

# *tUNEup from Home* University Preparation Course: An innovative practice to support first year students

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## **Abstract**

*This presentation discusses an innovative, practice-based initiative to prepare first year students for tertiary study. The program is offered totally online and, through its utilisation of sound pedagogical practices, assists students to become independent, self-directed learners who are able to manage the basics of academic writing and referencing, to use online learning tools and to access the university's support services. The design of the program allows for high level student participation, but requires relatively low staff maintenance to run for up to 100 students for each three week session. This program is equitable because it is free and all students can participate from their home base, regardless of their location and personal circumstance. *tUNEup from Home* has been evolving across a four year period as it responds to participant surveys and has now reached a consistently high level of student satisfaction in student surveys.*

## **The initiative.**

The challenges faced by new students in their transition from high school or the workforce to university have been well documented (e.g. Clerehan & Walker, 2004; McInnes, et al. 2000; Tinto, 1993, 1998). These challenges include students' successful integration into the academic and social life of the university. To assist with this integration, students benefit greatly from an orientation to the institutional practices and by connecting with the learning community. For students studying at a distance, this integration can prove even more difficult as academic, social and personal factors, as well as their physical separation from the university, can impact on their capacity to become successful and self-directed learners. Moreover, with the move to more virtual learning environments, students undertaking distance education may lack the skills and understanding necessary to take full advantage of what online learning has to offer (Price et al., 2007). The *tUNEup from Home* university preparation course is an innovative, practice-based initiative which aims to assist new students through this transition by addressing these factors.

The University of New England has long been a provider of distance education in Australia. Situated in rural NSW, it also has a policy of open access and so attracts a substantial portion of non-traditional students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The need for a program to introduce new students to the institutional and disciplinary requirements of university, as well as the range of resources, was therefore essential. The *tUNEup from Home* university preparation course has been our response to this observed need. The course is a three-week, online program which introduces students to tertiary study and helps them to engage with new academic literacies. The course is free of charge to UNE students and covers aspects of online learning, academic writing, study skills and the range of student support services at UNE. Specifically, the course assists students to:

- become familiar with the use of the virtual learning environment

- write in an academic context
- reference and become aware of the concept of academic integrity
- develop appropriate strategies to manage learning
- know where to go to for help
- form connections with a community of learners
- develop confidence

The benefits of the online platform are great. As well as reaching a larger proportion of UNE's students than those who can make it onto campus, the mode of delivery also promotes essential metacognitive strategies in the learning process and assists students to become more self-directed learners (Ibabe & Jauregizar, 2010; Quinn & Reid, 2003; Seufert et al. 2002). In its online form, the course has been offered to new students twice during each semester break since December 2007, that is, four times per year. Since then, 821 students have enrolled in the course, with an average of 70-100 students per three-week program. The program is paced to engage the average student for 2-4 hours daily, depending on their skill base.

*tUNEup from Home* is offered through a Blackboard learning management system that includes use of the discussion board, online quizzes, PDF files, an online journal tool and the 'my grades' tool to monitor their own progress. Also, a daily program of activities is set into the Blackboard calendar tool to direct the learning program and train students in time management. By the time the students begin their degree program, they have already become familiar with the tools and appropriate ways to engage with other students online. Moreover, students are introduced to others in the online learning community, an important means by which they can cope with the challenges of electronic delivery (Seufert et al. 2002). Feedback from past *tUNEup* students illustrate this, for example:

*[I liked] Being able to 'chat' to other students. Prior to the tUNEup, I thought I was the only 40 something doing this, but it was reassuring that I was wrong. I also found the information to navigate around the website invaluable. It has meant that I have not had to waste time surfing now that we have started 'real' study. (2009 student)*

*The introduction to Blackboard, as a first-timer, I felt very settled into the usage by the time my course began. All of the study material was relevant and very useful. (2009 student)*

*Well organized with a detailed study plan. The Blackboard discussion amongst the coordinator and other students was not only helpful, but also prepared you for future study. The subject matter refreshed your memory from school and added a lot more that I should have been taught in school. (2008 student)*

Students new to university study must also learn about and develop a capacity to engage with the structures, institutions and processes of the broader university community. The *tUNEup from Home* University Preparation Course facilitates this process by introducing students to the various student support services around the university which are available for on- and off-campus students. Students become familiar with these services in their exploration of the UNE website, as they are directed to the plethora of support services available to them during their studies. Nonetheless, it was acknowledged that online learning is not sufficient without attention and encouragement from the human face of UNE. To this end, the discussions with academic skills lecturers as well a counsellor and a librarian, who are invited to join the discussions with the *tUNEup* students in the final week, are encouraged. Participants have commented:

*Tune-up was helpful and informative. In the long lead up to the actual starting date of the semester, I was excited to be able to have access to something. For new students, it gives an excellent opportunity to really work out how UNE operates. I am grateful that UNE offers such a service. (2008 student)*

*The knowledge that I gained from it about how a University 'works'. How all the different places within the university, including the library in particular work. What is e-reserve, etc. I also thought the quizzes were fantastic at pointing out where my weak points are. (2009 student)*

The course has been continually fine-tuned so that it is a self-managed course that gives students a maximum of academic experiences with low management processes for academic skills lecturers to implement. A combination of activities and tasks are provided for students to work through over the three-week period. Students submit an academic paragraph writing task that is marked by the academic skills lecturers so that they have individual feedback on their progress. In addition, a number of automatically marked quizzes and self-assessed tasks on paraphrasing, summarizing and referencing provide excellent opportunities for self assessment. Feedback on these tasks is encouraged through the discussion board. Self assessment has been shown to assist with the development of independent learning and self management skills, necessary for successful study at university (Boud, 1995; Ibabe & Jauregizar, 2010). Student feedback included the following comments:

*The detail of all of the tasks and tests was fantastic. I find that I take in a lot more information if I complete a task or test rather than just reading and I appreciated being tested. (2009 student)*

*I also thought the quizzes were fantastic at pointing out where my weak points are. (2009 student)*

### **Impact of the initiative.**

The success of each iteration of the *tUNEup from Home* University Preparation Course is monitored by an end of course online evaluation. In addition, a survey has also been conducted of past *tUNEup from Home* students who have completed at least one semester of study. In a recent survey of students who participated in the *tUNEup* course in 2008, 75% said the academic writing component 'mostly' or 'comprehensively' assisted them in their subsequent studies at UNE; 82% said that the referencing component 'mostly' or 'comprehensively' assisted them in their subsequent studies at UNE; and 65% found the content on plagiarism 'mostly' or 'comprehensively' assisted them in their subsequent studies at UNE. Many students surveyed found that *tUNEup from Home* provided them with the confidence needed to tackle university study and study online. In fact, 54% of student surveyed felt that the confidence gained in the course 'mostly' or 'completely' contributed to success in their studies, and a further 42% felt that the course 'moderately' contributed to their success. The feedback from students is that the *tUNEup from Home* course equips them with the skills necessary to become effective and successful students. Again, 75% of students surveyed 'mostly' or 'completely' agreed with this statement. Comments from students also confirm this:

*Distinctions in the first semester after never having studied at tertiary level and over 2 decades since leaving high school , what more can I say? (2008 student)*

*It was my first semester and I only did one unit but I received a HD for my essay and I am sure I wouldn't have achieved that without the tUNEup assistance (2008 student)*

*I definitely feel better equipped to cope after completing tune up, (2008 student)*

*I really liked the help I received about how to study and how to make up a timetable. It really helped last year to get myself organised. I also liked how it gave me practical things (like the library tour) that I needed to use and when I did get onto the library page, I felt like I had some confidence in finding what I needed. (2008 student)*

However, further longitudinal studies are continuing to truly assess the impact of this innovative program.

## **Session outline**

### **Whole group discussion – ice breaker (5 mins):**

Group to discuss:

- What preparation do students need for their academic studies?
- What teaching and management strategies can be used to deal with student preparation in the online environment?
- How can we maximise opportunities for commencing students to access essential academic skills preparation prior to beginning their degree?

### **Presentation (10 minutes):**

- Outline of the *tUNEup from Home University Preparation Course*
- Brief demonstration of the live *tUNEup from Home* Blackboard site
- Discussion of the online teaching approaches embedded in the program
- Student evaluations

### **Whole group discussion – concluding remarks (10 mins):**

- What are the implications of such an initiative for student preparation for university study? Is there any avenue for collaboration between universities for such programs?
- Boud (1995) stresses the importance of self assessment on the development of independent learning skills. What impact do you think this initiative can have on beginning students' independent learning skills?
- How can this initiative be effectively evaluated?

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