

# Achieving a successful transition to higher education

Chris Morgan, The University of Sydney, Australia

Buenos dias.

I am very pleased to have been invited to address you today and hope that my presentation will contribute to your knowledge of this important area. My presentation will only talk about our experiences in Australia, but I am sure that we share much common ground.

## *Set the scene*

The reason that this topic is important is that every student who defers, drops out or repeats a subject is a wasted opportunity and a loss of resources.

Each such student experiences disappointment and distress. At the very least there is a delay in the potential personal growth they would experience from a successful higher education experience. And because of this there is a loss in potential in terms of their contribution to society and the payoff from their and their country's investment in their education.

There are two groups of students who, in Australia, are especially vulnerable to dropping out of their university courses – young students coming directly from secondary school to university for their first year of fulltime study and students studying part-time by distance education. In this presentation I will focus my discussion on the first of these two groups and look at some approaches we have been taking at my university which may be of interest to this meeting. If we have time at the end then I will make some further comments about retaining distance education students in their courses.

Let me tell you a little about my university so that you will understand a little of the context where I am coming from. SLIDE

Sydney Uni founded 150 years ago – first Uni in Australia and has enjoyed considerable prestige ever since. Rightly or wrongly, there has been a strong community view that this uni has the highest standards and the best degrees in the nation. It has the highest profile graduates, such as our Prime Minister, and a degree from Sydney Uni is highly regarded by employers. For these reasons, when people apply for uni entrance they will often apply for Syd Uni and Sydney Uni has been fortunate to be able to select students of undergraduate courses who have the best school performance

## SLIDE 2

Australia's oldest university

- 48,000 students
- of which
- 9,000 international students
- 16,000 commencing students
- 2,500 academic staff

Seeks to attract the brightest and the best students and staff

This is a university that WAS very comfortable. But things have changed and no longer is it so easy for the Uni of Sydney to claim to be the best of the universities in Australia. This has been difficult for many staff to accept.

All universities now operate in a globally competitive market, and in such an environment each university is very concerned about its reputation. My university has traditionally enjoyed a high reputation, a reputation that has opened the door to opportunity, attracting the best students, benefactors, commercial partners and top staff.

Fundamentally, a university's reputation is based on excellence. However, universities such as mine have to realise that in the world today excellence nowadays has to be broadly defined and it is no longer enough for the university to rely for its reputation on the quality of its academic staff or the achievement levels of entering students. A university's reputation for

excellence must now include how well it performs on factors that have a lot to do with retaining students – factors such as the responsiveness of administration, the service quality we provide for student and the learning climate they experience. If there are problems with any of these then it will be difficult to retain students in their courses.

## TRANSITION PROCESS

### REVIEW #7 LATHAM & GREEN PAPER ....

#### **FIRST YEAR STUDENTS**

More students leave their university courses in their first year than in any other year. If nothing else, universities concerned about their reputation should be vitally interested in this and should be doing what they can to look after their new students. When a student complains to their parents or friends about the quality of the teaching they are receiving, the support the university is giving them or else the condition of the facilities at the university, this has the capacity to damage the university's reputation, no matter how excellent it may be in other respects. Nowhere is it more important for students to have confidence in an institution's commitment to their well-being than in the first year of study.

The majority of students new to higher education in Australia come straight to university from school. This change can be a frightening one and it may involve adjustments that they have not been well prepared for. Because of this these students are at risk of having an unsuccessful higher education experience.

So why is this transition from secondary school to university difficult for many students? A study was done at a major Australian university whereby students towards the end of their first year at uni were asked for their impressions. One aspect of this was the differences between secondary school & uni. There was a general consensus that studying at university is different from studying at secondary school. Overall, students expected to have to adapt to university life and most expected that this would be challenging. The responses indicate that students did indeed experience some difficulties adapting to university life, particularly at the beginning of their first year.

Differences were identified by students in relation to four main areas: academic, administrative, geographic, and personal.

## SLIDE 3

### Academic

Having to adapt to academic changes was perhaps the most challenging aspect of students' transition from secondary school to university. Students had to grapple with a new emphasis on independent learning with an increased workload. They also had to adjust to different grading structures and assessment, and adapt to their changed relationship with teachers.

### Administrative

Students are personally responsible for organising their own administrative matters at university. The first few weeks proved a challenge for students in terms of navigating their way around the huge campus, organising their timetables and finding information. Students recognised the need to be persistent in asking for assistance and found that they had to chase matters up for themselves:

### Geographic

The transition of many students is intensified if they move away from home to pursue their tertiary education, and even more so if they have to move from a rural area to the city. Many students had to adapt, not only to the university, but also to the wider city where the university was located and the diversity of its population

### Personal

#### ***Making friends***

At university, first year students are surrounded by a sea of unfamiliar faces. This can be quite confronting considering the fact that most have come from secondary schools where everyone knows one another. Making new friends is therefore among the most immediate pressures faced by first year students. How soon and how well they do this may depend on their personality. Most students make friends eventually, citing the need to come out of their shell and approach people.

None of this is easy for many new students. School leavers typically experience close monitoring of their performance by teachers, parents and peers. For many, the decline in attention at university is an abrupt jolt. Students in large, elite institutions such as the University of Sydney are especially likely to feel alienated.

Ten years ago a comprehensive national survey of first year students was conducted. It revealed some disturbing facts about Australian universities, including those with a reputation for being academically excellent. It showed that we were not treating our first year students well.

## **SLIDE 4**

- Barely half the students found their subjects interesting
- Only 53 per cent thought the staff were enthusiastic about the subjects they were teaching
- Less than half said that their teachers were good at explaining things

- Only 41 per cent thought there was a positive attitude towards learning amongst their fellow students
- Well over a quarter worked in isolation from their peers and were not interested in extra-curricular activities
- About 30 per cent were negative enough during the first semester to seriously consider deferring

This result shook every university in Australia to take some action. I am pleased to say this included the University of Sydney which had the largest intake of first year students in the country, with many of them coming straight from school.

What did Sydney Uni do?

## SLIDE 5

•1. To provide programs to ensure effective transition from school to university by developing new orientation programs and a student at risk program based on international best practice. Also to develop a scheme for visits to schools by outstanding lecturers.

•2. To develop and implement methods for enhancing the first year experience and to communicate the resulting improvements to prospective students, parents and teachers. This is to be done through the establishment of a project to identify problems in the first year experience including problems experienced by equity target group students and the implementation of solutions. Also by the development of means to make known positive effects of project to prospective students etc, especially in selective state schools.

This was easy to say, but more difficult to do.

Some problems that needed to be resolved included:

## SLIDE 6

- there was too big a break from school to university
- how to ensure that the experiences of all students in the first month of lectures are positive;

- how to reduce the current focus on covering course content, and instead encourage staff to focus on how students progress in their academic training – and on not letting students simply ‘sink or swim’;
- there was a recognition that teaching staff had a direct responsibility for the quality of their students’ learning experience, and that (given the traditional culture of the institution) there was a need for staff development to enhance awareness of this responsibility and to provide them with relevant support

**How were these and other issues resolved?**

Commenced by forming a FYE Working Group

## **SLIDE 7**

This First Year Experience Working Group was coordinated by the University’s Institute for Teaching & Learning and had representatives from every faculty (there are 18 faculties) and from several central units such as Student Services and the Library. Its task was to devise strategies to improve the experience, orientation and transition of first year students utilising the following key principles:

- 1) Students will be familiarised with the University’s physical environment, academic culture and support services.
- 2) Students’ sense of purpose and direction will be developed by promoting their understanding of what their courses involve; where their course will lead them; and what their learning in those courses will involve.
- 3) Students’ engagement with the University, including with their peers, will be promoted and supported.
- 4) Students’ learning will be enhanced by developing their knowledge and skills, including generic skills, and by taking into account students’ diverse backgrounds and abilities.

Out of the work of this group and from reviewing the literature a great many ideas were developed. Too many for listing here but they were detailed into various categories and I’ll give a sample of the areas in the next slide.

## SLIDE 8

### Ideas for strategies...

It is dangerous to make assumptions and think that what to you is common sense will occur consistently right across a large university. So it was important to generate as many ideas as possible and to reach agreement on what was desirable and achievable. These varied from very basic ones that some people thought everyone did (but everyone didn't do these) to others that were new for the institution.

Here are some of those possible strategies:

#### *Pre-enrolment and Enrolment strategies*

- Staff available to answer queries at and, where possible, before enrolment
- Unit of study information available at enrolment

#### *Orientation events*

- Staff wear name badges for first two weeks of semester

#### *Teaching strategies*

- All students should have expectations for what and how they are to study made clear at the outset
- Students should be given every opportunity to interact with each other even in large classes and lectures

#### *Teaching organisation*

- The best/ most experienced lecturers should teach first year
- The availability of library resources should be checked prior to the commencement of the course and communicated clearly to students



### *Study skills advice and assistance*

- Teaching and assessment of study/ generic skills should be integrated into all courses
- All students should have library orientations/tutorials

### *Provide advice according to student's needs*

- The possibility of individual consultation should be available for all first year students
- Staff should be friendly, treat students as adults and foster good staff student relationships

### *Assessment strategies*

- There should be fast and early feedback on progress
- Practice exercises and quizzes should be available including trial exams and tests with feedback

### *Social events*

- All students should have the opportunity to participate in social events specially organised by the Faculty, School or department and/or in collaboration with student organised events and activities.
- First year students should have the opportunity to meet students from other years socially within the faculty or department.

One of the main tasks of each Working Group faculty representative was then to develop a Faculty based First Year Experience Plan incorporating these key principles.

## **SLIDE 9**

### **FRM FYE PLAN**

[First part only]

While each faculty has its plan to assist its own first year students settle into university life, there is an accompanying broader initiative that is not faculty-based and it intends to assist all new students irrespective of the faculty they are in. This initiative is called SWOT, ...

## **SLIDE 10**

Sydney Welcome Orientation and Transition

SWOT is the Sydney Welcome Orientation and Transition Program designed to help all new students to get to know the University and its services.

Faculties, the Library and central student support service work together in the SWOT Program to assist students become familiar with the University.

The SWOT Program for enrolled undergraduate students begins with Orientation in the week prior to the commencement of the first teaching week and continues throughout your first year offering a wide range of student support activities.

The SWOT Orientation activities coincide with the University of Sydney Union O-Week, which provides an introduction to the cultural, social and sporting activities available at the University.

As part of SWOT, each student is invited to try a quick quiz

## **SLIDES 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16**

<b>MOTIVATION</b>			<b>WHERE TO GO IF YOU SAY 'NO'</b>
I am convinced I made the right choices in my course	yes	no	> 'Trading Places' workshop Careers Centre
I generally feel in control of things	yes	no	> 'Succeeding at Sydney' workshop 'Strategies for Successful Learning' lecture
I can cope with stress	yes	no	> 'Coping with Stress' workshop

<b>FRIENDS and CONTACTS</b>			<b>WHERE TO GO IF YOU SAY 'NO'</b>
I make friends easily.	yes	no	> 'Friends and Contacts' workshop
I have no worry about getting involved in Uni life.	yes	no	> 'Succeeding at Sydney' workshop
I know where to get support for personal crises or problems.	yes	no	> Counselling Service

<b>ACADEMIC SURVIVAL SKILLS</b>			<b>WHERE TO GO IF YOU SAY 'NO'</b>
I can take responsibility for my own learning.	yes	no	> 'Strategies for Successful Learning' lecture
I know what 'critical thinking' means.	yes	no	> 'Developing Critical Thinking Skills' lecture
I can express myself well in spoken English.	yes	no	> Learning Centre workshops
I consider my written English to be adequate for uni work.	yes	no	> 'Successful Essay / Report Writing' lecture Learning Centre workshops
I know what 'academic honesty' means	yes	no	> 'Collaborative Learning' lecture
I can take good notes when listening.	yes	no	> 'Lectures and how to use them' lecture
I can take good notes when reading.	yes	no	> Learning Centre workshops
My maths skills are adequate for my course.	yes	no	> Maths Bridging courses in February tel:9351 4061
I feel comfortable negotiating email and the Web.	yes	no	> Computer Access Centres
I have good word-processing skills.	yes	no	> Computer Access Centres
I know how uni libraries work.	yes	no	> Library tours & information sessions

GETTING ORGANISED			WHERE TO GO IF YOU SAY 'NO'
I am good at getting started on things I have to do	yes	no	> Counselling Service
I am good at managing my time.	yes	no	> 'Strategies for Successful Learning' lecture Counselling Service workshops
I can maintain the balance between study, paid work and having fun.	yes	no	> 'Succeeding at Sydney' workshop Counselling Service workshops
I can pay for my textbooks and course requirements	yes	no	> Financial Assistance Office information sessions

COMMUNICATING			WHERE TO GO IF YOU SAY 'NO'
I will feel at ease giving an oral presentation to a group.	yes	no	> Learning Centre workshops
I can contribute effectively to a team project.	yes	no	> 'Collaborative Learning' lecture
I feel confident about approaching academic staff.	yes	no	> Find your First Year Coordinator
I know where to go for information.	yes	no	> University website 'Friends and Contacts' workshop University Calendar and Student Centre

Staff need to be supportive of this program. Without the cooperation of staff then the aims of the FYE program are unlikely to succeed. For that reason several initiatives were developed:

These included a Vice-Chancellor's Forum on the FYE... all academics asked to attend; various speakers organised to explain the need for the FYE program and the importance of role of staff in the program succeeding, and explain the expectations of staff that the university has.

To assist staff, a checklist for lecturers of first year subjects was prepared:

## **SLIDES 17,18, 19, 20, 21**

Staff are told that this checklist does not deal with teaching practices in general, or with structuring their curriculum or content in a lecture. Instead, it concentrates on what they can do to support students' transition. It is a starting point for the first or introductory lectures in any subject, perhaps with follow up in weeks 2 and 3. Much of the checklist is straightforward and intuitive, and perhaps easy to forget in the pre-semester rush of preparing curriculum and materials. Subject coordinators are told that tutors or demonstrators in their subject should have the same information so that they are aware of what has been passed on to students, and can reinforce this in smaller classes

### **Transition checklist for lecturers of first year subjects**

- Be enthusiastic about your subject: students say that this makes a great difference in how they engage with their studies.
- Smile as you introduce yourself, and provide contact details - phone, email, office consultation hours, and let students know how they should address you.
- Take a few minutes at the start of class to allow students to introduce themselves to a person nearby, maybe asking each other why they chose your subject.
- Suggest they have a coffee with some of the group in their next free hour, and use the time to talk about the subject.
- Show that you care about students settling in smoothly by offering tips on how to avoid queues for books, getting to locations, getting help when needed etc.
- Show a map in PowerPoint or overhead to indicate where your office is and any other buildings that are relevant to the subject.
- Refer to any transition programs in your faculty/department and encourage them to attend.
- Know the background of your group: check into what the VCE prerequisites for your subject cover. (Perhaps get onto an examination panel to have first hand experience and let them know you are familiar with the work covered by referring to it.) Have all of your students studied your subject at high school level?
- Be thoroughly prepared: this helps with the nerves and creates a good environment where there is no confusion.
- Make your expectations of the students very clear. For example:
  - What behaviour do you expect of them in lectures?
  - Are there questions, discussion times or activities in your lectures?
  - What time commitment is needed in this subject?

- Do you expect them to read everything on the reading list each week?
- Should they do any follow up after the lecture?
- Do you like to be approached after the lecture, or in office hours only?
- Is it okay to contact you by email?

The Department of Information Systems has an example of a student/staff expectations document at <http://www.dis.unimelb.edu.au/pdf/expectations.pdf>

- ❑ Begin on a positive note. The old line of 'look at the student sitting at either side of you: one of you three will not be here next year' makes students feel as though some are being set up to fail. Every student has been selected for the course because they have the potential to succeed.
- ❑ Try to include an early feedback task in your subject; first year students find it difficult to gauge how they're going when they start tertiary study.
- ❑ Keep your subject homepage up to date and engaging; students appreciate using the web as a study and communications resource.

### ***DE students***

At this point I would like to turn my attention to a different group of students altogether. These are the students studying by distance education. In my country, these are given very little attention by government yet they should be because they offer enormous potential for the improvement of the nation.

DE students are typically older than the on-campus full time student, they are likely to already be in the workforce and they are likely to be studying part-time frequently for the purpose of furthering their career. These are people who often have a lot of valuable experience and who are often in the position to put into practice straight away the learning they gain from their higher education studies.

In addition to their study obligations, there are other important factors in the lives of the typical DE student that requires their attention and priorities. These are usually their employment and their family. It is because of this that they are very vulnerable to dropping out of their courses.

There are many reasons why a DE student will drop out of their course. These reasons have been classified into four areas.

## SLIDE 22

### Categories of persistence barriers

<p><b>Situational</b> - arise from a student's particular life circumstances, such as changed employment situation, changed marital status or having a baby.</p>	<p><b>Institutional</b> - difficulties students experience with the institution, such as admission requirements, course pacing, and limited support services.</p>
<p><b>Dispositional</b> - personal problems that impact on the student's persistence behaviour, such as their attitudes, confidence, learning styles and motivation.</p>	<p><b>Epistemological</b> - impediments caused by disciplinary content or else the relative perceived difficulty of that content.</p>

I did some research into this by interviewing a number of DE students about the factors that made it difficult for them with their studies and classified their responses into these categories. This is what I found:

## SLIDE 23, 24, 25, 26

### Barriers reported by category type

<p><b>Situational</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ poor family support</li> <li>• lack of free time</li> <li>• change in circumstances</li> <li>• took more time than expected</li> <li>• study not related to job</li> <li>◇ money problems</li> <li>* problem with study environment</li> </ul>	<p><b>Institutional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• problems with course schedule and pacing</li> <li>• learning materials arrived late</li> <li>• insufficient feedback on assignments</li> <li>• insufficient/unsatisfactory communication with academics</li> <li>• course focus and expectations not clear</li> <li>• missed contact with other students</li> <li>• inflexible course structure</li> <li>* problems getting academic to call back</li> <li>• course content was duplicated</li> <li>• course content was wrong/outdated</li> <li>• difficulty with residential schools</li> <li>• problems with additional resources</li> <li>• unit design and quality issues</li> <li>* bureaucratic bungling</li> </ul>
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	* confusing changes to course
<b>Dispositional</b> ◇ personal study problems * unclear goals * time management problems	<b>Epistemological</b> • difficult content/discipline mismatch (eg <i>I can't do maths; too much science; I can't understand law</i> ) ◇ mismatch in assessment requirements ◇ course too management orientated (note: the course is marketed to prospective students as management-focussed) • course not hands-on enough ◇ course focus lacked personal relevance or interest ◇ units offered were not those desired * lacked prerequisite knowledge

- common to both persisters and non-persisters
- ◇ mentioned by only non-persisters
- \* mentioned only by persisters

## **Finish**

You can see that there are not simple answers to this problem for student desertion as this is a complex and complicated matter. Different factors affect different students differently. There are many, many factors that need to be addressed and to do that there needs to be a comprehensive approach.

The Sydney University FYE program I have shared with you was an attempt to take a comprehensive approach to addressing student desertion in their first year. It was a response to the bad news all Australian universities received from that national study of first year students held in 1995.

In the ten years since, there has been both good and bad news.

## **SLIDE 27**

**GOOD NEWS** – universities have responded by having major shifts in policy and practice, particularly through developing and implementing programs for the first year students.



**BAD NEWS** – the number of students entering universities has increased, the size of classes has increased, the class contact hours per student has decreased, the student:staff ratio has increased, the cost to students of attending university has increased, the number of hours per week that full-time students spend in paid employment has increased

So where does this leave us? The context of higher education is changing constantly, and in order to reduce student desertion we need to continually monitor the situation and respond to emerging issues.

We need to know more:

## **SLIDES 28, 29**

The wider community of professional educators and educational administrators are seeking to share their learning in this area.

Conferences at the national and international levels.

What have we learned?

## **SLIDES 30, 31**

- students entering tertiary education for the first time are increasingly diverse;
- academic staff's expectations of new students' abilities and knowledge are often unrealistic, and some students discontinue as a result of pressures arising from this mismatch;
- having a sense of purpose and a belief in one's ability is related to student commitment and satisfaction;
- students are prepared to take responsibility for their own learning, provided that they feel supported (academically and socially) by the institution;
- students whose learning takes place in learning communities rather than only (or mainly) in large classes are more likely to persist and to succeed;
- finally, and related to the above, students' sense of being socially and

academically integrated is a critical factor affecting persistence and success.

But there is much more we need to know:

## **SLIDE 32**

### **MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- **Are the goals, study habits and levels of commitment of students changing?**
- **To what extent and in what ways have the problems of transition and adjustment experienced by students changed over the past few years?**
- **Has the quality of the student experience of learning and teaching improved?**
- **What factors currently contribute to student attrition and course change rates?**
- **What motivates some students to defer study?**
- **How are information and communications technologies and their implications for pedagogy and communication affecting student learning and engagement?**

**GRACIAS**