

‘The First Year Summit: collecting and using student feedback’

Leander Kreltzheim, Transition and Orientation Programs, University of Melbourne
Sophie Marsland, Transition and Orientation Programs, University of Melbourne

Abstract

This session profiles the ‘Transition First Year Summit’, an annual student feedback and consultation event at the University of Melbourne. Each year, first year students at the University are invited to contribute feedback on their first year experience through focus groups and questionnaires. This session will provide an overview of how the Summit was implemented, from idea to annual report, and will identify the logistic and institutional steps which had to be navigated. The data collected has been widely sought throughout the University to assist in adding a student voice to both policy-making and pedagogical discussions.

Each year ‘Transition & Orientation Programs’ staff organise an event to investigate first year students’ transition into university life. The Transition First Year Summit (‘the Summit’) takes the form of several casual focus groups, bringing together students from all faculties and backgrounds. Run by later-year undergraduate students, the focus groups encourage first year students to discuss their impressions of university life, their faculty and course choices, social opportunities, university services and suggestions on how the university could improve the first year experience for future students. Self-evaluation questionnaires additionally provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and provide the University with quantitative data on how students experience their transition to tertiary study.

The Summit was designed to be an informal and ‘student-friendly’ event. On arrival, first year students are greeted by trained later-year students who register participants, distribute and collect self-evaluation questionnaires and direct students between the catered lunch, a questionnaire table and the focus groups. Each session lasts for approximately one hour, and three sessions are scheduled for the day. Later-year students act as facilitators and notetakers in the focus groups, with first year students being more comfortable to share their opinions with their peers than with University staff. First year students are provided with a book/movie voucher for their contribution.

Although several sections of the questionnaire are retained each year, the questionnaire is reviewed annually to obtain additional data each year. Questions often focus around topical issues or are designed to further investigate comments raised in previous years. Questions may relate to a range of issues, such as:

- Academic concerns: transition to new teaching styles; tutors and lecturers; accessing academic resources; adapting to independent study

- Personal transition: challenges of meeting new friends; moving out of home; balancing study, a social life and paid employment; personal issues; participation in clubs and student societies
- Access to student services: awareness of student services; specific experiences with services; problems or gaps in provided services
- Other transition issues: dealing with increased responsibility at university; dealing with isolation and loneliness.

Participating students are emailed a copy of the focus group questions prior to the event in order for them to reflect on their first year experience and provide the University with the most useful feedback possible.

Data gathered from the Summit has been extremely useful to a number of faculties and student services at the University of Melbourne. The student voice is an integral aspect of any decision making or planning for higher education institutions. Student feedback has been integral for staying abreast of their concerns, needs and perspectives in order to implement programs and curricula that are effective, relevant and responsive. Student comments and quotes have also been a vital tool for discussing the transition to university with school students in years 11 and 12 and have been used in web and print publications distributed both within and external to the University.

This Nuts & Bolts session will take participants through the tasks and outcomes involved in planning and running this annual event.

Session outline

The genesis of the idea

This section of the session will provide a brief overview of the key aims of the program since its inception in 2002. It will discuss:

- the importance of giving students the opportunity to communicate with the University
- the importance of distributing reports resulting from the Summit to the participating students
- the role of later-year undergraduates and the leadership opportunities provided to them
- the importance of staying abreast of changing student perceptions of and experiences within the University.

Planning the event

Planning for the Summit commences several months before the event, with preparations including emailing all first year students, managing finances, booking venues, liaising with caterers, timing the focus groups, staffing and seeking ethics approval for our research.

This workshop will specifically focus on two aspects of preparing for the Summit:

- the student selection process - we will detail how students are selected each year, with the aim being to select students to reflect the spread of students across the whole first year cohort (e.g. faculties, geographic origin, etc.)

- the recent introduction of student ID numbers – we will look at how the Summit was originally run (without ID numbers) and how the introduction of student ID numbers enabled us to track student comments in questionnaires and focus groups and subsequently provide more detailed reports about students’ experiences with individual faculties and courses.

Designing questions and questionnaires

This section of the presentation will focus on how Transition staff develop the final questions for each Summit and why such questions are integral to yielding helpful advice for staff and future students.

Training student volunteers

Appropriate and sufficient training of student volunteers is integral to the success of the Summit and the quality of the resulting data. This section takes workshop participants through the constantly-evolving training process, including:

- recruiting student volunteers
- designing training kits
- training sessions
- problems encountered and solutions.

Report writing and circulation

We will discuss the various ways that the Summit reports have been used within the University, including:

- by faculties and departments in effecting course- and subject-related changes
- within student services to improve services offered to students
- various University committees and working groups
- by Transition staff in presentations to secondary school students
- by Transition staff in print and web publications
- by Orientation staff in the planning of future Orientation Week programs.

With the inclusion of student ID Numbers in 2005, reports generated from the Summit have been able to provide a comparative analysis between student from different faculties and courses, and provide detailed analysis of the first year experiences of students from overseas, interstate and equity groups such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas or students with disabilities.

Discussion

Each year sees the evolution of the First Year Summit. We welcome comments, feedback and alternative ideas from conference attendants in an effort to discuss the responsibility of collecting and using student feedback, and to improve the event for future cohorts.