

# Transition and the art of engagement

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## Abstract

*First year university students are entering a transition phase that demands significantly adaptive behaviours. This can come as a shock, and the way each student manages their experience can lead to a wide range of outcomes - from withdrawal to achieving excellence. Since transition challenges both academic and social engagement, the question was posed: how can support services help students tread the path? An answer came in the form of two practice-based initiatives; one approach called 'Embedded Academic Support' which is now well established and a new trial entitled 'Transition Conversations.' The latter program initiates dialogue with new students around notions of transition and student self-efficacy by facilitating each student's self-enquiry into his or her own transition experience. Both programs employ the strategy of embedding initiatives into existing class spaces. The Transition Conversations program is scheduled for its first delivery, with trial data available in trimester one, 2011.*

## Transition and engagement in context

Transition in the context of higher education is multilayered and complex, dictated by the individual circumstances and motivational drivers of students who enter the arena (see McInnis, 2001). This is well understood but challenging to address, and engaging students via the support and guidance offered is a matter of art as much as science.

This presentation concerns itself with key notions of engagement and their impact on transition in the first year experience (FYE). Such examination led to the development of the practice-based initiative described which itself rests upon the concept, as articulated by Tinto (2009), that "at no time does involvement matter more than in the critical first year of university study when success is so much in question and no where it is more important than in the classrooms" (p. 5). FYE as a transitional marker is vital to student success, given that it is a time when academic skills and social foundations are laid (see Houn & Sankey, 2002). Transition Conversations speaks to these imperatives by providing an early experience of engagement with peers, student services and educators whose classroom acts as the conduit for the program. Transition Conversations is implicitly a FYE initiative since it lays such foundations early, in the spirit of reflection, imagination and connectivity.

The initial research areas that underpin this ACAP initiative included data from the Australian Survey of Student Engagement [AUSSE] (2010), produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], as well as individual researchers in the area of FYE engagement and retention. The AUSSE has drawn on its cross-institutional survey of first year students to lay out some of the complexities that are linked to student retention. Several themes emerged from their review of various studies. One such theme examined students' need to feel that "their university supports them, not only academically but also socially and personally" ... [with the additional need to be challenged in order to] "gain academic competence" (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006, as cited in ACER, 2010, p. 2).

Retention literature includes discussions of students' responsibility as well as institutional obligations. However, there has also been the suggestion that what is lacking in the literature is an understanding of the student's perspective on their responsibility for engagement (Bartlett, 2009). Bartlett points to a lack of transparency, and indeed a lack of open conversation with students about what higher education institutions are trying to achieve through the various services provided. The Australian College of Applied Psychology [ACAP], like many higher education institutions, provides opportunities to attend academic skilling workshops, peer mentoring and other support programs. Traditionally, such services have been guided by the philosophy of 'if we build it, they will come.' In this model of both provision and thought, when students don't take up the offer, there tends to be a culture of fault accorded to the student.

However, given that early retention is a prominent issue across tertiary institutions, it is worthwhile examining the service models that we adopt to understand the underlying philosophy and indeed resourcing that they attract. This will bring to light what makes such services visible, accessible and attractive to students. Transition Conversations seeks to build upon embedded (i.e. delivered directly within the classroom) participation models that do not promote the service as one that addresses 'remedial' concerns (with expectations of fixing mistakes), rather, a place to deepen individual student's ability to learn - allowing students to construct their own model of support.

'Transition pedagogy' principles, as articulated by Nelson and Kift (2005) appear to affirm the Transition Conversations approach to the FYE (in part) by communicating the importance of an embedded and scaffolded transition agenda that is integrated, student-focused and timely in its delivery. This is Transition Conversations aim. The program also offers a way for students to assess their unique needs, with a personal plan for transition into university life. Transition Conversation provides a pathway to action.

### *Design for student success: Institutional innovation and the FYHE at ACAP*

ACAP's 'Academic Vision 2010-2015' identifies the need to provide services to all students, especially those "underprepared/qualified" (ACAP, p. 6) with implications for those undertaking their first year and especially their first trimester. ACAP is in a unique position because of the nature of its curriculum. Practical knowledge about how to construct a supportive framework lies in the course work on offer - Transition Conversations draws from ACAP's Bachelor of Applied Social Science (coaching stream), with frameworks derived from positive psychology.

#### **Transition Conversations: The program**

ACAP runs each course unit over 12 weeks. Transition Conversations is presented to students in the second week of their first trimester of study. The program is delivered over 45 minutes as a 10 minute presentation on some of the key elements around transition, followed by students filling out a self-reflection form. Students then participate in small group forums that centre on a 'miracle' scenario (adapted from Solution-Focused Therapy) that projects students ahead two trimesters to personally successful outcomes. This method is strength-based and employs imagination and optimism to connect positively with the hurdles that have arisen in the reflective part of the session. Individual follow-up sessions are booked with those students who wish to further explore their reflections and progress. Thus, Transition Conversations aims to combine a targeted intervention within a 'whole learning experience' focus.

## **Headlines: Themes from Transition Conversations**

The following headline themes are snippets that are similar in format and tone to the ideas that are canvassed with students during the transition program: Retention, resilience, self-efficacy and support services formed the basis of the rationale provided.

### *Retention and its flipside: Attrition*

All students are vulnerable to some extent and need support to manage feelings of being overwhelmed or other difficulties. For new students:

- “When students achieve positive outcomes in the first year, this is likely to reinforce their commitment to university” (ACER, 2010). Conversely “most students who leave university early do so in the first six to eight weeks” (Cook, 2006).
- Students who perform “poorly in their first year ... are more likely to withdraw feeling academically inadequate” (Tinto, 1998, as cited in McLaughlin & Sutton, 2006, p. 20).

### *Resilience: From a psychological perspective*

What part might individual resiliencies play in a commencing student’s chances of completing their studies? Resilience is contributed to by “a number of factors ... (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific coping strategies” (APA Dictionary of Psych., 2007, p. 792). This definition suggests that perceptions can impact on engagement style, and negative beliefs about capabilities can become a hurdle to seeking help, especially if this produces fear about exposing ‘incompetence.’ Positive psychology relies on the idea that when in a healthy environment, coping strategies can be cultivated and practiced. Resiliency is drawn from behaviours already embedded in the personality, as well as resources in the current environment. Transition, then, is a time to draw on both these inner and outer worlds.

### *Self-efficacy: The confidence to pursue*

Notions of resiliency and self-efficacy are closely linked, and:

- Adjusting to the challenges of life is a process that draws upon the ability to be mentally, emotionally, and behaviourally flexible (APA Dictionary of Psych., 2007).

And yet:

- Psychological orientation can be “more about self-protection and the guarding of self-esteem than about network-building and accessing key forms of support” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, as cited in Bartlett, 2009, p. 54).

### *Student services models: Changing the landscape at ACAP*

Stevenson and Kokkinn (2007, as cited in Habel, 2009) state that “Recommending a focus on academic self-efficacy should not construct students as having ‘problems’ and being in ‘need’ of ‘services’... [rather they should] help empower students to inhabit a social role as agents (not just subjects) ...” (p. 97). Transition Conversations seeks to provide avenues to deepen the learning process while actively seeking to move away from a ‘deficit’ model of support.

### *The model: Transition Conversations*

Simply stated, Transition Conversations is based on the following:

- **Start an open conversation** - Transparent conversation around the idea of transition.
- **Self-reflection, forums and follow-up** - Identifying, acknowledging and discussing insight, motivation and capabilities.
- **Utilise ACAP's current knowledge base** - Coaching and positive psychology as a model to support FYE engagement with the College.

The anticipated impact of Transition Conversations is many-fold, and includes:

1. Increasing FYE student awareness of transition, both as a notion and as an experience.

Transition Conversations seeks to address first year student preparedness for change and raise their awareness of the challenges they may face, in the hopes that such awareness sparks help-seeking and/or self-regulatory behaviours. The program also seeks to make transparent College assumptions around student engagement and self-responsibility, provide rationales and seek students' perspectives.

2. Increasing awareness of self-efficacy and 'action' as a function of engagement.

It is important to avoid treating students as if they are in the action stage. Motivation to adapt to a new environment may not yet be present or envisaged. Providing an opportunity for students to reflect could help them identify where they sit in the continuum of pre-contemplation, contemplation and action related behaviours. New students hear how peers approach their early higher education experience and discuss the merits of various approaches.

3. Removing the stigma of booking an appointment with Student Services

Transition Conversations provides a measure of psychological orientation into the classroom. This model of thinking removes the remedial 'tag' from student support by providing engagement opportunities that enhance the experience of all new students, while simultaneously identifying and uplifting those who need the help but may not seek it. Current programs such as ACAP's Embedded Academic Support already demonstrate that embedded programs pay a bigger dividend for 'underserviced' and 'underprepared' students.

### **Nuts and Bolts: Session outline and audience participation**

The Nuts and Bolts presentation will take the following form:

- 15 minute presentation centred on the key idea headlines as outlined (*Retention, Resilience, Self-efficacy, Student services models*). This will include how Transition Conversations is delivered as well as early evaluations of the program.
- 5 minutes for conference delegates to get an experiential 'taste' of Transition Conversations by contemplating a brief self-reflection question and then conferring (within a forum facilitated by the presenter) around a 'miracle' question. Both the self-reflection and forum questions are adapted to suit delegates as 'students of life' to ensure relevance.
- 5 minutes for discussion on the question: What is the fabric of transition? Who or what weaves it?
- 5 minutes for discussing the potential value and transferability of the program to other tertiary institutions.

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