

Transition 2008: a First Year program from the heart of Australia's Food-Bowl

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This nuts and bolts session will report on the design, implementation and evaluation of an innovative transition program at a small regional campus of a major metropolitan university.

The Goulburn Valley community

The Goulburn Valley has a population of around 60 000 people, is located 180km north of Melbourne and recognised as the "Food Bowl of Australia". Home to the largest indigenous community in regional Victoria and a significant refugee population, there has been an historically low level of progression to tertiary study and relatively few tertiary places available in the area. La Trobe University has a small regional campus based in Shepparton.

The student body

In 2007 the Equity and Access Unit of the University reported on the high number of students from rural and low socio economic (SES) backgrounds at the Shepparton Campus. Although these students were performing well across the majority of indicators some decline in the retention and success of low SES students has been noted. In addition the success levels for rural students were below the University and state average. In 2006 a survey of the student body indicated that many students would not be studying at university at all if they did not have the opportunity to study locally. Although the numbers of school leavers is increasing, the Campus has a high proportion of part-time students returning to study.

Background

Despite the particular needs of the Shepparton student body, until recently there has been no consistent study skills support program. Realising the need for a more extensive transition program, campus staff successfully applied for a HEESP grant to develop a campus-specific transition program for first year students attending the Shepparton Campus. A cross-campus Reference Group of interested managers of student support services, ongoing students with vivid memories of their first days at University and Shepparton Campus academic staff was established to oversee the pilot project.

Program Concept

The concept of the program began with discussion about how it might best be delivered. While many of the Reference Group were eager to support the adoption of a web based vehicle, local academic staff highlighted the difficulties Shepparton Campus students often face in accessing such technology, including historically lower rates of computer ownership and regional Victoria's lower access rates to broadband internet services. It was decided that the program's accessibility (and potential success) would benefit from less dependence on technology and an increased emphasis on supporting the students' cultural transition. This decision underpinned the design of a two-pronged program: on-campus sessions (OWeek)

and the production of a stand alone, yet interactive resource CD (*Transition 2008: resources for new students*).

An appreciation of the current local Campus experience was identified as a vital component to the program meeting the needs of newly enrolling students. Specifically, it was decided to employ the program's Research Assistant from the current student body in the belief that this appointment would imbue *Transition 2008* with the freshness of the student perspective. This proved to be one of the most critical elements of the program's success.

Program Design

Program staff felt that students would most engage with the program if they could identify with its production and delivery. This belief shaped the decision to include student participation as much as possible in the program's design, content and implementation. Current Shepparton students were invited to participate in a filmed interview that would enable them to share their experiences of beginning University and form part of the program's content. Without exception these students were generous, articulate and thoughtful in their participation. Members of academic staff were also invited to participate in filmed interview sessions. These local *vox pops* added an authenticity that significantly enhanced the integrity of the CD resource.

The finished CD product was also greatly enhanced by the engagement of outsourced professional graphic design, filming and editing services. Though the University itself employs staff in these roles, it can sometimes be difficult for regional campuses to access, negotiate and liaise with metropolitan-based departments. Notwithstanding, local providers proved to be instrumental in delivering a polished and professional product with strong visual appeal. Another challenge faced by program staff included the enormous investment of time necessary to deliver a project of this kind. Although *Transition 2008* received a HEESP grant, applicants significantly underestimated the hours required to complete a program of this nature.

Program Implementation

The delivery of the program revolved around a four day OWeek that supported, reflected and expanded much of the content of the 'take-home' CD *Transition 2008: resources for new students*.

Students were welcomed to the University at an official Campus ceremony that included support from the local community: an Elder offered an indigenous Welcome to Country followed by a civic welcome from the City's Mayor. The presence of these dignitaries was complemented by the screening of a pre-recorded welcome from the University's Vice Chancellor.

A total of seven academic transition sessions ran during OWeek and included purely motivational seminars, practical computer laboratories, academic skills sessions and University 'enculturation' presentations. Intertwined with these more formal sessions were many informal opportunities to meet and mingle including icebreaker sessions, casual meals and other social events.

Evaluation

The first evaluation was in the form of a participation survey completed by students during the last day of the program. Members of academic staff were invited to provide feedback to the co-ordinators. The Reference Group met by teleconference to explore aspects that were well received and to discuss possible alterations to next year's program.

At the writing of this submission, focus group interviews of participants are yet to occur. These will provide more in-depth analysis of the perception of the value of the program by students. A further survey at the end of semester will allow students to give comments with hindsight. The Shepparton Campus 08 Transition Program may then be used as a template for other regional campuses.