

**Factors that affect student transition from Year 12 to the first year of  
university:**

**A case study of Arts undergraduates at Monash University**

**(KANTT97.387)**

**S. Tanya Kantanis**

**Monash University**

**A paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education  
Conference**

**Brisbane (November 30 – December 4 1997)**

**Abstract**

*Literature in the field of transition<sup>¾</sup> the process of change that occurs when students progress from Year 12 to the first year of university<sup>¾</sup> largely consists of specialised studies that tend to isolate and dissect pertinent factors; few writers have embraced the issue's global nature. This paper, based on research that was carried out at Monash University, recognises, appreciates and explores the complex interactive nature of the elements that pertain to transition and advocates a more holistic approach to the issue. The academic arena remains the main focus, with three other interrelated factors: environment, finances and socialisation noted as fields that are problematic for first year students, particularly Arts undergraduates, in making the transition.*

*From the research, and confirmed through the literature, serious concerns were registered in relation to limitations in the academic arena. More significantly, the results highlighted an area of concern that has received scant attention in the literature<sup>¾</sup> socialisation as an influential dimension in effecting a successful transition. In that, poor socialisation into the university environment and culture actively operates as a disincentive<sup>¾</sup> with serious repercussions<sup>¾</sup> for students facing the challenges of transition.*

## Introduction

The shift in the tertiary sector from elitist to mass education institutions of higher education appears to have exacerbated the difficulties of students attempting to make the transition to first year university. In attempting to come to grips with these changes much has been written about the factors that affect the process of transition from Year 12 to the first year of university, especially those related to the academic domain—ability, motivation, commitment, persistence, et cetera. Attention has been also been paid (in descending order) to financial, environmental and social factors as significant determinants for students in effecting a successful transition. Concentration in the literature is on specialised studies; few writers have embraced the global nature of transition. To examine the elements of the transition process as disparate and dislocated is to devalue both the discrete and interrelated impact they have upon the intricately interwoven web of contradictions known generically as ‘the first year university student’. The issue of transition needs to be considered as a holistic integration of these factors in order to meet student needs, facilitate the development of students as independent learners, and enable first year students to make the transition from the secondary to the tertiary sector successfully.

It was with the view of exploring this basic premise that transition should be considered in a holistic manner that I undertook a study targeting students of English in the Faculty of Arts at the Clayton campus of Monash University. From the research, and confirmed through the literature, serious concerns were registered in relation to limitations in the academic area, this, however, did not appear to be the main determinant of students’ successful transition from Year 12 to the first year of university. The results highlighted an area of concern that has received scant attention in the research—a heavy bias toward the significance of socialisation at, and into the culture of, university as most influential in effecting a successful transition. Factors such as the impersonal nature of universities as reflected by the indifferent attitude of many academics toward students, and an inability to establish a friendship network at university actively operate as disincentives that can have serious repercussions for students in facing the challenges of transition.

## Methodology

The information-gathering procedures used in this study included the design, development and implementation of a suitable questionnaire for first year Arts undergraduates. In addition to data collation through formal means, anecdotal information was amassed through informal conversations with students and members of the Department of English. Data collected verbally were interpreted with due cognisance being given to oral cues such as tone, volume, et cetera and either complementary or conflicting non-verbal behaviour.

The informal data gathering, in relation to both students and staff, has been ongoing. In fact, it has continued well beyond the life of the study. In interacting with both students and staff, I

found it more valuable to be in the receptive mode of listening rather than the productive mode of speaking. Students, particularly, found it easy to talk about their experiences knowing that as a former secondary school teacher I understood and appreciated the educational environment from which they had come and the changes that they were experiencing. Our discussions tended to occur spontaneously either before or after class; students who understood my research role came to 'chat' long after the end of first semester. Conversations with staff occurred at different times, in different forums and with different agendas. Some conversations were more formal than others were, some required more diplomacy than others did, all have been invaluable in the insights they provided. Being a shrewd observer of human nature was a powerful tool in helping to reinforce what I heard in conversation and read in the survey responses.

The analysis of the data was completed using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Multiple-item indicator questions were utilised in the survey to reinforce the validity of responses. This was achieved through the use of structured, scaled questions and unstructured, open-ended questions. The decision to use these two questioning techniques in the design of the questionnaire was quite deliberate. The intention was to produce data that would generate quantifiable results able to stand as hard evidence. This purpose was fulfilled by the design of scaled questions which: explored the complexity of a concept, enabled valid measures to be developed, increased reliability, facilitated greater precision, and by summarising the information into one variable simplified the analysis. Further to this, through the use of unstructured, open-ended questions respondents were encouraged to offer their own views, feelings and experiences without being constrained by any possible inherent limitation in the variables of the scaled questions. Despite the difficulty of precise analysis, and the fact that such questions do not confront the respondent such questions were used expressly to enable respondents to qualify, from a personal perspective, responses provided in structured, scaled questions. (A copy of the questionnaire distributed to first year students is available on request.)

The data collected from the questionnaires were analysed in the following manner: the structured, scaled questions that generated quantifiable results were tabulated as frequency and percentage distributions with mean, median and standard deviation statistics. The unstructured, open-ended questions which encouraged discursive comments were initially recorded *verbatim* and then used to draw on for globalised remarks or selected to be reproduced *verbatim* to highlight either general comments that pertained to a substantial proportion of the group or highly idiosyncratic observations. The nonresponse bias in this survey was negligible. The statistics have been used in a descriptive manner to faithfully record the characteristics of the sample.

The sample of 57 first year students studying 'Introduction to English Literature 1010' (a case of convenience sampling) was equivalent to 22.2 per cent of the first year cohort of this discipline. The response rate was 55.3 per cent. Several, but not all, tutorial groups of first year students undertaking the study of English Literature constituted the sample. (The organisation of tutorial groups is not done in a way that would lead to serious sampling bias.)

## Results

### Biographical profile

The questionnaire designed to investigate the first year experience of students in the Faculty of Arts commenced with a biographical profile of the sample. What may, in the first instance, appear to be a rather unusual finding, in that 91.2 per cent of the sample are native speakers of English is not so extraordinary when placed in context, that is, the sample was drawn from students studying 'Introduction to English Literature 1010'. Predictably, given the circumstance of this subject choice, the vast majority of respondents [84.2 per cent] were female. This figure was consistent with the composition of female students [80.5 per cent] and male students [19.6 per cent] undertaking the study of English Literature in 1996 (the year of the study). [Information supplied by the Department of English]

Consistent with the literature in the field was the result that the majority of students [66.0 per cent] falling in the age bracket, 19 years and under, entered university directly upon completion of Year 12. A substantially significant proportion [28.3 per cent] was above the school leavers' entry age bracket. The majority of mature age students [55.6 per cent] had had a break of more than five years in their education, whilst half that figure [27.8 per cent] had experienced a break of less than two years. For those who did not enter higher education immediately upon leaving secondary school, employment was their key priority.

In attempting to establish and evaluate any possible link/s between student expectations of university and the influence of home environment, information was sought regarding immediate family members (parent/s, sibling/s) who had been university educated. A remarkable 70.2 per cent of respondents were able to affirm that an immediate family member (parent/s, sibling/s) had been university educated. What was even more surprising, was that of this group, the greater number of those who had been university educated were parents [47.4 per cent].

From these results it could be inferred that students of English Literature, compared to many others, come from families where university education is the norm. It could thus be anticipated that they will have fewer problems in adjusting to the university environment than other students who are 'pioneers' in their families in relation to university completion, this, however, did not appear to be so.

### Pre-conceived notions and expectations of university

The next series of survey questions pertained to students' perceptions and expectations of university. Despite not taking a vocational course (such as: Medicine, Engineering or Law) which allows for direct entry into a profession, potential Arts graduates essentially viewed obtaining a degree as enhancing their job prospects. A substantive 78.9 per cent considered this to be their main goal in attending university.

The most common expectations first year students had of university prior to commencement can be categorised broadly as:

- meeting new and different people;
- having fun;
- enjoying the freedom of a learning environment that is not regimented in the same way as school;
- having the opportunity to explore greater and more interesting subject choices; and
- being mentally stimulated by new experiences.

The most striking feature about these responses is the emphasis on positive attributes associated with university, one might almost say that this is an idealistic view of higher education institutions. In the light of the general euphoria regarding preconceptions regarding university, when it came to the issue of work there was a sharp division between those who thought there would be less and it would be easier than VCE, and those who believed there would be more and it would be more challenging.

### **Influences shaping students' expectations of university**

The responses to the question related to the influences which helped to formulate students' expectations of university were quite unexpected and should provide a salutary lesson for both school but even more so higher education administrators. The combined efforts of university Open Days, careers teachers and other teachers were cited by a paltry 8.9 per cent as being a significant influence on students' expectations of higher education. Clearly, higher education administrators' marketing techniques are failing when students openly admit that the most significant influence on university expectations was 'self' [49.1 per cent]. Perhaps that is also why their responses to the previous question were so idealised. Could this communication breakdown be a consequence of adolescent arrogance belying ignorance? This might be an interesting point to investigate further given that the most influential groups of people to assist students in formulating their expectations of higher education after 'self' were the equally weighted 'friends' and 'family' [15.8 per cent].

### **Realisation of expectations**

My proposition that students have highly idealised preconceived notions of university appears to be validated by the responses that relate to the realisation of student expectations. A substantial 69.6 per cent of the sample indicated that less than half of their expectations had been realised. Evidently misconceived preconceptions impact significantly on the realisation of students' expectations of university. The main factors affecting the full realisation of student expectations were:

- a much heavier workload than expected;
- the unexpected complexity of some subjects;
- disappointment in discovering that university was not as interesting, exciting and as much fun as expected or had been led to believe;
- that staff were not as accessible as expected; and
- making friends had proved to be difficult.

With this hindsight, students considered the following information related to teaching methodology, subject requirements and work expectations useful to have known before commencing university:

- an introduction and better explanation of how lectures and tutorials function given that this is a new delivery mode to which most students have not been exposed previously;
- more information about the subjects, especially in relation to content and assessment;
- a more honest appraisal of subjects than that presented in the *Arts Undergraduate Handbook*;
- forewarning that the best preparation is to have completed the reading recommended for subjects before course commencement (and as an adjunct to this, that the cost of books is high); and
- academics, unlike teachers, are not overtly concerned with the individual student.

### **Information dissemination**

Despite not being valued highly for the actual contribution they had made to date in influencing student expectations of university, the respondents, overall, still believed that careers teachers, teachers in general and universities shared the responsibility of disseminating information about the first year experience at university. A significant response made to this question was the suggestion that the 'student union' should play a more active role; students wanted the opportunity to receive first hand, honest advice from 'peers'.

### **The success of first year students' transition**

The following responses related to a series of questions designed to probe the transition experiences of first year university students by determining the degree of success students had experienced regarding:

- the establishment of a friendship group;
- self organisation;
- time management;
- adaptability of independent learning style;
- accommodation to teaching styles; and
- the prospect of success.

It was not surprising but nevertheless disturbing to discover that virtually half of the respondents [49.1 per cent] did not consider themselves to have experienced success in the establishment of a friendship group by the end of Semester 1. At a time that may be filled with considerable apprehension and disorientation the lack of identification with another in the same circumstances can be a particularly alienating experience. Predictably, following the regimentation of school and the personal scrutiny of Year 12 staff, half of the respondents [49.1 per cent] did not consider themselves to be organised sufficiently well to

cope with the demands of university study. Furthermore, 63.2 per cent did not believe that they were managing their time efficiently to keep up to date with the work requirements of university. This did not only indicate poor time management skills on the part of first year students but also highlighted the lack of a centrally co-ordinated and carefully planned schedule of submission dates for assessable work. Academics who believe that first year students are not independent learners will perhaps have this view consolidated by the admission that a substantial proportion of students [38.6 per cent] did not believe they had been able to adapt successfully to the style of individual/independent learning expected of them. What should be of considerable concern to university teaching staff is that more than one third of students [35.1 per cent], even after attending lectures and tutorials for a full semester, did not consider themselves to have accommodated the teaching styles employed at university. In spite of these rather grim statistics, the majority of students [66 per cent] still believed that they would experience success in their university studies. Although it may appear that first year students are inherently optimistic; this figure is surprisingly accurate when compared with the 65 per cent graduation rate. [West et al., 1987: 13]

### **Factors affecting adjustment**

Without doubt, of the critical factors to affect students' level of adjustment the most consistently positive factor was developing a friendship group. Interestingly, the negative factors related strongly to the same aspect<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> an inability to make friends, sometimes coupled with shyness and feeling lonely and/or homesick. (This was an issue especially for country and overseas students). Even the more detached 'impersonal structure of the university' is directly related to students' inability to engage and interact effectively in a communicative context. There was a host of other responses; their diversity largely reflecting individual student needs. Although a sizeable number of students experienced some difficulty in adjusting to university life they were reticent to discuss their concerns openly; only 57.5 per cent were prepared to do so. Of these students the vast majority chose friends at university with whom to share the burden of their concerns. The need was to vent frustrations and receive moral support rather than pursue professional counselling. Most recognised that their circumstances were an inevitable part of the change process; a case of the old adage: 'a trouble shared is a trouble halved'. This view is borne out by the fact that the most common reason provided for selection of the individual/s to share the confidence was 'friends going through the same difficulties' with whom first year students 'felt comfortable'. Those reluctant to share their concerns with others were basically loath to do so because they felt it was something that they would have to work out for themselves. Essentially, these were the students who did not have a friend in whom they could confide and did not want to cause concern to their families.

The questions pertaining to drop out potentiality and the reason/s for this, indicated that the vast majority of first year students [78.9 per cent] had not given serious thought to dropping out. This seems fairly consistent with the fact that most students believed that they would experience success in their first year studies. The most consistent factor that dissuaded students from dropping out was their basic enjoyment of university life. Other influential factors were the fear of failing to meet parental and/or family expectations and having nothing else to do.

## **Positives and negatives of university**

The respondents saw the social aspects of university life; the development of friendships; meeting a great diversity of people; and independence as the most enjoyable aspects of university. The opportunity to study interesting subjects also rated reasonably well in this question. Conversely, the most frequent response given for the least enjoyable aspect of university was boring and irrelevant lectures. This was followed by: the crowded timetabling of submission dates for assessable work; time wasted in travelling to and from the campus; a feeling of alienation; lack of friends; and the prospect of forthcoming examinations, tests and assignments.

## **Secondary school and university: similarities and differences**

When asked to reflect on any similarities between school and university, the only real similarity identified was tutorials. In fact, one student noted that 'good tutorials are like classroom teaching'. The key difference between university and secondary school was perceived to be indifference towards students on the part of academics, as demonstrated in the response, 'most tutors don't care how students are performing'. In addition, many first year students were concerned with the dilemma that 'everything seems to be up to the student' although this was countered by (in some students' eyes) 'you don't have to go (to lectures and tutorials) and no one will check up'.

## **The Faculty of Arts: course selection and satisfaction**

The reason for the sample enrolling in the Faculty of Arts was straightforward, essentially it was a decision based on subject interest, with some respondents indicating they were as yet undecided on a career path and considered a generalist course to offer more job opportunities. Consistent with the earlier claim of expectations of university being determined by the individual, the majority of students [56.4 per cent] felt that they had not received adequate course advice before enrolling. However, of the advice they did receive, the most useful advice came from traditional sources: the *Arts Undergraduate Handbook*; other students; attending university Open Days; course advisers on enrolment day and careers teachers.

Although registering some disappointment with the course advice received, the majority of first year students [83.9 per cent] were nevertheless reasonably satisfied with the subject selections made. Those who expressed dissatisfaction with subject selection had sound reasons for this; almost all indicated reasons other than a mere lack of interest in the subject. It is disturbing to think that as much as 43.6 per cent of first year students had given serious consideration to dropping out of subjects in which they experienced dissatisfaction. This is more than double the earlier figure of 21.1 per cent that had given some thought to dropping out altogether. There is a perceptible change in student preparedness to tolerate continuation of a subject in which dissatisfaction is felt. Factors which encouraged students to drop out of subjects included the:

- ease with which change and/or drop out of subjects can occur;
- decision to replace a subject in which performance was poor with another subject;
- decision to give up struggling with the essays;

- possibility of experiencing greater satisfaction by taking an alternative subject; and
- fact that the student simply didn't like the subject.

On the other hand, those students discouraged from dropping subjects were influenced by the following factors:

- that one disagreeable tutor should not affect future progress in a subject which otherwise was enjoyable;
- the decision not to risk the completion a major/minor sequence;
- an inability to find a better alternative;
- distaste at the notion of adding more time to the degree;
- a desire to persevere until the end of semester as a consequence of having achieved pass grades to date;
- rejection of the idea of dropping out or giving up because this would be viewed as failure;
- having already purchased the texts; and
- subject/s related to career choice.

## **Discussion**

### **Academic**

The difficulties experienced by all students in making the transition from Year 12 to the first year of university in the academic domain have been well documented for numerous decades now. Further to these universally felt concerns among first year students there are some very specific issues related to undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts. Some attention has been directed to the difference in the persistence rates between students in the Faculties of Science and Arts, however, there has been little, if indeed any, attention paid to the factors which distinguish the Faculty of Arts—in any university—from every other faculty. The idiosyncratic features that affect Arts students underscore the increased difficulties they face in the process of transition in their first year at university.

A significant determinant in the formulation of expectations related to academic performance is prior experience. This is particularly pertinent for students in the Faculty of Arts because the diversity in their academic achievement is greater than for students in any other faculty of the university. At one end of the spectrum are students with very high Tertiary Entry Ranking (TER) scores who are attracted inherently to humanism. At the other, are those students whose TER scores were insufficient to secure a place in other faculties, and who, more often than not, have accepted the offer of a place despite lack of interest in order to simply say that they 'got into university'. This factor affects not only the potential for academic achievement in first year but also the motivational and attrition levels of these students. According to studies conducted by Anderson and Johnston [1983] and Price [1991], the highest rates of attrition were in the Faculty of Arts. The attrition rate of 18.2 per cent in 'Introduction to English Literature 1010' in first semester 1996 was thus consistent with Anderson and Johnston's figure of 19.2 per cent for Humanities/Social Sciences. [1983: 8]

Moreover, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) reinforces students' perceptions positively of their academic performance through the provision of an assessment system that methodically delineates the basis on which student endeavours are rewarded. Knowledge of the criteria of assessment enables students to exercise some measure of control in relation to the outcome. This is in stark contrast with the situation they face when they arrive at university. There is a very distinct shift from a secondary system that has provided close scrutiny of work through the drafting process; immediate feedback couched in positive language; criterion-referenced assessment; and high grades to a university system that provides little, if any, guidance on task completion; a flat refusal to look at draft work; low grades with delayed feedback (generally focusing on the negative aspects of the task without providing advice for future improvement) and subjectivity in relation to assessment. This is a seemingly unbridgeable chasm. Given this scenario, it should hardly come as a surprise that many students are disillusioned with the results they achieve in first year, especially those who had experienced considerable success in the VCE, and who consequently expect to replicate this performance in their the first year of university studies. Quickly students discover that a noticeable discrepancy exists between their Year 12 and the first year of university results. For some this is a temporary setback, for others, however, it can be a demoralising experience that may not only result in dissatisfaction with the subject but which can be extrapolated to feelings of negativity about the course and even beyond that to the university itself.

Not only are many students deluded by preconceived notions of their own academic achievement level—deceptively inflated by the assessment procedures of the VCE—which impacts significantly on their expectations of university performance, but students in the Faculty of Arts are in a unique, invidious situation—they appear to be further disadvantaged by their general lack of background knowledge in the subject choices they make. Unlike other faculties (for example, Medicine, Engineering and Science) which designate that prerequisite subjects be studied at Year 12 for entry eligibility to university courses, students in the Faculty of Arts are not bound by such strictures, indeed, this is viewed as one of the Faculty's attractions. Conversely, this very feature also serves as a major detraction, in that, there may have been no formal preparatory training in a given subject selected for study. Although some students may choose certain subjects on the basis of familiarity and/or previous experience, most do not. They are enticed by the sheer plethora of subjects available in the Faculty of Arts (more than two hundred first year subjects were on offer in the *Arts Undergraduate Handbook 1996*) which is not an alternative available readily in other faculties, as can be seen by the complete prescription in Medicine and Law or the limited flexibility in Science and Engineering. The VCE, with 43 study designs in total, of which only half are humanities-related, cannot possibly hope to prepare students adequately, if at all, for some of the subject choices they make when they commence a Bachelor of Arts degree at university. The example of first year students selecting 'Introduction to English Literature 1010' typifies the rationale of first year students' subject choices. Although English Literature is offered as a VCE subject, only approximately ten per cent of the State cohort takes this option. However, a significant proportion of the random sample, 40.4 per cent, indicated that they had no previous experience in this subject and had simply selected this university subject on the basis of personal interest.

Arts undergraduates, as with all first year students, experience feelings of dissonance and dislocation when they commence university, however, they also face some very formidable challenges from which most other first year students are spared. One of the easiest to overlook is the psychological hurdle that many Arts undergraduates need to negotiate in

terms of dealing with the disappointment of not achieving their first or even second preference. Considerable numbers of first year Arts undergraduates undertake courses that they are not particularly interested in, at institutions they would rather not be attending. Conversely, others are so grateful to have been offered a place anywhere that they are prepared to do their utmost to keep it but incessantly feel insecure knowing that they only 'just' crossed the fine line of the cut-off score to gain entry. It is these students who tend to be most easily demoralised, if not absolutely devastated, by the predictably low marks they initially receive for work produced. Not surprisingly, they are among the first casualties of attrition.

Subject diversity, the very element which operates as one of the real strengths of the Faculty of Arts, also contributes as its major weakness: lack of a cohesive student body identity feeds a sense of alienation. Unlike students in other faculties, for example, Law who are not offered any subject choice but who consequently develop a strong faculty and social identity because common contact time is maximised, Arts undergraduates do not enjoy these benefits. It is possible for an Arts student, in the course of a semester, to not even see all the other members of the same subject during lectures if the cohort is large enough to require scheduling of the same lecture at more than one time. This situation is exacerbated even further if the lectures are taped and/or subject clashes exist—some students only see other students undertaking the same subject during tutorial time. Particularly for students of first year subjects with large numbers isolation is an inherent feature of the lecture experience.

This sense of isolation generated by the lecture experience and compounded by limited contact with other students during tutorials increases the difficulty of establishing and maintaining social networks—the single most often expressed concern of first year students. The repercussions of this are enormous. Lack of a friendship network:

- undermines self-confidence and self-esteem;
- inhibits the development of socialisation skills;
- precludes discussion of assigned texts/tasks in a learning community;
- increases the difficulty of obtaining and sharing scant resource material;
- restricts the speed of familiarisation of the university, its facilities, resources and culture; and
- reinforces feelings of negativity toward the institution, others and self.

First year university students have come from a secondary school environment that is small, familiar and safe. Particularly in Year 12, students share a close and comfortable relationship with their teachers; they are allies, working together with a common goal—the successful completion of VCE. At university, first year students are thrust into an unfamiliar and impersonal environment where no such support appears to be available. Often tutors are post-graduate students with limited time and experience; little, if any, interest in teaching, and a dire dread in seeking advice from academic staff (on whom they role-model their behaviour and practices) granted the inordinately biased power relationship they share with academics who are usually their supervisors. Post-graduate students working as sessional tutors have a vested interest in maintaining a pretence of competence in the eyes of their superiors. First, as revealing any sign of teaching incompetence and/or insecurity could jeopardise their on-going employment as sessional tutors, and second, as this will reflect poorly on their ability as post-graduate students. When the exposure to teaching

methodology for post-graduate sessionals is only that which they have encountered as students or gleaned incidentally through informal conversation it is bound to be limited in its operational success.

To reiterate an aspect already mentioned, the vast range in the academic achievement level of students in the Faculty of Arts is an issue not only for the students themselves but also for the academics who teach them. Teaching effectively across such a wide spectrum is a challenge for even the experienced teacher, given the methodological limitations of many university lecturers and tutors this difficulty is compounded significantly. Many students in the Faculty of Arts are the least able to deal with the complexity of the demands made of them, essentially as the skills they possess in the areas of independent research, analysis and synthesis of information may be limited. They need guidance and support to develop these skills further yet the very people who should be in a position to assist them are, on the whole, unable to do so because they lack the teaching strategies to accomplish this task. Instead they throw the onus onto the struggling student in the guise of helping the student to become an 'independent learner'. This attitude is an abrogation of responsibility on the part of academics—a point that students do not fail to recognise and often comment upon in the most disparaging terms.

It is for the abovementioned reasons that the two most common teaching delivery methods employed at university come in for sharp criticism. Lectures are considered to be largely irrelevant and boring, whilst tutorials which are more closely linked to students' prior experience of classroom teaching generally fail to operate successfully because many tutors are unable to make them a meaningful learning experience for students. It has often been suggested that teacher training be incorporated into the higher education sector but this is a point comes in for sharp criticism as many academics consider as information transference to be fulfilment of the teaching component of their duties. Teaching is often viewed with disdain; many academics contemptuously scoff at the suggestion that there is a need to demonstrate 'best practice' in this area. However, this issue may need to be reviewed especially given the increase, and up-front payment, of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). Students will no longer simply expect to be taught by competent individuals but demand it, and not only vote with their feet by dropping subjects/courses if this is demand is not met but actually be prepared to change tertiary institutions so that their needs may be satisfied.

## **Environmental**

The physical environment of any large university, such the Clayton campus of Monash University can be daunting for first year students whose experience up to the time of commencement has been restricted to the secondary school campus, which, on average, is limited in terms of size, spread and population. Predictably, students who previously attended small country schools face even more acute difficulties in this regard. Particularly in the early weeks of Semester 1 many first year students feel dislocated, isolated and helplessly lost. They feel embarrassed in seeking assistance from total strangers; the risk of humiliation is too overwhelming, especially when others appear to know where they are going and what they are doing. Lewis acknowledges this as an aspect of the transition process when he says: 'The pervading nervousness among new students exhibits itself in a dread of doing anything wrong and looking foolish.' [1984: 33] Even the most basic activities:

sorting out timetables, locating tutorial rooms, searching electronic catalogues for library books et cetera (tasks that they were able to accomplish with the greatest of ease in the familiar environment of their secondary school) become exercises which now require investigative skills and considerable effort.

At the Clayton campus of Monash University signposting has been kept to a minimum, presumably so as not to detract from the natural setting, however, this makes location of, and navigation to, particular destinations virtually impossible; for first year students this constraint is a veritable nightmare. Clearly, little can be done to alter the sheer size of the campus, but a simple improvement with very noticeable impact would be to change the signposting around the university. Large, highly visible signs, which clearly identify buildings, lecture theatres et cetera would be invaluable in assisting first year students (and visitors to the university) to negotiate their way from one location to another. Although the current signage is not intrusive, it fails in its main purpose<sup>3/4</sup> to clearly identify and direct those unfamiliar with the campus to destinations being sought.

Further to these on-campus environmental factors affecting the smooth transition from Year 12 to the first year of university, accommodation plays a significant role. Monash, typical of almost all Australian universities has a population of commuting students. In the main, first year students still live at home with their families. The home environment and its mores seriously impinge on first year students' level of adjustment in regards to the new learning environment. Relevant factors include:

- parental attitudes toward tertiary education which affect the level of emotional, financial and (depending on capabilities) academic support provided;
- parental academic expectations of the student;
- degree of student independence;
- responsibilities demanded of the student; and
- the relationship between student, parent/s and sibling/s.

Students living independently also, to varying degrees, encounter the interpersonal elements experienced by students living at home. Further to these complications, however, students choosing to live away from home are affected by: financial constraints, accommodating to living with others (generally of their own age) and having to rely on their own resources to establish and maintain support networks.

Sharply contrasted with these students are those who have been forced to relocate from a rural (interstate or even international) setting. These students have had independence thrust upon them; their survival is largely dependent on their successful transition not only from Year 12 to university but country to city; leaving an established home to having to establish a new home; and a perceptible shift from family support to self reliance. Those who cope best are the ones who live in the University's Halls of Residence, and there is good reason for this. 'Comparing dormitory living with the alternatives reveals the positive impact of dormitory living on persistence.' [Astin, 1975: 91] This positive impact is related to the opportunity to share experiences of loss, homesickness, rural background, and academic work as well as the rapid establishment of a friendship network, all elements that enhance the transition process. This very point was recently reiterated by McInnis et al.: 'For first year students, in particular, the role of the college in aiding the social transition from school to university is

seen by college staff as particularly important.' [1995: 98] First year students unable to benefit from this collegiate environment tend to become more despondent and alienated, consequently making it even harder to develop a social circle. All country, interstate and international students should actively be encouraged to take the option of on-campus, residential accommodation where it exists.

In connection with accommodation, travelling time was raised by a number of students as a concern. Today's competitive job market appears to reward students who have graduated from more 'prestigious' institutions. With this in mind, euphoric about the offer that has been made and driven by the TER cut off scores, students do not initially consider the time required in travelling to be a serious impediment and accept an offer, irrespective of the location of the institution. It is only when the sheen of having achieved university entry has been dulled by the daily three hour slog on public transport that some misgivings are expressed about 'the travelling time'!

## **Financial**

Although financial factors surfaced as a consistent feature of concern for first year students in the writings of several academics in the field [for example: Abbott-Chapman et al. 1992, Boud and de Rome 1980, McInnis et al. 1995, Price et al. 1991, West et al. 1987] financial considerations did not appear to be of any real significance for this sample apart from these notable observations. Austudy, although available to the majority of undergraduate students, hardly constituted the means of their financial survival, therefore students relied on other sources of income in order to meet the needs of HECS payments and study-related and living expenses. Most students fell into one of these two categories: financial dependence on family or financial independence from family; both options appeared to be fraught with difficulties.

Financial dependence and a sense of duty reveal some interesting perspectives into the human psyche. On the one hand, concern was registered regarding obligation to complete a course as a consequence of being financially dependent on family, 'I (almost) owe it to my partner who is supporting me, in part, financially'. On the other, however, one student was compelled to work for his father for two full days per week in order to pay his way. Evidently, irrespective of individual circumstances, a sense of duty and dependence on family for financial assistance, especially in relation to HECS, study-related and living expenses, can be a heavy burden to bear.

Financial independence created problems of its own. Whilst apparently relieved of the sense of duty to a family member, in fact, this problem was not eliminated but simply transposed by a sense of duty to oneself through a reliance on either part-time or full-time work in order to make remaining at university a viable proposition. The obligatory need to work resulted in students selecting subjects according to the timetabling of classes so as to provide maximum employment opportunity. Inasmuch as this is clearly an undesirable way to undertake university studies, for some students, unfortunately it is a financial necessity.

Financial difficulties and their repercussions have intensified this year with the sizeable increase to the HECS fee. The implications of this move are bound to have far-reaching consequences as many families place even greater pressure on students to ensure course completion in minimum time. It is anticipated that the increase to the HECS fee will affect at least three other key areas substantially: subject selection, student mobility within courses and attrition. Subject selection, will increasingly be made according to pragmatic, as opposed to affective reasons; students will select subjects with increased discretion, less prepared to take options which involve an element of risk of failure. Student mobility within courses in which subject dissatisfaction has been experienced may be restricted due to the fear that a change will result in longer completion times and increased costs, therefore greater tenacity may be shown by students with subjects that they would perhaps have given away under different circumstances. In relation to attrition, early evidence of lack of success may encourage students to give subjects/courses away more readily. This situation will be compounded as more students are forced to take on part-time employment to cover the costs of undertaking a university education. With less time to devote to study and socialisation into the university culture, the transition process will become even more of a challenge for these students.

## **Social**

The one distinctive aspect, aside from the expected emphasis on academic limitations, which the survey instrument revealed as a major contributory element in the process of a smooth transition, was the establishment of a friendship network. Although this feature was not highlighted as being of particular importance in the literature, the sample overwhelmingly indicated that not having friends made the whole process of transition more difficult, whilst having friends helped students to settle in quickly and make progress with their studies. This is an issue of major significance as many students identified 'meeting people' as one of the key expectations of university prior to commencement; an understandable expectation for first year students to have, granted that few attend the same higher education institution as former school friends. More often than not, first year students do not know anyone when they arrive on campus. Even when there is a group of students who have all come from the same school there is no guarantee that these students will know each other beyond mere recognition or even like one another, let alone be friends. They may not be studying the same course, and even if they are, as Arts students, they may not be studying the same subjects or their timetables may not coincide to provide them with the opportunity to actually see and communicate with one another.

Establishing friendship networks requires fairly sophisticated social skills that are complemented by an outgoing personality; not all first year students possess these attributes. Therefore, despite expressing the desire to make friends, for some students there are very real impediments in the achievement of this goal. It was particularly disturbing to see this reflected in comments such as, 'nothing to do at lunchtime, few friends et cetera'. These students were further disadvantaged when it came to expressing their concerns. Due to the fact that first year students are generally reluctant to confide in anyone, if they do ultimately speak to someone it will, more often than not, be their peers—other first year students (their friends) because they are in a position to identify with the difficulties being experienced. The lack of this avenue to give voice to their concerns for first year students who have found it difficult to make friends tends to reinforce the alienation they feel and create a general sense of dissatisfaction with the whole university experience.

The need to belong, as a basic construct of human social interaction, cannot be underestimated in the significance it holds, particularly for adolescents. It is for this reason that the establishment of a friendship network is of such importance. Without friends, students have fewer resources at their disposal to assist them in the process of transition. They cannot express fears, review expectations, work collaboratively toward the resolution of difficulties, discuss subject matter to increase understanding as part of a learning community, share experiences, time and confidences. Although a substantial proportion of transition difficulties relates to the academic arena, in terms of actual face-to-face contact this appears to be only a small portion of students' weekly schedule. Undergraduates, especially first year students have a lot of time on their hands<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> time to spend with friends, to be alone, or simply to be lonely.

At the time that students enter university and are experiencing issues of transition related to their formal education, they are also at that stage of their lives where they are commencing a transition of another kind, that from adolescence to adulthood. The degree of upheaval and sense of dislocation for first year students is thus significant because it affects and challenges aspects of their personal (including sexual), social and academic lives. The express difficulty lies in the interactivity of these spheres; no single sphere can be touched without influencing and having repercussions for the others. For many first year students the magic age of eighteen confers upon them special privileges: they can vote, obtain a drivers' licence, legally be admitted to 'R-rated' movies, et cetera; it is a time of excitement and experimentation. University, in many ways, provides students with opportunities and experiences that will broaden their horizons.

There is a natural inclination for students to be adventurous when they first come to university, to throw off the shackles of a regimented school routine, and possibly a restricted home life, to revel in the freedom that the university environment fosters. Their desire to do this in itself should indicate quite clearly the lack of maturity of many first year students. Most, in fact, lead double lives; assuming the mantle of adulthood (behaving as they choose) whilst unsupervised at university, and conforming to their parents' wishes when under their watchful eye at home. This could not be borne out more obviously than by the following examples. In the literature I came across a description of an academic who was astounded to discover that when he suggested a course change to a student, the student responded by saying that he had to first discuss the matter with his parents before he could take any action. Clearly, there can be no doubt that: 'The parent is the child's most interested and most constant counsellor.' [Report of a Workshop held at the University of Western Australia, 1963: 8] This notion was strongly reinforced in the questionnaire when I sought to know the factors that had dissuaded students from dropping out, one respondent frankly stated, 'my mother/parents would kill me'. There is an indisputable discrepancy between the expectations of most academics who treat, and expect first year students to behave as autonomous adults, and parents, who continue to assume responsibility and ultimate decision-making for their children. This view is substantiated by the Report of a Workshop held at the University of Western Australia: 'The first year student is often faced with the situation of being treated as an adult at the university and as an adolescent at home.' [1963: 63] Confronted with such contrasting views and expectations, adolescents cannot help but experience a sense of dilemma at the very least, and at worst, utter confusion, in relation to their role and behaviour in these clearly conflicting environments. There is a tension for

students in that an indisputable discrepancy exists between the expectations and treatment of them by academics and their parents.

As if dealing with the disparate expectations adults have of first year students is not difficult enough, they must also contend with their peers. Alone, unsupervised, in a new environment, meeting new people, being exposed to new ideas and different values can be a testing time for many adolescents' strength of character. This can be a challenge even for a well-adjusted adolescent used to dealing with a wide variety of people, however, for those students coming from a single-sex school environment, university can be daunting to an unparalleled degree. Little, if any, attention has been paid to the inhibitory factors of social interaction pertaining to the considerable number of first year students who have attended single sex schools. For these students, dealing with members of the opposite sex in an educational environment, perhaps for the first time in their lives, may be a major challenge. Educators who have spent time in single sex school environments will readily admit females and males interact and behave differently in these contexts. Especially for students from sheltered backgrounds, university may provide the first experience of direct contact with people who:

- are culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse;
- come from different socio-economic backgrounds;
- espouse different, perhaps even radical, political views;
- indulge in substance abuse;
- live alternative lifestyles;
- have similar (or higher) academic achievement levels;
- have returned to study as mature age students, and with whom learning experiences are shared; and
- have a different sexual orientation.

University may even present them with their first opportunity to form a romantic attachment—with all the complications that that entails!

It should hardly come as a surprise then that first year students face considerable challenges as they enter these two significant phases of life experience: the world of tertiary education and that of adulthood. At this important juncture, when it would appear that increased guidance, support and encouragement were most needed to assist students in making the transition smoother, these very elements have been stripped away. Invariably, students do have to become independent learners, however, this will not happen by simply abandoning them completely on the presumption that left to their own resources they will independently start to learn. First year students, in particular, need to be taught *how* they may become independent learners. Such learning is an acquired skill that requires development and honing, as do the life skills that lead to mature adulthood.

First year students, like all individuals, differ in their intelligence, competence, experience, maturity, adaptability, motivation, commitment, social skills and desire to succeed. Although I could extrapolate from the data to make generalisations of the first year university experience for all students it would be presumptuous of me to do so. Other faculties may perhaps share some of these transition issues, however, they may have others related specifically to their own circumstances. What remains a fact is that each student will respond

in an idiosyncratic manner to the process of transition because control cannot be exercised over personality type, nor can situational responses be predicted definitively. One fact, however, is certain—all students will be in some manner be affected by the process of transition. What will differ for each student, however, is the degree of angst that needs to be expended in order to reach a point of resolution enabling the bridging of that gap from secondary school to the first year of university.

The students in this sample have clearly indicated that the socialisation factor surpasses even the academic as the single most significant influence in effecting a smooth transition from Year 12 to the first year of university. Given the idiosyncratic nature of Arts subjects, in that these students have far less contact with other students in the Faculty of Arts, attention needs to be directed towards efforts to engender a more cohesive student body.

## **Conclusion**

This study confirmed many of the traditionally held views regarding the academic difficulties that students experience in the first year of university, however, it also threw into sharp relief the importance of social considerations when examining the significance of factors affecting the transition. The brutal honesty of some respondents was overwhelming in relation to the pain they felt at their inability to establish friendship networks to assist them in the adjustment they needed to make in order to experience success—both academically and in terms of socialisation into the university culture. This is an area that to date has been clearly disregarding by researchers in terms of the impact that it can have on all other aspects of the transition process but one which must be considered seriously if the issue of transition is to be tackled in a holistic manner.

The student must be viewed as an individual with needs that extend beyond the lecture theatre or tutorial classroom. Attending to only one aspect of this difficult period of adjustment will not solve the problem but leave students feeling frustrated and forlorn—desperately searching to alleviate their sense of dislocation and dissonance but lacking the resources to achieve this without assistance. Ultimately, co-operation and care underscore the successful transition of the student from Year 12 to the first year of university. Secondary schools can significantly enhance the process of transition by developing realistic expectations of the first year university experience for their students. Universities, for their part, have an obligation to provide students with ‘best practice’ teaching, and assisting them to understand and appreciate the culture of the university—a function that only they can perform.

## References

Abbott-Chapman et al. (1992) *Monitoring Student Progress: A Framework for Improving Student Performance and Reducing Attrition in Higher Education*. Hobart: National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies

Anderson, A.W. and Johnston, D.C. (1983) 'Students' Reasons for Discontinuing Their Courses'. The University of Western Australia: Research Unit in University Education

*Arts Undergraduate Handbook 1996* (1995) Clayton: Monash University

Astin, W.A. (1975) *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Boud, D.J. and de Rome, E.A. (1980) 'First Year at University' (Proceedings of a Conference held at The University of New South Wales, Kensington, 18-19 June 1980). University of New South Wales: Occasional Publication, Tertiary Education Research Centre

Lewis, I. (1984) *The Student Experience of Higher Education*. London: Croom Helm

McInnis, C. et al. (1995) *First Year on Campus – Diversity in the initial experiences of Australian undergraduates*. Canberra: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, AGPS

Price, D. et al. (1991) *Student Progression in Higher Education: a Study of Attrition at Northern Territory University*. Canberra: AGPS

'Problems of Transition from School to University'. (1963) Report of a Workshop held at the University of Western Australia on August 5 and 6, 1963

Schonell, F.J. et al. (1962) *Promise and Performance*. Brisbane, Queensland and London: University of Queensland Press and University of London Press Ltd

West, L.H.T. et al. (1987) *Students Withdrawing from Full-Time Higher Education*. Monash University: Higher Education Advisory and Research Unit