance suggests that first year programs should address psycho-social experience and self management strategies early on (Robbins, Oh, Le & Button, 2009). Robbins et al. (2009) report that emotion regulation and social adjustment are important for early retention which enables students to acquire essential academic skill sets for success. Academic skills training related directly to performance. Robbins et al. (2009) note that both psycho-social and academic skills contribute to motivation required for persistence in later years. These authors recommend exploring cost effective and practical ways to integrate self management and academic skills interventions for their synergistic effects.

Alf Lizzio’s model ‘Five Senses of Student Success’ was selected as an underpinning framework for the guide, with the model shared with the students themselves. Using this ‘strengths based’ model that promotes self regulatory mechanisms, students are encouraged to become more familiar with University culture and systems and to develop their senses of purpose, connection and capability (Lizzio, 2006). Such an approach is consistent with studies outlining the benefits of building resilience and persistence from a positive psychological perspective (Luthan, Avey & Patera, 2008). This proactive stance also encourages students to learn more about university discourses (Lawrence, 2003).

In terms of the structure of the resource, four main themes are highlighted. These themes reflect key adjustment challenges faced by students across first semester; namely, Prepare, Belong, Learn and Succeed. Students can read ahead to gain a sense of their journey during the semester or select the theme most relevant to them at the time. Each section includes reference to students’ personal, social and academic journeys with the aims of normalizing their experience, reducing anxiety, acknowledging the nature of their learning as a whole, their development as a student and personal growth over time. The use of quotes at the beginning of each section of the guide also infuses a sense of hope and inspiration. For example,

"If I have the belief that I can do it, I will surely acquire the capacity to do it, even if I may not have it at the beginning" Gandhi.

"Do more than belong, participate." William Arthur Ward

"Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere." Chinese Proverb
"Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in day out." Collier

Purnell (2002) proposes the prepare phase as the place to begin transition, with more universities partnering with local schools to build future aspirations. The 'Prepare' section invites students to reflect on their personal strengths and skills, sense of purpose and expectations about study and academic culture prior to university entry. There is growing evidence that students are more likely to succeed when they are able to articulate a clear purpose for their studies (Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton & Cullity, 2008; Krause, 2005a) and when their expectations are realistic and more closely aligned with those of the institution (Crisp, Palmer, Turnbull, Nettelbeck, Ward, LeCouteur, Sarris, Strelan, & Schneider, 2009). Krause (2005a) argues that it is imperative that we manage student expectations. In concert with the online resource, students in one foundation course were also invited to reflect on their expectations of first semester during an initial tutorial session. The cohort's responses will be incorporated into the guide to assist their peers commencing first year programs in 2011.

Lawrence (2003) points to a general lack of familiarity with university culture and those with low social capital feel particularly ill prepared for their initial encounter with university systems, culture and life (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). The Prepare section fosters 'enabling' factors (Stewart, 2008) by acknowledging the presence and value of difference (Gale, 2009) and the range of strengths and resources students bring to study (Wilson, 2009). Krause et al. (2005) also suggest customized support for particular groups such as mature age students, with a segment devoted to them complemented by a one hour "Back to Study" workshop delivered during orientation week. This workshop was based on a more extensive program enjoyed by previous cohorts over the past twenty years.

The second section of the resource is entitled 'Belong'. Many surveys demonstrate that connections with staff and fellow students and opportunities to interact in meaningful ways in and outside the classroom contribute to enjoyment, satisfaction, persistence and academic outcomes (ACER, 2009; Krause, 2005a; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Topics covered in 'Belong' include encouragement for students to participate in campus life, get to know their learning communities and create their support network. Early contact with Student Support Services is advocated as a resource when required.

First year students who thrive are more likely to be self regulatory in their learning and coping styles (Krause, 2005a; McKenzie, Gow & Schweitzer, 2004) yet almost half have not adapted their approach by the end of first semester (Kantanis, 2000). Greater use of effective learning strategies promotes academic self efficacy and success. According to Robbins et al. (2009), academic skills interventions affect motivation and performance. Wingate (2007) argues that most students need learning support situated within their discipline and curriculum rather than universities adopting a deficiency model. The 'Learn' segment includes access to a Personal Learning Profile that builds on the 'Academic Survival Skills' identified in the preceding 'Belong' section. Making the most of assessment feedback, study-work-life balance, staying motivated and the benefits of collaborative learning are also addressed.

The final part of the resource 'Succeed' rests on the assumption that students have much to gain from access to information about how to succeed contained in the FYE literature available to the academic community (Dluzewska & Kirby, 2009; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006). This understanding has not been widely shared with first year students

themselves. 'Succeed' raises the question of what success means to each individual and includes tips for success based on data from recent surveys (ACER, 2009; Krause, 2005a). There are strategies for study and performing in examinations, with links to an online book "Surviving First Year: Passing Exams" written by Associate Professor John Germov and Dr Lauren Williams. Students are invited to reflect on what they've learnt about their chosen area of study and themselves as learners thus far. According to Hedberg, (2009) there is no true learning without reflection. Including a request for them to share their tips for surviving and thriving may also contribute to their capacity for self reflection and sense of self efficacy as learners. Huntley and Donovan (2009) advocate explicitly teaching habits of mind such as persistence to further enhance student capability.

All four sections of the guide refer to aspects of the personal, social and academic journeys experienced by students. These journeys are distinct yet intertwined and reflect the dynamic nature of the learner as a whole being. For example, 'Belong' - 'Personal Journey' acknowledges and normalizes a range of emotional responses to transition and the academic cycle. Pekrun, Goetz, Titz and Perry (2002) argue reciprocal causation; that is, student emotions about learning influence achievement in turn affecting their emotions. Pekrun et al. (2002) found that students describing enjoyment, hope, and pride in learning were more likely to perform well while boredom and a sense of hopelessness were deactivating. Academic emotions early in semester predicted cumulative grades. The student's emotional journey during the transition phase has typically received less attention than practical, social and curricula issues. Yet we learn from the inside out.

Students need to actively manage their emotions and balance states of flourish and distress so they are able to focus on their learning potential. In the 'Belong' - 'Personal Journey' segment of the guide students are invited to map their emotional responses across the semester. This activity raises awareness so they may employ strategies to cope with more de-stabilising emotions. Students also value opportunities to express feelings about their courses (Leece & Hale, 2009) assessments (Crossman, 2007) and grades (Turner, Husman & Shallert, 2002). Leece and Hale (2009) describe an exciting new project using emoticons to capture students' day to day feelings about their courses, with a quick response from Student Support Services activated when their 'learning wellbeing status' declines. First year teams can assist by addressing the role of emotion regulation in learning more directly (Huntly & Donovan, 2009) and by "designing educational environments in such ways that they foster students' psychological well-being" (Pekrun et al., 2002, p. 103). According to one large survey, first years cite their emotional health as the most common reason for seriously considering leaving university (Krause, 2005c). Given the pressure students face and the presence of psychological distress and mental health issues in the student population (Stallman, 2009) there appears to be need for more preventative and wellbeing approaches.

Clearly the role of the social journey during first year is also critical for adjustment. This includes connections to the university, academics and peers (Krause, 2005b). Students in one recent study nominated social integration as a key personal indicator of their success at university (Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin & Purswell, 2008). Those from rural areas and overseas face particular challenges leaving behind local networks (Krause et al., 2005; Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2006) with some evidence of the advantages of living in residential college community (ACER, 2009). Both school leavers and mature age students try to balance on and off campus relationship commitments (Krause, 2005a; Scevak & Cantwell, 2007): Institutional initiatives designed to reach out to first year students include mentor programs; open learning circles (Henderson, Noble & De George-Walker, 2009) and contacting those at

risk (Nelson, Duncan & Clark, 2009). The online resource develops a personalised relationship with students and educates them about the importance of playing their part in creating attachments to their university and links with their learning communities. For example, in 'Belong' - 'Social Journey' - 'Get to know your classmates':

"Get to know your classmates as soon as possible. Introduce yourself whenever you sit next to them in lectures and tutorials. Aim to meet one new classmate each week. Be curious about difference. What can you learn from classmates from other cultures, with various life experience and talents?

Ask questions in class. Participate in discussions. Listen to others and don't be afraid to share your ideas and opinions. Begin now! You can learn from one another. Form study pairs or groups and share resources.

If you have time, stop to chat before and after class. Arrange to meet up with other students during breaks. Say hello to people as you get around campus. You have a rare opportunity to make some lifelong friends."

The project will be evaluated using website hit data together with student and staff feedback within the School of Education and the broader university. There are plans to develop further resources, for example, explore the use of emoticons, use student tips for next year's cohort, a segment for first in the family, a blog moderated by student mentors, the guide translated to booklet, create a complementary tutors' guide, roll out the project to other interested Schools and link to tutorial activities. Additional graphics are currently being developed. To view the guide, please access the following site: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/school/education/pbls/>. The FYE conference nuts and bolts session plan is outlined in Table 1 below.

Nuts and bolts session plan

Icebreaker: (5mins) How important is the psycho-social journey to first year students' adjustment and success?

Facilitators: (5mins) Briefly describe the structure of the guide and demonstrate it.

Paired discussion: (5mins) Invite participants to trial a reflective activity from the guide.

Facilitators: (5mins) Share learning from experience e.g. highlights and pitfalls and evaluation of the resource to date.

Small groups: (10mins) Ask participants to reflect on the following questions:

What similar initiatives are they involved in?

What ideas from the resource would be relevant to their setting?

What partnerships work well?

Large Group discussion: (5mins) Request group feedback and acknowledge themes.

Consult the group as a reflective team.

Could they share some thoughts about ways to improve the resource?

Could we include their pooled ideas/advice for first year students in the guide from the point of view of a community of practitioners in the area of FYE?

Table 1. Nuts and bolts session plan, FYHE Conference, 2010.

Students' emotions about learning frequently remain unacknowledged. Grenfell claims that "emotions themselves can be considered as cognitive objects about which one can be mindful" (Grenfell, 2007, p. 8). The "First Year Student's Guide to University Study" is an online resource designed to enhance transition experience and support students' learning potential, resilience and wellbeing. The guide has potential to contribute to transition pedagogy via "third generation strategies" that involve "academic and professional staff who form sustainable partnerships across institutional boundaries" to offer a whole of university response (Kift, 2009, p. 1). Such relationships also enrich our learning.

References

- ACER. (2009). *Engaging students for success: Australasian student engagement report and the Australasian survey of student engagement*. Camberwell, Australia: ACER. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from http://ausse.acer.edu.au/images/docs/AUSSE_2008_Australasian_Student_Engagement_Report.pdf
- Bryson, C. & Hand, L. (2008). Student Engagement. In L. Hand, & C. Bryson, (Eds.), *Aspects of student engagement - SEDA special 22* (pp. 13-17). London, UK: Staff and Educational Development Association.
- Burnett, L. (2006). *The first year experience project report*. Brisbane, Australia: The University of Queensland. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from www.uq.edu.au/teaching-learning/docs/FYEPProjectReport2006.pdf
- Crisp, G., Palmer, E., Turnbull, D., Nettelbeck, T., Ward, L., LeCouteur, A., Sarris, A., Strelan, P., & Schneider, L. (2009). First year expectations: Results from a university-wide student survey. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 6(1), Article 3. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1073&context=jutlp>
- Crossman, J. (2007). The role of relationships and emotions in student perceptions of learning and assessment. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26(3), 313-327.
- Dluzewska, T., & Kirby, D. (2009, December). *Succeeding at uni: Ideas forum*. Paper presented at the ANZSSA Biennial Conference, Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved March 1, 2010, from <http://www.adcet.edu.au/StoredFile.aspx?id=2263&fn=Kirby+%26+Dluzewska+succeeding+at+uni++handout.pdf>
- Gale, T. (2009). Towards a southern theory of higher education. In J. Thomas (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 12th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference: 'Preparing for Tomorrow Today; The First Year Experience as Foundation'*, Brisbane, Australia: QUT Publications. Retrieved May 3, 2010, from www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers09/ppts/Trevor_Gale_paper.pdf
- Grenfell, M. (2007, June). *Emotions and cognition: The emotional lives of students studying online*. Paper presented to the Fourteenth International Conference on Learning, University of the Witwatersand, South Africa.
- Hedberg, P. (2009). Learning through reflective classroom practice. *Journal of Management Education*, 33(1), 10-36.
- Henderson, R., Noble, K., & De George-Walker, L. (2009). Transitioning into university: 'Interrupted' first year students problem-solving their way into study. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation & Development*, 6(1), 51-64. Retrieved May 3, 2010, from <http://sleid.cqu.edu.au>
- Huntly, H., & Donovan, J. (2009). Developing academic persistence in first year tertiary students: A case study. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation & Development*, 6(1), 1-14. Retrieved May 3, 2010, from <http://sleid.cqu.edu.au>
- Kantanis, T. (2000). The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year at university. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 9(1), 100-110.

- Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education: Final report for ALTC senior fellowship program*. Retrieved May 3, 2010 from www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/transitionpedagogy
- Kinnear, A., Boyce, M., Sparrow, H., Middleton, S., & Cullity, M. (2008). *Diversity: A longitudinal study of how student diversity relates to resilience and successful progression in a new generation university*. Perth, Australia: Edith Cowan University. Retrieved May 5, 2010 from www.altc.edu.au/resource-diversity-longitudinal-study-ecu-2009
- Krause, K. L. (2005a). Serious thoughts about dropping out in first year: Trends, patterns and implications for higher education. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation & Development*, 2(3), 55-68. Retrieved February 28, 2010, from <http://sleid.cqu.edu.au>
- Krause, K.L. (2005b, October). *The changing face of the first year: Challenges for policy and practice in research-led universities*. Paper presented at the University of Queensland Teaching and Learning Week: First Year Forum, University of Queensland, Australia. Retrieved February 25, 2010, from http://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/39274/UQKeynote2005.pdf
- Krause, K. L. (2005c, September). *Understanding and promoting student engagement in learning communities*. Paper presented at the James Cook University Symposium: Sharing Scholarship in Learning and Teaching; Engaging Students, James Cook University, Townsville/Cairns, Australia. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/Stud_eng.pdf
- Krause, K.L., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne, Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- Krause, K., McEwen, C., & Blinco, K. (2009, May). *E-learning and the first year experience: A framework for best practice*. Paper presented at the EDUCAUSE Australasia Conference, Perth, Australia. Accessed May 3, 2005, from www.caudit.edu.au/educauseaustralasia09/program/abstracts/monday/Kerri-Lee-Krause.php
- Kuh, G. (2007). What matters to student success in the first year of university? In J. Thomas (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 10th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference: Regenerate, Engage, Experiment*. Brisbane, Australia: QUT Web Solutions. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers07/abstracts/george_kuh.html
- Lawrence, J. (2003). *The 'deficit discourse' shift: University teachers and their role helping first year students persevere and succeed at new university culture*. Retrieved February 25, 2010, from <http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/march03/lawrence1.htm>
- Leece, R., & Hale, R. (2009, May). *Student engagement and retention through e-Motional intelligence: A contemporary approach to student support and retention management*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Student Retention, New Orleans, USA. Retrieved May 3, 2010, from www.educationalpolicy.org/backup/events/R09/schedule.html
- Lizzio, A. (2006). *Designing an orientation and transition strategy for commencing students: Applying the five senses mode*. Brisbane, Australia: Griffith University First Year

- Experience Project. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from www.griffith.edu.au/_data/.../Alfs-5-Senors-Paper-FYE-Project,-2006.pdf
- Luthans, F., Avey, J., & Patera, J. (2008). Experimental analysis of a web-based training intervention to develop positive psychological capital. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 7(2), 209 – 221.
- McInnis, C., James, R., & Hartley, R. (2000). *Trends in the first year experience*. Canberra: AGPS.
- McKenzie, K., Gow, K., & Schweitzer, R. (2004). Exploring first-year academic achievement through structural equation modeling. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23(1), 21-33.
- Nelson, K., Duncan, M., & Clark, J. (2009). Student success: The identification and support of first year university students at risk of attrition. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation & Development*, 6(1), 1-15. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from <http://sleid.cqu.edu.au>
- Pekrun, R., Goetz, T., Tiz, W., & Perry, R.P. (2002). Academic emotions in students' self-regulated learning and achievement: A program of qualitative and quantitative research. *Educational Psychologist*, 37(2), 91-105.
- Purnell, S. (2002, July). *Calm and composed on the surface, paddling like hell underneath: The transition to university in New Zealand*. Paper presented at the Sixth Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference: Changing Agendas "Te Ao Hurihuri", Christchurch, New Zealand. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/abstracts02/PurnellAbstract.htm
- Reason, R., Terezini, P., & Domingo, R. (2006). First things first: Developing academic competence in the first year of college. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(2), 149-175.
- Robbins, S. B., Oh, I., Le, H., & Button, C. (2009). Intervention effects on college performance and retention as mediated by motivational, emotional, and social control factors: Integrated meta-analytic path analyses. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(5), 1163-1184.
- Rosenthal, D., Russell, V., & Thomson, G. (2006). *A growing experience. The health and wellbeing of international students at the University of Melbourne*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from <http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/downloads/GrowingExperience.pdf>
- Scevak, J., & Cantwell, R. (2007). *Stepping stones: A guide for mature-aged students at university*. Camberwell, Victoria: ACER Press.
- Shea, P. (2005). Serving students online: Enhancing their learning experience. *New Directions for Student Services*, 112, 15–24.
- Stewart, A. (2008, July). *Outreach and social inclusion: Outreach for social cohesion*. Paper presented at the Go8/DEEWR Forum, Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved February 26, 2010, from http://www.go8.edu.au/storage/events/2008/social_inclusion_presentations/Ann_Stewart_Outreach_and_social_inclusion.pdf
- Stallman, H. (2009, December). *Towards a population approach towards promoting mental health in tertiary students*. Paper presented at the ANZSSA Biennial Conference,

Brisbane, Australia. Retrieved May 5, 2010, from
<http://www.adcet.edu.au/Anzssa/View.aspx?id=7061>

- Tu, C.H. (2000). Online learning migration: From social learning theory to social presence theory in CMC environment. *Journal of Network & Computer Applications*, 23(1), 27 – 37.
- Turner, J., Husman, D., & Shallert, D. (2002). The importance of students' goals in their emotional experience of academic failure: The precursors and consequences of shame. *Educational Psychologist*, 37(2), 79-89.
- Yazedjian, A., Toews, M., Sevin, T., & Purswell, K. (2008). "It's a whole new world": A qualitative exploration of college students' definitions of and strategies for college success. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(2), 141-154.
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': The role of social support in the first year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707-722.
- Wingate, U. (2007). A framework for transition: Supporting "learning to learn" in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(3), 391-405.
- Wilson, K. (2009) Success in first year: The impact of institutional, programmatic and personal interventions on an effective and sustainable first-year student experience. In J. Thomas (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 12th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference: 'Preparing for Tomorrow Today: The First Year Experience as Foundation'*. Brisbane, Australia: QUT Publications. Retrieved May 3, 2010, from www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers09/ppts/Keithia_Wilson_paper.pdf