# Unscrambling the egg: A muddled path to a holistic, coherent and integrated institution-wide approach to first year student transition. A Practice Report

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## Abstract

*A Third Generation approach to the first year experience and transition is widely recognised as essential and current best practice. However the significant challenges to institutions in achieving such an approach is broadly acknowledged. This Practice Report outlines the beginning attempts of one institution to recognise such a goal, and is designed to seek input and insight from workshop participants on proven strategies to progress this goal.*

## Introduction

Sector best practice, supported by a comprehensive body of research and theory clearly articulates the need for an effective coordinated institution-wide approach to first year experience and transition (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010), otherwise described as a third generation approach (Kift, 2009). This Practice Report outlines the beginning attempts of a large, diverse and multi-campus university to chart a course to realise such a goal.

## Context and background

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) is a large multi-campus institution with a strategic commitment to being a student-centred institution, committed to ensuring both opportunity and excellence in student outcomes. Widening participation, along with recognition and responsiveness to student diversity is fundamental to the mission of the University. A brief snapshot of some key 2012 statistics[1] informing this mission include: (1) Low SES students: 23.7% ; (2) First in Family: 53%; (3) NESB students: 32%; (4) high percentage of students in paid work and/or with other competing responsibilities. Student retention rates as is the case across the sector, varies significantly across courses and disciplines. At an institutional level, we had seen steady improvement in commencing retention rates from 2005-06 to 2008-09. However, this improvement stalled thereafter, though again with some variability seen across the institution. During this time, we have also seen growth in student enrolments as the university pursues a widening participation agenda.

Following a restructure of the University commencing January 2012, along with new leadership appointments, a *Student Experience and Engagement Committee* was enacted as a standing committee of the *Senate Education Committee* with responsibility for "developing, leading and coordinating institution-wide strategies to enhance the student experience and student engagement across the student lifecycle" (UWS, Clause 30, n.d.).

A high priority identified by the committee was to critically examine and understand the commencing student experience as they traverse their transition to University by mapping that experience from the student perspective.

Ultimately, the strategic imperative is to develop a whole-of-institution lifecycle approach to supporting our students' transition and success. We were not starting from a blank page however—there were many existing excellent programs and initiatives implemented across the university designed to enhance the first year experience. However there was recognition that there was an absence of any encompassing and unifying institutional framework and vision. Rather our institutional approach could best be described as largely "piecemeal" or certainly "discrete" initiatives, often despite the best efforts of their initiators— a not unusual situation across the HE sector as described in 2005 by Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005). Five years later, Kift et al. (2010) noted that "piecemeal" remains the "most apposite descriptor of FYE initiatives reported nationally and internationally…. Institutions still struggle with cross-institutional integration, coordination and coherence" (p. 2).

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[1] Provided by university personnel.

## Our guiding principles

In setting off on this task, we have adopted a number of guiding principles, each of which is supported by theory and research, and each of which is deemed important to our particular circumstance. This recognises the diverse characteristics of our student population, our commitment to widening participation and a student-centred approach, supporting opportunity in access and excellence in outcomes. These principles, which recognise that it is the total experience which counts, are that:

- There is a need for coherence, integration and coordination of initiatives and programs at the institutional level: It was recognised not only that the information provided to students and their experiences need to be *congruent* and *self-reinforcing*, but also that such an approach offers opportunities for enhanced efficiencies through value adding and alignment, as well as enhanced effectiveness – that the *sum can be greater than the parts!*
- It is necessary to take a *student perspective:* It is important to look at the student experience through their eyes, at their stage of understanding and transition, and understand what their reasonable expectations are of interaction with *the university*, as opposed to its components parts which is largely meaningless to them;
- Transition is a *process* not an *event* and that the university has an obligation to intentionally provide the necessary conditions and opportunities for student transition and success (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; Tinto, 2009);

- There is the need to recognise, accept and plan strategies and approaches which *"bridge sociocultural incongruity"* [emphasis added] (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012, p. 8): Recognising and enacting this need is important across all aspects of planning for student transition, both curricular and co-curricular, including all touch points between the institution and students;
- The *course curriculum* provides the *core connecting and meaningful construct* to which student transition (and learning) is anchored, experienced and made sense of: Thus the need for aligning curricular and co-curricular activities (Kift, 2009; McInnis, 2001) in a self-reinforcing and congruent manner;
- A successful institutional approach requires a balance between institutionally led and directed strategies and harnessing the capacity for the bottom up generation of innovative approaches and/or local (school, course, discipline) variation which can be supported, evaluated and adopted institutionally when proven effective and transferable, along with institutional support for scholarship and research;
- Student transition and success is *"everyone's business"* requiring strong, effective and supportive relationships between both academic and professional staff within schools and across administrative units at all levels of the institution, supported by institutional policies and practices (Foundational Dimensions, 2005).

- There is the need for the right data, at the right level (where it is meaningful and able to be acted on), readily available at the right time, in the right format, with processes to ensure institution-wide accountability and responsiveness to such data (James, 2012).

It is recognised, that achievement of our goal, underpinned by the principles articulated above, necessitates a "whole-of-institution transformation" (Kift, 2009, p. 1) involving cultural as well as structural change across the university.

## What have we done so far and what have we learnt?

1. Implementation of a strategic approach to planning and coordination of transition and support strategies across the institution through the establishment of a *Student Transition, Retention & Success Program* (StaRS) under the leadership of an Associate PVC Education.

2. Establishment of Academic *and* Professional FYE Champion roles within all Schools. The establishment of these roles provides direct communication channels into all schools in order to facilitate and support the implementation of strategies and ensure communication across the institution. The introduction of these roles has also enabled the formation of a:

- *Commencing Student Planning Network* consisting of School FYE Champions and representatives of all organisational and administrative

units across the university who have a key role in supporting student transition; and
- *First Year Champions Community of Practice* where FYE Champions will come together to provide support and facilitate sharing of ideas, strategies and lessons learnt. Two FYE Champion representatives are members of the key strategic policy making body, the Student Experience & Engagement Committee. Champions decided unanimously the forum would incorporate both academic and professional champions and collaborative research would be encouraged. To support such research ethics committee approval for a program of research is being sought which will enable speedy approval for discrete, but consonant projects as they arise. Each of these bodies is supported centrally through the Office of the PVC Education. Scholarship funding to support attendance of champions (academic *and* professional) to present work/research on the FYE has been implemented.

3. Implementation of a number of institution-wide strategies, including:

- A standardised orientation program, previously piloted (Gill, Ramjan, et al., 2011) and involving participation of more senior students enrolled in the same course;
- Implementation of First Year School Contact Officer (FYSCO) roles (Gill, Lombardo, Dlugon & Salamonson, 2011 ) across all

schools as one strategy to institutionalise, normalise and "encourage help-seeking by students" (Devlin et al, 2012, p.48);

- Ensuring the publication of consultation hours for all first year unit coordinators to help facilitate and normalise help-seeking;
- Key transition messages implemented within a core unit in every course over the first five weeks to provide just-in-time key information.

4. Mapping of commencing student direct "touch points" and planned institutional co-curricular initiatives through the student lifecycle from receipt of university offer to the end of the first session.[2] The following insights have been elicited thus far:

- No one within the university has a full understanding of the range of initiatives and projects in place designed specifically to support the first year experience and transition;
- Between the point of receiving an offer and midway point of first semester (15 weeks), a typical commencing student is directly "touched" (letter, email, phone call, event) up to 90 times, with the source of those touches coming from up to 10 distinct areas of the institution (excluding school

and/or course specific activities);

- The mapping process suggested a typical student could potentially attend seven unique *transition* events prior to their first class commencing;
- No one within the university has a full understanding of the range or timing of communication events with students and there is repetition between and across communications;
- Accessibility of the information (language used and ability to be understood by and to be meaningful to commencing students) varies greatly;

5. Comprehensive analysis of the preceding three years of data from the *Commencing Student Survey* reinforced the need for consistency and whole-of-course approach to assessment design, communication, elucidation and scheduling. The need for improved articulation of "clear expectations, using accessible language" as advised by Devlin et al. (2012, p. 26) was also a key finding. A project to scope this issue was implemented by auditing assessment plans across the first session for all undergraduate programs offered by the university and is being used to inform strategic action.

6. Formation of a strategic partnership with the Business Intelligence and Institutional Research Department within the University to develop more accessible, interactive

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[2] The UWS term for *semester*.

platforms to retrieve the range of varying student evaluative data, including markers for students at risk.

## Participant feedback and input

Discussion by participants reinforced the view that institutions face considerable challenges in achieving a true 3rd generation approach with many recognising commonality between the picture presented and the situation within their own institution, including the significant diversity in student experience within each institution. The perceived lower status of teaching and greater focus on research was identified as a common barrier to gaining the necessary engagement of academic staff. However, other participants cited changes to policy at their institution designed to strengthen the impact of teaching as a criterion for promotion, noting increasing instances of professorial promotion on the basis of performance in the teaching domain.

Participants also acknowledged the tendency toward "turf protection" and resistance of some staff providing support programs to the broader review of those programs within a coordinated and coherent support framework as a further challenge.

The dispersed responsibilities and accountabilities which exist across institutions were acknowledged as a challenge requiring strategic coordination. It was generally agreed that an institution needed a combination of both top-down and bottom-up strategies with strong, effective coordination in order to achieve a holistic, coherent and integrated institutional approach to student transition.

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