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## The retention and persistence support (RAPS) project: A transition initiative

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The transition to university is often associated with stress, anxiety, and tension and in many cases can lead to students failing or withdrawing from university. Transition problems result in high social and economic costs to families and the community. The past decade has seen a proliferation of transition strategies across universities. Results from evaluations of these transition programmes suggest student retention rates are significantly higher among those students involved in these programmes. The emphasis now though is to develop school or department based programmes as these are more readily adapted to meet the specific needs of students than university wide initiatives. The School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University has developed a transition programme that incorporates initial adjustment strategies, with ongoing support throughout the first-year, designed to help students cope with, and adjust to, the demands of university life. Issues regarding the development, implementation and evaluation of this programme are discussed.

### Introduction

The transition to university can be a time of extreme stress, which if not adequately addressed by the university often leads to student withdrawal. Not only do universities have a moral obligation to offer students as much assistance as possible during this time to enable them to adjust but new government funding strategies that place an emphasis on completion rather than enrolment, are making it a financial necessity. The face of higher education is changing and universities can no longer view themselves merely as citadels of learning; they are businesses, subject to market forces similar to those affecting other organisations. As such there is a need to recognise that transition problems equate to high attrition rates that may lead to fewer graduating students and thus less funding. Irrespective of new funding arrangements, transition problems can result in high social and economic costs to families and the community as well as the individuals concerned (Evans, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Yorke 1999).

Various factors impact on attrition rates, including the background characteristics of the students (Dobson, 1999; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Shields, 1995) as well as external and institutional factors (Tinto, 1993). For example, the disposition of the student on entry, his or her goal commitment, and individual university experiences after entry (both social and academic) can contribute to the decision to withdraw. The size of the institution, and the type and nature of the course also have significant influence on whether or not the student remains at university (Tinto, 1993). Coupled with these factors are the needs of specific student groups and the difficulties they might encounter as a result of their academic, social, cultural background, and personality characteristics (Lewis, 1994; Long, 1994; McJamerson, 1992; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; Strage, 2000; Terenzini, et al, 1994; West, 1985; Western, McMillan, & Durrington, 1998).

Students also bring with them a complex combination of idiosyncratic variables that impact on university performance and success. With the advent of alternative entry methods to university, age has become an important variable in the debate (Evans, 2000). Unfortunately, much of the literature that considers this aspect is contradictory. West, Hore, Bennie, Browne, and Kermond (1986) found that age had little impact on university success, while others argue in favour of deferring university study for a year following high school graduation as greater maturity increased the chances of university completion (Long, Carpenter, & Hayden, 1995). Clark and Ramsey (1990) found age to be highly correlated with performance, and in a national Australian study, Shah and Burke (1996) found that a 20-year-old enrolling student had the greatest chance of completing his or her degree course compared with a student of any other age group. However, considering age in isolation by excluding other contributing factors is to over simplify the complexity of the issue.

Cultural differences might also impact on a student's decision to withdraw, but again the research is conflicting. For instance there is some evidence to suggest that equity groups, such as mature age students, women, students with disabilities, and non-traditional groups, are less consistent in terms of their performance and less persistent in pursuing further education than non-equity groups (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, & Wyld, 1992; Bourke, Burden, & Moore, 1996; Dobson & Sharma, 1995;

McClelland & Krueger, 1993), although other research shows no difference between the performance of equity groups and non-equity students (Long et al. 1995). Again, the contradictory nature of the research indicates that there is more than just the issue of culture in the equation.

Other issues such as financial difficulties (Abbott-Chapman et al. 1992; West, et al. 1986), gender (Scott et al. 1996), school type (private or public) (Elsworth & Day, 1983), mode of entry (McClelland & Kruger, 1993), and socio-economic status (Western et al. 1998) have also been found to impact on attrition rates. In addition, the psychological makeup of the student in terms of how prepared he or she is for university (West et al. 1986), previous school performance (McInnis et al. 2000) and long term goals (Abbott-Chapman et al. 1992; West et al. 1986) have also been shown to predict first-year success.

Despite the conflicting nature of some of the literature, what does emerge clearly is the need for institutions to provide adequate student support services and to provide them in such a way that students feel comfortable in accessing them. As with the other variables discussed, one cannot conclude that there is a causal link between the provision of student support services and attrition rates (Promnitz & Germain, 1996). What can be said, however, is that support services such as academic skills advisers, counsellors, medical services, financial management advice as well as equity support officers can provide a vital resource for students experiencing difficulties, particularly in the first-year (Promnitz & Germain, 1996). The School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University reports attrition rates for first-year students of 17.7% in 1994, 20.3% (1995), 21.6% (1996), 21.0% (1997) and 20.0% (1998) (Drew, Pike, Pooley, Young & Breen, 2000). While these figures are representative of the national trend, it must be noted that attrition rates are often skewed because they include all 'drop outs' including temporary ones, and those students transferring to other courses or institutions (Evans, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Consequently the simple application of 'input/output' analysis offers little clarity or understanding to the issue of attrition. What can be said is that a significant number of first-year students find their experience of university to be so different from their expectation that they do not continue (Tinto, 1993).

Transition programmes that incorporate strong links with high schools, comprehensive orientation, and on-going support are most effective when they are designed for the specific learning environment for which they are aimed (Boddy & Neale, 1998; Gillespie & Noble, 1992; Pargetter 1999; Tinto, 1993). There is a need therefore for universities to develop comprehensive policies on the issue of transition and for individual schools and departments to design and implement specific strategies to assist their students in negotiating the transition phase of university life and develop the skills necessary for successful completion.

The School of Psychology has developed a site-specific transition programme designed to achieve this. The Retention and Persistence Support (RAPS) Programme is aimed at creating a strong sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) among students, designed to transform the transition to university from a situation of high stress to one of support and engagement. The RAPS programme was developed and trialled at the Joondalup campus at the start of the 2001 academic year. This programme was developed as an extension of the Peer Mentoring Programme (PMP), which had seen a reduction in attrition since its inception in 1998. In addition to the PMP, the RAPS programme incorporates all the components of Tinto's transition model - orientation, learning communities and collaborative associations with High Schools along with recognition of the impact of HECS and the financial demands faced by students. Figure 1 illustrates the RAPS programme. All first-year students experienced the programme as it was integrated into the learning environment of the School of Psychology for the entire academic year.

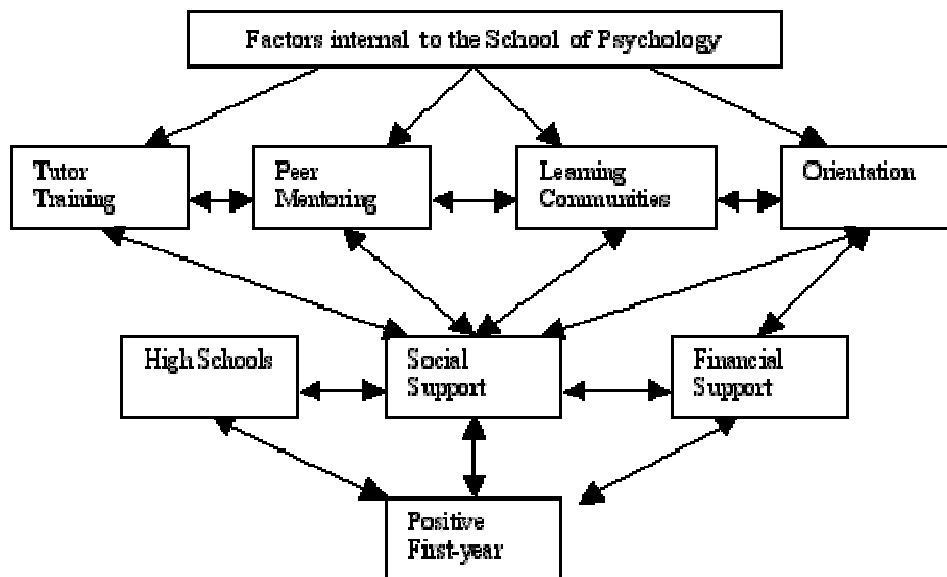


Figure 1: RAPS Model

#### Tinto's model of transition

Vincent Tinto is professor of education at Syracuse University and project director for the National Centre on Post-secondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment and is a well-known author on the topic of transition (Tinto, 1987, 1993, 1995a, b, 2000; Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1993; Tinto & Russo, 1993; Tinto, Goodsell-Love & Russo, 1993). Tinto recommends a combined approach to transition to university that recognises the role of high schools, family, and peers as well as the university. An integrated orientation programme that introduces students to faculty and services in an atmosphere of fun and support rather than stress and anxiety is an integral part of a successful transition.

Tinto also argues for a collaborative pedagogy that sees the student as an active participant in the learning process (Tinto, 2000). He proposes that to achieve this goal there needs to be a model of learning that encourages integration between students and lecturers and promotes social and academic support networks among students by developing learning communities and collaborative learning strategies.

Learning communities comprise groups of approximately 20-30 students who are enrolled in the same courses. They share the same experiences in terms of their lectures and tutorial sessions, which encourages friendship and support networks among the students. Because learning communities encourage contact between students outside of the classroom setting, they provide a bridge between the academic demands of university and the social and friendship needs of the students (Tinto, 2000). This has been shown to translate into improved academic performance with learning community students performing up to 25% better than students not involved in such programmes (Tinto, 1993).

#### Retention and Persistence Support (RAPS) Programme

##### Tutor training

However, the School of Psychology model extends that offered by Tinto by recognising the unique role played by postgraduate sessional tutors in the lives of undergraduate students. The RAPS model incorporates the student-tutor relationship as an integral component and, as such, a training programme has been designed to assist tutors in developing the necessary skills to maximise the benefits associated with this relationship. Post-orientation experiences are an important ingredient of a successful transition as early experiences provide a 'script' of what is to come in the future (Pargetter, 2000). Students who feel cared for as a result of enthusiastic interaction with staff are more likely to persist and overcome difficulties (Peel, 2000; Yorke, 2000). Several studies (Kantanis, 1999; Peel, 2000; Tinto, 1993) support the notion that regardless of peer support the key ingredient to

success is at least one staff member who is willing to offer encouragement and make the effort of knowing students by name.

This issue highlights the importance of comprehensive training for sessional tutors. Because of the way courses within the school of psychology are structured and taught it is reasonable to assume that it is the tutor rather than the lecturer who will best be in a position to identify and encourage the struggling student. The tutor is also able to bring his or her experience as a student into the classroom as a means of dispelling anxiety regarding assessment or progress through the programme. Training provided to tutors included issues relating to assessment and marking and ways in which to give supportive, constructive feedback to students without them losing faith in their ability or reacting negatively to lower-than-expected grades. Tutors are also important in establishing the learning communities among students by encouraging them to appreciate the benefits derived from such networks both academically and socially.

### Peer mentoring

Since it was trialled in 1999, the Peer Mentoring Programme (PMP) has seen attrition rates fall from a high of 21.6% in 1996 to just 13% in 1999 (Pooley, Young, Haunold, Drew, Pike, & O'Donnel, 2000). Therefore the concept of mentoring has been demonstrated as an effective method in improving retention rates among first-year students in the School of Psychology. Prior to orientation day first-year students are allocated a mentor. Approximately 6-10 students are matched to a second or third-year psychology student who volunteers to act as a mentor for the first semester. The role of the mentor is to provide a point of contact for students to ask questions they might otherwise feel are too trivial or silly. Mentors do not provide tuition for their mentees and specific questions about course content are referred to the student's tutor.

### Learning communities

Learning communities were created with students who were Psychology majors. Following enrolment students were allocated to mentor groups, which comprised six to ten students and a second or third year psychology student as a mentor. Learning communities were formed by grouping together two or three of the mentor cohorts into each tutorial and maintaining these tutorial groupings for the entire first-year. This was designed to encourage students to form collaborative study groups as well as friendship networks, providing them with support structures on campus.

### Orientation

Orientation programs are one area in which institutional action and planning can be improved as they have been found to improve retention rates (Stewart, 1998; Terenzini et al. 1994). A successful orientation is one that incorporates faculty and parental involvement and is crucial to a successful transition (Terenzini et al. 1994). It is likely that parental and peer support are especially important in Australian universities because so few students live on campus and therefore do not forge the social and academic relationships found on residential campuses (Peel, 2000). While parental involvement at orientation is not the norm the School of Psychology encourages it, although in reality most new students arrive alone or with a friend rather than a parent. For this reason, transition and first-year experience programmes need to emphasise the need for social interaction outside of the teaching and learning environment. For these reasons the orientation programme for 2001 built on the activities provided in previous years. It extends the standard format of acquainting students with the physical environment of the school and introducing them to lecturing staff to include access to student support services and postgraduate students. It also establishes the social infrastructure of the school by including a BBQ and entertainment.

### High schools

Schools also have an important role in the transition equation as it is during the final years of high school that students' expectations of university are formed (Pargetter, 2000). School leavers readily anticipate the move to university because of the greater independence and freedom it offers. However, it is often these two factors that cause the most anxiety for this group, which results in

feelings of isolation (Peel, 2000). Surveys of students withdrawing from courses suggests that those who feel isolated or disconnected from the institution are more likely to withdraw than those who feel connected to the institution and its occupants (Peel, 2000; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993; Tinto, 1995).

It has been argued that best practice should include providing students with information relevant to potential problems such as time management and self-discipline, adequate literacy skills, computing and IT experience and learning how to access library and on-line information (Pargetter, 2000). In addition, there should be an emphasis on the need for ongoing support from schools for a period of time after students leave high school (Pargetter, 2000). This is to allow students who feel the need for additional support to seek it from an environment in which they felt comfortable and secure rather than having to deal with unfamiliar people and services.

Therefore an important component of the RAPS model is an on-going initiative that involves stronger relationships with high school. Year 11 and 12 students will be encouraged to engage in a range of activities and learning opportunities conducted at the university. They will be provided with access to university facilities such as the library, and more accurate information regarding the nature and demands of university study will be provided. The School of Psychology will also provide workshops and seminars to these students about stress reduction and coping skills as well as exam preparation. Finally, the School of Psychology has developed a range of promotional materials in the form of workshops and presentations to be taken out to schools by staff or postgraduate students to promote the School of Psychology and the university to students in a non-threatening and innovative manner. Clearly this initiative is not common among universities even in Australia but the school of psychology believes this is an important component in the RAPS programme.

### Social support

Perhaps one of the strongest indicators for student success is the level of social support he or she has from family, friends, and peers (Kantanis, 2000; West et al. 1986). Therefore, establishing strong support networks is important for a successful transition to university (Dalziel & Peat, 1997; West et al. 1986). Establishing strong support networks among peers within the same course is vitally important for first-year students, especially as those who face the same demands and expectations can fully understand the nature of those demands. It is also important for students to find a balance between study and their lives away from university.

### Financial support

Research suggests that in excess of 40 per cent of full-time students are working between 12 and 20 hours per week (McInnis et al. 2000). The traditional student who arrived at university from high school and was supported financially by his or her parents until graduation is rare. Providing students with appropriate financial advice has now become an important component of students' support services. There are also calls for more on-campus employment opportunities to be provided as well as a need for staff to recognise that work commitments are justifiable reasons for extensions and deferred exams.

### Evaluation

An evaluation of the RAPS programme was conducted in early 2002 using both qualitative and quantitative methods. A series of focus groups were conducted with current second year students who had experienced the new first-year format and unit statistics were calculated for the first-year research methods class. This unit was selected because students in previous years had consistently found it to be stressful and anxiety provoking, mainly due to a misunderstanding of what psychology involved, and this resulted in high attrition levels for the unit. As the unit runs in the first semester of first year any attrition from this unit adversely affects subsequent units so it was deemed to be pivotal in addressing the overall attrition levels for first year students.

Results from the focus groups indicate students felt supported throughout the year, they experienced lower levels of stress and anxiety, formed strong friendship connections, and were better placed to

cope with the diverse demands of university study. Unit statistics indicate a net zero attrition from the research methods unit and a 100% increase in the number of students passing the unit at Distinction and High Distinction level compared with data from the previous cohort of students. A detailed account of the evaluation process and outcomes can be obtained from Darlaston-Jones, Cohen, Pike, Haunold, Young and Drew (forthcoming).

## Conclusion

Clearly the RAPS programme has succeeded in its aim to address attrition from the first-year psychology cohort especially in the research methods unit. As with all such programmes, improvements and adjustments can be made to maximise the potential of the programme. Further refinement of RAPS has been implemented for the 2003 academic year to develop the tutor training programme further and to enhance the relationships between high schools and the School of Psychology as well as developing the orientation programme to more closely meet the needs of students. Further on-going evaluation of these initiatives will be conducted to ensure RAPS continues to meet the needs of psychology students.

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