KIFT ALTC SENIOR FELLOWSHIP: ARTICULATING A TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

Commentary on first year curriculum case studies: Orientation and transition perspective

JENNIFER LESKE

AUTHOR:
Jennifer Leske’s role as the Coordinator, Transition to University at Flinders University, has a university-wide scope. The role primarily supports student transition to university, and on through the first year of study ...
Commentary on first year curriculum case studies: Orientation and transition perspective

Author

01. Jen Leske is the Coordinator, Transition to University, Flinders University, Adelaide. The role has a university-wide scope and primarily supports student transition to university, and on through the first year of study (the main brief). Support is also available for other year level transitions and, to a lesser extent, the transition from university to employment. The role involves coordinating a central Transition Office information and support service, coordinating the university’s central orientation programs, developing transition and orientation related brochures, managing websites, and various peer mentoring programs. In addition the Coordinator works with various stakeholders across the university, providing advice and assistance to implement innovative initiatives and strategies designed to enhance student engagement and transition to university, before, in and beyond orientation week. A focus of recent years has been to strengthen student transition, not only via the central orientation program, but within specific degree welcome or orientation sessions.

02. Jen Leske holds degrees in Social Work, Psychology and Gender Studies, and previously worked in the areas of sexual health, mental health, and with the Department of Education and Children’s Services as a Student Attendance Counsellor. She has returned to study in 2008 via a degree in teaching, so the experiences of ‘transitioning’ are again very fresh!

The First Year Curriculum Perspective

Definition of transition

03. With reference to the breadth of the role, ‘transition’ in this commentary will refer to the process of orientating commencing undergraduate students over the course of their first year experience. As students rarely acquire all the skills necessary to navigate university life during orientation week alone (and I believe much of the current information provided in orientation week is transferable to semester class time), I have commented on the various staged strategies discussed in the case studies, and their application to a transition pedagogy where the first year curriculum is harnessed to mediate transition as a longer term process. In addition, please note that when ‘class’ is used throughout this commentary, I am referring to lectures, tutorials, workshops and so on.

Student Orientation and Transition to Tertiary Learning Perspective

04. Orientation is typically viewed as the main ‘strategy’ or timeframe to induct students into university life. Winning a place at university is an extremely exciting time for students, and navigating the new environment can be met either with great enthusiasm and expectations or with great apprehension or anxiety. For many students, universities can be big ‘scary’ places; particularly for students who are not good with directions, have shifted from the country or interstate, who have to catch public transport, who are prone to anxiety, or for many other reasons. Students do not attend orientation for a myriad of reasons, from extending their holidays, to not being able to find a parking space, not wanting to go through the ‘stress’ of making new friends, being extremely anxious, or because they are confident they will be able to navigate the university when they start their studies in week 1 (which, of course, some of them are quite able to do).

05. Change and human adaptability to university studies does not happen overnight … or within orientation week. In South Australia, kindergarten, primary and high school students receive a supported transition and ongoing support when they start their various stages of
schooling. In the workplace, people are generally provided with an induction and ongoing support from a manager, or within a team, and receive the incentive of money, amongst other things to continue. Undergraduate students are in most cases new to university. They undertake a steep learning curve in the first few weeks, navigating a large new geographical and virtual environment, learning different and new ways of studying, forming new routines, meeting in the vicinity of 300 new faces and/or virtual identities a day (let alone remembering names); and paying large amounts of money for an education. And they do most of this in the first few weeks ... alone! In addition, there is the unwritten expectation that, by the end of orientation week in preparation for learning in week 1, new students will have formed new friendships and have familiarised themselves with available avenues of support. Do universities expect too much from students during orientation and the first weeks?

06. Ideally, a transition pedagogy scaffolded into class time would allow for a longer student induction to university life, including more activities and opportunities for students to adapt to their new environments. The chance to get to know other students and staff in the first few weeks of university studies, whilst building life and study skills, promotes competency, support networks, self-efficacy, confidence, and resilience. Generally the largest numbers of students attend in weeks 1 and 2, perhaps because they believe attending lectures, tutorials etc. in this timeframe is necessary for success. These early weeks of the first semester can be exploited as an opportunity to equip students with skills necessary to be successful, and as a critical time during which to further induct and orientate all students. However, implementing good transition strategies beyond orientation week is challenging. This is why we are here!

07. The James Cook University first year law program is an excellent example of how to embed student-centred orientation and transition support both before and during the first weeks of students’ transition to tertiary studies. A renewed focus equips students with support and skill development, with a decreased emphasis on content — a truly student-centred approach. The model scaffolds support during class time providing students with extra opportunities to adjust to their studies, new routines, and new environment, whilst appreciating that students have differing abilities, skills, and learn at different rates. This is extremely important for students who may be struggling or anxious as it provides more opportunities to seek help within class time from someone familiar with whom they feel comfortable and whom they know is available to speak to them. Emphasising the necessity for the best staff to be working in the first year, the general staff member, tutor or lecturer effectively becomes the significant staff person students are encouraged to seek help from at university. Similarly, emails sent by the First Year Experience Coordinator regarding timely information on workshops etc. provide another instant avenue for students to respond to with any queries they may have. In addition, students begin the process of becoming familiar with other university supports.

08. Scaffolding support in class time takes into consideration students’ busy lives; including work, and family commitments, and limited time to attend extra-curricular activities. When not defined within subject outlines, extra-curricular activities (particularly group work) can have a negative impact on students’ lives. Via workshops held during class time, law students learn professional writing skills (genres) for law very early on, further encouraging students to seek help during class time, and allowing
their progress to be monitored by teaching staff who are able to ensure that students receive extra assistance when needed. Students are provided with ‘in-class’ opportunities to develop skills in time management, note taking, writing, and referencing for law, in addition to seeking program or enrolment advice. As a result, students can immediately apply what they have learnt to their studies. In addition, using non-teaching staff to provide some of the ‘in-class’ activities creates ‘the impression of seamless support offered across the university’, making students feel more supported, while also fostering self intervention strategies.

To assist with the social aspect of transition, students are assigned a peer mentor, use online technology, and are involved in icebreaker activities fostering the formation of social connections. Peer mentors, aware of subject content, expectations, and the complexities of studying law, are able to assist students by disseminating important and relevant information. Importantly, ‘in-class’ time is scaffolded for peer mentors to provide such information and meet with new students, thus allowing mentors to feel supported by staff, and sending a message of the mentor program’s legitimacy. In this way, the ‘remedial’ connotations of ‘mentoring’ are more easily dispelled.

The suite of study materials developed by the school assists with familiarity and ease of access, whilst providing increased prospects of identification with the School of Law; thus increasing students’ sense of belonging and professional identity formation. The law case study is an excellent example of embedding a myriad of support within a transition pedagogy.

The Information Technology (IT) case study at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) involves a small cohort of 30 students, and provides a niche for marketing, support and monitoring. Contrary to most programs, orientation within the QUT IT program is compulsory, with attendance generally between 85 and 90%. Making orientation compulsory has many merits for mediating expectations of students and attendance. Similar to James Cook University (JCU), and important to building on students’ support networks, the IT program incorporates various ‘getting to know you’ activities designed to facilitate student interaction. The IT approach attempts to make students feel welcome through increasing social support using peer mentors.

Assigning new students to a peer mentor prior to orientation week means questions relating to orientation programs and undertaking university study can be answered by email before Orientation. Queries are recorded to assist with refining the program. In this case study, and similar to many programs at Flinders University, mentoring interactions occur outside class time, with face-to-face support offered via informal mentor/mentee drop-in sessions (and with the bonus lure of a free lunch).

Unlike the JCU Law case study, students may not feel as compelled to participate where the meeting becomes
an extracurricular activity; however the small size of the cohort may work in the mentoring program’s favour. Peer mentors can offer commencing students excellent, ‘fresh’, first-hand advice on transitioning to university, including what to do, what not to do, program expectations and commitments, and other study tips. In addition, student peers can provide advice on assignment expectations (including academic integrity). Aligning new students with student mentors, particularly from the same program or subject, assists in accelerating a sense of identity and belongingness with other students, the profession, and with the program and/or faculty in general. Similar to Flinders University, students are also employed as ‘Orientation Facilitators’, facilitating small group sessions to increase social interaction between students.

13. Importantly, Program Coordinators play a central role in assisting new IT students during orientation and transition periods. As Program Coordinators play a valuable role in advising students, and supporting them, it is imperative they be ‘seen’ to be approachable, and available to students when needed; even if students later wish to withdraw from subject(s) or the program of study. Students can also provide valuable feedback relating to programs, responses often missing in end of program Course Experience Questionnaires.

14. The QUT IT case study uses Blackboard for a ‘program community site’, offering support material to assist students, providing online industry/organisational case studies, providing links between modules, subjects and program aims. Creating opportunities to explore career options during class times fosters professional identity development and clarification of career goals, pathways and expectations.

15. Similar to other case studies, scaffolded ‘just-in-time’ emails are also used to communicate weekly information to students. The advantage of academic staff sending emails to students, as in this case, is that the staff who send them are generally able to assist with further queries related specifically to students’ studies.

Yet another initiative to increase resilience and personal confidence is the allocation to IT students of a local ‘Green Room’. Such a space can accelerate and increase the likelihood of students interacting and communicating with other students in the same program or subjects.

16. The IT study further sought to identify students at-risk of disengaging in learning activities throughout their first year; and differently to other programs, even during orientation. This allows follow-up of students who do not even make it to the first day of university, of which there are many. The recording of attendance, monitoring of early assessment items, and weekly online activities assists in the early identification of students ‘at-risk’.

17. Trained Student Support Officers are employed to work with students self-seeking support, and to act as advocates if required.

SCIENCE (BIOLOGY)
CASE STUDY (Gleeson, University of Melbourne)

18. Similar to the programs at JCU and QUT, the University of Melbourne offers a centralised transition and orientation program. The Biology program is jointly facilitated by a collaboration of professional and academic staff, from both within and outside the School of Biology. Also in common with the case studies, the orientation and transition programs aim to connect students with other students, increasing their social support, resilience and academic success. Again content delivery is decreased in week 1 in favour of ‘meet and greet’ tutorials where students and tutors interact via nametags and icebreaker activities. Scaffolding in-class transition activities fosters name recognition, social support, study group formation, accelerated social and university identity-forming, and increases the likelihood of students asking tutors or peers for assistance. Students undertake a ‘degree specific’ tour of the learning facilities culminating with coffee and biscuits — the lure of food should not
be taken lightly! Facilitating tours by degree cohorts enables social interaction between students studying the same program, and provides the space for students to ask general or degree specific questions.

19. In weeks 2 and 3 of this program, more chances are again allocated for interaction via two ‘Science 101’ workshops where students participate in icebreaker activities, form study groups, and have the chance to ask questions to a panel consisting of staff and students. Sessions are facilitated in conjunction with central transition staff, while postgraduate students facilitate study groups. The intention appears for students not to ‘de-school’ or ‘unlearn’ skills they already have, but to re-skill and induct themselves into university life and the culture of the discipline; with an emphasis on identifying, when needed, the need to seek support. This model provides a positive view on new skill acquisition at university, building self efficacy and confidence within each student’s own capabilities, whilst acknowledging the skills they already have on entry. In workshop two, and similar to other peer mentoring schemes, postgraduate students are assigned to study groups and undertake a pastoral care role. Students are provided information relating to their studies, such as important dates, and support services available, whilst tutors provide the more academic and administrative information regarding students’ academic studies. Whilst the curriculum acknowledges prior learning, additional tutorials providing extra support are offered to students to bridge any gap in skills. Further support includes the provision of a ‘duty tutor’, online learning modules, and small collaborative groups within tutorials. Creating a top-down approach and to ensure the program’s continued success, tutors meet weekly with the Director to ensure consistency of messages.

20. Interestingly as another early intervention technique, students for whom English is a second language and those with a low ‘English’ score are given a Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) test on entry and then asked to meet with a program advisor to ensure that additional support, if needed, is provided. Again, this is a way of scaffolding early measures to monitor students who may potentially require extra assistance. Similarly, after the mid-semester test period, students identified as ‘at-risk’ are contacted individually with information regarding available support.

Applied Sciences (TechOne) Case Study (Fee and McCracken, Simon Fraser University)

21. The TechOne program provides a generic academic orientation for various bachelor degrees beyond first year. In this case study, TechOne academic staff worked closely with student services staff, the library, and other staff in facilitating a transition to university program for approximately 375 students. Similar to the QUT IT case study, admitted students receive an email from the program advisor directing them to an online community portal where students are able to ask questions and learn from information there provided. TechOne’s 2-day orientation program fosters student interaction and provides early information relating to support services, the program, faculty and other key staff. As students are generally more likely to ask their peers for information and assistance, orientation leaders, many previous undergraduate students, facilitate a week where students are introduced to the many extra-curricular activities and other supports available.

22. The first few weeks of class time are used to orientate students to the Library, academic integrity and other university policies. The Student Learning Commons Coordinator speaks to students, increasing the approachability and profile of services staff and support available. Where double degree programs exist, partner faculty staff are also invited into classes to provide a more comprehensive picture for students about possible future program options.

23. Students and students interact through collaborative projects and lab work. Such activity based programs involve staff, as well as graduate students (Uber TAs (Teaching Assistants)), and are reflective of
workplace project teams. Importantly, this provides authentic learning, relevance, and assists in the formation of a professional identity, while also making students feel more comfortable about approaching staff. While the focus of the teams is on the learning experience of both students and staff, Uber TAs moderate communication with staff about the difficulty level of tasks and their achievability.

24. Initial ‘low stakes’ formative assignments and tests are used to assist students in learning academic expectations, with prompt feedback provided to assist students gauge their academic success. Students needing to develop their skills are able to access the assistance of a writing coordinator or peer educator.

ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
(EXPLORATIONS) CASE STUDY (MARCHBANK AND FEE, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY)

25. The Explorations in Arts and Social Sciences foundation program allows students to explore a wide range of disciplinary areas within a one year program, rather than a specific degree or disciplinary area. The program promotes academic success by using a ‘student-focused’ approach to skill attainment, with the emphasis again on the process of learning rather than content. Subjects are designed to increase self-efficacy, be authentic, and relevant to the local region. Learning occurs via a professor, who also monitors student disengagement and pastoral care, and the graduate student teaching assistants.

26. It is of concern that the Explorations’ orientation program is not available to all students due to limited places. This raises equity concerns as it is often students who are well organised and well prepared who attend these programs, while those most at need may miss out. To increase support and early help-seeking behaviour, the orientation program provides staff and students with the opportunity to get to know each other. First tutorials and seminars are also used as ‘introductions/orientations to the specific subjects’. In these classes, students appear to go through a process of ‘unlearning’ to examine their own learning habits. Outreach support is provided through scaffolded information and support, academic advisors, and academic support. In addition, the Student Learning Commons provides peer assisted support and the Student Societies and Student Life orientation program provides information of other on-campus social support and activities available.

EDUCATION CASE STUDY
(HEALY, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY)

27. The QUT Education orientation aims to induct students both organisationally and socially in preparation for university life. Importantly, the Education program acknowledges that the introductory period of orientation influences student attitudes regarding future study. If students have a good experience in orientation, they will have increased their self-efficacy, confidence and resilience for undertaking university studies. Program Coordinators meet their student cohorts in orientation week and provide support through weekly email messages. Peer mentoring programs currently exist in Primary and Early Childhood Programs only. During the first three weeks of semester, mentors offer support and informal meetings to an allocated cohort of commencing students.

...Education refers to the ‘de-schooling’ of students to align student expectations to tertiary learning. The first tutorial is devoted to unpacking expectations, including those of an independent learner.
28. Similar to other case studies, Education refers to the ‘de-schooling’ of students to align student expectations to tertiary learning. The first tutorial is devoted to unpacking expectations, including those of an independent learner. Active participation is encouraged via quizzes, wikis, peer assessment, teamwork, but whether this occurs during class time or as out-of-class activities is not stated. Blackboard is used for messages, and also, for example, to make available samples of good and bad assignments; providing exemplars of what is expected in student work. It is often assumed that students will know how to write, without any skill development at university, for university studies; the provision of online exemplars are highly recommended as one mechanism to assist in this skill development.

29. The curriculum design acknowledges multiple learning paths and styles. Inline with educational theories, the academic role is seen as more of a facilitator of knowledge acquisition, rather than ‘a sage on the stage’, with students viewed as ‘knowledge brokers’. This concept assists students to learn from each other and allows for a great diversity of ideas and experiences. In addition, 75% of tutorial time is allocated to active work, rather than mini lectures, building student capacities through participation and reflective learning. A staff training session on the ‘provision of effective feedback to assist positive student attitudes’ is important staff development. A low-stakes formative assessment is given to students prior to week 5.

30. Student attendance is recorded and cross-checked before being referred to the subject coordinator, and then to the subject mentor to initiate student contact where necessary. The strategy of ‘non-attendance [of students] leading to no access to tutor assistance’, in terms of inclusion, equity and provision of support mechanisms to students, is a strategy not recommended for a transition pedagogy. As students are not a homogenous group, and pay for their education, they should be able to utilise such services at any point. Indigenous students are further supported through Oodgeroo Unit, with a representative attending all orientation sessions. Unlike the majority of case studies, the Education faculty has a dedicated Project Manager, First Year Experience, who, amongst other responsibilities, provides a valuable link in seeking student feedback via meetings (lunch provided) and student focus groups.

**Writing and Communication (Bilby) Case Study (Radbourne and LeRossignol, Deakin University)**

31. The Bilby study focus is based on pedagogy and equipping students with skills to be successful writers at university. Importantly, the curriculum is student-centred, providing for authentic learning experiences. Students are allocated to groups and, via the use of replicated life scenarios, act and write as professionals from a particular perspective. In the subject, students develop professional skills to be used both within and outside the university.

32. The case study provides an example of how a generic subject can incorporate an online multimedia resource package to assist students improve their writing, research, critical analysis, presentation, and communication skills. The subject’s focus of improving student writing skills allows staff to monitor academic progress and, where issues arise (for example, during workshop essays) referrals can then be made to university support services. Regular formative assessment and feedback are also provided. Lastly, the Bilby program promotes student engagement and student development by way of learning objectives related to professional and career goals.
Common components for a transition pedagogy

Many common components for a transition pedagogy are identifiable from the case studies examined, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study common components for a transition pedagogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ More emphasis on socialisation and skill development in the first weeks rather than content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Provide early intervention via encouraging peer and staff social support, for example, by:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Icebreakers and other social strategies used prior to orientation, during orientation, and continuing within class time, including staff involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Peer mentoring — beginning, at least, during orientation week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Early academic and support services’ staff involvement and support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Incorporating teamwork and other forms of collaborative work in the curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Orientation and transition strategies must continue to be implemented during semester class time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Early monitoring of at-risk students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Early low stakes formative assignments with prompt and useful feedback. Training provided to staff where necessary around giving good feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Engagement and early linkages to future career aspirations and goals through authentic learning and other similar approaches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My context and commentary: Flinders University

The student population at Flinders University comprises approximately 16,500 students, of whom approximately 4500 are new undergraduate commencers each year. Since my appointment late in 2005, orientation and transition programs at Flinders University have undergone significant change. My role includes coordinating the university’s Start Smart Orientation Program where staff collaborate across the university to host a range of academic, supportive and social events during orientation week.

2008 was the most successful offering of the Flinders University Start Smart Orientation Program to date, with increased student attendance at all orientation events. Over 3000 students visited the university’s ‘Orientation Welcome Tent’, attendances at many ‘revamped’ orientation events almost doubled and, as noted in Table 1 below, the numbers of students undertaking tours have increased significantly.

Table 1: Table indicating student attendance on Flinders University orientation tours 2008-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty tours</td>
<td>1272</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central campus tours (support services)</td>
<td>1230</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>2449</td>
<td>786</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 95% of tours are coordinated centrally; however, some degrees facilitate their own tours and are not included in these figures.

Through improved marketing, Flinders University increased the formal expectation that students should attend orientation week activities. While numbers attending the orientation program have increased over the past few years, it is acknowledged that getting all commencing students to undertake orientation is still a significant challenge.

The Flinders University central Start Smart Orientation Program for all commencing students consists of the following main aims:

- Provide orientation events to accelerate the transition to university process.
- Increase self-efficacy and self-confidence.
- Increase student interaction and socialisation — with peers and staff.
- Increase familiarity with student support mechanisms.
Increase familiarity with university grounds.
Increase academic literacy skills — in particular university jargon, writing and critical analysis.
Increase connectedness to both the university and other students.
Accelerate student identity with the university.
Encourage the development of professional identity formation.

Since late 2005, the Transition Office has worked collaboratively with different areas across the university to encourage and enhance student transition. As a result, many school or degree-based orientation programs were redeveloped and expanded to include 3–4 hour sessions, with some held over 2–5 days. Unlike ‘traditional’ lecture style orientation programs, consisting solely of information on program structure (generally repeated in week 1), the new orientation programs have been re-worked to meet the aims mentioned above. Programs have used a combination of some or all of the following strategies in new degree orientation welcome sessions. Ideally, the strategies could be scaffolded during class time for maximum skill attainment, applicability and impact:

- Welcome from the Dean or another significant staff member.
- Guest motivational speaker: studying successfully, career aspects and life after university.
- Information from support services: strategies for enhancing transition, including using the library, time and stress management techniques, changes to routines, career information and advice.
- Student speakers reflecting on their experiences.
- Peer mentoring schemes — central and degree based.
- Icebreakers and group work designed to get students interacting and socialising.
- Tours of schools, the library, services and other campus areas (provided by mentors or lecturers).

Encouraging social interaction via icebreaker activities, morning/afternoon tea, lunch or both.
Working with the Student Learning Centre incorporating academic information and skill development similar to the EXCELeRate Introductory Academic program.

All new programs indicated increased attendance at orientation events, on tours, and within classes, in addition to increased help-seeking behaviour, and increased socialisation. Moreover, staff enjoyed participating in these programs.

Most orientation programs have borrowed and replicated central services strategies used in orientation week, but have the advantage of a niche ‘degree’ marketing strategy for attracting students, in addition to providing the strategies during allocated class time. Doing so provides the opportunity to reach a wider audience of the student cohort. Degree or program specific orientations provide an avenue unable to be replicated via central orientation programs.

In addition to the new orientation programs, many mentoring initiatives have appeared on the Flinders landscape. Since 2006 a Peer Assisted Study Scheme (PASS) has been instituted in the school of Biology and at least six schools, in collaboration with support services, have implemented mentoring initiatives, as an adjunct to the centrally based Transition Mentoring Program. The mentoring initiatives were developed in response to a student and staff identified need for students to receive more support whilst transitioning to university. It was agreed that trained peer students, who had been through their first year of study, were the best to provide such assistance. Peer mentoring initiatives assisted in making students feel more comfortable, confident, and encouraged students to seek assistance if needed.
A spin-off of these projects has been the increased social interaction of students in differing year levels and increased communication between staff and mentors. As many of these programs were assisted by seed funding sustainability is again an ongoing issue.

With a focus on transitioning students to social, academic, and environmental aspects of university, such excellent results from both Flinders University and the case studies have implications for scaffolding strategies into weeks 1 and beyond, when information and skill acquisition may be more relevant and applicable. At this time students are not inundated with information relevant to studying, and are more settled into new routines and navigating their new learning environment.