Students, parents, partners, friends and the university: collaborators in successful first year transition.

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Abstract

While recent research shows that commencing students are generally aware that university will be different from their previous learning institutions, they are largely unaware of what those differences might be or how they might manage their new teaching and learning environment. Much of the transition literature focuses primarily on the incipient relationship between new students and the university and overlooks other key aspects of student lives. For example, in Australia more young people are living at home and dependent on family for longer, and many commencing mature age students must manage university study and multiple competing relationships and responsibilities. There is also the influential role that others play in Australian university students’ lives and in supporting student success. This Nuts and Bolts session showcases two recent and complementary University of South Australia resources – a ‘Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends of UniSA students’ and ‘Smart Start: A Companion for New University Students’ – that explain and demystify university for transitioning students and their immediate stakeholders. These resources address the key questions that affect students and other key stakeholders in their lives to encourage and empower students with more control of their early university experience. This session will invite dialogue around these initiatives and the impediments to measuring their impact.

Rationale

While the profile of students undertaking tertiary study in Australia has changed significantly due to internationalisation, widening participation initiatives and shifting population demographics (Dunworth, 2010), until recently much of the first year experience discourse recommended that transition initiatives focus on the relationship between the student and the university, positing the latter as central to student lives (e.g. Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). However, for many university is increasingly just one aspect of a complex life, and frequently not the most important as students juggle study, work, family and other responsibilities (Devlin, James, & Grigg, 2008; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011). Transition initiatives need to recognise and cater for this reality (Johnston, Collett, & Kooyman, 2013).

First year programs that segregate pre-existing family and social relationships from student life are unrealistic, especially with new technologies encouraging the blending of new and continuing familial and social relationships (Johnston et al., 2013). In Australia, many students attend local universities, live at home out of economic necessity or choice, and maintain part-time work and community links (Devlin et al., 2008; Keevers & Abuadha, 2012). Others, such as mature age students returning to study, are likely to lead complex lives with responsibilities that define how (and how much) they interact with the university (Zepke et al., 2011). Regional and external students can face different and sometimes further restrictions, including what and where they can study, because of location (Ellis, Watkinson,
& Sawyer, 2008). Lack of time for study is one of many factors known to put students at risk (Krause, 2005). It can also limit their interaction with and adaptation to the university.

Recent research suggests that despite increased attention to orientation and transition over recent years, students continue to need explicit advice on what being a university student means (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2009). They might understand that university will be different to their previous educational experiences but they are largely unaware about what those differences might be or how they might manage their learning in this new environment. Yet if they are to thrive they need a “sense of belonging” and an understanding of their place within the university (Kift et al., 2010), including explicit advice about how to incorporate being a university student into the rest of their lives. Their persistence and academic success depend on a practical understanding of the ebb and flow of the academic year, the centrality of the assessment schedule to their planning, and knowledge of the support structures that could help them persist (Johnston et al., 2013).

Transition discourse should also cater to students’ parents, partners and friends and acknowledge their need to understand the university environment, its opportunities and its demands (Johnston et al., 2013, p. 55). This is especially important in the case of families where a student is the first to attend university or has an important role in ensuring the family’s well-being e.g. in migrant communities (Burgoine & Hull, 2007). As key stakeholders in a student’s life, these influential others should understand the time and mental requirements of tertiary study, otherwise they may inadvertently place demands on students which jeopardize their chances of success (Johnston et al., 2013).

This session will focus on a recent two-pronged, two stage approach taken at UniSA to educate students and their parents, partners and friends about the University’s teaching and learning environment. It focusses on two publications – the Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends of UniSA students (2013) and Smart Start: A Companion for New University Students (2014) – designed to enhance the quality of the first year experience and support persistence. The process of developing these resources will be outlined and participants will be invited to contribute from their experiences of working with and evaluating outreach resources.

**Project**

In early 2012, the authors of this paper – two Language and Learning Advisers with a specific focus on widening participation – along with a Counsellor, all based in the university’s Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) and all experienced in orientation and transition programs, began an initiative to promote parents, partners, and friends’ understanding of the university experience, in the interests of making study expectations transparent and demystifying higher education. UniSA is known as the local university of choice for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and has a history of catering to diversity (Luzeckyj, King, Scutter, & Brinkworth, 2011; Stokes, 2014). The Language and Learning Adviser/Counsellor-driven initiative was consistent with widening participation initiatives across the university, but was also unique in addressing not only students but the influential others in their lives equally unfamiliar with university conventions.

The overriding aims of this undertaking were to make transition smoother, increase retention of students who may drop out due to familial or social pressures, and enhance the quality of their first year experience through educating the influential others in students’ lives – parents, partners, friends and family members – about tertiary study and ways that they can enable and support their students (Johnston et al., 2013). The authors developed a series of
information evenings for parents, partners and friends of students. The limited reach but positive impact of these sessions prompted the development, over two years, of two glossy transition publications and online resources for both students and their parents, partners and friends. The publications offer both groups similarly themed information about university, equipping both parties to share the transition experience and resolve common early questions.

The first product, the Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends, was designed to introduce parents, partners and friends of students – as well as students themselves – to the various facets of university life, including study expectations, strategies for succeeding, and miscellaneous student services. To make information accessible and transparent to this layperson audience, inclusive language was employed and graphic illustrations used to illuminate concepts such as escalating workload patterns over the course of a study period, the ideal distribution of on-campus contact and off-campus non-contact time, activities that students should participate in to ensure success, and important items for students living away from home. The finished product was launched in early 2013.

The second document, Smart Start: A Companion for New University Students, was launched during Orientation 2014 to complement a broad suite of enhanced Orientation initiatives and materials. It is both an introductory primer to university for new students and an ongoing resource, using graphic illustration and inclusive language to help convey its message in as accessible a manner as possible. It also transmits a strong student voice, with current students featured throughout. This publication was part of the Vice-Chancellor's university-wide project ‘Better Orientation 2014’ and is integral to the university’s push towards enhancing the first year orientation experience.

The authors believe both the Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends and Smart Start are fresh and valuable contributions to the transition experience at UniSA. The former engages the most influential stakeholders in students’ lives, recognising and harnessing the role they can play in supporting student success. It also explicitly acknowledges the complexity and multiplicity of relationships that the current student body carries into tertiary study and nurtures a greater sense of community in involving these vital stakeholders in the university experience. The second publication likewise caters to the complexity of students’ lives and strives to make transparent the expectations surrounding study and strategies to bolster transition success. Both enable students to be the locus of knowledge, information and experience, and both are compatible with the Good Practice Guidelines outlined by Nelson and Creagh (2013), particularly around avoiding reductive assumptions about student backgrounds and inclinations. Moreover, while the former document was a more focussed undertaken driven by a small group of close collaborators, the latter entailed and represents a multi-services, university-wide collaboration, in which the coordinators liaised with both academic and professional staff (e.g. in marketing and administration), resulting in a document tailored to satisfy multiple interests and outlets. This FYE undertaking thus came to represent best practice in joining the interests of academic and professional staff in reaching out to all first year students (Kift et al., 2010).

**Future directions and questions**

Concrete distribution data indicates the dissemination and reach of the Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends and Smart Start – both in print form and electronically – have been wide, and anecdotal evidence suggests that both documents have been utilised well by students and the influential others in their lives. However, it has proven challenging to substantiate the effectiveness of the former document for its target audience, given the
ultimately tangential relationship of this audience to the university. After guiding the audience through the development of these initiatives, showcasing the finished products (copies of both guides will be provided to audience members), and reinforcing our initial data on their reach and impact on transition and first year experience, we propose engaging the audience in discussion around the following points:

- Given the target parents/partners/friends group of the first document and their proven reluctance to engage with online surveys, how can we collect further data on the impact of the Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends?
- How might we extend on this work (current discussions include translating these guides into other languages and building a complimentary suite of resources)?
- Who is doing similar work using other mediums?
- How might we maximise the impact and reach of these resources and their spinoffs?

References


