

# The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year of university

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## Abstract

*This paper, based on research conducted at the main campus of a large Australian multi-campus university, explores the role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year of university. Although traditionally academic achievement has been the measure of success in the first-year of tertiary studies, this research indicates that students who do not have a positive experience in making the social transition at university face increased difficulty in negotiating their way through the challenges of first-year. Due to the increasingly changed nature of the 'first-year student' — a consequence of societal and higher educational changes, especially in the last twenty years — the responsibilities of academics have also changed. Particularly for those taking tutorials, demonstrations, laboratory practicals, etc. 'networking' these classes to facilitate students' social transition as part of the first-year experience at university should be an integral part of the teaching program.*

## Introduction

The first-year university experience of a significant number of students is neither satisfying (in terms of personal fulfillment) nor successful (if academic achievement is the measure). The final year of secondary schooling identifies the most academically able students to undertake tertiary study. Why then, do approximately one third of students drop out in the first-year of university? Moreover, why do even those students who do proceed achieve relatively less well than the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) would indicate, and fail to complete in minimum time? A frequent response from past researchers to these disturbing issues has been to apportion blame — this has been directed at the students themselves, and secondary schools — the institutions from which the students have come. In 1957 Matthews said: 'The temple of learning has many floors but one thing is common to those in charge of every floor — they are dissatisfied with the training on the floor below. It is what you might call an endemic complaint' (1957: 116 cited by Genn, 1971: 7). This still holds true. In this very mould, Power *et al* state:

'At the higher education level, academics often complain about inadequacies in the backgrounds of school-leavers and their lack of commitment to their course'; 'There are serious academic problems among the younger and academically less well motivated and prepared students ...'; '... the most serious problems identified relate to the low course commitment and lack of preparation of younger students in non-professional courses ...'; 'Schools have the role of preparing students academically ...'; and 'The type of education provided in some secondary schools can leave students poorly prepared to adjust to the new demands of higher education' (1987: 2; 40; 42; 48; 50).

Power *et al* are not alone in expressing such views. More recently, in a survey of academics from universities across Australia, McInnis *et al* found that these same sentiments are not only still being echoed by academics but that:

'Dissatisfaction with the academic quality of students more than doubled between 1978 and 1993 ... Indeed, less than a third of academics in 1993 were satisfied with the academic quality of students' (1995: 5).

In today's mass education environment, it is not productive to pursue this line of argument that has at its foundation the view that secondary schools exist primarily as preparatory agents for an elite group of students to gain university entry. The shift to a mass education tertiary landscape has created greater diversity, in terms of ability, motivation, interest, commitment, maturity, social skills, etc. of the student population. This necessitates a re-evaluation of academics' expectations of first-year students, a re-conceptualisation of first-year students and the qualities they bring to the university, and a reconstructed understanding of the needs students have which the university should meet. Some progress has already occurred. Universities have acknowledged the need for counselling, disability, language and learning services, etc. and established these resources within higher education institutions. Such measures have, however, come only a small way in dealing with the issues that affect students because they are removed from students' most common point of contact: academic staff.

The world in which today's students have grown up is vastly different from that of a generation ago. Changes have occurred at an accelerated rate. Everyday living is more fast-paced; culture is visual and technologically driven; communicative competence and social skills have been eroded; life is a complex web, not the linear progression that it once was. This lack of stasis inevitably means that, along with everything else, the role and responsibilities of the university teacher need to be reviewed and undergo change. This is not a notion that sits comfortably with many academics, as is evident from the comments of McInnis *et al* above. This research indicates that academics who interface most directly with first-year students will need to take a proactive role in the networking of tutorial, seminar, demonstration, laboratory practical, etc. classes to enhance students' prospects of social transition, including enculturation into the life and practices of the university. In an economically rationalist world this is not an unrealistic expectation for the paying customer to have.

## **The study: its method and key findings**

In 1996 a pilot study — the precursor of what was later to develop into a much larger investigation — sought to explore the views of first-year students upon commencement of their studies at the main campus of a large multi-campus university. The sample was comprised of Arts undergraduates taking first-year English. The general characteristics of this sample included a lower ENTER than for more professionally oriented courses with vocational motivation being of less significance. The majority (66.0 %) was school-leaver students. The nature of their university experience included lack of a fixed cohort with whom to establish social networks (due to the fact 'core' subjects are not a part of the Arts course structure), large classes and relatively few contact hours compared with those of students in professional courses. A detailed questionnaire, comprised of multiple-item indicator questions as well as structured (closed and scaled) and unstructured (open-ended) questions, was distributed to 100 students; 57 responses were obtained. (The larger study currently being undertaken with more than 1600 respondents from all faculties and campuses seeks to ascertain whether the features identified in this sample will be replicated on a broader canvas.)

The data collected from the questionnaires in the pilot study were analysed in the following manner. The structured (closed and scaled) questions, which generated quantifiable results, were tabulated as frequency and percentage distributions with mean, median and standard deviation statistics (where applicable). The unstructured (open-ended) questions used to encourage discursive comments were initially recorded verbatim and then used to draw on for globalised remarks or selected to be reproduced verbatim to highlight either indicative comments that pertained to a substantial proportion of the group or highly idiosyncratic observations. The non-response bias in this survey was negligible.

The most common expectations these first-year students had of university prior to commencement can be categorised broadly as:

- meeting new and different people;
- having fun;
- enjoying the freedom of a learning environment that is not regimented in the same way as school;

- being mentally stimulated by all the new experiences; and
- having the opportunity to explore greater and more interesting subject choices.

The most striking feature of these responses is the emphasis on social aspects of university life rather than academic achievement. Sadly, a substantial 69.6 % of the sample indicated that less than half of their expectations had been realised. The main factors affecting the full realisation of student expectations were:

- that making friends had proved to be difficult;
- disappointment in discovering that university was not as interesting, exciting and as much fun as they expected it to be or had been led to believe;
- that staff were not as accessible as expected;
- a much heavier workload than expected; and
- the unexpected complexity of some subjects.

A combination of the strong social emphasis of students' preconceived expectations and the high proportion who felt these expectations had not been realised, was evident in that almost half of the respondents (49.1 %) had not experienced success in the establishment of a friendship group by the end of Semester 1. At a time that may be filled with considerable apprehension and dislocation, the inability to identify with others in similar circumstances can be a particularly alienating experience. Lack of organisation, in terms of competing demands (49.1 %), and time (63.2 %), adversely affected academic progress. This may be attributed to the highly teacher-directed learning of the secondary school context. What is more disturbing, however, is that even after a full semester a substantial proportion of students (38.6 %) did not believe they had adapted to become independent learners, and more than one third (35.1 %), had not accommodated to the teaching styles employed at university.

Development (or lack) of a friendship network featured as a critical factor in students' level of adjustment. Despite the fact that a sizable number of students experienced some difficulty in adjusting to university life they were reticent to discuss their concerns with anyone. Only 57.5 % were prepared to do so. Of those who were prepared to discuss the difficulties they were experiencing, the vast majority chose friends at university with whom to share the burden of these concerns. The most common justification for the selection of these individuals as confidants was 'friends going through the same difficulties' with whom they 'felt comfortable'. What students needed was the opportunity to express concerns and vent frustrations rather than seeking expert counselling; the issues that concerned them were not seen as being of such significance as to warrant professional attention. In most cases it was moral support that was being sought, a case of the old adage: 'a trouble shared is a trouble halved'. Thus, reinforcing the significance of social transition as a great need that students require to have fulfilled, especially in the initial experience of first-year at university.

## **Social transition matters**

Social transition underpins a successful academic transition to university. This research highlighted that the development of a friendship network was a major contributory element in this process. The sample indicated clearly that not having friends made the whole process of transition to university more difficult, whilst having friends helped students to settle in quickly and make progress with their studies. Establishing and maintaining a friendship network requires fairly sophisticated social skills that are complemented by an outgoing personality; not all first-year students possess these attributes. Therefore, despite expressing the desire to make friends, for some students there are very real impediments in the achievement of this goal. Comments such as, 'nothing to do at lunchtime' and 'few friends etc.' reflect the grimness of this daily reality for first-year students. The need to belong is one of the core desires that shapes human behaviour: for adolescents this need is magnified. It is for this reason that the establishment

and maintenance of friendship networks is of particular importance. Without friends, students have fewer resources at their disposal to assist them in the process of transition to university.

Especially for first-year students undertaking subjects with large cohorts, little likelihood of having subjects in common and few contact hours, as was the case with the sample in this instance, an inherent feature of the lecture experience is isolation which is often translated to the broader university context. For those first-year students who have found it difficult to make friends, the repercussions of the inability to form friendship networks are immense. Lack of such social networks can:

- undermine self-confidence and self-esteem;
- inhibit the development of socialisation skills and communicative competence;
- preclude discussion of subjects' 'big ideas';
- preclude discussion of assigned texts/tasks and analysis of subject matter in the non-threatening environment and risk-taking environment of a learning community;
- preclude discussion on assigned texts/tasks for clarification and enhanced understanding;
- prohibit students from acting as 'critical friends' by providing feedback on each other's work prior to submission;
- prevent students from revising collaboratively for tests/examinations;
- increase the difficulty of obtaining scant resource material;
- prevent students from offering assistance, guidance, encouragement and emotional support to one another;
- reduce persistence due to lack of group identification and established camaraderie;
- restrict the speed of familiarisation with the university's, services, facilities and resources;
- reduce the prospect of enculturation into the university's life and practices;
- negate collaborative discussion of academic and personal concerns and resolution of these difficulties;
- negate the sharing of experiences, time and confidences;
- preclude the expression of fears, the review of expectations and the celebration of achievements; and ultimately
- reinforce feelings of negativity toward the institution, others and self.

Developing friendship networks in first-year is an imperative. For this sample, the face-to-face contact hours were minimal compared with, for example, students studying Medicine or Pharmacy. They had a lot of time on their hands — time to spend with friends socialising and/or extending their understanding of subject matter as part of a learning community; to be alone and undertake independent study; or simply to feel lonely. For first-year students, whose socialisation skills are not well developed, excess time can be their worst enemy.

## **The need for realistic expectations of the first-year experience by academics and students**

Adjusting to the life and culture of university usually takes time and effort due to the considerable differences between the educational environments of secondary school and the university and the experiential nature of transition. School-leaver students' educational experience involves close scrutiny of work through the drafting process; immediate feedback couched in positive language; objective, criterion-referenced assessment and high grades. At university little guidance is provided on task completion compared to that at school, draft work is considered to be unacceptable (although some discussion of work may be deemed appropriate) and low grades appear to feature, especially in the early stages prior to accommodation to university teaching and learning styles. This frequently occurs because assessment is norm rather than criterion referenced. Furthermore, although independent learning is a common expectation that academics, more often than not, have of first-year students, what this actually means and how students can meet this expectation is seldom made explicitly clear to them. Certainly, students do need to become independent learners, however, they cannot accomplish this unassisted and immediately upon entering university. As with all learning, the skills of independent learning need to be developed over time with an appreciation of discipline-specific requirements. The process of independent learning needs to be a cumulative progression — it is unrealistic to expect otherwise. It is unrealistic expectations, on the part of both academics and first-year students, that have produced what is referred to in the literature as: 'attrition', 'wastage', 'drop out', 'fall out', 'withdrawal', 'failure' and 'non-persistence'.

Students are more likely to experience academic success and personal fulfillment at university if there has been recognition and appreciation of the following:

- expectations of the university and of self need to be realistic;
- reasonable effort needs to be expended by the individual student to negotiate initial feelings of alienation, isolation, dislocation, dissonance, etc.;
- the nature of learning and teaching at university is different from that experienced at secondary school;
- the culture of university differs from the ethos of secondary schools;
- independent learning is an expectation academics have of students at university;
- active involvement in learning communities enhances social and academic transition;
- the freedom of independence and the responsibility of being treated as an adult are codependent;
- a balance needs to be struck between the competing demands of university study, social life and paid employment;
- the responsibility of asking for information, assistance and (if need be) reassurance rests with the student; and
- development of social networks within and beyond the classroom has more far-reaching implications than merely that of having made friends.

## **The profile of first-year students**

School-leaver, first-year students typically experience a sense of apprehension and loss but also excitement at the prospect of commencing university studies (many of these feelings are also common amongst non school-leaver students). Most first-year students overlook the fact that others share their anxieties, believing that they alone feel alienated, especially if they are the only student from their school to be attending a large university campus, and not familiar with it. Limited contact with other students and academic staff tends to reinforce students' isolation. Anxiety is natural — especially when it appears as if everyone else knows where to go and what to do and terminology used and taken for granted by university staff is unfamiliar, for example: 'major' and 'minor' sequences, 'points', 'honours', etc. — few,

however, would admit this freely. Almost all students are concerned that the style and pace of teaching and learning is different from that experienced at secondary school. First-year students are particularly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of reading that has to be completed in a relatively short space of time. Assigned written work is particularly intimidating by virtue of its assessment weighting, and the fact that most of it falls due in the latter part of the semester — often precluding feedback prior to examinations, and creating a time management nightmare with several pieces due at about the same time. Significant numbers of commencing students are unsure of what is expected of them in lectures and tutorials/seminars, and at a more fundamental level, require direction on manner of address, and appropriate interaction with lecturers and tutors. Students, especially those who are ‘pioneers’, that is, the first one in the family to attend university, are worried about letting down themselves and their families. These feelings can be compounded if students have come from the country to the city to study or even just relocated to be closer to the university campus and are homesick. Students who do not know to whom to turn or where to go for advice and assistance feel unsupported and lost. These feelings are perfectly natural and all first-year students, to some degree, experience some combination of these concerns, the difference — in terms of how they make the transition to university — lies in how quickly they establish a friendship network and well they learn to manage these challenges. Other important factors include the ease with which they adapt to different teaching styles and their willingness to accept the responsibility of independent learning.

Crucial to bridging the gap that exists between the nature of learning and teaching at secondary school and university is speed. With only a thirteen-week semester, often eroded in terms of face-to-face contact by lack of compulsory attendance (through choice), and fieldwork, public holidays, etc. (by necessity), first-year students’ adjustment needs to be relatively quick and seamless — the outcomes orientation of universities in many ways predetermines this as a priority. Yet given the very nature of transition — that it is a process of adjustment requiring the passage of time — to expect first-year students’ transition to take place speedily is a contradiction that causes considerable consternation for first-year students.

Many traditional academics struggle to appreciate the nature of these issues and the degree to which they affect first-year students. (Traditional academics is a term applicable just as much to young postgraduate students role-modelling themselves on their supervisors, ‘academic aspirants’, as those academics entrenched in the ‘old school’, that is, those who identify with the analogy of ‘sink or swim’). Such academics see themselves as teaching subject matter not teaching students. In fact, academics that fit this mould see the teaching of subject matter and the teaching of students as one and the same thing. These individuals require a significant shift, both in terms of educational philosophy and culture, (yet with relatively minor modifications to classroom practice) to recognise and utilise effectively the nexus between teaching and learning, including the significant dimension of social transition. The benefits for academics include more active class participation, increased student collaboration and cooperation with peers and staff making delivery and management more effortless, improved attendance, increased speed of enculturation, etc. — to name but a few.

## **Tension between the ‘transition to university’ and ‘from adolescence to adulthood’**

At the same time school-leaver students are commencing tertiary studies and experiencing issues of ‘transition to university’ related to their formal education, they are undergoing a transition of another kind, that ‘from adolescence to adulthood’. The degree of upheaval and confusion this causes adolescents is of serious consequence because it affects and challenges aspects of their personal (including sexual), social and academic lives. The express difficulty lies in the interactivity of these spheres, as no discrete sphere can be touched without influencing and having repercussions for the others. There is an inclination for school-leaver students, when they commence university, to be adventurous by throwing off the shackles of a regimented school routine (and possibly a restricted home life) to revel in the independence that the university environment fosters. While for many first-year students university contributes to a life of freedom and experimentation, living at home (which was the case for many of the school-leaver, first-year students in this sample) places them under considerable constraints from parental pressure.

Since the university treats students as autonomous adults, academics and administrators seldom appreciate that first-year students, in particular, are not given this level of autonomy in their lives away from the university. The university, by considering all students as adults, is actually doing first-year, school-leaver, students a huge disservice – it burdens them with responsibilities that they are often ill equipped to accept. Many students appear to lead double lives: assuming the mantle of adulthood through enforced responsibility at university, whilst simultaneously resuming the role of adolescents by relinquishing responsibility at home and conforming to their parents' wishes. There is a tension for students, in that a clear disparity exists between expectations and treatment by university staff and parents. Two brief but telling examples should serve to highlight this divide. Academic advisers frequently suggest subject/course change(s) to students, only to be met with the typical student response that the matter needs to be discussed with parents before any action can be taken. The passage of time has not substantially changed the nature of the relationship between parent and child, 'The parent is the child's most interested and most constant counsellor' (Report of a Workshop held at the University of Western Australia, 1963: 8). Further reinforcement of this notion was evident in student responses to the factors which dissuaded them from dropping out of subjects/courses in which they are not experiencing success. The response that headed the list: 'My parents would kill me!' Confronted with such contrasting views, first-year students cannot help but experience a sense of dilemma, at the very least, and utter confusion, at worst, as to their expected role and responsibilities in each of these environments.

First-year students face considerable challenges as they enter these two significant phases of life experience: the world of tertiary education and that of adulthood. At this important juncture, when it would appear that increased guidance, support and encouragement are most needed to assist students in making the transition relatively smooth, the move to a different educational environment sees these elements disappear; the infrastructure that had supported students at school is gone. Without that which is safe and familiar, first-year students are at increased risk of stumbling and falling; the additional social and academic demands placed upon them, especially the need to establish new friendship networks and become responsible independent learners, invariably overwhelm some students. It is under the weight of these pressures that many, too many, choose to drop out – officially withdraw – or fall out – remain enrolled, and Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) liable, but do not attend – rather than face the prospect of failure and 'loss of face' with family and friends.

For many researchers in the past the easiest interpretation was to view this either as a failure by the secondary sector to prepare students adequately for tertiary study or as a consequence of a decline in academic standards. These views do not recognise that:

- attrition rates have remained consistently high since being identified as a consequence of transition difficulties some forty years ago;
- the landscape of the tertiary sector has changed markedly since the introduction of mass education; and
- social transition issues seriously impact on the prospective academic success of first-year students.

## **Tension within the world of education: prior knowledge versus new experiences**

As if contending with the incongruent expectations adults have of first-year students is not difficult enough, they must also deal with the views and influences of their peers. Alone, unguided, in a new environment, meeting new people, exposed to new ideas and different values can be a testing time for many adolescents' strength of character. This can be a challenge for even a well-adjusted adolescent used to interacting with a vast cross-section of the community, however, for those students who come from single-sex school environments, the initial university experience can compound these difficulties. Insufficient attention has been paid to the inhibitory factors that pertain to social interactivity as faced by considerable number of first-year students who have previously attended single-sex schools. For these students, relating to members of the opposite sex in an educational environment, perhaps for the first time in their lives, presents social as well as academic challenges.

Especially for students from 'sheltered' backgrounds, university may provide the first experience of direct contact with individuals who are:

- culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse;
- come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds;
- espouse different, perhaps even radical, political views;
- indulge in substance abuse;
- live alternative lifestyles;
- have similar (or even — more threateningly — higher) academic achievement levels;
- have returned to study as mature age students (many the age of school-leaver students' parents), and with whom learning experiences are to be shared as peers; and perhaps
- have a different sexual orientation.

University may even present some students from sheltered backgrounds with their first opportunity to form a romantic attachment — with all its complications!

## Conclusion

The role of social transition issues underscoring the success of academic transition cannot be underestimated. Particular attention needs to be directed toward:

- creating quality teaching and learning experiences for first-year students;
- developing curriculum designs and that enhance interactive and social experiences for students;
- sharing intellectual control with students — encouraging them to embrace independent learning skills and adopting an internal locus of control;
- fostering the development of friendship networks and learning communities; and
- professionally developing academics to be cognisant of, and better able than at present to manage, the diversity of students who are the products of a mass education environment.
- managing the diversity of students who are the products of a mass education environment.

Provided with time, quality teaching and learning contexts, and opportunities to form social networks, first-year students will begin to adjust and familiarise themselves to a new and different educational setting that is university. Students will be better able to make the transition if they can to benefit from learning in small-groups, doing so in a collaborative learning community which increase students' sense of worth, and enhances their ability to think laterally and encourage independence of expression.

Although emphasis in this paper has been on social transition, the process of transition to university should be viewed in a holistic manner. In addressing the issue of transition to university we must never lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with people's lives. It is easy in attempting to objectify the problem and search for solutions to end up dehumanising students. Kowalski recognises this element of depersonalisation when he states:



'The student as human being seems not to be an important concept in far too many institutions of higher education, but rather seems more appreciated as a statistic: a degree aspirant, a major, a minor, a female, a datum to report for state financial support, possessor of a good I.Q., a genius, and a potential member of a discipline, among other things' (1977: 84).

We would all do well to remember, irrespective of the remedies that we propose, that a little care and attention — the human touch — goes a long way in providing reassurance and encouragement to students in their first-year of university. Normalisation of the process of transition to university for students and mainstreaming of the issues affecting first-year students' transition to university should be the goal of all academics.

Clearly, the first-year of university is problematic not only for the students undergoing the transition to university but also for the academics who teach them. The emphasis needs to be steered away from apportioning blame and toward forming productive partnerships. Collegiality within and between institutions — secondary and tertiary — and students' best interests should underscore the activities of all 'teachers' to help ease the transition dilemmas that are faced by first year students. Commencing students desire and expect their university experience to be different from that of secondary school. Secondary school teachers can prepare tertiary-bound students for the transition to university by encouraging them to increasingly utilise independent learning skills, develop social skills and improve their communicative competence. For their part, academics can facilitate and hasten first-year students' academic transition by acknowledging the value of social transition, integrating the networking of classes as an inherent feature of program design. Moreover, by engaging students to construct new meaning of formal education contexts by normalising the transition to university, students are more likely to appreciate and embrace the notion of lifelong learning.

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