

## **Peer transition programs: Run by students for students**

University of Newcastle:  
Dr. Sarah O' Shea & Ms. Michelle Vincent  
Student Transition and Retention Team

James Cook University  
Mr. Alan Calder & Mr. Peter Hanley  
Teaching and Learning Development

### ***Abstract***

*This presentation will highlight the 'nuts and bolts' of peer transition programs that have been underway for some time at two universities. James Cook University first offered Kickstart in 1998 with an underlying philosophy of allowing experienced student mentors to design, develop and facilitate a short course that introduces first year students to the culture and environment of university life. The University of Newcastle developed Uni-start in 2006 along the same lines, and both institutions have continued to evaluate and refine their respective transition programs. Participants at this session will hear how the two institutions have collaborated, how these types of programs could be initiated in other universities and they will hear first-hand from some of the student facilitators and participants in the programs. The session will also briefly touch on the literature of peer involvement in the first year transition process as well as discuss the challenges of institutional implementation.*

### ***Introduction***

Students, particularly those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, often encounter educational situations and do not have the necessary cultural or knowledge capital to negotiate the implicit nature of an institution's 'hidden curriculum'. Thus, many of the expectations presumed both prior to arrival at university and during the initial stages of study, may remain hidden or unexplained for certain groups. The onus largely falls on the university institution to accommodate those students positioned outside the 'traditional' cohort. Based on the recognition of the need to better prepare students for the university environment, these university transition programs are designed to address 'gaps' in knowledge and understanding by relying on students themselves to identify these. Peer transition programs are developed and delivered by second and third year student mentors for commencing first year students.

### ***Background***

Research conducted in relation to the transition process highlights the vital role that peer interaction plays in adjustment to university. McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) indicate

how interaction amongst peers is fundamental to the creation of successful learning communities whilst Kantanis (2000) argues that peer interaction and networks can aid the transition and adjustment of first year students. Peer transition programs build upon existing student mentor programs by engaging student mentors in designing and delivering two to five-day transition programs for commencing students in or prior to Orientation week. The strength of a transition program that has been designed by student peers is that it enables discussion of university culture and expectations from a student's perspective and so reflects the skills and information that the students themselves lacked upon arrival rather than what was assumed to be lacking.

The benefits that this initiative has for both the commencing students and also, the student mentors facilitating the programs will be identified in this presentation. Given the demographics of both the institutions, which include high percentages of students from low SES backgrounds, students who are first in the family to attend university and also, mature age or 'second chance' learners, peer transition programs are a practical and effective approach to better prepare students academically and socially for their academic endeavours. This is particularly the case in the current economic climate where institutions and staff are struggling to improve student experience with limited budgets and resources.

### ***Description of the initiative***

Once student facilitators are recruited and trained, these individuals decide on how the program should be structured, the types of information that needed to be provided and also, the range of activities to be included. However, additional support and guidance is also provided by staff and the nature of this will be described during the presentation. The types of areas that have been covered by the programs operating in both institutions include:

- An overview of the university's culture from students' points of view
- Introduction to university terminology
- Expectations and realities of university study
- The importance of peer support and study groups
- Essay Writing Skills – planning/structuring
- Study/Time Management Tips and Tricks
- Meeting and Engaging with Key Academic Staff
- The who, what, where of HELP!

For the student facilitators, these programs provide marketable skills and training in the art of presentation, group management, planning and delivery. In addition to this, at both institutions student evaluations have reported feelings of achievement and personal reward after participating in the program – a sense of giving something back to the university. As one facilitator remarked: *'Overall, the most significant benefit of participation in the program for me was the deep sense of satisfaction I gained through helping people adjust to university life ...'* Another explained how participating *'...had been a wonderful journey...'* and *'...enabled me to see just how capable I really am ...'*

*[providing] ...me with the opportunity to acquire professional skills valued by the University, the community and employers.'*

In summary, the session will cover the following areas:

- Describe how the initiative was implemented in both institutions
- Suggest sources of funding and provide advice about how other institutions might implement the program
- Highlight how both institutions have adapted the program and provide explanations for the particular approaches adopted.
- Describe how these programs have been evaluated at both institutions and highlight the results from these evaluations.
- Explain the multi-layered nature of interaction that occurs as a result of these types of programs
- Provide student reflections by inviting student facilitators and participants to present at the session or using their written reflections.

Audience participation will be facilitated through a series of small focus groups, where participants will be asked to discuss whether a similar program could be introduced within their institution or area. The objective of the session will be encourage those present to not only explore the opportunities offered by these peer transition programs but also to reflect upon the practicalities of introducing such initiatives.

The session will address the following conference themes:

- Building learning communities in FY
- Teaching and / or supporting large FY cohorts
- Best practise in peer to peer interaction in the FY
- Engagement and belonging – outside formal curriculum
- Academic & professional partnerships to enhance FYE
- Enhancing equity and participation
- Institutional transformation and the FYE