A Culture of Success: Building Depth into Institution-Wide Approaches to First Year Transition.

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A deeply embedded culture of success facilitates students to effectively negotiate their higher education experiences, holding more promise for first year transition than initiatives that target transition alone. It is imperative that issues of first year transition are anchored in institution-wide approach, and not executed in a ‘piecemeal’ fashion around the various faculties of a university. This paper argues that breadth of approach (at an institutional level) must also foster and support depth (at a school or faculty level) for the transition experiences of students to be best supported. Following Tinto’s (2005, 2009) institutional conditions for student success, we developed a multi-level intervention, which aims to transform a school culture. It is the overarching ambition of success and engagement that ensures the result is greater than the sum of its parts, accomplishing significant outcomes for student learning and support in the Architecture School at University of Technology, Sydney (UTS).

A deeply embedded culture of success facilitates students to effectively negotiate their higher education experiences, and holds more promise for the first year transition of all students than initiatives that target transition alone. This project encompasses a whole school, a rapidly growing school, and the ethos and culture of the discipline, supporting opportunities for success at all levels, including first year – creating a deep approach to transition. It is imperative, however, when considering issues of transition in a discipline specific framework, but that they are anchored in an institution-wide approach, with all the consistency, support mechanisms and scholarly basis that this provides. This paper argues that breadth of approach (at an institutional level) must foster and encourage depth (at a school or faculty level), not just for the transition experiences of students to be best supported, but also so that local cultures can thrive to nurture a sense belonging, and school or faculty identity. Equally, localised initiatives need to ensure they plug into a greater institutional network, or if none exists to ensure that student support mechanisms are maximised.

First Year Transition Experience

The experience of students entering first year of university has become the focus of much research in recent years (Tinto 2005, 2009; Nelson et al 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Kift 2008, 2009). The facilitation of transition into the institution has been at the forefront of this work, with an emerging interest in widening participation, particularly with respect to students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds (Devlin 2009, 2011). Australian federal government targets, to increase enrolments for LSES students from 15 to 20% of the undergraduate cohort by 2020 ensure that this is an emergent field for Australian first year experience (FYE) researchers (Devlin & O’Shea, 2012).

Krause et al (2005) called for a new focus on institution-wide approaches to FYE intervention, instead of the then prevalent ‘piecemeal’ departmental initiatives. In the intervening years, however, much of the literature has still disregarded the institutional scale. The Australian federal government target for LSES enrolments may be the catalyst required
to tip the balance, with universities now establishing institution-wide responses to transition, FYE coordinators, and frenetic activity around widening participation. The necessity for explicit, well-organised institutional strategies for responding to issues of transition is established (Nelson, Smith et al. 2012, Tinto 2005, Kift 2009, Lawrence 2005) and with government funding supporting transition, a 20% LSES enrolment target deadline looming, and the influential figures in the literature driving institution scaled initiatives, it can be expected to see institution-wide approaches to first year transition across Australasian universities in the imminent future. This paper most strenuously supports this development. The project presented here is located within and supported by the UTS First Year Experience Project, which operates a university-wide strategy aimed at improving FYE through a third generation (Kift, 2009) approach to transition pedagogies both in- and outside the curriculum, with a focus on retention and success (Egea & McKenzie, 2012). Without this institution-wide framework the initiatives discussed in this paper would not exist, or be credible: it is the starting point and the essential structure for sustainability.

The UTS First Year Experience Project

Underpinned by the UTS Widening Participation Strategy (2010-2015), which sets out a ‘whole of university’ approach, and located with the university’s Equity and Diversity Unit under the umbrella of Retention and Success, the UTS FYE Project has rapidly grown to support first year experience and transition across the institution. The key themes of the project revolve around students’ identity and sense of belonging; curriculum (engagement in the discipline and embedding transition pedagogies); aligning curricular and co-curricular student support mechanisms; infrastructure and supporting students to navigate the university system. Faculty transition initiatives for targeted discipline specific support are facilitated through the cross-university transition learning community, which includes FYE Strategy Group, Faculty FYE transition coordinators, FYE forums, FYE Grants. This institution-wide approach aims to respond holistically to students’ transition, taking into account the whole person. Simultaneously, it considers multiple faculties, schools and departments, and therefore learning cultures within the institution (Egea, McKenzie & Griffiths, in press).

While we develop breadth across the institution, it is imperative to simultaneously embed depth within each sub-unit of the institution. This necessitates evolving the way previously or potentially ‘add-on’ transition programs, (Tinto, 2009) or ‘piecemeal’ initiatives, (Krause et al, 2005) are conceived of, framed and incorporated into the wider network.

Embedding Depth for Success

Much of the literature around low SES students and their transition to higher education focuses on the deficits that need to be overcome. A focus on success needs to replace this emphasis on deficit, if we are to find constructive solutions for LSES students (Devlin, 2009). This claim of Devlin (2009) is in fact transferable to the problem of transition for all students, and is generalisable beyond this to their entire education. A focus on success and “what works” breeds success (Flaig & Stadler, 1994). Positive affect has also been demonstrated to lead to success too (Lyubomirsky et al, 2005), ensuring that happy students in a culture of success are more likely to be successful themselves.

University study is about more than the achievement of a qualification: it is about enabling students to achieve their potential and thus empowering their futures and their careers. For academic staff, especially those working with transition students, it must be about inspiring students and motivating them to take advantage of the opportunity afforded them to achieve
all that they can through their education. At the School of Architecture at UTS a conscious culture of success has been developed around the application of transition and widening participation strategies. Despite the origins in transition pedagogy, this culture is not confined to the first year, and is not even predominantly located there. It infuses across all years of the school, influencing and inspiring students in both the under- and postgraduate programs, as well as extending to high school students who are considering architecture as a career, and beyond with graduates into industry. Following Tinto’s (2005, 2009) institutional conditions for student success, we developed a multi-level intervention, which aims to transform a school culture. Addressing each of Tinto’s conditions, it is the overarching ambition of success and engagement that ensures the result is greater than the sum of its parts. A range of tactics, that respond to Tinto (2005, 2009) is being implemented to deal with retention in various target groups, underpinned by a series of strategies aimed at improving student outcomes (Burke et al, 2012 – see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Range of tactics employed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Group</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential 1st Year Students</td>
<td>Summer School</td>
<td>Appropriate course selection; Retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Year Students</td>
<td>*First Year Experience Initiatives: In/out Curriculum; Peer-support; Week One, Year One Charette</td>
<td>Retention; Transition to course; Induction into the discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd &amp; 3rd Year Students; Postgraduate (PG) Students</td>
<td>*Formal Peer-tutoring Program; Leadership Development Program</td>
<td>Retention; Induction into the discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning PG Students with architecture degree from a university other than UTS</td>
<td>Masters Foundation Studio</td>
<td>Retention; Transition to the course; Induction into the discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students; Graduates; Greater Discipline</td>
<td>Expanded learning opportunities; Exhibition cultivation</td>
<td>Lifelong learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Tinto (2009, p. 10) observes “that student success … is the result of an intentional, structured, and proactive set of strategies that are coherent and systematic in nature”, noting that this is most imperative in first year. The architecture school has responded directly to Tinto’s (2009) observations, by intentionally setting up proactive range of tactics to foster success, and by doing so across the first year of study and beyond.

As the scope of this paper precludes an in-depth analysis of all tactics noted in Table 1 above. Instead, several components will be extracted and examined against the literature to demonstrate the depth of the approach, and the anchoring within the institution-wide framework. This analysis will focus on the Formal Peer-tutoring Program, the associated Leadership Development Program and their roles with first year students in the FYE initiatives.

Context for Peer-Learning

The university and the UTS FYE Project embrace and support peer-learning as a complement to the academic timetable, both in principle and with resources. Peer learning is well established across the institution with the nationally recognised and ALTC cited U:PASS (UTS Peer Assisted Study Success) program, which assists students in difficult subjects with traditionally high failure rates. A total of fifty key subjects across all faculties of the university benefit from U:PASS, many of these subjects targeting transitioning students. The sessions are informal group gatherings facilitated by peer leaders, who formerly performed well in the subject themselves. In research conducted in the past few semesters, the average mark achieved by students attending U:PASS was 12-15% higher than those who did not attend at all (UTS internal metrics).

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The particularities of the equivalent difficult transition subjects (with high failure or drop-out rate) in architecture have prevented their direct inclusion in the U:PASS system. Instead, a discipline-specific Peer-Tutoring in Architecture (PTA) program has developed to respond to the unique learning culture of the architectural design studio, with the support of UTS First Year Experience Project grant funding, and UTS Learning and Teaching Grants. The manager of U:PASS has partnered with the architecture staff to develop the training for peer-tutors, ensuring that this potentially ‘piecemeal’ project is firmly embedded in the institution-wide approaches to peer-learning.

Peer-tutoring was selected due to the indisputable and comprehensive demonstration throughout the literature of the effectiveness of peer assisted learning across a multitude of age groups, institutions, faculties and assessment types. Peer-tutoring has repeatedly been found to add value to the educational experience of both the peer tutors and the peer tutees and to improve perceptions of institutional belonging. (Topping, 1996a&b, 2005; Falchikov, 2001; Goodlad & Hirst, 1990). Effective in responding to issues of transition (Coe & Keeling, 2000), peer-tutoring has also been identified as beneficial for low SES students (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989).

Peer-tutoring has at its foundation the need to ‘set the bar high’, so that students are excited and motivated by what they are able to achieve. At the same time structures are set up to enable the required achievements to be identifiable and for students to know how to attain them. Such accomplishments enable students to gain access to best opportunities when they graduate. This is particularly the case within architecture, where the quality of their architectural portfolios predominantly determines their quality of employment. By setting high standards, and motivating students to aspire to excellence, however, some (particularly early stage students) can easily become intimidated and could withdraw from architectural study. It would be irresponsible therefore to set these aspirational standards without also providing exceptional levels of student support. This has been the aim and also one of the measures of success through the integration of peer-support/tutoring in the architectural design studio, combined with ambitious curriculum development.

“All the tutors and Jo were always around and willing to help. The fact that they so passionately wanted to help made me want to work harder and harder so not to disappoint them. Good tactic.” UTS Student feedback survey (SFS) 11221 2012.1

A community of practice framework underpins the peer-tutoring project, and the planning and development are held together by this conceptualization (Adam et al, 2011; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In a learning-by-teaching framework, selected senior exemplary architecture students at UTS have been trained to act as peer tutors to junior students in the design studio on a regular basis, supporting them in specific critical aspects of the studio culture. This has occurred over five years, growing to meet the huge demand and enthusiasm from the recipients and the peer-tutors. While students become peer-tutors by invitation only, they are invited based on their own performance in the subject and their level of engagement in the classroom. There is no selection on the basis of ethnicity, but a diverse group of peer-tutors tends to emerge regardless. Supplementary peer-tutoring is provided to all tutorial classes for five key subjects in first and second year architecture. Peer-tutors are not tutoring design itself, but are instead there to support student learning, spending three hours per week with briefing, training and debriefing. Due to the nature of the design studio, peer-tutors were able to work with students during their three hour curricular tutorial session. Students still see their tutor, but also interact with the peer-tutor, effectively doubling the amount of time each student had for feedback on the project. There were eighty volunteer peer-tutor positions in
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forty-three tutorial classes supporting 280 students in their core design subjects over two semesters in 2012: offering over 2000 hours of volunteer commitment. This has already grown another 20% in 2013. Peer-tutors do not receive course credit or payment for participating, but they are unanimous in claiming that it is a valuable learning experience, that has escalated the way they engage in their own studies. Between sessions, additional debriefing occurs on a Facebook page, set up for peer-tutors and staff, and students are very professional in their engagement with staff on the page (Jenkins et al, 2012).

The students who have been peer-tutored benefit with skill development, enculturation, increased sense of belonging, and confidence negotiating the university systems. The presence of a diverse cohort of peer-tutors in the first year transition subjects also act to provide role models for a diverse cohort of students. The benefits of additional support and a higher standard of work are clear for the recipients of peer-tutoring and the official UTS Student Feedback Survey (SFS) results echo time and again the students’ appreciation for the support. For the peer-tutees, the peer-tutors (who because they were recently first year students themselves), became role-models. They offered reassurance (“I found that hard too”), inspiration (“If I can do it, you can – and here is how”) and motivation, because the peer-tutors all knew that commitment to work maximised learning opportunities and bred confidence as well as success.

“It has been a learning experience. However with the peer mentors, it has made a huge difference in the work that I was able to accomplish. The mentors are able to empathise with you as they were in that position not too long ago.” SFS, 11211 2012.1

“IT's always great to converse with someone who's gone through the same thing. They not only helped with the work but also encouraged me to keep going with the course at times when I thought about giving up.” SFS, 11211 2012.1

For both the volunteers and recipients, the peer-tutoring has a positive effect on their sense of belonging. UTS SFS 11221 2012.1: 1=disagree, 5=strongly agree, 52% cohort response rate Q9. Peer-tutoring had a positive effect on my sense of place in the school: 4.40 (0.72)

For the peer-tutors themselves, the learning opportunity is manifold. They are offered learning-by-teaching, and associated training, whereby peer-tutors are equipped for future teaching or critiquing roles or for leadership roles in design practice. Students who act as peer-tutors benefit from increased sense of institutional belonging, the ability to critically analyse the work of their peers, they learn leadership and interpersonal skills and elevate their own understanding of the process of design learning (Topping, 2005). For peer-tutors, being invited to participate in the program has bred a mantle of recognition and prestige. They feel valued by the School, and inspired to invest in the program in recognition of the trust the staff member has placed in them. They additionally experienced the positive benefits of giving, and of contributing to other students learning. After they have participated for a short time they become aware of how much they are accelerating their own learning, and becoming further motivated in their own work. They clarify and synthesise their own position in architectural design and broaden their own understanding of the tutor-student interaction, maximising the effectiveness of their own classroom time.

“I am glad to be apart [sic] of the peer-tutoring program, I feel as though peer-tutoring is enabling me to find an educational home now within the architecture department. I hope to be apart [sic] of peer tutoring in the future.” SFS 11221 2012.1

Across several development focus groups the following findings emerged. All students (100%) claimed peer-tutoring had a positive effect on their marks, and that this was an enduring effect that would last beyond the immediate subject. Students who had received
peer-tutoring claimed the program had had a positive effect on their confidence as designers and on their enthusiasm for their design studies. All students who received peer-tutoring stated they would want to become peer-tutors in the future and would be willing to volunteer.

While not initially a formal component of this peer-tutoring, mentoring developed regardless, between the peer-tutors and recipients, and between academic staff and peer-tutors. Mentoring is a valuable and successful process to prepare leaders for successful negotiation of a dynamic global workplace, and the ambiguities inherent therein (Leavitt, 2011), and has been an additional positive outcome.

Somewhat simplistically, enculturation for transition students requires that they understand the expectations of the institution, that they are shown how to meet these expectations and that they are supported to do so. This occurs through the peer-tutoring for five hours of every week of the first year of study. The regular and enduring nature of a peer-tutoring relationship is significant, as is the success-focused framework of the program. Additional, transition strategies for depth include a Year One, Week One collaborative project to ameliorate culture shock, early low stakes assessment, training for first year design tutors on transition pedagogies and support mechanisms, social all school gatherings, lectures and student and alumni exhibitions. The conscious establishment of deep strategies for success is firmly embedded in the UTS FYE Project. The institution-wide approach provides breadth with clear priorities, frameworks and support mechanisms such as telephone calls to every student, targeted support for students from a range of pathways into university, training sessions for university infrastructure, language support and an array of other structures.

Culture shock is evident for all architecture students, the intensity of which is expected to be greatest for those from low SES backgrounds, for whom this learning environment is likely to be most removed from their previous educational experience. By intervening with this body of measures, all students stand to benefit, but those who benefit most are anticipated to be students from low SES backgrounds. The success rate in the faculty for students from LSES backgrounds since 2009 is 96.77%, which is higher than the rate for the general cohort, of 88.28%. These rates do not prove that these measures are effective in easing transition for LSES students, but certainly once LSES students enter the faculty, they are successful!

**Context for Leadership Development**

“What students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college. Voluminous research on college student development shows that time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single biggest predictor of their learning and personal development.” Kuh et al (2005), p. 8.

University years are critical years for leadership development (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). The opportunities created by the institution and the professional development programs offered are imperative for leadership to flourish (Elnagar et al, 2011).

Professional practice of architecture, and preparation for registration as an architect, is something of high priority for students in the discipline. For graduates of architecture to become registered as architects, they must attain the required standards in the professional registration examinations after several years of graduate industry experience. Tailoring professional development and leadership programs to an understanding of practice-based performance ensures their relevance for students, so they are highly motivated to participate (Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006).
Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (1999) identified that formalised, targeted initiatives facilitate students to improve their leadership skills. The top four initiatives were identified as: Mentoring programs; Leadership workshops; Community service; Guest speakers. These are all embedded in the architecture school: some as part of the peer-tutoring program, some open to the wider school. This checklist from Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt, however, does not take into account more contemporary priorities in leadership, which require that we develop our communities of practice to engage with uncertainty, complexity and pluralistic possibilities (Brew, 2012; Watkins et al, 2011). The UTS institutional priorities of practice-based learning are instrumental here. Directly influencing the way leadership development has evolved within the architecture school, priority has been given to development of professional dispositions, to design thinking as it plays out in practice, and to the ability to adapt to complexity and change in practice-related experience. For example, with the two core mandates of the peer-tutoring closely aligned with the subtleties of practice, the program ensures peer-tutors test and learn the skills required to elevate the level at which they stand to operate in future practice. The action-based leadership learning in peer-tutoring requires participants to learn to respond to challenging situations, to weigh up complex sets of factors and to work with uncertainty in an on-going learning trajectory. They have to respond to unexpected inputs, as students show them their creative work, develop an intellectual response to it and support the student’s learning, all in a few moments. They do this approximately eighteen times over in a session. The mastery of skill sets and advanced representational tools is an additional practice driven component of the program, which benefits both the volunteers and the recipients. They connect this practice-related experience to the reflection and framing in the briefing/debriefing sessions, consciously developing their position in the field. Edwards & Turnbull (2013) found practice-based “placements, in particular, hold the key to the development of contextually sensitive leadership ability” (p. 52). Closely aligned to the way architecture is delivered in practice, peer-tutoring is not just LIKE design leadership in practice, it IS design leadership in practice. With reference therefore to Schön’s (1983) theory of the reflective practitioner, and Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice, the theoretical framework of the peer-tutoring community of practice is expanded to a community of practitioners (Watkins, 2011). This conscious framing of professional development opportunities for students and a community of practitioners has allowed a simple peer-tutoring program to expand to a genuine development program for participants and a framework for the success-focused culture of the school. Across a number of focus groups, 100% of the students involved have claimed this program to be a beneficial leadership development experience. Most claim that there is no other forum available where they can learn and experience this type of practice-based leadership.

**Institutional Conditions for Student Success**

Tinto’s (2005) five institutional conditions for student success serve as a reference for developing the culture of success in the school, and they also serve as a yardstick to measure them by.

_Institutional Commitment_ “is a condition for student success. Simply put, institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing student success, especially among low income and under-represented students, seem to find a way to achieve that end.” Tinto 2005, p.90. The provision by the university of elaborate structures of student support as demonstrated in this paper, and the enthusiastic culture of success that students enter, demonstrate to students that
the school and the university are committed to their success. Students are shown success, and they are dared to dream. Then they are supported in finding ways to reach for their dreams.

**High expectations**: Students are set exacting standards and are regularly shown examples of exemplary work, being challenged to aim high themselves. This extends to the peer-tutors, who have training materials, which they take into the classroom with examples of exceptional student projects notated to explain how the student went about achieving it.

**Support**: In a third generation (Kift, 2009) transition environment, contextualised academic support and student support is evident, in a number of deep and broad approaches. Financial support is additionally a part of the institution-wide mechanism, and is not perceivable to staff or peers once the student is in the classroom.

**Frequent feedback**: Students receive weekly feedback from their tutors on their own design projects. The peer-tutors provide additional weekly feedback from a non-threatening source, and options for correction are explored with them when work is not on track. Additional written feedback is provided from the tutor in advance of the census date, and low stakes assessment items are introduced to first year design studio.

**Involvement**: Tinto advocates for academic and social integration, as a prerequisite for success. The integration of peer-networks into the first year classroom, and their reach beyond into the social events of the school, into the computer laboratories where students work on projects or beyond the institution goes a long way towards students feeling involved – with results from peer-tutoring demonstrating an elevated sense of belonging. Peer-tutors themselves experience this involvement too, within the new role of working with staff, they feel valued and valuable.

**Concluding remarks**

The project in the UTS School of Architecture is a work in progress. It by no means sets itself up as an exemplar, but rather demonstrates how a project that is part of the institution-wide approach to transition can build its own culture and depth to better facilitate student learning. A culture of success is proving contagious, with students and academics enjoying the benefit. Teaching students who are engaged and passionate about their work is its own reward, as is seeing the students move on to success beyond the institution.

The argument for institution-wide approaches to support student transition is not new, but it can be perceived as threatening to those working in initiatives that are not broadly across an institution. What is argued here is that with the breadth of approach at an institutional level must also come depth at a school or faculty level. Both need to be fostered and nurtured. For those working in localised interventions, opportunities should be sought to plug in to the institutional framework, adapting and improving the work as this connection occurs. Likewise, those advocating broad institutional measures should develop strategies to enmesh the more isolated initiatives and to allow them to become a part of the institutional approach all the while looking for ways to improve that broad framework.

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