

Win win: enhancing students' transition through academics reframing of their teaching and learning practices

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Abstract

The institution-wide First Year Experience (FYE) Program at the University of Technology Sydney uses a systematic approach, framed by Kift's First Year Curriculum Principles for Transition Pedagogy (2009), to support the transition, retention and success of low socio-economic status students. The Program promotes inclusive teaching and learning practice to benefit all first-year students, and as the number and diversity of the cohort has grown, so has the need for academics to reframe their teaching approach. This good practice report presents the findings of a research project investigating academics' changing perceptions and teaching and learning practices. Two key components of the Program have contributed to these changes: the FYE grant scheme and FYE Forums. Overall, academics have developed a deeper understanding of Transition Pedagogy and become more confident and reflective practitioners which in turn enhances student success. This 'win win' outcome potentially has relevance to all FYE teaching and learning environments.

Introduction

Students' experiences of higher education curriculum and learning environments affect their transition, success and retention. While the design of the learning environment has always been important, the continued growth and diversity of students has resulted in many universities introducing programs to enhance students' experience of transition. The First Year Experience (FYE) Program, implemented at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in 2011, is an institution-wide, systematic approach designed to support the transition, retention and success of first year students, and specifically those from low-socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds. The program is part of the UTS Widening Participation Strategy (WPS) with funding from the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. The FYE Program was informed by third generation first year policy and practice articulated by Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) and by Kift's Transition Pedagogy (2009) to support LSES students '*within a philosophy of inclusive good practice*' (McKenzie & Egea 2017, p.68). This philosophy has led to an expectation that academics will develop more student-centred curriculum design, and thereby reframe their approaches to teaching and learning.

The evolution of the UTS FYE Program's support of students' transition including its successes and challenges, is well-documented (Egea, Griffiths & McKenzie 2014; McKenzie & Egea 2016; McKenzie & Egea 2017), whereas the Program's impact on supporting academics to reframe their teaching and develop a more inclusive good practice approach is less so. Developing academics' understanding of student transition is central to the UTS FYE Program but the shift in academics' perceptions of what constitutes good teaching practice has not been

the focus of past evaluations. We realised that many academics involved in the Program were beginning to change their teaching practice from a transmission model of subject delivery to a more student-centred approach, one that may lead to transformational learning (Sadler 2012). We also realised that this shift from transmission to transformation was reflected in the academics' learning about teaching. We decided to conduct a research project investigating the role that the FYE Program has played in supporting academic staff to reframe their teaching and learning (T&L). This good practice report presents the findings of the research project through the academics' reflections.

Background

The UTS FYE Program has two key components:

- a) A small grant scheme, based on Kift's (2009) First Year Curriculum Principles (FYCPs) of Transition Pedagogy (Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation), which creates a framework for academics to intentionally design the curriculum to support student transition.
- b) The FYE Forums which provide a community of practice for sharing and learning from each other's T&L practice and opportunities to network.

As mentioned above, the university's initial evaluations of the FYE Program focussed on the student experience and the impact the FYE grants had on student success. However, in 2016 the Program owners broadened their evaluation to include the impact that participating in the FYE grant scheme and FYE Forums was having on the academics' perceptions of T&L. This evaluation shift was the result of:

- a) Feedback from the annual internal FYE Forum surveys which indicated that the teaching practice of the majority of the respondents (e.g. n = 57 in 2015) had been influenced by both trialling new practices in the FYE grants and the activities presented at the FYE Forums.
- b) The reflections of the FYE program coordinator based on the FYE grant reports (Mid and end of year).
- c) The FYE program coordinator's interactions with the grant holders.

The FYE Program's coordinator (author 1) and a colleague who had worked on numerous grants (author 2) began to question whether academics' T&L practice changed solely as a result of their attendance at forums (as the FYE Forum survey suggested); or whether their participation in the FYE grant scheme, with its focus on the FYCPs, also influenced the academics in rethinking, reframing and implementing new practices. Our investigation began with this broader focus but narrowed down once we started analysing the data (detailed below).

Academic engagement in the FYE program at UTS

FYE grants provide resourcing for academics to try new T&L activities, which they evaluate and embed to create sustainable practice change. The initial application process requires the academics to identify troublesome curricula and design key project activities that are evidence based and consistent with one or more FYCPs. Practice change opportunities arise from the small size of the grant projects, the application process, reflection on practices and internal dissemination. Initiated in 2011, by 2016 the grants had supported 153 academics from all disciplines (including 10 academics working in the T&L division) to engage in practice change, with some engaging further in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Institutional T&L grants are an effective way to engage disciplinary academics' interest in and support for T&L practices. Grants, even very small FYE grants (up to \$4000 at UTS), provide recognition and an incentive to participate and even to innovate (McKenzie & Egea 2016). However, a limitation of many grant-based education initiatives is that they target the professional development of individual academics (Hum, Amundsen & Emmioglu 2015). When Hum et al. (2015) evaluated the success of a teaching development small grant scheme they initiated at their institution they focussed beyond the grant scheme's role in '*building individual knowledge/practice*' (p.30) and looked at potential impacts on '*institutional/organizational knowledge/practice*' (p.30) through institutional dissemination.

Another key component of the FYE program is the FYE forums. The six forums annually operate as sites of situated learning within a professional community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). They provide a participatory framework (Hanks in Lave & Wenger 1991) and opportunities for '*conversations and community around teaching*' which as well as being '*as important as individual development*' (Hum et al. 2015 p. 30) recognise the need for a move beyond an internal dialogue to a reflective dialogue with others in order for deeper learning to occur (Brockbank and McGill 1998 p. 85). As noted by Kennedy (2005), such interactions can '*act as powerful sites of transformation . . . through collective endeavour.*' (p. 245). Interest in the FYE Forum community has been exponential, beginning as an advisory group with 26 members in 2011, and growing to over 600 members in 2016.

Methodology

This research project received ethics approval from UTS HREC (ETH16-052) in April 2016. The data are drawn from interviews with FYE grant team leaders. Forty academics were identified as the team leaders of two or more grants and invited to participate in interviews. Twenty academics, representing all faculties, consented to be interviewed. The interview participants varied considerably in terms of age, experience and duration of service at UTS.

The interviews were conducted between May and July 2016 by the research project team and lasted between 25 and 75 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed professionally. Interviewers prepared by examining the FYE grant applications, and interim and final reports submitted by the grant teams. The interviews focussed on: the grant process; the academics observations on changes in their T&L practice and the role of FYCPs of Transition Pedagogy; the impact of the FYE program more broadly on their continuing practice; and, the influence of academics as agents of change through forum presentations and discussions.

As part of the analysis, the interview data were supplemented with data from the FYE grant reports. All sources of data were analysed in Dedoose (www.dedoose.com), a multi-media qualitative data analysis tool, with coding completed in two stages. This enabled the researchers to narrow the focus to analyse how an academic's interpretation of FYCPs framed their grant curriculum design, and how participation in the FYE grants and Forums has influenced continuing T&L practice.

The impact of the FYE program on academics' teaching and learning practices

The impact of the FYE Program on many academic's T&L practices has been transformative. For one academic, the FYE program's role:

“. . . was to really enlighten me to the fact that although I'd been teaching in the first year space for many years mostly what I'd been doing was focusing on the curriculum and the content . . . So

for me that was a whole paradigm shift in how I thought about what these students are experiencing when they come in." (Business academic, 2016).

The following section tells the story of this impact through the academics' voices.

Academics' interpretation of Transition Pedagogy

Given that grant applicants were required to address at least one of the first-year curriculum principles (FYCPs) of Transition Pedagogy (TP) (Kift 2009) in their grant applications, all our interviewees had the opportunity to comment on how the FYCPs had shaped their T&L practice. Some academics reflected on how their overall understanding of the FYCPs and TP has deepened over time. One academic noted that her understanding had:

" . . . continually evolved during the semester based on in-class student feedback and student engagement; we realised that one of the most important factors in engaging first-year students was making the content relevant not just to the discipline but also to their background and their future aspirations, while creating a fun and interactive learning atmosphere." (Information Science academic, FYE grant report 2015).

For another academic, the FYCPs of TP provided:

"A framework for academics to work without overhauling the teaching habits too much and without overhauling any curriculum or things like that...It becomes a second nature, applying what has been developed in my FY classes, i.e. the language work, or individualised just in time feedback, to other classes and courses." (Physics academic).

We now draw on academics' reflections on their approach to and interpretation of each of the FYCPs of TP in turn to demonstrate how practice change was implemented.

Transition principle

'The first-year curriculum explicitly assists transition academically and socially into learning in higher education and the new discipline.' (Kift 2009).

For many academics the 'Transition' principle is about introducing students to the discipline, establishing a sense of professional identity and professional practice. Typical FYE grant activities focused on building welcoming and safe classroom environments within a university context. Academics started to intentionally scaffold content and classroom practices and provide links to university and academic support programs. For an engineering academic, the transition principle is *"about how students come into [subject], it's about scaffolding and setting students up so that they can succeed."*

Other academics saw transition into the discipline as a key motivation for student success in their first year classes. New teaching activities focused on workplace preparation including resources on time management, building resilience, and learning how to think as a professional in the discipline. The learning environments were designed to enhance students' reflection on professional and disciplinary practice, and to *"develop their own concept of what they want to do as an environmental scientist and what they want their careers to look like."* (Environmental science academic). A Law academic (#1) realised students would become more reflective but also more resilient if they could *"learn from the experience of practising lawyers (what does it mean to be a professional)."* A Business academic introduced students to making connections to emphasise *"a professional network, like it starts here."* Whilst an Architecture

academic designed an innovative approach for students to “*experience the culture of architecture school in week one.*”

Diversity principle

‘The first year curriculum embraces and supports the diversity and reality of students’ backgrounds, previous experiences and preparedness for university.’ (Kift 2009).

Inherent in this principle is the design of a learning environment that supports all students to be successful in their learning goals, independent of their cultural and academic backgrounds. Not surprisingly, many academics selected this principle as it reflects the diverse cultural, academic and linguistic backgrounds of our students. Popular activity design included: making students aware of their entry knowledge levels and subject requirements; academic and professional capacity building opportunities; and, engaging and varied assessment design. After engaging with this principle, academics are less likely to “*take for granted those cultural experiences in the way that we teach*” (Design studies academic). They are also more acutely aware “*that there are so many different levels and aptitudes going on in that classroom.*” (Business academic). Building on a strength model has been transformative for this Law academic (#2):

“I now see the students much more as individuals and have introduced techniques to aid transition and nurture a sense of belonging . . . I learn something about each student which I can then refer to in class. I might relate a law question to their part time work context for instance.”

Engagement principle

‘The first year curriculum incorporates pedagogies, teaching approaches and materials that engage students in their learning and facilitates interactions with peers and staff.’ (Kift 2009).

To increase student engagement with subject tutors, peers and content, academics designed activities which included developing online communities, collaborative face-to-face activities and building in peer-mentoring. For example, subject tutors designed pre-work activities for an environmental science field trip. The result was greater engagement and enthusiasm among staff (many of whom were young researchers) and students:

“The students got to connect with people that were young researchers that had a real energy about the science that they were teaching. They could translate really complex ideas into simple terms so that students weren’t intimidated and, in fact, they were excited by it.” (Environmental Science academic).

An engineering academic implemented a peer-mentoring initiative which:

“ . . . trained senior students to mentor first year teams in professional practice approaches: student teams presented their ideas in a formal presentation and mentors gave feedback as an informal discussion. It has been a great success and it runs each semester since it was embedded in practice.” (Engineering academic).

Academics also learned that a problem with design could mean things do not go as planned. In this example, students preferred peer support within the class to a social setting. The grant holder reflected:

“We trialled the concept that peer mentors go to class one week and then the following week, meet FY students in the cafe after class. And that didn’t work. No one came to the café . . . for some reason they don’t want to have that extra . . .”(Communications academic).

Assessment principle

‘The first year curriculum aids transition to higher education assessment and provides early feedback.’ (Kift 2009).

To implement this principle, academics began to redesign assessment tasks, write explicit assessment guidelines, and introduce early formative feedback. Activities included early low stakes assessment, mastery learning, feedback to feedforward, progressive assessment, and benchmarking practices. For example, academics in the Faculty of Health realised that their students (especially those with language difficulties) needed time to develop and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the unfamiliar subject content in order to achieve better results. For students in Health:

“A progressive assessment task gave depth to their thinking about the issues and an opportunity to ‘do better’ if they were able to... to ‘speak’ about the problems. This enabled at risk students (contemplating dropping out) a greater chance to redeem their grades.” (Nursing academic).

Although feedback in the form of low-stakes activities is built into the university’s curriculum design numerous academics have realised that effective feedback has to be structured and explicit. One academic, who implemented weekly feedback realised that students loved feedback and wanted more, but *“for some students they aren’t really aware when they’ve been given feedback.”* (Chemistry academic).

Design principle

‘The first year curriculum is designed intentionally for commencing students, based on evidence from practice and research.’ (Kift 2009).

This principle encompasses all the other principles, as it underpins the sequencing of the curriculum, ensuring that learning environments are designed for the success of all students. Academics who chose this principle have usually had several grants previously and have drawn conclusions that any meaningful change to student transition depends on intentional integration of practice within the class delivery, with tutors and with assessment.

For example, in 2014 a cross-disciplinary team working in first-year science embedding academic and professional communication skills was *“actually looking at design for student transition and that’s kind of more of a big picture one.”* The team designed the delivery of academic integrity materials to guide the subject tutors to facilitate student learning rather than lecture the students *“So rather than just saying don’t plagiarise we gave them the skills to avoid plagiarism, using the literature better so that they could write up their scientific reports.”* The result was a change from *“a very passive lecture type scenario that the tutors used to give on what to do in the report with an activity that took the place of that passive lecture.”* (Science T&L academic).

Monitoring and evaluation principle

‘The first year curriculum should itself be evaluated and should monitor for student engagement.’ (Kift 2009).

Although academics are aware that the participation of students, particularly those at risk of failure or withdrawal, should be monitored, few select this principle. An exception is an experienced FYE grant holder whose earlier grant projects involved the design of online diagnostic and individualised feedback tools that monitored student progress and engagement. In a later FYE grant, he extended the ‘Monitoring’ principle to enable students to monitor and evaluate their own learning by gamifying the online testing modules. This enabled students to improve their test results by motivating them to compete with themselves and with others as they developed their knowledge in physics:

“Students noted that with the structure and organisation of the adaptive learning approach their learning was more in-depth and allowed them to monitor how their skills improved over time as they were allowed to revisit already covered material and get rewarded for their effort.” (Physics academic).

Academics’ reflections on the FYE forums

The research project also investigated the academics’ thoughts on the role the FYE Forums play in disseminating T&L practice. Many commented on the opportunity to share and hear about FYE grant strategies:

“... extremely valuable in terms of a showcase for ideas and new techniques.” (Law academic #2).

“There are so many things that one can learn from other approaches, because other academics in other disciplines think differently and have different approaches. Some of the approaches may be suitable to what I do or just make me think.” (Physics academic).

“Student engagement is what I worry about, and so I get ideas from here about engaging my students.” (Information Science academic).

They also identified that issues of transition are similar across disciplines:

“The things that they’re addressing that we can adapt, that you don’t really think because they’re different, like science . . . they do a lot and I liaise with a few of the science people who are excellent. So just picking up on what they’re doing, and they do some wonderful stuff, so we could adapt to health.” (Nursing academic).

Some academics forged relationships and even research partnerships across disciplines *“The First Year Forum has been a gateway for things, not just with learning and teaching, but also with research.”* (Interaction design academic). The same academic recently commented that these forums provide *“an opportunity to both build long-lasting connections, and also make new connections.”* (Personal communication, 2020).

Academics’ reframing of teaching and learning beyond the first year grants

Framing grants using Transition Pedagogy helped academics to extend their T&L practice beyond the grant activity and deepen their understanding of student transition and learning. They *“have really enabled them [academics] space to play with ideas and to find out more about effective teaching practices.”* (Academic Language and Learning academic). Project findings show how grants had a broader impact as academics realised that their practices had synergies across subjects and disciplines, within and beyond first year, and in some cases led to T&L scholarly outcomes and publications.

T&L practices have become more inclusive. One academic noted she would now “*keep in mind that all students are coming from different backgrounds, different levels of experience, they have different access to resources, whether they’re digital resources or intellectual ones.*” (Environmental science academic). Several academics reflected on the importance of scaffolding, with one electrical engineering academic stating the importance of designing a learning environment that builds student confidence and a belief in their capacity to learn:

“Students want this type of thing [scaffolded activities] when they’re learning, so they can understand. I want them to know what they are doing . . . I realise in the first year if you can get students who are satisfied, happy, and also know the key points, the chances that they’re going to learn and then stay focused over the next few years is most important.”

Academics have noted that their curriculum design in general has become more flexible:

“... it’s more modular, ... and then I can see how students are going with that, do we need to give them more information or less information, and kind of grouping them in that way, sending them to different groups.” (Business academic).

“It’s really made me just rethink the things that I would have just taken for granted. I didn’t think I would be the sort of person who would be abandoning the traditional lecture because, I’m a very traditionalist scholar in many ways . . . [I am now] much more interactive.” (Communications academic).

Several understood the transferability of their first year T&L practice to later year subjects, for example: “*I have been able to carry that [professional networking] through as I’ve moved into a further part of the degree programme.*” (Business academic). In Nursing “*the reflective videos [have] been adaptable . . . Nurses use a lot of reflection in their programs. So they can be adapted across subjects.*” (Nursing academic).

Others commented on the growing awareness about teaching and learning scholarship among academics who “*might have been made aware of the scholarship of learning and teaching which they might not have even known existed*” (Maths academic); the convergence of teaching practice with the acceptance of an interest in and legitimisation of educational research “*a type of research that the faculty will do.*” (Life science academic), and “*a teaching practice that is kind of pushing over into teaching and learning research, and that’s good.*” (IT academic).

Academics in some faculties operated as change agents and influenced their colleagues:

“I have to interact within the faculty with other academics who are teaching subjects which I share with them, and they just get infected with that . . . that’s the way I work. That’s the way I think things have been done best and been improved. So what happened in the first year, you’ll find it in the second and the third year as well. It slowly trickles through.” (Science academic).

While others used their grant outcomes to influence colleagues to consider applying for grants:

“Having completed these like small grants and having a very solid outcome I can showcase those to academics and say this is a model for how you could implement something like developing skills . . . it’s evidence for them to show that we could do it.” (T&L science academic).

However, in contrast, several academics indicated that colleagues were less enthusiastic in supporting students in transition. In this example, the academic who has designed her grants around inclusion, belonging and student partnership met resistance from her colleagues. She stated:

“I felt like almost every problem I was experiencing in the [first year] classroom related to the transition pedagogy. But when you tried to change something, it's seen as mollycoddling the students, but it's not what I'm doing really.” (Information Science academic).

The FYE Program opened up new avenues for recognition and research for participating academics. A number of them indicated that they had published papers and chapters based on their first-year experiences. For example, one academic said *“We talked about these students . . . that was really important, that we could tell their story. It's also important we got a publication.”* (Law academic #1).

Impact on student experience of transition

Measuring improvements in student experience of transition as a result of the FYE Program is presented here as the effect on student success (pass rates and retention rates) and the Student Experience Survey (SES). Since the FYE program is part of the university's WPS program, we measure the success of domestic cohorts and students from LSES backgrounds who are commencing the first year of their undergraduate degree. From 2011-2016 (years of study), student numbers increased with a growing number of first-year students from alternative entry programs including higher proportions of students with LSES backgrounds. However, despite this growth and change in student population, pass rates of domestic and LSES students have improved significantly and retention rates have remained stable.

The SES data for UTS (2012-2016) for domestic commencing cohorts, indicated increasing positive trends in *Overall Experience, Skills Development, Teacher Quality* from 2013- 2015. Although *Overall Satisfaction* dropped slightly in 2016 due to an institutional initiative, *Learner Engagement* continued to trend positively. The improved pass rates may be due in part, to academics improved understanding of the student experience of transition and a change in the teaching and learning practice. An area we would like to research further.

Conclusion

The findings from our research project demonstrate the impact the UTS FYE Program has had on supporting academics' in reframing their T&L practice and thereby enhancing students' transition. Its success highlights *‘the importance of building an internal mandate for change’* (McKenzie & Egea 2017, p.75) and enabling capacity building, a key element in successful institutional approaches to supporting transition (Lizzio & Wilson 2010). This enabling is achieved through: the FYE grant framework, underpinned by the FYCPs of TP, which guides practice in a low-risk, low stakes environment in which academics can try out new ideas; and, the FYE forums which provide an inspirational community of practice and opportunities to disseminate and learn. Academics' comments suggest their understanding of the FYCPs of TP has deepened and informed new curriculum design approaches while being active in the Program has helped them to overcome *‘internal barriers’* including low confidence around teaching skills (Carbone et al. 2019) and become more effective and reflective practitioners.

Academics' ability to teach using a more student-centred approach and to be adaptive to their changing and increasingly diverse cohort, enhances student transition leading to improved student retention and success at our institution. One of the academics who has embraced this diversity suggests that the next step for the FYE Program is to move beyond developing inclusive T&L strategies for a *‘generalised student’* to supporting academics in developing a more multi-faceted but targeted approach:

"I think the really important thing to do in the future, is to find out more about our students. Who they are, and who's doing well and who's not doing well, and why? That is where I think we can really make a big difference." (IT academic).

While these are the findings from one institution, we would suggest that the impact the FYE Program has had on supporting academics in reframing their T&L practice and its potentially positive effect on student transition, has relevance in all FYE T&L environments.

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