

# **A blueprint for enhanced transition: taking an holistic approach to managing student transition into a large university.**

Karen Nelson, Faculty of Information Technology, Queensland University of Technology,  
Australia, kj.nelson@qut.edu.au

Sally Kift, Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology, Australia,  
s.kift@qut.edu.au

Julia Humphreys, Division of Administrative Services, Queensland University of  
Technology, Australia, j.humphreyst@qut.edu.au

Wendy Harper, Division of Technology, Information and Learning Support, Queensland  
University of Technology, Australia, w.harper@qut.edu.au

## **Abstract**

*Enhancing the student experience in their first year at university requires: students to encounter curriculum that is sensitive to their realities, adequate and timely access to support services, and opportunities for them to become part of communities of learners. Leveraging from the foundations of extensive curriculum reform, two faculties and two divisions in a large university embarked on a project that seeks to systematise a transition philosophy of engagement across academic, professional and administrative silos. This paper describes the pilot phase of this ambitious program of change.*

## **Introduction**

National and international research into the needs of transition students, for example that emanating from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Melbourne (most recently, Krause *et al.*, 2005), articulates the focal areas of activity for learning and teaching institutions to successfully manage first year experiences. In Australia, this knowledge has been recently formalised into Australian Government policy. The December 2005, Government Discussion Paper, “Learning and Teaching Performance Fund: Future Directions” (DEST, 2005), recommends commitment to first year students as a core area of strategic planning for universities who are further advised to focus on improving the overall quality of the student learning experience. The Discussion Paper also notes that the First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) – initially developed by CSHE - could be included as a possible future Stage 2 indicator for the Teaching and Learning Performance Fund’s allocation model.

In consideration of this knowledge and the regulatory environment in which our large institution operates, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has sought to enact a transition philosophy constructed around one central and two supporting principles (QUT, 2002a): that enhanced transition requires –

- Curriculum that *engages new learners in their learning*: this curriculum must be embedded, integrated and coordinated with institutional practices across the academic, professional and administrative domains to seamlessly support new learners through:
  - An awareness of and *timely access to support services* (QUT, 2002b); and
  - A *sense of belonging* through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experiences (QUT, 2002c).

Krause (2005a, p3) describes *engagement* as “the time, energy and resources students devote to the activities designed to enhance learning at university”. However, the critical issue for us is that, as the *Policy Center for the First Year of College* (n.d.) suggests: effectiveness in promoting engagement for transition success is dependent on the creation of *organisational* structures and policies to provide a “comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year ... [that] is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among

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academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements". We are also aware, as McInnis (2003, p.13) cautions that: "bridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs [is] a substantial challenge for many universities."

The essence of our approach described here is that a coherent, institutionally-managed, program for engagement (curriculum and learning, assisted by professionals and administrative processes and staff, as well as belonging to a learning community) is really what transition students should encounter on arrival at their new institution.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the pilot phase of our project to embed a Blueprint for Enhanced Transition within and across our large institution. In the following sections we present and discuss the following topics. Firstly we ground our Blueprint in three important concepts underpinning our focus on transition management: the special needs of transition students, what has been done at our University to understand and address these needs, and how we are going to convert our knowledge into practical classroom based activities. Next we describe how we intend to communicate the Blueprint for staff engagement in our University by presenting a visual conceptualisation of its key components in figure 1. In section 4 we provide an overview of the project initiatives (activities within the Blueprint) and show, again visually in figure 2, how these Blueprint elements relate to the one central two supporting principles of our First Year Philosophy. Finally we briefly describe each of the project initiatives and our evaluation strategies for each of them. We close this paper by highlighting our plans for further work in the area of enhanced transition.

## **Formulating our blueprint**

### ***So, why are the needs of transition students so special?***

Students in transition to higher education face increasingly complex and dynamic issues of diversity, in terms of both their demographics and backgrounds *and* their preparedness for tertiary study. We have highlighted elsewhere the extent of this diversity in the contemporary massified higher education sector (Kift & Nelson, 2005). We also have noted that, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, commencing students arrive at university with baggage and expectations, regarding which we have a duty to be cognisant, as well as varied levels of preparation and doubts about university life. Not surprisingly, many new students are either not overly familiar with, or have completely ill-informed preconceptions about, what might be encountered in the course of their choice (James, 2001). These factors may impact on their ability to achieve to the best of their ability and/or may ultimately influence their decision to drop out (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Krause *et al*, 2005).

These academic and *quasi*-academic needs are compounded by additional adjustments commonly encountered when attending university for the first time, such as: leaving families or familiar supportive environments; finding new accommodation; balancing full-time, or finding new part-time, work; making new friends; establishing new networks; and (time) managing their many and varied roles, of which "student" is but one (Kift & Nelson, 2005).

In this context, it is also useful to note that the 2005 CSHE FYE survey (Krause *et al*, 2005), highlighted some characteristics and learning preferences of QUT students that deviated significantly from other institutions. For example: QUT students were more likely to:

- Have greater conflict between their work, household or family duties (ie, outside responsibilities) on the one hand and study commitments on the other;
- Work with other students on class projects and group assignments outside of university time;
- Use electronic facilities (eg, email) to communicate with friends, staff and other students;
- Utilise web based resources and information provided;
- Ask fewer questions in class;
- Find it hard to keep up with the volume of work;
- Find it more difficult to get motivated; and
- Gain less satisfaction from studying.

Without question then, the overall capability of students to engage with their learning is further compromised when, within the space of a few short weeks, they must confirm course choices, decide which pre-entry seminars and courses to attend, participate in university and faculty orientation sessions, select or be allocated to small group classes, learn the institutional language, manage timetables, begin classes and assimilate unit and assessment requirements, as well as adjust to their new discipline of study.

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While this morass of factors might seem impenetrable and unmanageable, importantly, we know conclusively from others (Tinto, 2002) and from data collected from more than 700 of our commencing students that - no matter what other factors exist – overwhelmingly, students come to our institutions to learn.

Therefore, the central principle on which the QUT FYE program is founded – *curriculum that engages new learners in their learning* – is based on two beliefs (QUT 2002a): namely that –

1. *Students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to have a successful university experience* – in all their diversity it is the one thing they *all* have in common (Kift, 2004) and, as Tinto reminds us (2002, p.4): “the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated. In the final analysis, student learning drives student retention”.
2. *Students in their first year have special learning needs arising from the social and academic transition they are experiencing*. From multiple starting points, all students are on a journey to becoming self-managing and self-directed learners and the first-year curriculum must help get them there.

### ***Well, what have we done so far to address these factors?***

The re-conceptualisation of a customised transition year as logical, sequenced and integrated in its own right to provide the necessary scaffolding to assist transition students, both in and outside the classroom, to adjust to a more independent style of learning, is an obvious way in which to inspire, excite and motivate new students. James, (2002, p.78-79) refers to the “overall coherence of the curriculum”. Meyers *et al* (2004, p.2) refer to “cumulatively [developing] students’ higher-order thinking and academic skills necessary for understanding and later personal and professional lives” and a “careful sequencing of curriculum” to produce educationally valuable academic outcomes. In these ways, the first year curriculum forms a coherent foundation for ongoing learning engagement. Furthermore, there it creates potential for harnessing enthusiastic learning engagement in the critical first days of the first weeks of the first year, to promote a sense of academic connectedness, so often missing for the contemporary learner.

Thus, significant curriculum renewal and a focus on a transition pedagogy based in a constructivist view of learning (Kift 2005; Kift & Nelson, 2005) has already been undertaken in the two faculties driving this project – Law and IT. New curriculum that makes extensive use of embedded devices to ameliorate aspects of transition shock has been introduced (and is continuously evaluated for its effectiveness in supporting these ideals). These devices include: simple to complex concepts; curriculum alignment; scaffolded skills development; the use of early and formative assessment, especially to identify at risk students; criterion referenced assessment; introduction to team work; and making explicit the implicit conventions, frameworks and explanatory systems in learners’ minds, *etc.* The criticality of infrastructure issues (such as training and supporting sessional teachers who engage with transition students and the multi-dimensional role of the first year teacher, who requires professional development, support and reward structures) has also been addressed, to the extent culture and logistics will presently allow (Kift, 2003a).

However, engaging, coherent, curriculum - even when the curriculum content is sound and tailored to mediate transition - is not, by itself, enough to ensure *sustainable successful* transition. Inevitably, transition is a responsibility that must be shared and understood by *all* areas of the university – academic and professional, student services, administrators and environmental support. Moving towards this holistic collaborative environment requires systematizing transition philosophy *within* the elements of strategic infrastructure *and* practical activities *across* all traditional silos *between* faculties and divisions.

### ***Now, how will we convert this knowledge into practice?***

Embedded institutional change is dependent on the creation of *organisational* structures (Swing, 2003). Therefore, it seems essential to situate *both* the coordination and integration of institutional practices *and* course and curriculum renewal for transition pedagogy within an overarching constructivist view that makes explicit to commencing students the presence of supportive strategic infrastructures as a visible institutional commitment to its transition intent.

Traditionally, these learning environments that seek to integrate and present “a single view” to students have been called Managed Learning Environments (MLE). These have been described as

*A system that uses technology to enhance and make more effective the network of relationships between learners, teachers and organisers of learning through integrated support for richer communication and activities* (JISC/UCISA, 2003).

Recently, Clinch (2005) suggests widening the JISC description of an MLE to include other aspects of learning

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experience such as the timetabling system and library catalogue to enable “seamless movement between ... these systems”. Similarly, Hawryszkiewicz (2000) described learning environments in terms of workspaces. He abstracts the concept of the workplace to describe any physical or logical structure (e.g a classroom or a repository of learning materials). The two main requirements of these learning environments are: (1) the organisational structure, relationships within it, and the tools to create the structure, and (2) the tools to create learning content and support for teaching and learning. According to this description, the role of the workspace is to “bring together people, materials and facilities and the communications between them”.

Our conceptualisation of an MLE for Transition (Nelson, Kift & Harper, 2005) is informed by systems thinking which is described by Kramer and de Smit (1977, p.5) as a way of describing or thinking about the real world or resolving problems based on two premises:

- Reality is regarded in terms of wholes
- Systems interact with their environments and are regarded as open systems

A systems thinking based MLE requires shared goals and objectives and encompasses:

- people - students, teachers, professional and administrative support;
- processes - learning, learning administration and learning support;
- information and data - learning materials, support materials and data required by students to monitor and administer their learning;
- systems - e.g. a virtual learning environment (VLE), other learning software and systems providing access to resources;
- information and communication technologies (ICTs) -the hardware and networks required to support learning and communication processes, information storage and access.

Extrapolating then, some of the elements that should be addressed in a MLE for Transition and that form the foundation of our “*Blueprint for Enhanced Transition*” include:

- Curriculum that is scaffolded for both content and skills development (Kift and Nelson, 2005) because this is where students’ attention is focussed and can be harnessed to mediate as many of their institutional interactions as possible.
- A seamless, one-world view of their institutional engagement, to support both their learning and the administration of their learning (Nelson, Kift & Harper, 2005): a single point of contact with their new university world that mitigates confusion about *knowing where to go* and *how to access* services and resources.
- Student-centred systems of information dissemination tailored to individual needs. Information overload is inexcusable when we know as much as we do from, firstly, corporate data about individual students and, secondly, from wider research, about transition learning and support needs.
- Active interventions that: prevent predictable issues becoming problems, address needs and create opportunities for academic and social connectedness.
- Pro-active, timely and tailored assistance and reassurance for specific cohorts with special needs (minority groups, rural students, students with disabilities and students who have English as a second language). Keeping in mind that student expectations and misconceptions need to be understood and dealt with honestly (James, 2002);
- Time and workload management resources which could and should assist timely access to support services and a sense of belonging.
- Personal interaction – with peers and with teachers (to facilitate a sense of social and academic connectedness: Krause 2005b). This can be delivered in strategic ways through mentoring or “buddying” and through the sensible embracing of caring interaction (for example, cohort emails described below). And lastly but not least,
- Technologies that our students (the Y generation) have so readily embraced as an integral part their lives (Krause 2005b);

## **Communicating the blueprint**

As suggested by the US *Policy Center for the First Year of College* (n.d.), critical to the success of enhancing the transition experience for *all* students is the efficacy with which resources and strategies that have been informed by a transition philosophy have been embedded, integrated and communicated across the institution. While presently there is a large number of individual activities contributing to a successful transition experience across various of the institutional parts – faculties, schools and divisions – to the student eye, these appear piecemeal and most lack overall organisational coordination and integration.

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Knowing everything that we do about students-in-transition and their unique needs – academically, administratively, socially and support-wise – if we could push out to them exactly what the research and our (and their) experience tells us they need, and at the time when they need it, what would that look like? Irrespective of academic discipline, how would the ideal scaffolded transition be framed if we mapped it over a transition period of (say) 15 to 18 months; notionally from pre-Orientation, through Orientation and the first few weeks, through semester 1 and onto semester 2, and concluding with the commencement of semester 3?

This is the task that we have set ourselves in this project; to canvass all aspects of the institution – academics, administrators, student support staff, student services staff, advisors, academic developers, counsellors, managers, not least of all students and potential students – to come together to explore this challenge from a “one-world” viewpoint. Though there will undoubtedly be various layers of diverging detail, for example, as between individual units, dependent on whether the perspective is generic academic or generic administrative (or generic hybrid), and taking into account whether the detail is university-wide or discipline specific, if we seriously examine the transition experience from this critical student-centred perspective and investigate what new students need to know and when “that” might desirably be made available (pushed) to them, we are capable of communicating something approaching a blueprint for transition.

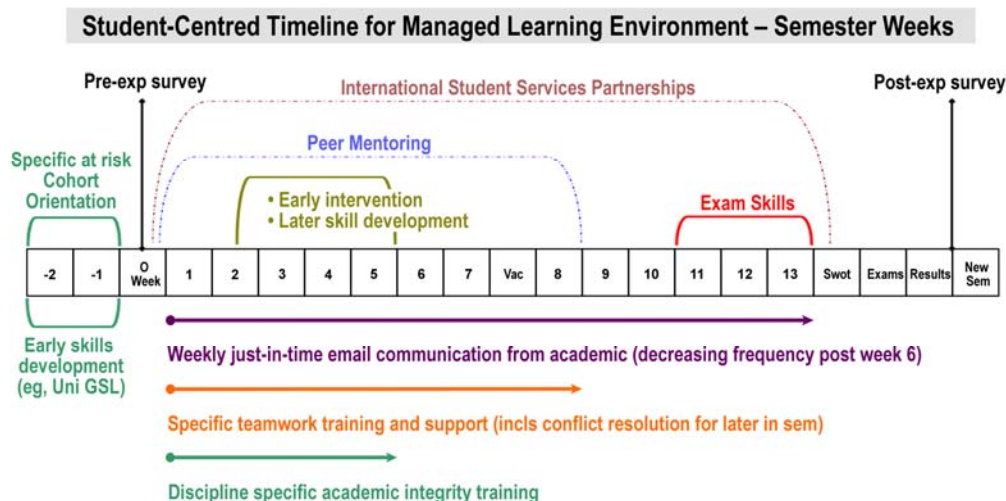
This task requires us to ask that we bring our collective institutional knowledge to bear around

- all of the various resources, programs, information and strategies (transition tools) that we have at our institutional disposal; and
- what we know about when those tools are most needed.

and settle to examine the tantalising possibility (in the perfect transition world) that it might be possible to develop a transition blueprint within which these tools can be strategically and optimally delivered, both to avoid information overload at critical points and to support students in the entirety of their institutional interactions in an anticipatory, just-in-time, manner.

### Visualising the Blueprint

To assist us communicate the form the Blueprint for Enhanced Transition will take we have created a simple timeline that encapsulates its key concepts and some of the focal areas of project activity.



**Figure 1: Visualising the Blueprint**

### Supporting Staff Development

An essential tool in harnessing *staff* engagement with the transition blueprint is the development of a First Year Experience Communication Strategy that has as its primary focus, staff development. Two key tools are being developed by us at QUT to implement this strategy. The first tool is a dedicated website repository of resources for staff and other stakeholders: academic, professional and others. This site will address three distinct audiences:

- QUT’s governance bodies and other stakeholders interested in strategy, research and initiatives in the area of FYE;
- QUT staff requiring professional development and resource dissemination in the area of teaching,

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- supporting and providing information to students in transition; and
- the national and international higher education community seeking to share knowledge of new developments.

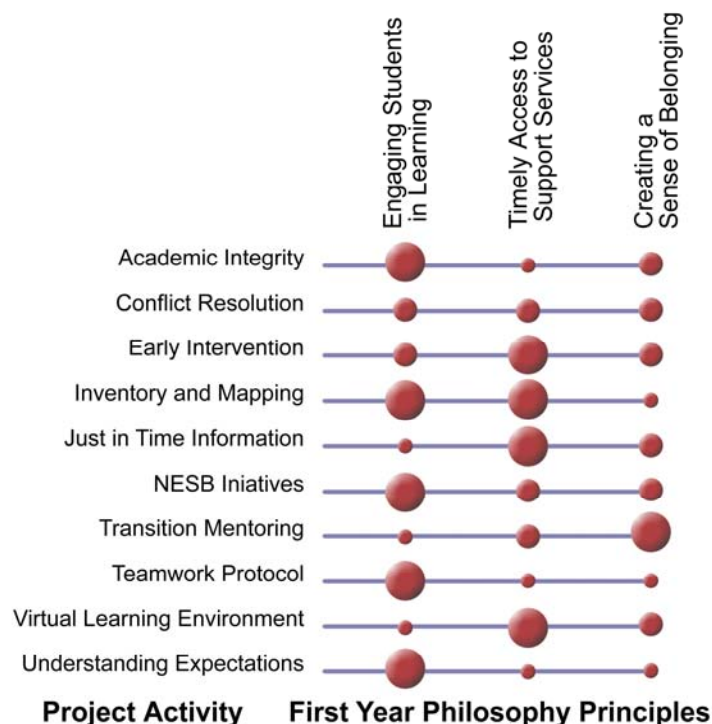
This site will be managed by the university’s central First Year Experience Program and will provide resources for staff in a coherent framework that accounts for the range of issues facing students at different times on the academic calendar and links these issues to the myriad of resources and tools available across our university and beyond.

The second tool being developed to implement the communication strategy is a comprehensive staff development program, with an emphasis on support for sessional staff teaching transition students (Kift, 2003a), which complements the online resources. We believe that the Communication Strategy and its two key initiatives are necessary to facilitate the magnitude of cultural change required to allow the embedding of a transition blueprint in the university’s teaching and learning philosophy.

### Overview of our project that aims to embed the blueprint

Our current project is focused on developing the blueprint and trialling initiatives that support its systematisation within our institution. We are encouraged by the generosity of our faculties and the Divisions of QUT who, with in-kind and cash contributions, have funded this project with \$A 0.5M. The core project team of four (2 academics and 2 senior division staff) is supported by four part-time administrators, a project officer, numerous academic colleagues and professional staff from divisions and faculties.

Activities in our pilot program are designed to target the central and two supporting principles of QUT’s First Year Philosophy: engaging students in learning, providing timely access to support and, creating a sense of belonging. The figure below shows the relationships between the project’s focal activities and these philosophical principles.



**Figure 2: Relationship between Project Initiatives & First Year Principles**

A key part of our project to embed this Blueprint is that the pilots provide the opportunity to create meta-resources about each initiative (e.g. action plans, protocols, templates, reusable materials etc) so that the knowledge they contain can be made available (via the web repository described in section 3.2) and readily reused by colleagues acting on the Blueprint. In the section below, each of the initiatives shown in Figure 2 is described as well as the evaluation strategies we will use to determine how effective each initiative is in supporting student transition issues

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## **Project initiatives**

### ***Academic Integrity***

*Plagiarism and academic integrity* have always been critical issues for our students and recent research has indicated their prevalence is unacceptably high (most likely greater than 50%: McCabe, 2004; Szabo & Underwood, 2004). However, deterrence by and punishment under the sector's dedicated promulgation of academic (dis)honesty policies has done little to curb the incidence of plagiarism (in the absence of concurrent education programs), given that many instances of academic dishonesty arise out of lack of knowledge around appropriate referencing styles (a particularly acute issue in law which uses neither Harvard nor APA, but rather the Cambridge referencing system) and from poor skills development (Breen & Maassen, 2005). Commencing students have recently expressed considerable concern about the possibility of a finding of academic misconduct against them for even minor, unintentional plagiarism. This issue is of particular concern to our new law students as it may have the potential to jeopardise their prospects of admission to legal practice<sup>1i</sup>

To assist students in this aspect of their academic transition, the project team is embedding skills training on academic referencing at several points in core first semester curriculum, together with a push-out to students of the resources and formative tools available via the University's recently developed *Academic Integrity Kit*. The individual courses that have embedded this training will be specifically evaluated for this aspect, while a modified version of a previously validated survey instrument will be used to measure students' perceptions of academic integrity before their exposure to the *Kit* and at the end of the semester, after the *Kit* has been used. To understand more about these changing perceptions and students responses to the package of interventions deployed, focus groups will be conducted with the first year cohorts also at the end of the semester.

### ***Conflict Resolution and Teamwork Protocol***

*Team Work* causes more distress and concern for both first year students and teachers than probably any other single issue. If teamwork is part of the curriculum (and there are valid arguments that it should be), then unless *teachers* understand the dynamics of teamwork tasks and the need to support students doing them, and unless *students* are trained in teamwork skills and in pro-active conflict resolution strategies in anticipation of potential team dysfunction, much of the value of other foundational work on transition will be lost.

These two aspects of the project are therefore aimed at delivering –

- firstly, a sustainable, pro-active conflict resolution training tool (via video streaming and other online resources), the development of which is based on research conducted by colleagues in the Faculties of Law and Creative Industries in which staff and students have identified flashpoints for conflict in student teamwork. In this context it is noted that, as per the recent 2005 CSHE FYE survey (Krause *et al*, 2005) referred to earlier, QUT students self-report as doing more teamwork than students in other institutions; and
- secondly, a Teamwork Protocol developed to assist teachers as regards the optimal conditions for setting teamwork assessment (for example, to advise on embedding training for teamwork assessment, the design of such assessment and clarifying the need to monitor and, as necessary, to support students in the event of team dysfunctionality).

The efficacy of both of these initiatives will be evaluated by course evaluations and focus groups.

### ***Early Interventions***

The notion of using an organised program of early interventions to monitor for signs of student disengagement is widely accepted as a valid FYE strategy. In our project we use a double-pronged approach to monitor (dis)engagement:

- (1) *Monitoring for attendance and participation*: this will be actively monitored by tutors who are requested to follow up students who, in the first critical few weeks of semester, miss classes or appear not to be engaging with their fellow students or their learning materials; and
- (2) *Non-submission of, or poor performance in, early assessment item(s) (beginning of week 4)*: The early assessment item is used to monitor for academic quality, identify areas of need for skills development

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<sup>1</sup> The matter came into sharp focus after a recent Supreme Court of Queensland Court of Appeal decision in 2004 deferred the admission of a Queensland law student for six months on the basis that a plagiarism finding against him rendered him "unfit to practise" for the purposes of admission at that time (*Re AJG* [2004]). In that decision, Chief Justice de Jersey said (*Re AJG* [2004], 4):

*Legal practitioners must exhibit a degree of integrity which engenders in the Court and in clients unquestioning confidence in the completely honest discharge of their professional commitments. Cheating in the academic course which leads to the qualification central to practice and at a time so close to the application for admission must preclude our presently being satisfied of this applicant's fitness.*

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(including English proficiency and possible learning difficulties (for example if the work submitted does not meet content or format requirements)).

Unit coordinators manage the program and contact students who show signs of being “at risk”. Identified students are referred to professional staff, such as counselling and learning advisors, for managed assistance. The evaluation strategy for early intervention is based on preventing unnecessary attrition and reducing the frequency of unexplained attrition.

### ***Inventory and Mapping***

A useful web repository will contain both high quality resources *as well as* high quality information about each resource that describes characteristics of its use. An inventory of all resources (learning objects) currently available (including those being developed) in our institution will be performed and metadata will be collected using the IEEE LOM Data Model Standard (1484.12.1) (IEEE). The mapping will then be integrated into the Communication Strategy as part of the staff development resources. Evaluation of this aspect is a continuous project where the effectiveness of each teaching resource (learning object) and the repository of objects will be evaluated using information resource evaluation techniques familiar to us such as InfoMap (Burk & Horton, 1988) and FAVORS (FIT, 2006)

### ***Just in Time Information***

Modelled on Deakin University’s staged delivery of transition information, the Deakin “Infocflow Program” (Emmitt *et al.*, 2002), for the past three years regular degree-tailored emails (initially weekly, then falling off to fortnightly as the semester progresses) have been sent to all first year law students as a discipline cohort. These regular, just-in-time communications seek to stagger the delivery of vital information, to raise awareness about and to address issues first years may encounter, to direct students in a timely way to relevant support services and resources, and to normalise their concerns and fears (Kift, 2003b). Evaluations conducted on this initiative (Kift, 2003b) reveal that students find such communications from a senior Faculty academic –

- Motivational;
- Made explicit the determinants of success;
- Were sensible, funny(!) & helped put things in perspective;
- Created a sense of belonging;
- Reduced their sense of isolation and loneliness;
- Showed that the Faculty cared about student progress;
- Normalised the stressful experience;
- Made them feel like "real students".

### ***NESB Initiatives***

QUT is a multi-national university and a considerable portion of its commencing cohort comprises of international and domestic students who do not have English as a first language. Unit success and GPA data indicates that poor levels of English proficiency may prevent students from fully engaging with: curriculum intent; learning materials and contents; and appears to make teamwork even more challenging. This program seeks to raise awareness in the entire cohort about communication across language boundaries, to identify students whose learning may be compromised and offer them a program of contextualised (for specific units), tailored (to meet individual needs) additional support. Our evaluation strategy will: identify common issues faced by students, assess the effectiveness of the support program in terms of take up, and evaluate the outcomes for each referred student that completes their agreed program.

### ***Transition Mentoring***

Peer mentoring offers students in transition to university an opportunity for support from a more experienced student who has been trained as a mentor. In our program the Mentors are volunteers and apply to take part in this program. Students that successfully complete their mentor role responsibilities are eligible for a Dean’s Faculty Service List, an award specially instigated to support this program. The focus of the mentor -mentee relationship includes.

- personal support and encouragement (not counselling)
- information giving
- problem solving
- referrals for professional help
- academic skill development (not tutoring)

Each relationship is guided by the needs of the mentee and the guidelines under which the mentor operates. Our transition mentor program operates for the first 8 weeks of semester. Mentors are provided with operating guidelines which include a description of the mentor role and our expectations of them, evaluation and data

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collection sheets, list of referral (where to go for help) services and a planned program of mentor to mentee communication including templates for emails. Mentors are, in turn, mentored by QUT's central FYE Program Coordinator. The Coordinator follows-up on issues detected by the mentors and refers students experiencing difficulties to academic support or counselling in liaison with their academics coordinators. Evaluation of the program will reuse with the creators' permission an evaluation strategy used by colleagues elsewhere (reference to be supplied pending permission to release details).

### ***Virtual Learning Environment***

The VLE Transition Portal we have implemented is founded on the holistic presentation of academic administrative information (such as class allocations and notices), academic learning needs (unit materials and resources, learning activities) and professional support services (such as counselling or academic learning support). The integration of content uses mass customisation which occurs during the user-authentication logon process. Entry of student logon details allows student information already held in corporate systems to be harvested to create an individual portal for each student based on their academic details, self-identified resources, unit needs and information being pushed to them from professional, support and academic staff. Functionally, the portal has five key elements, each of these has drill down, store and archive capability. These elements are:

- An individual student calendar;
- A message portlet (unit specific academic messages as well as critical date administrative messages);
- Access to student selected resources (e.g. discussion forums);
- Direct access to our home-grown online learning environment, QUT's OLT system, for unit materials, resources and learning activities; and
- The most recent emails sent from a QUT address.

Initial evaluation of the effectiveness of the portal contents was established in a series of focused interviews. Other evaluation data, including portal usage statistics are being collected and will be compared with historical access data.

### ***Understanding Expectations***

Many of our students, especially first generation students, come to us with completely ill-informed preconceptions about what might be encountered in their course of choice and what it is to be an independent tertiary learner in the relevant discipline. It is our duty to understand and deal honestly with these expectations and misconceptions (James, 2002) and, also in return, to be clear about our academic expectations as tertiary educators. To this end, the project team has administered a qualitative "Expectations Survey" to every first year student in Law (including external students) and IT (n=>1100) and will re-administer the survey in Week 13 to gauge the actual experience as students then report it. The Week 1 data is currently being analysed and will be fed back to students, hopefully before the semester break.

### **The way forward**

This paper is underpinned by early work completed at QUT, which based on an extensive analysis of the literature defined one central and two supporting principles for managing the first year experience. In this paper, after revisiting this early work, we have described a large teaching and learning project that aims to enhance transition into university by creating a Blueprint for institutional wide communication and action. We have described the elements of the Blueprint (each of our project activities) and shown how they map onto the first year principles that underpin our transition pedagogy. The Blueprint elements are now be mediated through curriculum based activities and data that will allow their effectiveness to be determined is being collected as described in each of the respective sections above. This data will be published in forthcoming publications. From mid-late 2006 we will be completing the pilot phase of this project and finalising the Blueprint. Our focus will turn then to raising staff awareness, designing staff development programs, and refining the metadata repository. These activities will lead to publication of a final series of papers related to this project under the working title of: "*realising the dream: how collaboration between professional and academic staff improves the experience of transition students*".

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