Abstract: Across Australia, participation rates in higher education for disadvantaged students are low; most often associated with their low socioeconomic background, rurality, and lower aspirational levels. An alternate transition model, the Thriving Transition Cycle, designed to provide an innovative, staged and cyclic approach to the transition to tertiary study was applied to first year students in the faculties of Health Science at five Australian universities. The model provided a template for support that accounted for the stages of transition successfully negotiated. Results indicate an effective, proactive cycle of support that invites learning and growth, rather than being driven by procedure and triggered by crisis.

Background

The recruitment and retention of disadvantaged students in tertiary education is problematic as their entry characteristics, expectations and reservoirs of resilience are limited (DEEWR, 2008; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). The most under-represented group, struggling with this unsettling transition, are those from a low socio-economic background and those from isolated, rural communities (van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift, & Levitt, 2007). The current tertiary environment will become increasingly challenging as the Australian government policy targets for expansion and social inclusion are progressed (James, et al., 2010).

Historically, transition has been described as a linear process involving the abandonment of the familiar, followed by a period of disequilibrium and a new beginning (Bridges, 1986; Nortier, 1995; Selder, 1989). A more personal account was described by Schlossberg (1989) as an artefact of the characteristics of the transition, the individual, and the resources available to the individual.

The capacity to thrive in challenging transitions is consistently the product of support, the nature of the transition (e.g. welcome, unwelcome, expected, and unexpected), aspects of self (e.g. dispositional factors, previous experiences, and openness to experience), and the ability to deal with ambiguity. The transition to tertiary education brings contextual challenges (Coates, 2008) and there is a growing body of evidence that retention strategies should be an integrated, contextually appropriate, institution-wide approach (Kift, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Wilson, 2007). Of deeper concern, less than 20% of tertiary student students perceive tertiary institutions as capable of providing support to cope with non-academic responsibilities (Coates, 2008).

The Thriving Transition Cycle

Nicholson’s Transition Cycle (Nicholson, 1990) provided an novel framework to examine the student transition experience. Developed to explain work-role transitions, it was adapted to describe geographically dislocating transitions by Harris et al (Harris, Myhill, & Walker, 2012a). Further, in the current Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) research, Harris and
Barnett (2013) adapted the model to the transition to higher education as the *Thriving Transition Cycle*.

This research study focused on the characteristics and processes of this unsettling transition, particularly for those regarded as at-risk students (i.e. first-in-family, rural and remote, low SES) entering the faculties of health science. The participating universities applied the model in a series of steps: a) scoping of their existing programs of support, b) the identification of the particular cohort within their university, c) training student support officers in the operation of the model and familiarity with the IT components, d) the application of the model to the cohorts and the documentation of the type, duration and impact of the interventions, and e) reflection with the project team through interviews and questionnaires.

The application of the model involved a cyclic process of 4 stages (i.e. preparation, encounter, adjustment and reflection), and 16 components where three guiding principles held true. The transition (1) had recursive qualities with one stage leading to the next through the cycle; (2) had disjunctive qualities/characteristics at each stage; (3) had interdependent and dynamic antecedent qualities with the resolution of one stage defining the next. This research identified five important themes associated with the transition to university:

1. Transition is cyclical with critical stages that predicate the success of the transition;
2. Traditional front-loading through orientation provides information, but does not provide the capacity or confidence to thrive;
3. The stages of the transition cycle provide opportunities to provide pre-emptive support to students;
4. Early intervention and reflection are more effective than crisis management;
5. Successful transition programs are embedded into the whole student experience.

Key Question 1
The transition to university involves a constellation of factors. With your table colleague, list the top 3 deal breakers that contribute to a student’s failure to thrive.

The Thriving Transition Cycle accounts for an individual’s transition to higher education and provides the best opportunity to thrive. This model describes the scaffolding for universities to design early interventions, and describes the transition to tertiary study as a cycle, where the stages being well resolved, provide the best opportunity to thrive. Those that thrive have:

Stage 1: Preparation
- Purposeful and selective mastery (readiness for the challenge);
- Confidence and proactive strategies (motivation);
- Self-assurance and positive detachment (positive planning);
- A clear and ordered, forward focus (comprehensibility);

Stage 2: Encounter
- Positive self-concepts and a willingness to learn (confidence);
- Clarity of purpose and a commitment to process (sense-making);
- Awareness of the transition process and engagement (meaningfulness);
- The capacity to link with others and access resources (engagement);

Stage 3: Adjustment
- Awareness of the transition and challenges (role adjustment);
- Responsiveness and attentiveness (manageability);
- The capacity to identify and access to support systems (support systems);
- Independence and sociability (relationship building);

Stage 4: Reflection
- The capacity to identify pathways and learn from experience (personal development);
- Mastery of new and complex skills (environmental mastery);
- A willingness to be open and receptive to future challenges (trust and commitment);
- The capacity for autonomous planning and strategic insight (exercise of discretion).

Lessons learned
Students need to be coached on help-seeking behaviours, and such behaviours should be destigmatised. Early signs of potential student difficulty include failure to submit an assessable piece of work, failure to attend, decline in outputs or performance. The automated flagging of these indicators and the development of algorithms that assist in their predictive validity may assist with more efficient screening and follow-up of at risk students.
Informal forms of support may be just as effective as more formal support mechanisms. The model provides pathways for the identification of individual students and how these supports can be strengthened.

From our observations and the analysis of the student counsellor data, there have been a number of key messages around student transitions. Students who benefit most from transition support and intervention are those less likely to self-identify as needing support or seek it out. Conversely, high achieving students may help-seek outside of the university system as accessing internal resources may be seen as failure (to thrive or achieve). Consequently, to embed transition support strategies in curricula will require different approaches to learning and teaching such as: more face-to-face or active e-mediated encounters between the learner and the teacher.

The study indicated that students will have crises at various points during their course of study, thus the resources available to assist individual students and the organisations’ response strategies should be available for the duration of their enrolment and clearly communicated to them. In that regard, certain trigger points for crises can be identified and anticipated (e.g. failure in an assessment task, lead up to exams, and lack of feedback, financial difficulties, homesickness, clinical placements and placement encounters).

Conclusion
The whole concept of being a first year student begs the question of background and the experiences a student brings to the transition. Finer filters are required to better understand the commonalities that certain groups possess to allow timely and effective interventions to be applied. The pastoral work undertaken with students by academics (especially student advisors, or unit/course coordinators with large student cohorts) within schools is often not fully recognised as work within the teaching-research-service concept of academic life. Such work can be difficult to measure and can exert a greater demand on time than the amount (often notionally) allocated. Within the health sciences, the idea of a common or shared first year for students in the health professions is becoming more commonplace. Such a strategy may afford opportunities for more health-related transition initiatives to be put in place. These may include content and activities related to interpersonal relationships, field placement adjustments and re-locations, and the broader concept health transitions.

The Thriving Transition Cycle provides an alternate model for support of students in transition. The templates for the early identification of transition problems and the pathways for early intervention are described in detail. Clearly, the best opportunity to thrive is a commitment to student support beyond orientation, and this proactive model provides a cycle of stages that invites learning and growth, rather than being driven by procedure and triggered by crisis.

Key Question 2
Pick one of your deal breakers and re-examine the issue through the enabling lens of the Transition model. Has your perspective changed?
References


