

# **My First Year: A program designed to increase first year students' engagement by extending orientation**

<sup>1</sup>Dr Georgina Heath, <sup>2</sup>Ms Lorraine Overton, <sup>1</sup>Dr Cenz Lancione

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychology Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia

<sup>2</sup>Arts, Education and Social Sciences Divisional Offices, University of South Australia

## **Abstract**

*The first year of university is a challenging year and many students withdraw from their studies during this time. Quality orientation programs can assist with engagement and retention. However, attendance is typically not compulsory and numbers at orientation sessions are decreasing. This paper discusses a transition program designed to extend orientation activities into the first six tutorials of four core first year courses. Tutors will play a key role in ensuring this project is successful. Training will be provided to tutors and they will be given the opportunity to provide ongoing feedback. It is expected that a team of specialist first year tutors will be developed that along with the weekly tutorial activities will assist with engagement and retention of first year students.*

## **Background and Rationale**

Engagement and retention of university students has been of ongoing concern, particularly with the increase in numbers of non-traditional students now participating in higher education and the increasing flexible delivery options required to support the diverse cohorts participating in higher education (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Tinto, 2006). A cohort analysis covering the period 2005-2014 revealed that approximately 25% of Australian university students had not completed their degree over the nine-year period (Australian Government DET, 2016). Withdrawal is most common within the first year of university (Tinto, 2006). In particular, the first few weeks of the first semester are a crucial period of time where students will either engage with or disconnect from their studies (Wilson et al., 2016). Students are experiencing a period of intense social and cultural adjustment together with a sometimes overwhelming academic learning curve. They are introduced to often unfamiliar ways of learning in an environment which can be isolating and intimidating (Araujo et al., 2014; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005).

To assist with engagement many Australian universities hold orientation programs. Orientation programs are typically designed to introduce students to their peers, university staff and support services along with providing students with information to assist them transition into university

successfully (Krause & Coates, 2008). Orientation programs are usually optional and therefore students may not attend. Indeed, a recent review of the orientation program for students in the Division of Arts, Education and Social Sciences at the University of South Australia showed that only approximately 65% of commencing students attended their program orientation day and numbers had decreased from the previous year. Even if students do attend orientation, the large volume of content can be overwhelming and university staff have been criticised for overloading students with information (Singer, 2003).

The responsibility to help commencing students settle into university has evolved in recent years from being the sole responsibility of a single support unit through to an institution-wide approach to supporting commencing students across the first year of their programs (Kift et al., 2010). The 1<sup>st</sup> generation models of the First Year Experience (FYE) included providing support for commencing students through orientation and transition programs delivered at the start of the students' first year. Often these were restricted to Orientation Week. These programs were typically co-curricular and often delivered by segregated support units. Second generation models evolved integrating the support offered to commencing students as part of the curriculum, followed by the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation models whereby the support for the FYE is holistically delivered seamlessly across all areas of the tertiary institution, ensuring that the FYE truly is 'everybody's business' (Kift et al., 2010). This 3<sup>rd</sup> generation model ensures that integrating a holistic approach to the FYE delivers a transition pedagogy, which fosters engagement, support, from both institutional staff and peers, and assists to create a sense of belonging for students entering their first year of higher education, and increasingly from diverse backgrounds and methods of entry into university (Kift et al., 2010; Nelson, Kift, & Clarke, 2008; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2010; Trotter & Roberts, 2006).

To provide all students with opportunities to build relationships with their peers, generate a sense of belonging, link students with support services and build the students' key academic skills, typical of a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation FYE pedagogy, one approach is to extend the transition activities typically delivered at orientation into the first weeks of the first semester. The School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy (PSW) at the University of South Australia have this year conceptualised a program to include transition activities within tutorial classes of core courses across the whole school cohort, integrating support services offered by other units across the university.

This paper will outline a transition program to be implemented across four core courses within the School of PSW within the University of South Australia. The project aims to assist students' transition into university by extending orientation activities into tutorials in the first six weeks of teaching. Furthermore, this project aims to develop a team of specialised first year tutors to improve the first year experience.

### **The initiative: 'My First Year' – orientation activities that extend into the first six tutorials of the semester**

In 2016 the School of PSW implemented a project to increase engagement and retention in first year students. As part of this project two First Year Coordinator positions (0.2 FTE) were created for staff members within the school. In preparation for the 2017 cohort, the First Year Coordinators have been developing the project to focus on assisting first year students within the school transition into their first year of university. Drawing on the transition pedagogy that argues the first year experience is ‘every body’s business’ (Kift et al., 2010), the First Year Coordinators have been working closely with a team of staff members within the University including Academic Advisers and the Student Engagement Unit. One of the first initiatives of the project has been to develop a transition program (‘My First Year’), which includes adding common short tutorial activities over the first six weeks of the semester into core first year courses across the programs within the school. These tutorial activities have been designed to assist students with forming relationships and to provide students with necessary academic skills required for university. A similar approach was trailed in the first iteration of Murdoch University’s transition program (‘UniEdge’). This iteration included an orientation session in foundation unit tutorials during the first week of teaching (Lefroy, Wojcieszek, MacPherson, & Lake, 2014). However, this tutorial session was removed in subsequent iterations, as there was resistance from the tutors teaching these units and it was reported that this might have impacted on the delivery of these sessions. Similar to previous criticism of orientation programs (Singer, 2003) tutors involved in these sessions believed that students were overwhelmed by the amount of information during the tutorial. The current initiative will address these issues by breaking down the program content over a six week period to avoid an overload of information. Furthermore, the project recognises that first year tutors play a pivotal role in engagement and transition in the first year of university (Kift, 2003) and students regard their relationship with their tutors as one of the most important relationships at university (Rohden & Dowling, 2006). Tutors will be trained and will be invited to provide feedback as the intervention is implemented to assist with the ongoing development of the program. It is hoped that involving tutors in the program will encourage their support and assist with delivery. As such, a second goal of the project is to develop a cohort of specialised first year tutors.

The tutorial activities will run for 10-15 minutes per tutorial and will be placed in four core first year courses. Skills based activities will be run with two of the courses over the first six weeks of the study period. Activities will include topics such as introducing students to the library, where to start with assignments, how to submit assignments, reading and interpreting reports from the anti-plagiarism software (‘Turn it In’) and organisational skills. The other two courses will run activities will focus on engagement and transition into University. These sessions have been designed to assist students with getting to know their peers via group activities that relate to course content. These activities and the resources used will be attached to a first year website accessible to the students, this will allow the students to have important information and links at their finger-tips. Tutors will also have access to the site along with a hidden section with full instructions for the activities.

As mentioned above the tutors will play a vital role in implementing this project. All tutors teaching the four courses will attend a workshop prior to the beginning of the study period. The importance of the project will be explained along with instructions for running the activities. In addition, staff members from the library and support services within the University will attend the workshop to provide tutors with an understanding of the help available to students

who may require extra support. Mentioned previously, a goal of the project is to develop a team of specialised first year tutors.

## Expected Impact

It is expected that this intervention will benefit both first year students and tutors. Firstly, it is expected that this intervention will benefit students by assisting them with some of the academic skills required for their studies (e.g. avoiding plagiarism), familiarising them with university systems (e.g. how to submit an assignment) and help available to them (e.g. peer leaders, counsellors). Furthermore, it is hoped that the transition activities will help students to engage at university by getting to know their peers over time and ultimately assist them to form study groups and friendships, to help develop a sense of belonging and reduce isolation. A second aim of the intervention is to develop the skills and knowledge of the first year tutors resulting in a team of specialist first year tutors.

## Key Questions

- What activities have you used to assist first year students in forming friendships/study groups?
- What skills do first year students require?
- What sort of training should be offered for tutors teaching first year courses?
- How can we best assess if the program has been successful?

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