

A mid-year orientation program: Addressing the needs of mid-year entry students

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Abstract

Whilst much attention has been paid in the last decade to the first year experience of tertiary students, in particular their orientation and transition, little research has focused on students who commence at mid-year. This report provides an insight into the expectations of mid-year entry students and their initial experiences. It reports on a small-scale study associated with an innovative orientation program, Mid-year EXCELeRATE, designed to better equip these students in their first few weeks at University and to facilitate their transition process. The results indicate that students did not recognise the importance of social support in transition prior to commencing their studies, although the importance of this factor became quite evident to them during their early experiences. Several problems were identified as being particular to mid-year entry and further research will lead to a better understanding of the mid-year entry experience by University policy makers and teaching staff.

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The forgotten students

Almost all Australian universities now admit students to commence study in the middle of the year. This trend is the result of increased competition for market share, with universities using the mid-year entry mechanism to “top-up” under-enrolled programs. From the students’ perspective, mid-year entry can have a number of advantages. Clearly, it provides flexibility in the timing of commencement. It also allows students who have commenced in a program to which they were not well-suited to transfer to another more appropriate program without loss of time. Additionally, students who may have missed out on a place in their first preference program at the beginning of the year have a chance to reconsider their choices and commence in an alternative program in the mid-year.

However, we have surmised for some time that mid-year entry students are the forgotten students when it comes to transition and orientation, and thus we believe that they are at a particular disadvantage. While there is a plethora of literature addressing the transition and orientation of first-year student in general, there is a dearth of literature focusing specifically on mid-year entrants. An extensive search of Australian and international literature has unearthed just four publications that make reference to mid-year entrants (Britt & Hirt, 1999; Lawrence, 2004; McNaught & Hoyne, 2011; Peska, 2009). Bruning (2002, as cited in O’Shea & Vincent, 2011) highlights the link between students feeling valued and their level of satisfaction with their institution. Thus, if mid-year students have gone unnoticed for the most part, then it would be difficult to see how they could feel valued as students, or be as satisfied with their institution as beginning of the year

commencers who are well supported through their first year at university.

In this report, we begin by presenting a snapshot of Flinders University, and our mid-year student cohort. We then present the initial findings of a small-scale study conducted which furnishes an insight into the expectations of the mid-year students prior to commencing their courses. Next, we detail Flinders’ new orientation program, *Mid-year EXCElerate*, which was designed specifically for mid-year entry students and delivered by the Student Learning Centre (SLC) at Flinders University. The intention of this program was to connect the mid-year entry students both academically and socially in their new study environment in order to address some of the challenges associated with mid-year entry that have been identified in the literature (Britt & Hirt, 1999; Peska, 2009). Finally, we examine the early experiences of a group of mid-year entry students, as revealed in qualitative interviews conducted during their first semester of study.

Flinders University

Flinders University, one of three public universities in Adelaide, has a total enrolment of close to 25,000 students and is located 12 kilometres from Adelaide city centre (Flinders University, 2014). This is significant in that, for many students, travelling to Flinders by public transport involves at least two buses, and thus, many choose to come by car. Given that most university students, including Flinders students, also need to be engaged in paid employment (Hall, 2010; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010), many of our students are spending fewer hours on campus. Negotiating study and work commitments in a tight schedule can often negatively impact on opportunities for students to

engage with other students and staff (O'Shea & Vincent 2011).

Who are mid-year entry students?

The mid-year entry option attracts quite a different cohort of student to those that commence university at the beginning of the academic year. Typically, the predominant group of Semester 1 commencers come straight from school. However, as McNaught and Hoyne (2011) contend, a higher proportion of alternative entry pathway students tend to commence at the beginning of Semester 2 and this trend was certainly borne out at Flinders University for undergraduate students that commenced at the beginning of both Semester 1 and Semester 2 in 2013 (Table 1).

Additionally, the age range of the 2013 cohort of Semester 2 commencers at Flinders University (as compared to Semester 1) further supports the notion that mid-year entry attracts a higher proportion of non-school leavers (Table 2).

The backgrounds of the 39 participants in our study reflect some similarities with the overall data for mid-year entrants at Flinders, and some interesting differences. Ten of the participants indicated that secondary schooling was their highest educational level. Of these ten, only two had been at school in the previous year. Half of the participants reported that a TAFE qualification was their highest level of education, while only seven (18%) named tertiary studies as their highest educational level. Clearly the immediate school leavers are as under-represented in our study as they are in the overall cohort. On the other

Table 1: Basis of admission for undergraduate students commencing at Flinders University

Basis of Admission	Secondary Education	Higher Education	TAFE	Mature Age/STAT	Other	Total
Semester 1	2538 (45)	1522 (27)	338 (6)	846 (15)	395 (7)	5639
Semester 2	90 (17)	207 (39)	74 (14)	117 (22)	43 (8)	531

Source: Flinders University (2013) where each cell contains the number and % of students

Table 2: Age of mid-year entrants commencing at Flinders University

Age (years)	<20	20-29	30-39	40-49	>50	Total
Semester 1	2368 (42)	2594 (46)	451 (8)	169 (3)	56 (1)	n = 5639
Semester 2	74 (14)	335 (63)	74 (14)	37 (7)	11 (2)	n = 531

Source: Flinders University (2013) where each cell contains the number and % of students

hand, the proportion of those with a higher education background and a TAFE qualification are at odds with the overall group. A straightforward explanation could account for this discrepancy. As the data was collected at the conclusion of an academic orientation program, it may well have been that those students who had already had a taste of university life did not feel that such a program had much to offer them, while on the other hand those coming to university for the first time from alternative pathways such as TAFE could have been more inclined to access the benefit of an academic orientation program.

What were their expectations?

In order to gain a greater insight into the nature and needs of mid-year entry students, initial survey data was collected from 39 mid-year students. Our respondents were asked to reflect upon some of their expectations regarding their studies. We were interested in exploring how they felt in general about commencing study (Table 3), what they saw as the personal strengths they would bring to their studies (Table 4), what they considered would be challenging (Table 5), how confident they felt about managing the academic requirements of their programs (Table 6), and what external factors might impact on their studies (Table 7). The data gathered in the paper-based survey comprised either responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale or open qualitative responses. For the questions: *How would you rate your feelings about commencing study at Flinders?* and *How would you rate your confidence to fulfil the academic requirements of your course?* respondents selected on 5-point scale from Quite Nervous to Confident. These responses are summarised in Table 3 and Table 6. The questions: *What strengths to you bring to*

your studies? What aspects of your study do you expect to find challenging? and *Are there any external factors you think might affect your studies?* invited open-ended qualitative responses. These responses were analysed and coded to determine the key themes that were evident. These themes are summarised in Tables 4, 5 and 7.

Interestingly, the students did not mention anything related to social skills when asked about their personal strengths and challenges that would impact on their studies. This is noteworthy, as much recent research has shown that forming social networks is critical to successful student transition (James et al. 2010; Kift, 2008; Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2000) and that social isolation is a key impediment to transition for mid-year students (Britt & Hirt, 1999; Peska, 2009). In the main, however, the mid-year students' responses differed little from the findings of others in studies undertaken to explore first year students' expectations (e.g., Crisp et al., 2009; Nelson, Kift, & Clarke, 2008). Though, in our study, the participants' consideration of what external factors might affect their studies is another clear indication that the mid-year cohort comprises a high proportion of non-school leavers, in that family, work and money were high priorities in balancing their studies and their personal lives.

Mid-year EXCElerate

The growing literature on transition confirms the need for students to feel both socially and academically connected with the university, particularly when they commence at mid-year (Britt & Hirt, 1999; Lawrence 2004; Peska, 2009). In addition to this, academic staff members in the SLC have observed that students commencing at mid-year can experience problems unique to their intake. Some of these problems are administrative complications,

Table 3: How would you rate your feelings about commencing study at Flinders?

Quite nervous	Slightly nervous	Okay	Somewhat confident	Confident
5 (13%)	15 (39%)	6 (16%)	9 (21%)	4 (11%)

Table 4: What strengths do you bring to your studies?

Organised	Motivated	Life experience	Confident	Want to learn	Willing to work	Enthused	Goals
2 (6%)	10 (25%)	2 (6%)	4 (9%)	7 (19%)	4 (9%)	5 (13%)	5 (13%)

Table 5: What aspects of your study do you expect to find challenging?

Academic writing	Maths	Content knowledge	Managing workload	Lack of confidence	Organisation	English 2 nd language
20 (49%)	3 (8%)	4 (11%)	4 (11%)	2 (5%)	4 (11%)	2 (5%)

Table 6: How would you rate your confidence to fulfil the academic requirements of your course?

Quite nervous	Slightly nervous	Okay	Somewhat confident	Confident
1 (3%)	7 (19%)	13 (32%)	6 (16%)	12 (30%)

Table 7: Are there any external factors you think might affect your studies?

Family	Work	Distance to travel	Money	Time
9 (24%)	12 (31%)	9 (24%)	7 (17%)	2 (4%)

others relate to having to “hit the ground running” when joining courses in which most students have commenced in Semester 1. More worryingly, teaching staff can often be unaware that some of their Semester 2 students are new to the university and may need extra explanations and support. Additionally, the demographic profile of mid-year entry students, as detailed in the first section, indicates that these students are more

likely to be commencing, or returning, to university after having taken reasonably long breaks from formal academic study. Taking all of this into account, the SLC moved to create an innovative, orientation program, *Mid-year EXCErate*, which would connect the mid-year entry students both academically and socially in their new study environment. In this next section, we report on the success of this program and the positive impact that it had on the

transitioning of mid-year students into their studies.

The new *Mid-year EXCElerate* program was inspired by *The First Year on Campus Learning Carnivale Conference* (James, 2010), a post-orientation initiative at the University of Wollongong, in part as a response to a study by James et al. (2010). The Flinders University *Mid-year EXCElerate* was planned as a two-day program. Undergraduate mid-year commencing were invited to attend with the understanding that they were expected to commit to attending the entire program. The program was promoted as providing both academic preparation and a means of meeting other commencing students and university staff in an enjoyable and beneficial two days. In line with current thinking on transition, we aimed to give the students a sense of belonging (Kift, 2008), so that students commenced university with some familiar faces on campus to reduce the sense of social isolation which is often experienced (Chambers, Waugh, & Barnes, 2012; James et al., 2010), and to provide peer support, if needed. We elected to promote and encourage the "social participation in learning about and within" the University (Lave & Wenger 1991, as cited in O'Shea & Vincent, 2011, p. 154), rather than the "partying" aspects often associated with many O Week activities which according to Peat et al. (2000, p. 4) can provide a somewhat unrealistic impression of the challenges of university life.

This was achieved by:

- the creation of a context in which students would meet and interact, enabling the establishment of peer relationships and support;

- introducing students to the campus layout to reduce initial stress and confusion;
- familiarising students with the basics of using the learning management system, Flinders Learning Online (FLO) and the library facilities;
- providing an introduction to key academic conventions and expectations;
- refreshing students' numeracy skills;
- introducing students to academic thinking, reading and writing; and
- introducing the facilities, services and support available to Flinders' students.

Our main challenge in planning this program was to limit the content so that information useful to commencing students was delivered in a timely manner without creating an overload (Kift, 2008) that could increase anxiety. Our approach was to present essential content, together with why and how it would be useful at university, to provide interactive activities in which the information or skills could be applied, and to show students where and how to avail themselves of further information and services if needed. We also attempted to recognise and cater to students' more specific needs by having them select from a range of focussed workshops which included specific academic numeracy topics, writing literature reviews, writing for the sciences or humanities, as well as paraphrasing, group work and oral presentation skills.

The degree of interaction in the *Mid-year EXCElerate* program was beyond the coordinators' expectations. Feedback was very positive with 100% saying they had a clearer idea of expectations, and that the program had helped them to prepare for

their studies. The social and networking opportunities and the academic preparation content were rated most highly in terms of being helpful. In the interviews that we conducted, all participating students reported that the *Mid-year EXCELerate* program had been useful to them and that they were glad that they had participated. Each commented that they had appreciated the chance to meet other students and to be familiar with the campus and services before commencing study:

It was excellent. It's been nineteen years since I have done some tertiary study... so actually coming back to doing academic writing and getting an idea of what the academic world is completely foreign to me. For me, it [EXCELerate] was invaluable. It taught me a lot of things that so far have been working very well.

On the first day of uni I had to start my subject along with the students who had already been [here] from the start of the year. I didn't feel isolated from them because I already knew what was going on. When the tutors started talking about the assignments I already felt I knew the base to have to do it.

All of the students commented in some way on meeting other people at university:

I actually found two people from the EXCELerate program that I sit next to in lectures and tutorials. They're both social work students but happen to be doing the same geography as I am. That was nice.

And I met some colleagues I'm going to study with so it's given me a pathway to making new friendships and making uni familiar too.

Students and staff alike were very pleased with the impact of the *Mid-year EXCELerate* program based on student evaluations of the program and our follow-up interviews. There were enough interactive

opportunities within the program for students to be at least familiar with some staff in support positions. Additionally, several students commented on the importance of feeling less anxious about studying after they had participated in the program and had met other students and seen the campus. It would appear, at least in this study, that prior to study, potential students are likely to consider issues such as their academic ability, managing competing responsibilities, time available for study and finances, and do not connect establishing social relationships at university with successful study. For mid-year entry students, this may be of particular importance as many friendships, study groups and peer-mentoring relationships have already been established.

Experiences in the first semester of study

Mid-way through Semester 2, we conducted three focus group interviews involving eight students who had participated in the *Mid-year EXCELerate* program to explore what their experiences had been to that point in time. The focus group interviews followed a semi-structured format comprising opening questions to stimulate discussion both about the efficacy of *Mid-year EXCELerate* and the students' early experiences in their first semester of study. The interviews were transcribed and, in the first stage of data analysis, the transcribed text was scrutinised using a holistic approach to reveal any common themes. These interviews confirmed our suspicion that the students were indeed dealing with a range of issues that were particular to being a mid-year entrant. The over-riding themes that arose from the interviews were that some students were feeling socially isolated, that teaching staff seemed

unaware of the presence of mid-year entrants in their classes, that content knowledge covered in Semester 1 was assumed in Semester 2, and that particular administrative problems hampered the students' transition. In the second stage of the data analysis, the transcribed text was coded according to these four main themes and in this section we use the students' voice that arose from this coding activity to examine these themes in more detail.

We had hoped that the *Mid-year EXCErate* program would have broken down some of the social isolation experienced by mid-year entry students as had been described in the literature (Britt & Hirt, 1999; Peska, 2009). However, some students still reported that this was a challenge as other students they were studying with had not attended our program:

For me the main difficulty I have is being a bit lonely around the place. I'm in a very small degree - 20 of us in total in the first year - supposedly 7 or 8 in mid-year entry but I haven't met a single one of them yet. So you don't feel part of any particular group.

One student who had previously studied at an inner-city University commented on the "commuter culture" (O'Shea & Vincent, 2011, p. 154) at Flinders in which students come on-campus to attend lectures and then leave to go to work or other commitments, rather than spending time on campus studying or socialising with other students.

I think that making more friends is a challenge because people come and go. ... I think it's just a uni culture I guess. People just come and go and don't want to stay and hang out.

Several students also mentioned that teaching staff seemed unaware that they had just started at university:

...most lecturers don't remember that there is mid-entry - they assume you know, that you've been here six months already.

We tried to explain to our tutors we are mid-year entry and we don't have any clue. She said she hasn't got time and can't do more than that.

None of my tutors would have any concept that I have just started. In first semester first year they know that everyone is new. I'm sure they have got more general information than I have.

The lack of recognition and acknowledgement by teaching staff is compounded when the content knowledge covered in Semester 1 is assumed in Semester 2 topics, despite there being no formal pre-requisite requirements. This aspect caused our respondents quite a deal of anxiety and in one case led to the student withdrawing from his studies.

... they're assuming a heap of knowledge from Semester 1 which I don't have. So I guess in some respect ...well, I would never have come in mid-year if I had known that was the case. I would have started next year ... So I stopped probably two or two and a half weeks ago.

It's very uncomfortable going there knowing everyone knows what the lecturer is talking about but you don't know what he's talking about.

The fact [is] that most people have already done it and they know what they're doing. Whereas we are like standing there going "I'm not sure what they're talking about". So I go back and read stuff they mentioned. Most of it strictly relates to Semester 1 though.

The final obstacle some of our interviewees faced as mid-year entry students was a range of administrative difficulties that

impacted both on their studies and their personal lives.

We had less choice [with the timetable]. By the time I enrol I could hardly find 4 or 5 classes to join. I have to come to uni for 4 days for the 4 subjects. Those that started from the beginning booked their classes for 2 days.

I have this mid-semester field trip. The university had some trouble with some mid-year entry email addresses - we were sent an email but mine wasn't working. But I didn't know until later and eventually I got sent another email saying "Why haven't you turned up to this? We sent you an email weeks ago" ... I then tried to make contact with the lecturer and he basically brushed me off and said you should have been there. I explained I had a problem but I don't think he believed me.

It should be emphasised, however, that the accounts we heard from the interviewees were not all negative. There were also a number of good news stories to be heard.

I've found my tutors to be good so far - I've been lucky in that sense - and they've taken some time when I've explained it's the first report I'm doing.

I think because I have studied before, I don't feel any different. I don't feel out of place. Just because I started at mid-year... I don't feel any different from the rest.

I haven't felt from anybody, from the lecture classroom, or anywhere that I only started halfway through. I haven't had any of that. I'd say I've had no problems whatsoever and I think I've fitted in quite well. I've really made friends.

The range of student responses was, in many regards, no surprise to us. Rather, they confirmed what we had surmised for some time based on anecdotal evidence: that mid-year entry students are often the forgotten students when it comes to

transition and orientation, and thus maybe at a particular disadvantage and at greater risk than those students who commence at the beginning of the academic year. At our institution, it is evident that there is a need for all concerned to be more cognisant of mid-year entry students and their particular circumstances and needs. Of note, however, is that the initial concerns that students had identified in the prior to commencement survey, namely managing academic writing, content knowledge or time management, did not, at least in the first semester, appear to have materialised. Rather, their personal challenges principally involved their social isolation, which as we have highlighted earlier was not anticipated by the students.

Conclusion

Flinders University's *Mid-year EXCErate* was received very positively by all of the mid-year entry students who attended, and all felt that participation in the program was of benefit to them both socially and academically. Notably, all participants in our study made mention of whether or not they were able to establish connections with other students in their individual programs once they had commenced study but none had mentioned it prior to commencement. Nor did any respondent make a connection between the social aspects of being on campus and successful study. This suggests that commencing students may not realise the extent to which their ability to form social networks may support them in their transition to university study, despite much research identifying social factors as being important in tertiary success

This study has revealed further issues for students commencing at mid-year that should be addressed elsewhere in the University—, at least at our institution—as

more needs to be done to facilitate the transition of mid-year entry students. Awareness-raising amongst teaching staff is one strategy that would be effective, as would be ensuring that if students are permitted to enrol in particular subjects in Semester 2, then an extensive knowledge of Semester 1 content is not required. In addition, as a higher proportion of students who commence at mid-year are mature-age or have not come directly from school, they may need extra support in terms of managing family and multiple other commitments and/or in using educational technology for learning which previous research (Britt & Hurt, 1999; Peska, 2009) has indicated is important for successful study. It is our intention that the findings from this study are disseminated through various relevant committees within the University to inform our future practices with regard to the transition and orientation of mid-year entry students. It will also lead to a more extensive study in this very under-researched field.

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