Transition: From a school perspective

Robert Pargetter

Abstract

This paper considers transition and the transformation process from the perspective of the school. The paper suggests that a ‘Transition Charter’ is a useful way to smooth students’ passage to university.

Introduction

The vast majority of Haileybury College students move from school to study at first year university level. Just as it is important for students and their parents how well they perform in Year 12, it is also important how well they perform in first year at university. This is common for many secondary schools in Australia, so the issues facing Haileybury mirror those facing many schools.

Research has now told us much about first year university performance. We know that despite the sorting process involved at university selection, a very large number of students have an unhappy first year experience. This occurs for virtually all universities and comes even where selection criteria are high, and is a widespread factor at first year study across courses and institutions. (McInnes and James, 1995).

Students can have an “unhappy year” for several reasons

- they cannot relate to the course or institution and drop out or fail and leave (about 15%);
- they do not have a successful first year of study passing in at least 75% of their units (about 30-40%);
- they do not have a level of performance comparable to their level of performance at school (70-80%); or
- they succeed academically, but are personally unhappy, lonely or alienated.

Fortunately the longer term university experience is much different, and many students come to perform well at university and enjoy their time there. But they often have an unhappy beginning, particularly in first semester.

There are many views, and some research as to why this occurs (Pargetter et al 1999, Clarke et al Peel, Tinto, 1993 and HEFCE, 1997). It is probably due to some combination of the following factors:

i) personal, social and community issues relating to young adults sorting out their personal lives, relationships with parents, living, studying and travel arrangements, and coping with social pressures and problems;

ii) lack of information about the nature of university life and university study, lack of preparation for the university experience and for self-management, a failure to come to grips with the new institution;

iii) mismatch between student and course, or between student interest and ability with choice of subjects,

iv) loss of the support network which was so important in Year 12 consisting of school, friends and parents; and
v) an inability to adjust to the learning requirements at university compared with those typically required in Year 12 at school.

Many of these issues are well known, and have always been problematic for students. Some have in recent times had a greater impact with changes in senior secondary education, higher school retention rates, mass higher education and changed expectations at university and changing social conditions.

Universities are becoming increasingly aware of these transition issues, and many institutions and course management groups have made very important moves to support students across the transition. (Transition offices have been established at Monash University, the University of Melbourne, and at other institutions. A number of conferences on transition have been held in Australia, such as “Transition to Active Learning”, jointly hosted by the Queensland Institute of Technology and the University of Melbourne at Ormond College, University of Melbourne, 3-5 July 1996. Ongoing interaction between Monash University and the school sector 1995-, and websites such as www.adm.monash.edu.au/transition!, and www.sc.edu/fre (University of South Carolina)).

Generally there are good student support services, assisting in ways from study advice and subject selection, through personal counselling and support, to assistance with housing, legal, medical and financial matters. There are many attempts to orientate students into institutions and courses, to form new networks and find new friends, to cope with the operation of the institutions, the courses and the subjects, and to adjust to the requirements of managing the student experience. These occur at multiple levels, from institutional services, through student unions and organisations, to course advice, tutors and support staff.

In more recent times there have been increasing efforts by institutions to try to have their expectations and requirements provide some connections with the experiences of the last year at school, for example the work in progress at Monash University through their learning and teaching plan. At least there is an awareness of issues such as assessment criteria, drafting and submission requirements, and standard of presentation and the authenticity of work that is submitted. While it would be untrue to think that universities have done all they could in these directions, there is now much more awareness of the issues and some significant attempts to address some of them.

This is also in the context of universities taking teaching and learning more seriously, and rewarding excellence in teaching and intervening when unacceptable levels of teaching performance occurs. Nonetheless there is still a lack of training of the university teachers, and still a lack of adequate support and scrutiny of teaching performance.

What seems clear from transition research from within the university context, where a charter of good practice is laid down for a course or a discipline or an institution, there is clear evidence that if that charter was followed in practice, the transition experience of first year students would be significantly enhanced (Pargetter et al 1999).

Where does this leave schools in the transition process?

From recent research we now know some more about transition performance (Work in progress at Monash University on qualitative measures of first year performance and the development of a transition index (1999):

- we know that on average there is a direct correlation between Year 12 performance and first year university performance

- we know that with female outcomes being superior in first year performance is about the same as in Year 12 performance

- we know that there is significant variation in first year performance according to school of origin that cannot be reduced to either gender factors or Year 12 performance factors.
Consequently it would seem that what happens at school matters, and that this is not simply a matter pertaining to Year 12 performance and gender factors.

This suggests that a school could in an analogous way to the university level, develop a charter of good practice in preparing students for university study and for the transition beyond school. This kind of strategy though is speculative, as systematic research has not been carried out to support the principles of the charter. The project started by Monash University to provide to schools information about the performance of their students makes systematic research on this question possible. Information is in the form of a transition index which reports the average percentage of units passed in the first year of study for students entering Monash University coming from a school for a particular year, and which includes some benchmarking data to allow schools to evaluate this performance comparatively. The availability of such an index each year, together with local school data, will allow a school to evaluate the components of a charter and to compare transition performance.

Here are some charter points which prima facie relate to the five factors which were identified as affecting successful transition. They also in large mirror features identified in the university charter for good transition practice. It will take research over the next five or so years to test whether this suggested charter is on the right track.

a) Awareness. Some years ago it was common to present Year 12 students with the view that they were at the last great hurdle, and that university study would be easier, less work and more fun. This practice has pretty well stopped. Students need to be aware that there will be serious transition issues for them to face, that they will have trouble organising their own lives, they may be lonely, and they will need to take positive action to ensure they are prepared for and cope with change.

It is also important that parents are aware of these matters, and that they do not adopt the “thank God it’s over” approach to finishing Year 12. They need preparation for continuing their support of their adult student sons and daughters, and instructions about how to provide that support.

b) Early orientation. It is important that students are comfortable in and operate effectively in a university environment.

This has two elements. First, during the secondary years there should be systematic opportunities to perform tasks and operate in ways typically associated with university study. Each study area has its own character, but some exposure to lectures, tutorials, library use, organisational tools, lab reports and time management would be obvious examples. This would involve access to a variety of learning spaces within the school. As Year 12 is a busy year and a pressure year, these activities need to start in early secondary years.

Secondly, visits to universities, awareness of programs at universities and general familiarisation with a university campus should be part of the secondary program. It would be desirable to visit a number of campuses, perhaps a number of times. These visits should be systematic and relate to activities which have a positive value in their own right. Library research, special events, Junior University and use of university facilities for school functions would provide such opportunities.

c) Course advice. It is important to ensure that the quality and completeness of course and careers advice is optimal. Again it is best achieved with a systematic program over many years, involvement of parents, active participation in the process by students, and an effective work experience/exposure program.

Often a conference arrangement is required to bring together the strengths and interests of the students, the aspirations of the parents and the professional expertise of the career advisers.

In the end it is important that a course name conveys to the student genuine content about the nature of the course and the nature of the career at the end of that course. It is also important to accept that at some stages a student is not ready to make some decisions, so options for courses with a range of
career outcomes should be laid out, as well as highly targeted courses.

Encouraging multiple pathways which allow students to keep career direction under review has considerable merit. However it must be in a context of a course structure which does not promote particular popular “prerequisite studies” to keep options open at the expense of a selection of subjects which reflect the student’s strengths and interests.

d) Independent learning. University teachers routinely identify the learning skills they seek in their students as those belonging to an independent learner.

An independent learner is a student who can largely, but with guidance and support, make the decisions necessary for that student to learn. They need to have skills to decide how to involve themselves in learning activities, how to manage time and how to prepare for assessment tasks. It requires a high degree of self awareness and personal management, as well as past practice at learning in different ways and evaluating how successful such learning has been. Sometimes these traits have been caught up in the notion of a resilient learner.

These are not easily developed traits, and while they have some relationship with typical requirements encountered in Year 12 classes in many studies, they are not necessarily the very same skills that are required. In other words, being an independent or resilient learner is not something that happens by osmosis — it requires development.

As there would appear to be an element of risk taking involved in the acquisition of some of these skills, their development does not sit easily with seeking optimal results in the competitive situation at the end of Year 12. Consequently it would seem best to look at a sustained program to develop these skills across the secondary years, where in the end they can enhance Year 12 performance as well as the transition to university study. However there is no reason to suppose that these two kinds of end of school outcomes are incompatible (Some schools are able to achieve a higher Adjusted Performance Index (as produced by the Victorian Board of Studies) and a higher Transition Index (as produced by Monash University). In other cases there is a great difference in these figures.).

There would appear to be many good approaches to the development of these skills. In general they seem to seek some tasks where students need to manage extended projects, and to make judgments about their approach to that project. But each discipline can identify the kinds of skills required, by relating this to first year university requirements for that discipline, and look at a systematic program to develop those skills without risking any important school outcome.

One element in such a program could be to take a university level subject at Year 12 — as in the Victorian extension studies or enhancement program. This gives experience of the kind of study, learning and assessment aimed for at university, but with the support of a school environment. Student outcomes for such programs are very high, and the students report the subjects provide valuable experience for future university level study (Monash University found such responses in its independent evaluation of its Enhancement Program (1997)).

e) Ongoing school support. Why should school support stop at the completion of Year 12? In principle a school could provide an ongoing level of support during the move beyond school, and particularly during the transition process.

Some schools have tried transition conferences, but the timing seems to not appeal to a student who has just completed Year 12 examinations, or who eagerly awaits university life. Perhaps the support needs to wait until needs arise.

Course and career advice certainly could be provided for secondary graduates for a significant period. One school openly advises that this is available for five years. Perhaps a designated teacher could be an ongoing contact person for ex-students and their parents who are experiencing difficulties in coping with transition, providing advice and guidance to those who have needs, and even a referral
service when more specialised help is needed. Of course it would be best if such help was sought from the university, but one concern in some transition problem cases is students’ inability to access such help even if it is available.

A charter which expresses a commitment to a school doing all it can to help with transition is an expression of good intent. How in practice could the charter lead to real changes in the school, and genuine attempts to help the student from the school “make the move”?

Here are some details of the practical elements of Haileybury’s attempts to implement a charter on transition.

i) **What we teach and how we teach**

Haileybury’s policy of child centred learning throughout all stages of schooling and individual programs has been strengthened to indicate the development of the independent and resilient learner.

From its middle years program commencing at Year 5 to its VCE program, there will be an emphasis on the variety of learning experiences, including those which reflect the skills most applicable to tertiary teaching and also that will develop the independent learner. It will also involve access to and use of a variety of learning spaces such as theatrettes, seminar rooms, resource centre and study areas.

Self management and risk taking will be seen as part of this development, but in the context that the student does not have negative consequences in Year 12 outcomes. In fact the desired outcome is to look for optimal performance both at school and beyond school. Hence some school assessed tasks at each year level will provide for an extended learning task, developing a range of skills.

In Year 12, given the nature of the Haileybury cohort, up to 30% of students could take a university first year sequence in an area of strength and interest.

ii) **Tertiary preparation and orientation**

There should be no surprises for a Haileybury student in moving from school to university. And the parents of the students should also be well prepared.

The program through middle years and the pre-senior program at Year 9 will include the development of a range of life skills that become more important when students move beyond school. This will be reinforced through the personal development and social education program in Years 10 to 12.

The Year 9 program also ensures that a student can operate comfortably in moving around the city, using public infrastructure, locating new venues and can handle time and tasks in an independent fashion.

Students will become familiar with major university campuses, their facilities, teaching locations and their styles of teaching and learning, and support services. Not only should students experience these settings, but visits from ex-students, including at student-parent forums, will make students and parents aware of the potential difficulties with moving from school to university, and what strategies can be used to overcome these. There will be use of transition programs offered by teaching institutions, and systematic use of open days and other invitations. The establishment of a transition office as a responsibility of the Associate Dean (Community Relations) will give a profile and a response to transition within the school.

iii) **Course advice and support**

The career advisory service places a strong emphasis on matching students and courses, and involving teachers, students and parents in all matters pertaining to subject selection at Senior School and course selection for tertiary entrance. There will be every attempt for management of student and parent
expectations to keep realistic expectations and to cover options and possible scenarios. Where appropriate multiple pathways will be encouraged.

The advice service is seamless as the student leaves school, covering the notification of results, change of course preferences, management of the selection process and orientation into the course of study.

This course advisory service is available to all ex-students, and the ex-students publications and networks will promote use of this service.

A special additional support service will be driven from the transition office to provide advice and to give someone to listen to any student who wishes to look to the school for some initial support, particularly through the first semester of tertiary study. It will also be available to the parents of ex-students.

Contact with the most recent graduating class will ensure students can keep in contact with the school and each other, and make approaching the school an easy step.

The points of approach will be multi-facetted to minimise the embarrassment or nervousness of students. It can be through careers office, transition office, the counsellor, the chaplain, the heads of departments, the Dean of Studies or heads of house. All will be briefed and developed to handle such enquiries, and to provide an avenue for advice and support.

Will it help? The lead time in education is very long and it will take longitudinal studies of some length to evaluate this kind of approach. We are aware that universities, such as Monash, has made a long term commitment to working with schools and systematic research into the transition issue. It seems clear that schools will need to make a matching commitment. This is a research commitment for Haileybury.

References


Peel, M., Work in Progress, Monash University.