Towards a transition pedagogy: a case study of a regional Australian university's approach to enhancing the first year experience

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Abstract

The first year is a critical period in the determination of student success, none more so than for students from diverse backgrounds including those from low socio economic backgrounds. Achieving the utopian 'third generation' or 'transition pedagogy' approach to the first year experience requires a transformational shift: a whole of institution approach including explicit curriculum design and seamless partnerships between academic and professional staff. This paper documents one institution's progress towards a transition pedagogy and describes specific initiatives in an ambitious project of change that has complemented the university's response to the widening participation agenda.

First year experience drivers

An impressive body of research points to the importance of intentional and targeted support for first year students managed in a coordinated and systemic way (Kift, 2009; Krause, 2006; Nelson, Kift, Humphreys & Harper, 2009; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2005, 2007; Tinto, 2009). Despite progress in this direction, first year experience (FYE) commentators argue that the efforts remain essentially piecemeal and lacking in the institutional coordination necessary for holistic and sustainable wide enhancements (Kift, 2009; Krause, Hartley, James & McInness, 2005; Tinto 2006).

Apart from the social and moral responsibilities universities have to provide a quality student experience upon acceptance to university (Coates, 2005; Devlin 2010) and the obvious financial benefits to a positive first year experience and student retention (Marrington, Nelson & Clarke, 2010), there are strong external pressures operating within the Australian higher education sector, highlighting the need to address the first year experience as a point of urgency. In 2004, The Australian University Quality Agency recommended that Charles Sturt University (CSU) ensured "greater consistency in the student experience across subjects" (AUQA, 2004, p.7). In 2005 the Australian Government recommended universities focus on the FYE as a core area for strategic planning (DEST, 2005). Following the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008), national targets for attainment and low socioeconomic status (LSES) students have led to a focus on enhancing the quality of higher education for all students, but especially those from diverse backgrounds (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010).

Kuh (2007) asserts that the student experience varies more *within* than *between* institutions and this is arguably the case at CSU. While a focus on the FYE is not new (in some areas), what *is* new is the current strategic, whole of institution and coordinated effort in support of

the FYE. This paper describes the university's approach to enhancing the FYE for all students and how this has intersected with the Government's widening participation agenda.

The institutional context

CSU is a large regional, multi campus university spread across locations in Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Canberra, Dubbo, Goulburn, Orange, Paramatta, Wagga Wagga and Ontario (Canada). With more than 33,000 enrolled students, approximately 70% study by distance education. As a University whose strategy commits to 'national vision – regional opportunity' (CSU, 2011), the student profile was diverse well before social inclusion and widening participation became prominent on the Government's educational reform agenda (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). With a geographical footprint that spans areas of regional Australia where university participation is well below national averages (DEEWR, 2008), more than 22% of CSU students are from LSES backgrounds and approximately 41% are the first in their family (FIF) to study at University. CSU's commitment to VET sector partnerships is also evident in the high numbers of students (approximately 25%) admitted to CSU on the basis of a TAFE qualification.

The historical context

Swing (2003) believes that embedded institutional change may take as long as ten years to effect. With this caution in mind, it is useful to look briefly at the antecedents to the current status of the FYE at CSU.

Historically the student experience was seen as the responsibility of the Division of Student Services. Similar to many universities across the sector, the student experience, as ill defined as it was, was seen as events or add-ons that happened in aid of the curriculum, for example, orientation and student support such as learning skills or counselling. While many examples of outstanding practice could be located across the university, in general they lacked institution wide coordination, understanding and awareness and were not supported by policy or in some cases appropriate levels of funding. Similarly, many wonderful examples of curriculum based approaches to the support of FY students were also evident across CSU, but an embedded and systemic approach to a transition pedagogy was clearly absent.

In 2005/2006 CSU embarked on a major Work Process Improvement (WPI) project. A main outcome of the project was an opportunity identification report in 2007. Among the key themes that emerged from this report, the student experience was highlighted. In particular the report noted that:

> The lack of clear ownership of student support may be a barrier to effectively addressing these issues and it is unlikely that we can effectively assess the effectiveness (and therefore improve) student support and the delivery of a positive student experience through looking at the areas responsible in isolation from one another. (Cox, 2007, p.15)

As a result of the report, in 2008 a Student Experience Program was established, with its Director tasked with the question "how we can create an integrated and quality student experience." In March 2009 the university executive considered the post Bradley environment and how best to support the increasing diversity of the CSU student cohort and ensure a positive student experience, particularly in their first year. In September 2009, the

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Transition Project was established. Under the leadership of a newly appointed Director of Transition and the Governance of a high level university wide steering committee sponsored by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), with representation from the Sub Deans Learning and Teaching from each Faculty and executive representatives from student facing Divisions, the project aim is to increase participation opportunities for our very diverse student cohorts and ensure that our students are successful and autonomous adult learners by the start of their second year of study.

Shortly after the project was initiated, the Government announced the commencement of the Higher Education Participation Partnerships Program (HEPPP) and associated funding. While student diversity has always been embraced and supported at CSU, the 'new' focus on widening participation and the establishment of the HEPPP aimed at transforming educational opportunities and experiences for students from a LSES background, provided new impetus and opportunity to address the FYE and transition issues. While some additional areas were added to the project as a result of the availability of HEPPP funding, for instance student aspiration, the end goal remained the same: an explicitly supported, whole of institution approach to supporting students, in all their diversity, to make the transition to university study.

The examination and implementation of transition initiatives was intentionally placed within a 'project' rather than an existing organisational unit of the university. This was done not only to ensure an outcomes focus, but to also allow the university to consider the ongoing placement of such initiatives while building the organisational capacity to deliver the necessary outcomes.

Project initiatives

Some specific initiatives of the Transition Project (in their varying states of progress) are described below. All initiatives are underpinned by an embedded and whole of university approach, which in some cases has meant the discontinuation or consolidation of existing programs and practices. (Note that the initiatives described are limited to those centring on the FYE therefore do not include the aspiration and pathway phase of the project.) The 3 initiatives that will be described are as follows:

1. Transition Pedagogy
2. Orientation
3. Student Transition Achievement and Retention Plan (STAR)

1. Transition Pedagogy.

The challenge of providing a high quality first year experience for a diverse body of students requires a strategic and whole of institution approach. (Kift, 2009; Krause, 2006). Fortuitously, the commencement of the Transition Project coincided with the conclusion of an ALTC Senior Fellowship on the FYE. The major outcome of this fellowship is "the articulation of a research based transition pedagogy – a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for heterogeneous cohorts" (Kift, 2009, p.2). Central to the transition pedagogy are six First Year Curriculum Principles that are supportive of first year learning,

engagement, success and retention: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment and evaluation and monitoring.

The final ALTC report, and in particular the First Year Curriculum Principles were utilised extensively across CSU over an 18 month period to: initiate discussions; use as benchmarks; as the basis of curriculum design and redesign; and as the basis of professional development. A one university approach to the dissemination and, more importantly, the adoption of such principles is certainly challenging in the CSU context given the geographical spread of the campuses. To this end, a 'viral' approach was adopted. Initially a paper introducing the Principles was written and tabled at each Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee. This in turn was sent to each school Learning and Teaching Committee and across Divisions. Champions were identified and targeted to assist in 'spreading the word'. Reactions to the Principles were overwhelmingly positive and they have been embraced by all areas of the University. The following are typical of the comments received:

> *"they are a revelation!"* (from a senior academic)
> "the principles are a language and framework on which to base and affirm my current practice as I don't have an education background"(from an experienced academic from Faculty of Science)
> "a welcome lifeline that is desperately needed for those of us new to university teaching. I can't believe you let me teach first years without them (the principles)" (from a new academic)
> "I think we should have them printed and have them on large posters in every staffroom at CSU!"(a Head of School) NB. posters were printed, and now appear in staff rooms and offices across CSU

The feedback was evidence of the passion and enthusiasm of staff to enhance the FYE at CSU, however as noted by Krause (2003, p.1), passion and enthusiasm are "no substitute for solid policy foundations which guide and determine present and future decisions and ensure that first year transition issues become fully integrated into the strategic plans of institutions." Fortunately the combined top down and bottom up approach utilised at CSU driven by the Transition Project has resulted in many changes to institutional wide strategic policy and practice around the FYE. Some of the most significant examples include: the First Year Principles becoming embedded as an essential component of the new CSU Degree course development process with new and revised courses required to document alignment with the principles; the First Year has been a specific inclusion in the newly developed Graduate Statement and CSU Commitments; the First Year Principles have been included in the CSU academic induction program (Foundations of University Learning and Teaching); and arguably the most significant, the inclusion of a Student Experience Plan as one of the three enabling plans that underpin the new University Strategy. These actions have embedded the FYE into the very fabric of the university ensuring it will be attended to systemically long after the project is complete. It should be noted that in its subsequent audit of CSU, one of AUQA's affirmations was "CSU's focus on student retention and the first year experience" (2010, p.7).

Concurrent with the lobbying, publicising, advising and promotion of the importance of the FYE, an extensive professional development program was embarked upon. This included invitations (and requests to be invited) to speak at school and faculty groups, and hosting information sessions for Divisional staff including Library, Student Services and Learning and Teaching Services. Every opportunity to attend every meeting, no matter how tenuous the link appeared, was accepted in order to promote discussion and action around the FYE at

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CSU. In addition to the more informal staff development opportunities, two major programs were initiated. The first was an annual Student Engagement Forum to showcase Kift's Transition Pedagogy. Professor Kift and Professor Marcia Devlin keynoted and, despite being held in teaching time, in excess of 140 staff attended with comments such as "this is the best event I have been to in all my time at CSU" being typical. This event further cemented the 'viral' approach, with staff attending taking the keynote videos and resources back to their faculties to continue the discussion amongst staff unable to attend.

Another major professional development initiative is a sponsorship program to attend the Pacific Rim First Year Experience Conference. In order to encourage staff attendance and build a community of practice around first year issues, ten sponsorships worth $1,000 are made available each year to support staff attendance. The sponsorship is conditional on three things: firstly the staff member must present to their learning and teaching committee upon their return, secondly the staff member must attend the following year's conference at their school or division's expense and finally the staff member must commence an initiative as a result of their attendance and apply to present this at the following year's conference. In 2009, no CSU staff attended the conference. In 2010, seventeen staff attended with one presentation accepted. In 2011, the sponsorship was offered once again. Twenty two staff will attend with four presentations accepted.

2. Orientation

A comprehensive orientation program that combines institutional level programs accompanied by faculty based initiatives is critical in ensuring successful transition to the first year at university (Krause, 2006). Prior to 2010, no formal guidelines, principles or policy existed at CSU to inform the development of orientation making measurement of the program understandably difficult. Student surveys however did yield interesting feedback. Reflecting the 'on campus centric' nature of existing orientation activities, when distance education students were surveyed in 2010, more than 50% of respondents (n=1907) indicated orientation required improvement or they were unaware of its existence. Feedback regarding on campus orientation was far more positive in the main, however a smaller percentage of feedback, consistent across several years raised concerns around perceptions of a focus for students living on campus, lack of appropriate activities for mature aged students and a focus on alcohol related activities.

In early 2010 the Transition Project chaired a university wide working party including academics from all faculties and support staff from all divisions. The Working Party developed a University wide set of guidelines for CSU orientation including an institution vision, objectives, good practice principles, evaluation processes and organisational responsibilities. The document emphasises the shared responsibility of orientation as everyone's business (Kift, 2008), and explicitly unpacks the notion of orientation as a process rather than an event and the importance of the curriculum in mediating a successful student transition. The guidelines were endorsed by the Steering Committee and used as the basis of orientation in 2011 which is occurring at the time of writing.

But what of the many students who study by distance education and never visit a campus? Keeping Kift's First Year Principle of diversity (2009) in mind, new online resources were developed to ensure orientation addressed the needs of all students regardless of where and

how they were studying. A new orientation web site was developed that was promoted to all students upon acceptance of offer in both print and online notifications. The site is being visited in large numbers with more than 120,000 page views recorded since its launch in November 2010.

The Transition Project also developed a set of online screens to welcome students to CSU upon acceptance of offer and to introduce some basic survival level information, for example, online systems, support available and contact details for further questions. Again, mindful of ensuring the first year experience is accessible and inclusive, several sets of screens were created so that each student would receive relevant images and information based on their key enrolment demographics. Parameters were set around age (baby boomer, X gen and Y gen), international and indigenous. This small programming inclusion ensures that the first key messages from the university are inclusive and targeted to the specific needs of individual student cohorts.
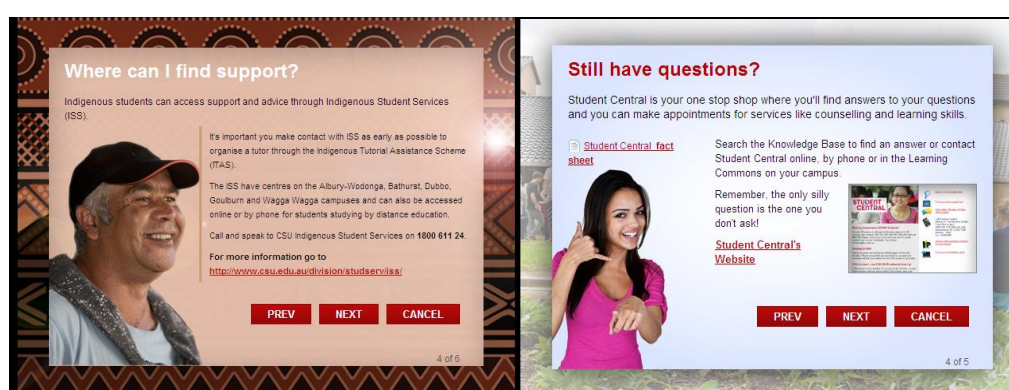

Figure 2: Examples of 2 versions (Indigenous and X gen) of the welcome screens activated upon acceptance of offer.

3. Student Transition, Achievement and Retention Plan (STAR)

In terms of the widening participation targets set by the Government, CSU has been delivering on these for many years with the LSES percentage of student enrolments averaging approximately 22%. In 2011 more than 1,700 commencing students were from LSES backgrounds, and an incredible 68% of students indicating they are the first in their family to study at university.

Vincent Tinto (2002, p.2) argued that while the individual characteristics of our student cohorts are largely beyond our control, "this is clearly not the case for the settings in which students are placed. Those settings, classrooms, laboratories, residential halls, and the like, are directly under our control and are, if we wish, subject to change by our actions." The STAR Plan seeks to address the settings to which Tinto refers, not from a point external to curriculum but as researchers have advocated widely (Gale, 2009; Kift, 2009; Krause, 2006; Tinto, 2002, 2006; McInnes, 2001) from *within* it. As Kift explains (2009, p.9), "a transition pedagogy seeks to mediate the diversity in preparedness and cultural capital of entering students." Using McInnes' (2001, p.11) explanation of curriculum as "the glue that holds knowledge and the broader curriculum together", it is through utilising this transition

pedagogy that CSU seeks to better support all FY students, but in particular those from LSES and FIF backgrounds.

The approach to the STAR Plan is one of centralised coordination and oversight with devolved reporting and responsibilities. While driven from within the Transition Project responsibility for the specific redesign of curriculum and hence achievement of outcomes is led by each faculty. Funding equivalent to a Level B academic plus communications, travel and staff development costs have been transferred to each faulty for the appointment of an Academic Lead of the STAR Plan. Funding has also been made available for a Support Star to be appointed to assist the implementation of the plan, particularly in the area of data gathering and analysis. Each Faculty selected one to two courses upon which to rollout the star plan. A selection criteria was developed including analysis of students retention and progress rates, percentage of LSES enrolments and the student success ratio (the calculation used by DEEWR to compare success rates of LSES and NLSES students.)

According to UK researchers, the changes to curriculum provision and learning, teaching and assessment, which have occurred alongside the transition from an elite to a mass participation HE sector, benefit all students and can have a positive impact on higher level and critical thinking skills (Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman, & Reid, 2007). Similarly, Kift (2009, p.15) proposes that an obvious way to support widening participation and diversity is through "coherent, integrated, intentional, supportive, and inclusive first year curriculum design". The STAR Plan supports this view and has enabled each Faculty though a combination of funding, centralised support and leadership to focus on leading change in each of their selected courses with a focus on the following areas:

1. student orientation
2. alignment with the first year principles (with a focus on assessment)
3. student communication
4. identification and proactive support of at risk students (Student Success Team)
5. implementation of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)

While the many sub projects being carried out to progress the STAR Plan are too numerous and detailed to address here, it is already evident in a short time that many positive and systemic changes are taking place across the University in support of an enhanced FYE. Examples include the provision of class lists to staff indicating demographic data to allow teaching staff to tailor their methods and activities to the needs of their students; (a staggering 96 out of 140 students in one class were listed as first in family); using plain English in assessment tasks and marking criteria; university wide implementation of PASS (Skalicky, Rogan, Austin, Farrugia, & Rosario, 2009); increased use of early formative assessment, and systematic inclusion of tasks that can act as early indicators of level of student engagement triggers on non engagement within the curriculum. Each academic lead will report on specific progress and outcomes of STAR within their faculty in due course.

Student Success Team

Research by Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2007, p.272) points to a "connection between students' sense of support at an institution and their reports of increases in their social and personal competence." As part of the STAR Plan a Student Success Team modelled on the

successful programs at QUT reported by Nelson et al (2009) and AUT reported by Carlson(AUQA, 2011) is being piloted at CSU. A team of trained students commenced work in January this year phoning every student enrolled in one of the seven STAR courses, plus all new LSES students (n=2,600). The first campaign, a welcome to CSU campaign provides students with information regarding support services and enrolment processes and has answered questions primarily around orientation, enrolment and accommodation. The second of four campaigns over first semester will focus on students identified at risk due to them not having accessed their subject information by the second week of session. An evaluation plan is in place for this pilot with the hope that a similar effect on student persistence, as reported by the founding institutions, is achieved (Marrington, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010).

The future of the FYE at CSU

According to Swing (2003), embedded institutional change is dependent on the creation of organisational structures. It is this rationale that has led to the Transition Project being mainstreamed into the formal university structure more than twelve months earlier than the originally anticipated project completion date. In a relatively short time, an enormous amount has been achieved through the Transition Project. External pressures combined with the effective, multi level leadership and management in a climate of readiness for change (Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers & Abraham, 2005) appear to have created the 'perfect storm' in which to make and embed organisational change within the University. As this paper is being submitted an exciting change proposal is being considered within the university community that will signal not only the ongoing university commitment to the first year experience but will also put in place a structure that actively supports and enables sustainable and seamless partnerships between academic and professional staff in order to achieve the desired third generation approach to the first year experience for the benefit of all students.

Summary

This paper has briefly described some of the initiatives occurring at CSU in an attempt to improve the first year experience. While not yet at the point of third generation FYE, considerable progress has been made in a relatively short period and much evidence exists to show that an institutional transformation is occurring. Substantial gains have been made within the guiding strategies and policies of the university together with student support and learning and teaching practices. Staff across the university are collaboratively and systematically focusing their efforts on an enhanced first year experience.

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