

The Development of a Student Focused Model for Transition to University

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Abstract

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Abstract: The transition to university is a well recognised challenge, especially for non-traditional students. This paper presents a student-focused model for the transition to university, developed through an extensive literature review, discussions with a range of professionals nationally and internationally, and first year teaching practice. The model was applied to the development of a range of strategies to be implemented at one institution. The use of the model may facilitate the development of a university-wide approach to the issues of student transition to university and the first year in higher education experience. The model will allow a balanced approach to be developed.

Introduction

The transition to university life and study is a major transition that requires both social and academic support. This is particularly the case for non traditional students for whom participation in university education has increased over the past 20 years (Devlin & O'Shea, 2011). It is not however useful to recruit students from non traditional backgrounds unless appropriate support is made available to facilitate or enable success (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The provision of support to commencing Higher Education (HE) students (often referred to as First Year Experience [FYHE]) has been a focus internationally for some time but has become more focused recently in Australian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Student attrition from a university course has personal and financial costs for the individual and economic costs for the institution. However, where the expectations of the student are met by the social, academic, and physical resources provided by the university, there is increased wellbeing and satisfaction that translates into student retention (Gilbreath, Kim, & Nichols, 2011).

Processes at recruitment and the transition to university study are important for student retention and success (Uren, 2001). Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010) suggest that a university wide approach to FYHE is required and although there has been years of work in many institutions, FYHE is still fragmented. A proactive to providing an environment that is both flexible and rigorous is now essential for the attraction and retention of students who have different lifestyles (Krause, 2006).

Considerable effort has been made by universities to aid social integration of first year students, however, less effort has been made in assisting students be academically successful through acquiring the processes of learning (Krause, 2006). A sense of belonging has been shown to assist retention (Krause, 2007)

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and underpins other aspects of the successful transition to university (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). A sense of belonging is often measured by a sense of being comfortable, acceptance, trust, (Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2011), plus membership, support (Johnson, 2012) or a sense of “being at home” (Carolissen, 2012).

Student engagement is an important factor in student retention (Woolley & Bowen, 2007). However, as Krause (2007) argues “. . . to understand engagement, we need to analyse more astutely the full range of student commitments beyond the classroom, including their involvement in paid work” (p. 2). This suggests that a ‘whole person’ approach to student engagement and retention is required. Adopting this holistic approach makes the development of FYHE strategies more complex as they are then required to address a range of different issues. This complexity is demonstrated in the variety of issues contained within the FYHE literature, for example, Madgett and Belanger (2008) applied 24 variables in their analysis of retention factors. Clearly there are factors that HEIs have no control over and these have been cited as affecting students’ decisions to drop out. Such factors include economic factors, family responsibilities, personal problems (Madgett & Belanger).

It is within this contextual framework that universities must endeavour to meet the needs of their current students, attract new students, and adopt as far as possible a whole of person approach in facilitating tertiary study to retain students.

Background to the Project

In 2010 ECU introduced *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* with the aim “to develop and implement a distinctive and accessible ECU undergraduate curriculum framework (UCF)” (de Jong, Cullity, & Middleton, 2010, p. 3). *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* is focused on three main features; Employability Oriented, Student Focused Environment, and Learner Centred Teaching. *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* is based on the concept of the student journey through their degree and commences with a focus on first year, the mid course year (usually the second year) and the final year (third year). Different issues arise during the undergraduate journey. In 2011 one of the four areas identified for development was the First Year Experience (FYHE).

Two of the authors were appointed as Project Leaders with the task of developing a university wide approach for the development of FYHE strategies. These academics have extensive teaching experience in particular in relation to first year students in HE. The remainder of this paper details the development of a model that is student-focused and which directly represents one of the three main features of *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* (student-focused environment).

The Development of a Student Focused Model for the Transition to University

A range of people from within the University, both academic and professional staff across a large number of programs and areas contributed to the knowledge used to develop the model presented in this paper. In addition several contributors were external to the University.

Individuals directly involved in the process of developing the model were the FYHE Project Leaders and a working party of seven members who contributed to the proposed FYHE strategies within the university. The

development of the model was the result of a series of events and four specific actions by the team of authors.

These actions first included the conduct of an extensive literature review of both the published academic literature regarding FYHE and desk research through a range of university websites to determine what HEIs nationally and internationally were doing in relation to FYHE. Within the literature review, several key areas were identified. The importance of retention of students to the universities for economic and political purposes was identified as a potential issue for the continued existence of HEIs. The second key area identified was engagement of the student from pre commencement, commencement, and progression through their degree to graduation. Third, the point of entry into the retention and engagement of students is before they commence study.

The second action involved consultation within the university. This was facilitated by the formation of a group (the Staff Led Group [SLG]) which comprised academic and professional staff from a range of support services with an interest in FYHE. This group was formed through the recommendations of heads of schools to staff who were involved with first year students. The SLG participated in a range of activity based meetings with clearly defined outcomes that enabled the identification of good practice within the university. This group was charged with providing critical evaluation of how the FYHE project within *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* was progressing and contributed to the work of a working party that was formed from members of the SLG. In choosing members of the working party, the Project Leaders were careful to ensure that as many areas within the university were represented as one of the roles of working party members was to talk with all staff in their area, especially those who were not involved in SLG. In this way communication about the FYHE project was increased within the University as a whole. The working party was established to manage the FYHE project in a timely manner as consultation with the larger SLG group may have been cumbersome.

The third action was attendance at national and international conferences by the Project Leaders and working party members who met to present what they had learned at the conference to consolidate organisational knowledge of FYHE. The fourth action was the dissemination of information from the Project Leaders conversations with national and international FYHE experts.

Outcomes of the Process

As the working party progressed with the task of developing a university wide approach to FYHE, it became apparent that principles and strategies that underpinned the strategies needed to be highlighted to guide the work. It was important that these principles were congruent with the ECU's values of Integrity, Respect, Rational Inquiry, and Personal Excellence.

The four principles are: first, relationships (staff-students and student-student) are built on a basis of trust, integrity, respect and equity; second, processes that develop an understanding of identity, a sense of belonging, collective responsibility and collaboration are used to enhance the student experience; third, the provision of active, independent and reflective learning that sustain student dispositions for learning and enhance contextualised employability skills; and fourth, there is a commitment to identifying and supporting students who require extra support. The principles and twelve strategies that are linked to these principles are available from the authors.

As these principles were being developed, it became apparent that a model

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to guide the FYHE work would be useful. In this regard, members of the FYHE working party met with a view to developing a workable and relevant model. This model adopted the student-focused approach which was one of the key aspects of *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* and represents the considerable overlap in the different aspects of student transition to university. The contextualised model for the current work is shown in Figure 1. The model is based on aspects of a student focused approach that is evident in the FYHE literature, especially in relation to engagement which is supported by a sense of belonging which underpins other aspects of the transition to university (Krause, 2007; Palmer et al., 2009). Three key aspects of how the student interacts with their HEI are represented by: involvement in their university *community* (represented by yellow in the model); the *personal success* of the student (represented by blue in the model); and the *academic success* of the student (represented by red in the model). Interactions amongst these aspects that affect the individual are represented by the colours, green, purple, and orange. The student at the centre of the model stresses the student focused approach and the circle around the model represents the underlying sense of belonging that supports the other aspects of the student transition. The model is based on aspects of the transition to university that an HEI might have some control over and does not account for external factors such as economic situations of individuals, family responsibilities and personal problems with which the HEI cannot provide assistance. The model focuses on the transition to university and although the model can account for a range of issues in relation to later employability (academic and personal success in particular), the issues of employability have not been included in this paper. Additionally the effects of the physical environment on the student transition have not been included, although they are recognised as playing an important role in learning (Khan, & Iqbal, 2012).

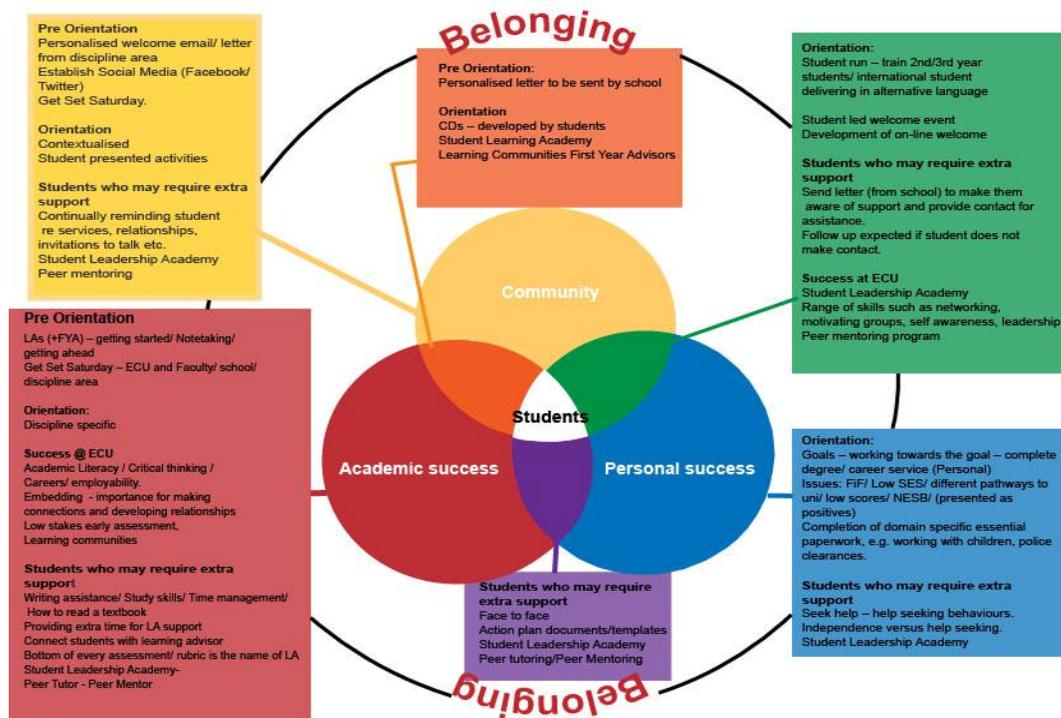


Figure 1 - The model for a student-focused approach to FHYE

Conclusion

From the FYHE literature, knowledge gained through the various conference attendances, and current successful practice within the university, seven components in relation to FYHE were identified and communicated within the university as potential strategies to enhance the experience of first year students. These seven components were: (1) the appointment of First Year Coordinators (FYCs); (2) pre commencement strategies; (3) post commencement extension of orientation activities; (4) Success @ECU which included learning, teaching, and assessment strategies (5) strategies to target students requiring extra support; (6) the development of a Student Leadership Academy; and (7) professional development for staff to support a range of needs to facilitate staff involvement in FYHE. These seven strategies were included in a FHYE Discussion Paper that was provided to the University's Academic Board for consideration.

Linking the seven strategies to the model

As the range of potential strategies was identified for recommendation to the University, they were placed within the Student-Focused Model. The appointment of FYCs fits across all three major aspects of the model as they have a role in developing the sense of belonging and community for students through the development of School specific induction and social activities. One role of the FYC is to support the desired outcomes of the *Curriculum 2012 and Beyond* project that includes the implementation of learning, teaching and assessment strategies and seeks to enable students across both academic and personal success.

Pre commencement strategies to enhance engagement and post

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commencement extension of orientation activities are part of the development of a sense of belonging and acceptance within the university community. Such strategies also will enhance engagement and provide opportunities for academic and personal success.

Success @ECU includes learning, teaching, and assessment strategies that will support student academic success and some strategies within this aspect of the framework also support community participation and personal success.

Strategies that provide extra support for those who require it fit with community, academic, and personal success. Such strategies may include peer mentoring or participation in a learning community. The proposed Student Leadership Academy will provide opportunities for student personal success and community participation. Professional development was considered as crucial for staff to develop the necessary skills and competencies which would support the remaining six components.

Conclusions

The project to enhance the first year experience of students resulted in a holistic model that supports a university wide approach to FYHE. It can be used to guide the work of both academic and professional staff in a range of roles within a university, supporting Tinto's statement of FYHE being "everybody's business" (Tinto, 2010, p. 9). As the model is underpinned by a sense of belonging, it supports a sense of working together, whether that be staff working with staff, staff working with students, or students working with students. The use of the model to guide FYHE work provides an innovative aspect to work in FYHE and facilitates the acceptance and use of good practice. The model can be easily contextualised and applied in different disciplines. The model shown in Figure 1 above is contextualised for the University in which the authors of this paper work, however it clearly indicates the considerable overlaps that occur using a student centred approach and allows the use of a whole person approach.

In terms of the current project for which the model was developed, the model addresses aspects of the main features which include an Employability Orientation which is demonstrated through the concepts of both academic and personal success. The second aspect of the project required that a Student Focused Environment be developed. In this context the community aspects of the model address this feature. The third aspect of Learner Centred Teaching is demonstrated in the concepts of personal and academic success which will be developed through good learning, teaching, and assessment practices. It is considered that this model is useful to ensure that all aspects of FYHE can be addressed and the use of the model may assist in the development of a university wide approach to FYHE.

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