

## **Flinders' Law Students' Transition: Warm Welcome, Hot Topics: Cool Program**

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### *What?*

This year Flinders Law School introduced a multi-faceted transition program to ease and accelerate first year students' transition into the Law School so that they are more confident, more competent and more connected more quickly. The program comprises a four session program, *New-in-Law*, in O week; a Law student mentor scheme running through weeks 1-8; a virtual meeting ground, LexFLO; and a weekly forum meeting on first year interests: the *Wednesdays at 4 in 5* sessions.

*New-in-Law* was designed to provide a warm welcome as well as (1) an orientation to the Law School/ Law Library; (2) opportunities to meet informally with fellow students, Law School staff and established students; (3) some study skills practice with a Law focus; (4) some elementary 'Law' information and vocabulary; (5) an introduction to some Law student activities, such as moots, competitions and conferences; (6) tips and tales from established students and graduates, who were also encouraged to talk about their careers; (7) a basic overview of the University's and the Law School's expectations; and (8) an awareness of the various agencies on whom they could call for support to manage 'Law and life' issues through to a successful graduation.

Attendance numbered 170-180 students on Days 1-3 and 130-140 on Day 4, indicating that about 70% of new Law students who had then accepted offers attended. All respondents who answered agreed that they would recommend the program to a friend starting Law in 2008.

The Law mentor scheme recognizes the potential for using current students as a contact point for incoming students. It also provides mentors with an opportunity to enhance their leadership skills. Mentors acted as hosts for small group sessions during *New-in-Law*, met with their allocated first year mentees in weeks 1 and 2, and will maintain email contact with their group through to week 8 of semester 1.

Flinders' online educational support network (known as Flinders Learning Online, or FLO) has the functionality to allow a web presence specifically for first year law students: *LexFLO*. *LexFLO* is central to the workings of the law mentor program, as it allows effective communication within groups. It also gives the first years a space that they can consider their own, enhancing their feeling of connectedness within the Law School and with each other. Among early inclusions were 'Get to know . . .' quizzes, injecting some fun into orientation. The law mentors also use this space to post discussion topics and useful links, open up chats and arrange mentor group meeting times.

Wednesdays at 4 in 5 provides a time and venue for informal discussions on a range of matters including student competitions, study skills and insights from practitioners on areas of law that first years study.

### *Why?*

Students enter the Law School with a wide range of previous experiences and uneven exposure to 'law' related information

During 2006, teaching staff in the Law School discussed a staff perception that transition into Law was becoming more, not less, difficult. Irrespective of students' previous experience, there seemed to be an increasing 'preparedness gap' among first years. Much of this discussion was merely illustrated by anecdote and observation. However, an informal questionnaire of first year Tort students in Semester 1 revealed the challenge students were finding, irrespective of their previous academic background, in the quantity and style of the reading required and the relative complexity of the analytical skills they were expected to master. Their comments echoed earlier first year cohorts and were heard by staff as relating more broadly to their transition and not exclusively to Tort. When a volunteer group of first year teachers met to explore 'options for improvement' their discussions identified other concerns: student disengagement; a loss of 'community' over time; an absence of conversation around staff and student expectations; the importance of students building resilience; and the need to refine generic as well as Law-specific study skills. The conviction grew that a more comprehensive and ambitious transition program was appropriate. From this more encompassing vision the new program evolved.

### *How?*

#### *Volunteers*

Once the issue of new student 'preparedness' had been raised for discussion by a Staff Seminar reporting on the Tort survey (above), a group of first year teachers volunteered to explore strategies to address it.

#### *A collaborative venture*

The initial law staff meeting resolved to develop a new program as a collaborative project, partnering the Law School with Flinders Law Students' Association and the Student Learning Centre as well as the University's Transitions Co-ordinator. The Law Library and the Law School administrative staff were also closely involved. Significant contributions from all these partners were essential to the design of the programs. The Transitions Office is a recent arrival at Flinders but the Law School's relationships with the other partners were all well-established.

#### *Resourcing*

The School, and the Faculty, had agreed the first year matters were a priority. While much of the true cost was hidden by volunteer effort, resources for printing and other instrumental costs were provided subject to budgeting.

#### *Student mentors and hosts*

Calls for expression of interest were solicited via email in late 2006. The selection criteria included excellent interpersonal skills; a willingness to contribute to the life of the Law School; an ethical approach to independent study; a commitment to the principles of equal opportunity; and a successful academic record. The responsibilities of the law mentors were

advertised as acting as hosts for the *New-in-Law* Introductory program through O week; meeting with a group of incoming students in weeks 1 and 2 of semester 1; and maintaining email contact with their group through to week 8 of semester 1. Interviews for the positions were held in December 2006. Questions relating to study technique, workload issues and problem solving were put to the candidates, with the majority of the candidates who applied being selected as suitable for the needs of the program. In February 2007, the 14 successful candidates were trained by the University's Transitions Office. The 2 hour training session included role-play, a question and answer session and a thorough briefing on the aims and outcomes of the program.

The mentors were encouraged to avoid a classroom set up for their meetings and to set the tone of each session as one of support, openness, friendliness and honesty. The law mentors were asked to fill in a session report form for each of the sessions, with questions including number of students in attendance, topics covered and participation levels. The law mentors were also encouraged to pass on any useful tips of which they thought their mentees should be aware.

### *Invitations*

As the Program was designed between October and December 2006, there was no opportunity to publicise it through Open Days or Admissions adverts. Each student who received an offer to study Law at Flinders in January received, separately, an invitation and a letter from the Dean of Law encouraging them to attend if they accepted the offer. These were individual personalised letters. Recipients were asked to RSVP: most did, some just turned up on the day.

### *A warm welcome*

The student mentors acted as hosts throughout *New-in-Law* with a brief to be pro-actively friendly and engaged. Bright red T-shirts from the Transitions Office made them conspicuous. These were echoed by similar T-shirts emblazoned with 'Flinders Law First Year Friendly' worn by Law staff when attending the program. Offices of first year teachers and other significant locations were identified by bright red posters. A PowerPoint loop presentation about the Law School with upbeat music was prepared and played as students gathered for the sessions. Opportunities were included for informal small group sessions where new students met and chatted with staff and hosts.

### *Documentation*

A First Year Law handbook was prepared including 'tips for success' from award-winning graduates and information about the School, the degree and the university. Each *New-in-Law* session was accompanied by a workbook for each attendee containing materials to use during and after the session.

### *Presenters*

Each of the four sessions had an 'MC' charged with setting the tone for the session, maintaining momentum and keeping all contributors to time. The emphasis was to provide absorbing and relevant sessions in an engaging, relaxed and purposeful atmosphere. Flinders Law is fortunate in having teaching staff with excellent skills for this work. A presenter from the Student Learning Centre facilitated discussion and practice in reading and note taking techniques during the first three sessions, with plentiful audience participation. We were also fortunate when inviting the help of graduates, who willingly returned and talked about their experience (or, in one case, participated in a video-recorded interview). All the graduate input was on a volunteer basis.

### *Staff support for the student mentors*

The law mentors were supported by three members of the Law School staff, who were available to answer any queries and deal with any concerns that the mentors might have had regarding the program. The first year students were also aware of the staff standing 'behind' the law mentors and were encouraged to approach a staff member if they felt it was necessary. The logistics of the program were coordinated by one member of staff who allocated each student to a mentor, briefed the first year students about the program and dealt with general trouble-shooting surrounding the running of the program. This coordination was greatly facilitated by the use of Flinders Learning Online.

### *The electronic dimension*

LexFLO has been invaluable in the later parts of this program. The Law mentors used LexFLO and Flinders' email to arrange group meetings with their mentees. In conjunction with the Transitions Office, the Law School drafted a number of emails containing *Hot Tips* that were to be passed down to the first year students through the law mentors. These emails were designed to filter important information to the first year students as needed throughout the first 8 weeks of semester 1 in order to avoid information overload. Some of the *Hot Tips* included the arrangement of rooms in the Law School building, the opening times of the Student Services area and links to the University Support Services.

### *A sustainable future*

Evaluations from *New-in-Law* indicate its success with the audience. The Mentor program has been set up in such a way that it has been quite difficult for a first year student to fall through the net, as it were, and not have someone from the Law School make personal contact with them. The success of the program will be partly due to the efforts of the law mentors in reaching out to the students who appear to be making no contact with anyone on campus. Although it has been a challenge for the law mentors to arrange meeting times when the majority of their group is able to attend, the session reports that are currently available are an early indication of success in achieving the aims of this program. This is a pilot program that will undoubtedly require a certain amount of tweaking, but the template appears to be sound for the purposes of providing support to first year law students. Steps are underway to translate the 2007 program to a template allowing subsequent programs to be administered by a project officer. As all evaluations are analysed further refinements will be introduced, but as a pilot 2007 has been a most encouraging start.