



# KIFT ALTC SENIOR FELLOWSHIP: ARTICULATING A TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

COMMENTARY ON FIRST YEAR  
CURRICULUM CASE STUDIES:  
DIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

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01. **D**r Stuart Levy is the coordinator of Monash University's Diploma of Tertiary Studies (DoTS), which provides a pathway into Monash degrees for applicants who have not met the university's conventional entry requirements. Students utilising the pathway are primarily the first in family to attend university, are drawn from low socio-economic backgrounds, and come from regions of Victoria that exhibit significant patterns of educational disadvantage. Since 2001, he has been the principal staff member responsible for the design and delivery of two non-disciplinary specific core subjects that seek to provide students with the skills and attitudes considered necessary for effective engagement and academic success.

## THE FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PERSPECTIVE

02. **H**ow we go about encouraging our students to become learners is as significant in the first year of higher education as what we set out to teach them in terms of disciplinary content. The stated aspirations of the sector identify desirable graduate attributes that reflect both the specifics of content and generic capacities that relate to the graduates' relationship with knowledge itself.

03. The challenge for first year curricula and pedagogy then becomes articulating programs that satisfy both of these requirements, regardless of discipline. An appreciation of graduate attributes deserves to be the starting point for a revised first year pedagogy, as we should care what types of graduates and citizens our students become. Nonetheless, first year tertiary education should have as its focus the types of learners who are most likely to be successful.

04. One of the consequences of the 'massification' of the tertiary education sector has been that 'student diversity' is no longer a localised phenomenon and instead

constitutes the mainstream institutional experience. The 'typical' student, if he or she ever existed, has become less easily identifiable amid the ranks of commencing students. First year enrolments are now marked by a lack of uniformity in interests, expectations, capacities and motivation. Most (sadly, not all) new students desire to become graduates, but the paths that they take are necessarily moderated by where they have come from and what they bring with them. As a consequence, the first year curriculum of the 21st century needs to be responsive to student diversity in order to cultivate a degree of uniformity in certifiable standards of learning and excellence.

05. Desirable core curriculum components include:

- practices that encourage engagement
- scaffolded learning
- explicit instruction in necessary educational (or academic) skills
- the provision of 'insider knowledge' on how successfully to navigate higher education
- pastoral care
- a strong sense of community
- a clear sense of manageable challenge and appropriate rewards
- formative and supportive assessment practices
- an induction into the culture, and disciplinary subcultures, of the academy
- staff who are engaged and engaging teachers
- for on-campus enrolments, an emphasis on face-to-face teaching and learning.

## THE CASE STUDIES

06. **I**t is perhaps an unnecessary observation that each of the commissioned case studies incorporates a majority of features considered desirable in first year programs. Within their own contexts, each of them assists students with transition and engagement through practices necessary to become successful students and



later graduates. They utilise a variety of exemplary teaching practices to mediate and address the learning challenges confronted by a diverse range of first year learners. For these achievements, each of the contributors is to be highly and thoroughly commended. The reflections that follow identify practices within individual case studies that clearly articulate initiatives intended to accommodate student diversity in first year curriculum design.

### SCIENCE (BIOLOGY) CASE STUDY (GLEESON, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE)

07. This case study exemplifies an underpinning transition philosophy that facilitates the formation of student-staff and peer-to-peer study and social interactions, enacted through the provision of week 1 tutorials, despite the absence of content material. This provides an opportunity for students and staff to become known to each other and endeavours to make clear that there is as much support at university as at school for independent learners who seek it.

08. In common with most other case studies, there are embedded trigger points to facilitate early intervention strategies for students who have not demonstrated successful transition, integration or engagement. Importantly, there is an acknowledged need for some students to unlearn 'strategies for learning carried over from school' in order to become independent and lifelong learners. This is significant as it recognises diversity among student capacities and attitudes and acknowledges that some students may not recognise, or perhaps resist, the need to change their approaches to learning. Rewarding talented first year students with program specific prizes is an effective strategy to recognise success through which engagement can be encouraged and appropriate conduct can be modelled.

### ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (EXPLORATIONS) CASE STUDY (MARCHBANK AND FEE, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY)

09. This Canadian case study articulates a unique form of first year education designed as a foundation for future academic success, rather than specific disciplinary or vocational content. It is conceptualised as promoting amongst students the requisite skills, attitudes and abilities to be successful at university. Student diversity is addressed through recognition of the necessity, in both design and delivery, to meet the needs of different kinds of learners from a range of family and educational backgrounds.

10. A 'student-friendly' pedagogy, concerned with learning processes, is practiced within a learning community model with generous student access to staff and a cohort model ideal for the identification and delivery of pastoral care. Content, delivery and assessment is intended to speak to students with different abilities and preferences and to engage them in their individual zones of proximal development. Importantly for the engagement of a diverse student body, an emphasis is placed upon fostering individual commitments to learning through an emphasis upon face-to-face learning. The program is sequential across a full year with Semester 2 activities building upon the skills and knowledge covered in Semester 1.

### APPLIED SCIENCES (TECHONE) CASE STUDY (FEE AND MCCracken, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY)

11. The provision of introductions to library and support services staff during class time is intended to assist students to orient themselves to university cultural practices and conventions. This assists in the delivery

of an integrated learning experience that links curriculum with appropriate support services (to which could be added those staff responsible for program administration).

12. A cohort model with small classes is utilised to build robust peer-to-peer and staff-student relationships in a personalised learning environment to create an engaging student experience. These relationships also provide an opportunity for timely interventions with high retention and progression rates following. Collaborative assessment projects are further utilised for 'bringing students together with wide-ranging abilities and interests'. The use of graduate student teaching assistants in both design and delivery of the program provides the opportunity for student voices to be incorporated and 'ideal' behaviours to be modelled.

## WRITING AND COMMUNICATION (BILBY) CASE STUDY (RADBOURNE AND LEROSSIGNOL, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY)

13. Knowledge of student cohort demographics underpins the design and delivery of this virtual learning environment. Clear links are made between the students' previous experiences and the learning experiences at university to provide a platform for engagement. Student diversity is further catered for through a variety of delivery techniques at different sites, with pedagogy centred upon a recognition of diverse learning styles. The multimedia delivery format is recognised as requiring customisation of the technology, content, instructions and activities to the learners.

## EDUCATION CASE STUDY (HEALY, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY)

14. This program is explicitly designed to assist students in their transition into the nature of university learning in which

transition is recognised as a mediated and supported process that occurs over time. The development of learning communities is promoted by embedding opportunities for active and interactive learning, peer-to-peer collaboration and staff-student interaction. There is also recognition of a need to 'de-school' students in order to better match their expectations of university learning with the realities of what will be required. Underpinning much of this is an appreciation of the need to know about, and explicitly manage, student diversity within the first year intake. This approach is fully in tune with the First Year Curriculum Design Principles, which note:

*First year curriculum design should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students. First year curriculum design should recognise that students have special learning needs by reason of their social, cultural and academic transition. Diversity is often a factor that further exacerbates transition difficulties [not for individual students, but for the measures put in place]. The first year curriculum should take into account students' backgrounds, needs, experiences and patterns of study and few if any assumptions should be made about existing skills and knowledge. 'Diversity' in this context includes, for example:*

- membership of at-risk groups
- widening participation (for example, non-traditional cohorts)
- students existing skills and knowledge; and
- patterns and timing of engagement with the first year curriculum (for example, mid-year entry).

15. Accommodating diversity should ideally be part of both curriculum design and pedagogy. Teaching staff present themselves as partners within a community of practice and learning and thereby encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and to reflect on how they learn effectively. (A master-apprentice model of university learning, still held by some senior staff, requires revision so as to cultivate greater opportunities for diverse student groups to make personal investments in their university learning.)



## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CASE STUDY (NELSON, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY)

16. This program acknowledges that the dominant factor in effective student transition is a full year — two semesters — of exposure to the academic environment. Nonetheless, it is also acknowledged that what happens prior to students arriving at university can also be influential. This alerts us to the continued need for tertiary institutions to work closely with the secondary school sector in order to cultivate an orderly transition experience for all students.

17. Transition and engagement need to be a managed and monitored process involving academic staff in alerting the appropriate support services or providing a referral service. The ‘siloeing’ of students into discrete subjects for privacy reasons, however, inhibits the development of holistic practices that could more effectively address student diversity and student engagement. It often means there are difficulties appreciating how students are progressing within a program of study until the collation of grades at the end of teaching periods.

18. Learning style diversity is recognised through flexible teaching and assessment practices that model appropriate and desirable academic behaviours and literacy. This is supported through extended contact time, particularly in small class settings, which ‘somewhat negate the need for supplementary sessions’ and are ideal for addressing student diversity. These are, however, vulnerable to budgetary conceptions that privilege a one-model-funds-all approach to teaching.

## LAW CASE STUDY (WESTCOTT, JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY)

19. To overcome a recognised diversity among commencing students, and to avoid initial information overload, important orientation week (O-week) activities,

skills development and information have been extended and embedded into the first weeks of class time. These steps complement a student-centred ‘whole of first year’ approach that seeks to overcome the compartmentalisation of curriculum and learning practices. Underpinning these initiatives are identified sets of core student skills and capacities, learning outcomes, teaching settings, and assessment practices that are constructively aligned across subjects to create an integrated first year learning experience.

20. Student engagement is encouraged through the uniform presentation of study materials, weekly and subject learning outcomes, a focus on the development of discipline specific skills and attributes, the provision of criteria based assessment matrices, and low-stakes formative assessment. Some assessment components have been designed to assess students on the work they would be required to complete to be prepared for classes — in essence modelling and rewarding appropriate student engagement practices.

21. A reduction in content provides opportunities within class time to embed support staff and program administrative staff engagements to enhance skills development and student ownership of study programs. The use of technology for video-streaming subjects across campuses is deferred until later years of the degree so that students can expect three hours of face-to-face teaching on a weekly basis.

## ADDITIONAL COMMENT ON THIS PERSPECTIVE

22. **T**he massification of tertiary education has encouraged participation by increasing numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Many have a vocational view of tertiary education without any clear sense of the academic cultural practices and principles with which they are being asked to engage. It then becomes incumbent upon first year programs to introduce and

educate these students about the culture of higher education, as it is in this last that many of the necessary skills for success are embedded and encoded. In doing so, students are empowered to decode and recode the culture of higher education for themselves. Addressing student diversity requires programs or program components that make explicit the cultural practices of the university sector that has particular approaches to writing, thinking and conduct. This sensitivity also needs to acknowledge disciplinary differences with the advent of much interdisciplinary learning. It is in this area — the rivalries between faculties and disciplines — that significant obstacles to creating uniform first year teaching experiences remain.

23. Additional staff time (a resource) should be allocated to first year teaching in order to incorporate specific skills acquisition and development sessions into the curriculum. Car park ('commuter') students are unlikely to commit additional time to voluntary sessions: a hangover from school attitudes about 'what's set' and 'what's not'. There is a pervasive view, strengthened by

an emerging user pays mentality, that if something is important it will be part of the program of study.

24. Good teachers are friendly, supportive, motivating, respected, can relate to their students, students can relate to them, and are, most importantly, available. There needs to be greater institutional recognition that first year teaching staff need time for contact with students if transition and engagement are to be nourished and differences mediated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students who are committed to transition, engagement and success desire face-to-face, formal contact with staff and peers and are frustrated by structural and institutional practices that limit such opportunities. Students are also concerned about summative assessment for ranking

purposes, a hangover from their secondary school experiences in attaining a university position, and require clear explanation of formative assessment practices.

25. Staff need to appreciate where their students have come from in order to scaffold their learning for the acquisition of the requisite literacies to become effective independent and lifelong learners. Good staff also model preferred/required behaviours and allow students to observe such behaviours in operation. Class environments in which the teacher-student relationship is concealed behind a partnership model of directed learning provide opportunities for students to become confident learners. Minimising perceived notions of continual evaluation

allows students with diverse capacities the opportunity to 'risk' engaging with the preferred learning styles of the university.

26. If effective student transition and engagement is recognised as taking a full year to achieve, then institutional measures to ensure this should be embedded within and across first year programs. During this time, learning should principally be

face-to-face in order to encourage students to 'become transitioned' and engaged through the cultivation of a personal commitment to tertiary study.

27. Timetabling of both classes and assessment to avoid clashes is often overlooked but has a significant impact on students' learning experiences. Administrative attitudes and faculty rivalries that shift the focus of timetabling away from students do little to enhance the prospects of diverse student groups developing a sense of engagement or commitment to their studies or institutions.

28. The random allocation of students to tutorial or lab classes has often been considered a mechanism for integration, however it breaks down whatever

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pre-existing relationships and peer networks may exist amongst students. It also stifles opportunities to build upon fledgling associations developed during O-week. In seeking to treat all students equally we potentially further jeopardise the engagement of the most vulnerable and isolated.

29. Innovation, pedagogical reform, and staff enthusiasm and commitment all flourish under the application of flexible budgets and workload formulas that acknowledge the importance and challenges of first year teaching. The application of rigid budgetary and workload formulas across the entire undergraduate experience, which see first year students treated equally to final year students (who should be closer to the ideal of an independent and lifelong learner reflecting the graduate attributes of their institution) is manifestly inequitable. To effectively address the diversity among first year students in order to cultivate engaged and committed learners, class time with peers and staff should be a central feature of on-campus first year programs.

30. The diversity that now characterises first year student cohorts makes it important to introduce the university's desired learning and thinking practices in an explicit, directed and integrated manner. In this way students, during their first year, become aware of what these practices involve (declarative knowledge), how these practices may be deployed (procedural knowledge) and when and why these practices should be used (conditional knowledge). To explicitly address diversity among first year learners it is necessary, within their programs of study, to deconstruct university learning so that the students may reconstruct themselves as engaged, committed and successful learners.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

31. Addressing student diversity in order to make the first year experience more rewarding and engaging for all students continues to be a challenge. The sector has to grapple with how to be more accommodating and supportive of the enormous diversity among students whilst maintaining a clear picture of the types of graduates it seeks to produce. In essence, the challenge of diversity is how to make the transformative experience of higher education alluring, attractive and engaging to new types of students.

Ruth Wallace (2008), 'Reluctant learners: Their identities and educational experiences', *National Centre for Vocational Education Research*, provides some interesting insights, employing identity as an analytical lens through which to examine educational engagement.

ChanMin Kim (2008), 'Using email to enable e3 (effective, efficient, and engaging) learning', *Distance Education*, 29(2), 187–198, continues the sector's examination of technology as a viable engagement tool for distance education and hybrid programs.

Practices within Monash University's *Diploma of Tertiary Studies* pathway, which has been successfully engaging on-campus students over almost ten years, are reported in S. Levy & H. Campbell (2008), 'Promoting motivation and engagement among academically at risk students', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 9(2), 17–25.

32. Whilst diversity among students and institutions suggests 'model' solutions will remain elusive, the six First Year Curriculum Design Principles at the heart of this Fellowship provide a solid foundation upon which to create contextually appropriate strategies.

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Further resources developed under this ALTC Senior Fellowship, *Articulating a Transition Pedagogy*, are available at

<http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/first-year-experience-and-curriculum-design>