

A pilot transition program for first year students attending Shepparton Campus

prepared by Iris Perkins and Donna Baldwin, May 2008

Reference Group

A cross-campus Reference Group of interested managers of student support services, and Shepparton Campus academic staff was established to oversee the pilot project (see Appendix I). Ongoing students with vivid memories of their first days at University were also consulted during the planning stages.

Program Concept

The concept of the program began with discussion about how it might best be delivered. While many of the Reference Group were eager to support the adoption of a web based vehicle, local academic staff highlighted the difficulties Shepparton Campus students often face in accessing such technology, including historically lower rates of computer ownership and regional Victoria's lower access rates to broadband internet services. It was decided that the program's accessibility (and potential success) would benefit from less dependence on technology and an increased emphasis on supporting the students' cultural transition. This decision underpinned the design of a two-pronged program: on-campus sessions (OWeek) and the production of a stand alone, yet interactive resource CD (*Transition 2008: resources for new students*).

An appreciation of the current local Campus experience was identified as a vital component to the program meeting the needs of newly enrolling students. Specifically, it was decided to employ the program's Research Assistant from the current student body in the belief that this appointment would imbue *Transition 2008* with the freshness of the student perspective. This proved to be one of the most critical elements of the program's success.

Program Design

Program staff felt that students would most engage with the program if they could identify with its production and delivery. This belief shaped the decision to include student participation as much as possible in the program's design, content and implementation.

Current Shepparton students were invited to participate in a filmed interview that would enable them to share their experiences of beginning University and form part of the program's content. Without exception these students were generous, articulate and thoughtful in their participation. Members of academic staff were also invited to participate in filmed interview sessions. These local *vox pops* added an authenticity that significantly enhanced the integrity of the CD resource.

The finished CD product was also greatly enhanced by the engagement of outsourced professional graphic design, filming and editing services. Though the University itself employs staff in these roles, it can sometimes be difficult for regional campuses to access, negotiate and liaise with metropolitan-based departments. Notwithstanding, local providers proved to be instrumental in delivering a polished and professional product with strong visual appeal. Another challenge faced by program staff included the enormous investment of time necessary to deliver a project of this kind. Although *Transition 2008* received a HEESP grant, applicants significantly underestimated the hours required to complete a program of this nature. (see Appendix 2)

Program Implementation

The delivery of the program revolved around a four day OWeek that supported, reflected and expanded much of the content of the 'take-home' CD *Transition 2008: resources for new students*.

Students were welcomed to the University at an official Campus ceremony that included support from the local community: an Elder offered an indigenous Welcome to Country followed by a civic welcome from the City's Mayor. The presence of these dignitaries was complemented by the screening of a pre-recorded welcome from the University's Vice Chancellor. The civic component of the program continued with community guest speakers in the careers session, an information from Centrelink and entertainment by Word and Mouth. Cross-campus guests were also supportive of our program; Julianne East (ESL Academic Skills, Bundoora), Shannon Kerrigan (Access and Equity, Bendigo) and Anne Stansfeld (Careers, Bundoora).

Seven academic transition sessions ran during OWeek and included purely motivational seminars, practical computer laboratories, academic skills sessions and University

'enculturation' presentations. Intertwined with these more formal sessions were many informal opportunities to meet and mingle including icebreaker sessions, casual meals and other social events.

Evaluation

The first evaluation was in the form of a participation survey completed by students during the last day of the program. Academic staff were invited to provide feedback to the coordinators. The Reference Group met by teleconference to explore aspects that were well received and to discuss possible alterations to next year's program. A further mid-semester survey allowed students to give comments with hindsight.

Results

New enrolments for 2008 undergraduates at Shepparton Campus numbered approximately 75. Of these 12 returned the initial survey forms and 62 responded to the mid-semester survey. We estimate that 50 attended Transition sessions (exact numbers were not recorded at each session). The first day was very well attended with numbers dropping off as the week progressed. Perhaps the official nature of the 'welcome' compelled some to attend while later in the week work commitments and childcare availability were issues that affected attendances. Despite this, those who attended overwhelmingly indicated the transition sessions were worthwhile. Of most value to the students were the computer sessions and the campus tours. A session conducted by Julianne East, *How to succeed in first year*, was also particularly well received with many comments as to its usefulness.

Academic staff noted that in the first week of semester they were able to identify those who had not attended *Transition 2008*. These were the students who needed extra assistance or who simply looked baffled. "They were visibly lost and it took them a few weeks to catch up" (Bev Guest-Smith, Nursing coordinator) There were far fewer problems with students not being able to access the computer network than in past years. Another observation has been more inter-faculty socialisation between students this year. This could be that the early icebreaker sessions allowed students to get to know each other.

Recommendations

The Shepparton Campus 08 Transition Program could be used as a template for other regional campuses. Copies of the CD were sent to Orientation Week coordinators at each campus and also to librarians working on developing a resources CD for off-shore students.

It is recommended that the CD be updated for the 2009 Orientation program. If there is sufficient expertise and resources available, the information contained in the CD could be transformed into webpages accessed from a link on the Shepparton Campus page. With input from educational designers, marketing personnel, graphic designers and further production of video clips, such a site could be promoted to students on enrolment, well prior to OWeek.

It is not recommended that a WebCT/LMS unit be created for Transition given the beginning of semester access problems with the system for the past two years. Students do not all have passwords before semester begins.

The Transition program should be run along similar lines to 2008 but with more emphasis on practical academic skills and expectations of university following on from the success of the quite general session run by Julianne East. It would be worth running more specific sessions on essay writing, time management and referencing.

We believe that a formal Civic Welcome could be held at a city council venue to begin OWeek. Together with the mayor, indigenous elders and an ecumenical component this ceremony could form the first function of the program with other sessions held on campus.

Support received from the Student Guild was valuable in that they arranged and financed social opportunities during OWeek designed to compliment the Transition program. It was expected that the newly appointed Student Services Officer employed from a Student Guild HEESP grant would have commenced prior to OWeek but this was not the case. If this position is to continue in 2009, there are further opportunities to expand the range of social activities and the supervision of the practicalities of the transition program (eg. meeting guest speakers).

The Shepparton Campus will need to commit significant resources to ensure that Transition 2009 is improved by these recommendations. The program should become a part of usual campus activities as the value to commencing students has been clearly demonstrated.