Effective transition for non-traditional students begins before the first year experience - A school to university co-enrolment approach to transition.

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Abstract

At a time when it is necessary to think creatively about effective ways to prepare, encourage and induct students from diverse backgrounds into higher education, it is important to focus on not just improving the first year experience, but also on the potential for schools and universities to work together to better construct the transition of these students across sectors and institutions to both build aspiration and to ensure future retention and success. This paper reports on a two-year co-enrolment project being undertaken at Victoria University with its neighborhood schools in the west of Melbourne. Firstly it looks at the development, implementation and review of a pilot project in 2014 that brought secondary students into the university in Years 11 and 12 to undertake university studies, and also on how the outcomes and learnings from this pilot continue to inform subsequent iterations of the program at Victoria University (VU).

Background

Evidence shows that if students from a low SES background get to university their background does not negatively affect their chances of completing the course (Marks, 2007). Later Homal and Ryan as cited in NCVER (2014) claim that:

Interactions between educational aspirations and student background characteristics do not seem particularly important, suggesting that aspirations have a similar impact on educational outcomes, regardless of SES or Indigenous status (p63).

There is an opportunity here for universities to work with schools to provide effective transition for students to build and support aspiration. Transition programs’ aims are twofold – preparing students for university by developing skills to support academic expectations, and debunking myths about who should or should not enter university. This is described by Behrendt et al (as cited in Naylor et al, 2013) as “unlocking capacity and empowering choices.”

In response to this opportunity, VU’s Early Uni. Pathways (EUP) program, drawing from current transition pedagogy in the field, works with schools to encourage and support the move from school to university by building aspiration, preparing for different ways of knowing and by scaffolding transition to meet the challenge of providing increased access, support and success for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

The Victoria University and partner schools Early-Uni Pathways program

In 2014 Victoria University worked with four schools with low SES demographics in a Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funded transition pilot program, but not surprisingly these schools’ students’ backgrounds were non-traditional in
multiple ways (CALD, refugee, first in family, LSES). Fifty-five Year 11s and nine Year 12s from three schools took part in Early–Uni. Pathways in 2014. In 2015 numbers are planned to treble (160 Yr.11s and 24 Yr. 12s) when more schools (8) are included and when university units and Victorian Certificate of Education)VCE subjects are aligned to offer dual credits into university and the VCE.

Influences on the development of the program

Victoria University has a partnership arrangement with the University of Texas in El Paso (UTEP) which, like Victoria University, is located in an area of economic disadvantage with a good proportion of students from NESB and LSES backgrounds. The success of the Early College High School (ECHS) programs in their region to both provide increased access for students as well as increased success through co-enrolment in school and college, prompted us to explore the possibilities for our region. Students who undertook ECHS co-enrolment in College and High school have proven to be very successful in the performance in subsequent HE study. The Hanover Report (2013) states:

> Recent studies have demonstrated that students who enroll in dual credits perform better in college than those who did not take the courses in high school’ and that ‘at-risk students who participate in early college programs maintain high levels of participation and engagement throughout high school and are more likely than non-participating at-risk peers to ultimately graduate (p.5).

We looked also at various Australian models of school- to- university transition programs and found many that introduced and involved students in university experiences but none co-enrolled students in Year 11. A number enrolled Yr.12 students in the Victorian Higher Education Studies subjects sometimes with an acceleration rather than transition focus, although it is likely that both approaches had positive transition outcomes. Across the sectors there are many successful programs emerging requiring collaboration that recognize the benefit of blurring the lines between secondary and tertiary education such as the Bridges to Education Program undertaken by Sydney Basin Universities (Macquarie, Sydney, UTS, UWS and ACU), the Victorian Learn, Experience, Access Professions (LEAP) and CQ University Widening Participation to name a few.

In the face of these different approaches, it was helpful to look at Trevor Gale’s Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach (DEMO) an outcome of a 2008 DEEWR funded research project ‘Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students’. This examined the nature and extent of programs, interventions, and outreach activities targeting pre–Year 11 students in Australian universities. Although our work was centered in the Year 11-Year 12 years, we found the matrix useful in validating our own approach. In this study Gale examines a range of transition programs ranging from university visits, university enrichment and/or interventions, programs targeting the talented; university tasters and exposes. He extrapolates from a meta-analysis of the data, a matrix for designing and evaluating early interventions. Gale’s findings showed that some of the more positive characteristics of such programs included:

- bringing middle-year students onto a university campus to experience a (modified) university teaching experience, which draws on their lifeworld knowledge.
- *Programs that aim to familiarise students with university ... the better forms are those that involve extended interactions with universities and university staff and students (p.10).*

Looking at existing programs and successful indicators, there seemed to be a place for a program that involved authentic university study through co-enrolment as a means of raising aspiration and inducting students into university.

### What did the VU program look like?

When designing the program we developed a program architecture that involved four layered and integrated streams that would allow us to develop a coherent, nuanced approach to our work.

- Curriculum to Curriculum alignment (Yr 11 with a University unit)
- Student to Student support (involvement of university peer support program)
- Teacher to Teacher collaboration (school and uni teachers, and curriculum advisors)
- Institution to Institution alignment (acknowledgement of effects of habitus)

The program includes both a Year 11 and a Year 12 component with a non-award unit undertaken in Year 11, and two HE units undertaken in Year 12 as part of the students’ school VCE program, but for the purposes of this presentation I am going to look mainly at the Year 11 program as this is the most developed at this point.

In 2014, 49 Year 11 students from three pilot schools undertook an 8 week, specifically designed learning unit constructed as an hour lecture for all and a two hour tutorial once a week. There was also an optional real-time chat session for an hour per week on another day. Students were bussed in and out of the university campus for the on-campus session. Students from different schools were mixed together across three tutorial groups. The teaching incorporated the study of theories on ‘social capital’ and ‘education for health’ and then moved into an applied project involving students working in small groups. It culminated in a series of presentations to the university and school communities. Students were enrolled in the university, received student IDs to access university resources, and were inducted into the university on-line learning system, where lectures and resources were uploaded and discussion boards and on-line chats were conducted. Student peer mentors from the university assisted students with the program helping with pragmatic needs around getting onto the university systems, facilitating engagement activities, supporting the small groups with their projects and providing an ongoing source of information and support about life as a university student. The content of the learning unit designed by university staff was informed by the school teaching staff who prioritized independent learning and university approaches to learning, including introduction to learning and applying theoretical concepts. It was clear to them also that it was about learning, a way of getting to know…. not just an experience.

### What were the direct Outcomes of the 2014 pilot?

In Year 11 41 of the 47 students finished the course with 4 withdrawing midway and two who did not finish their assessment. All completers were successful in passing the unit.

Research to date has involved a mixed methods approach targeting the views of students, teachers and leaders before, during and after the program. It also looks at the policies, practices and history of the institutions involved and attempts to identify the contributing factors of the design, practice and outcomes of the project in the success or otherwise of the
project. Initial interviews surfaced students’ lack of experience of university study; a fear that they would be seen as ‘kids’ by the other university students although they were in separate classes; various levels of concern that they may not cope with the expectations; various degrees of feeling ready; hesitation and excitement about attending a university campus; worry that it was outside their comfort zone and concern with working with strangers from other schools. Post interviews generally displayed considerable confidence in their ability to navigate the university itself and pride in getting to know it through their projects in a way they hadn’t envisaged (university collaborations with the community); an enjoyment in working with and getting to know students from other schools; an excitement about the learning program itself and how university was different to school but also seeing strong links with some content and skills covered at school. Students professed that the program took away their ‘fear of university’ and reinforced or strengthened their desire for a university education. Teachers of the university program as well as contact staff and leadership of the three schools were also interviewed before and after the Year 11 and Year 12 programs. From these and student inputs, issues are currently being teased out and some interesting insights are emerging. Of the 41 Year 11 students from 2014, 15 are taking up Year 12 university subjects in 2015 and others were at pains to say that although a university unit didn’t fit their Year 12 schedules they would resume university studies in 2016.

What VU learnt from the program

The study reinforced our original notions that:

- a shift in student identity can be made in this time, and can act as an indicator of success;
- that there are distinct benefits in building on institutional experience in curriculum design for transitioning students.
- an awareness of the importance of bringing the higher education habitus closer to the familial/school habitus of the students (Bourdieu as cited in Thomas, 2002 p.438)

It also gave rise to new considerations that need to be integrated into future models:

- An identified need to integrate students’ university study into their school load more successfully and overtly.
- The importance for students to find commonality between their school work and their university work.
- That student mentors play a very positive part of the experience for the students.
- The importance of supporting students in their academic skills, especially in the various Year 12 studies needs to be explicitly addressed.
- The potential to have university and school staff work together on course advice.

Most importantly, the pilot taught us that the interface between schools and the university is more important than what happens in either institution. This locale is rich with potential but it has to be truly transformational to create real opportunity for individual students. As Liz Thomas (2010) states there are a wide variety of reasons institutions may wish to increase diversity including funding, new markets, social justice, policy, and staff commitment. However, institutions can respond to student diversity in different ways. Thomas (2011) notes:

the idealized types are: altruistic (no institutional change), academic (little or no change), utilitarian (special access and additional support mechanism) and transformative (positive view of diversity resulting in institutional development) p.10.

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We see the last of these as the real challenge in our work going forward. Universities need to respond, adapt and co-create the transitional interface in ways that recognizes and values the students’ position in the learning experience. They are students whose learning and home experience have shaped their views and who don’t necessarily see university education as their future; who have commitments to school, work and family; who may be positioned to find university learning as very different and potentially irrelevant and may rely less on their family social capital and more heavily on the support of their schools for shaping their future. The same assumptions we make about first year students may not apply to students who have not traditionally expected to attend university. We have to not just work around these characteristics but embrace the reality and work with schools to create a path for these students to access, and be successful in university learning and life.

References


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**Potential discussion points.**

1. What do others see as the benefits and limitations of providing a so called authentic learning experience as a successful way of facilitating school to university transition?
2. What approaches do others see as working well in the school-university interface?
3. ‘Furthermore, it indicates that students are more likely to persist within an educational institution that does not require them to radically deviate from their habitus’ (Thomas 2010 P 439). In your experience, knowledge or opinion, how important is the notion of institutional habitus to successful transition? Is it then feasible or even desirable to blur the line between school and university?

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