

# Achieving academic engagement: Supporting academics to embed first year transition pedagogies in the curriculum

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## Abstract

*This paper describes a small grants scheme aimed at supporting academics to embed first year (FY) transition pedagogies in the curriculum, as part of a university-wide FYE strategy. The scheme enables first year subject coordinators to apply for funding to address one or more of the six transition pedagogy principles in ways appropriate for their disciplines and students. Over three years, fifty grants have been awarded to coordinators from all faculties for projects that range from resource creation to tutor development to changes in assessment and feedback practices. The paper describes the operation of the scheme and provides an initial analysis of the successes and challenges of its first two years from the perspectives of the grant holders and the UTS FYE Coordinator. Two examples of FYE grants are used to illustrate some features of successful projects.*

## Introduction

Kift (2008, p.4) states

“... in all their diversity, and in spite of their changing patterns of engagement, students come to us in higher education to learn. Therefore, for transition to be truly successful, for students to be educated and thus retained (Tinto 2002a), first year curriculum that engages and supports new learners in their learning must be the FYE centrepiece and the first principle.”

This paper describes a university-wide small grants scheme aimed at supporting academics to embed first year (FY) transition pedagogies into the curriculum. The scheme is part of an First Year Experience (FYE) strategy at the University of Technology, Sydney, (UTS), and is one component of a broader Widening Participation Strategy, aimed at supporting the participation, retention and success of students from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds and indigenous students. Consistent with recent recommendations on supporting low SES students (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith and McKay, 2012), the scheme provides resourcing for teachers of these students, within the philosophy that curriculum-based strategies that support low SES students benefit *all* students.

The design of the scheme was influenced by a third generation approach to FYE (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010), which emphasises embedding transition pedagogies in the curriculum within an overall ‘top-down and bottom-up’ institutional framework. The ‘bottom-up’ scheme sought to engage the coordinators who design and teach the first year curriculum, as well as the professional staff who may work alongside them. As even enthusiastic first year coordinators are often time-poor, have competing priorities and have limited resources, some financial support for their engagement was seen as desirable.

The competitive grant approach is consistent with other academic practice, providing recognition and an incentive to participate as well as practical support. Even very small grants have been found to encourage participation in national teaching development projects (McKenzie, Alexander, Harper & Anderson, 2005). Amounts as small as \$500 can 'legitimise' academics' participation in initiatives and contribute to the sense that their efforts are recognised and valued.

This paper describes the grant application process, an initial analysis of the outcomes, successes and challenges of the first two years of the scheme for both the first year coordinators and the UTS FYE Project Coordinator (FYE Coordinator), and two examples of successful FYE grants.

### **The FYE grant scheme**

The scheme commenced in 2011, when coordinators of first year subjects were invited to apply for grants of between \$1000 and \$4000. Projects were required to focus on a first year subject and aim to embed strategies that were consistent with at least one or two principles of the Transition Pedagogy Principles (Kift, 2009) and would benefit students from low SES backgrounds and/or Indigenous students. The grant requirements were refined slightly for 2012 and 2013, with inclusion of projects that focused on second year subjects undertaken by pathways students.

In each year, decisions on the grants have been made by a panel comprising the Director of the Institute for Interactive Multimedia and Learning and Associate Deans Teaching and Learning or equivalent from two faculties. Applications are assessed for their likelihood of benefitting low SES and/or Indigenous students, relevance to transition pedagogy, practicality within the timeframe and budget, and sustainability. If projects lack coherence but have potential, the applicants may be encouraged to resubmit.

Over 50 projects have been funded since 2011. Grant holders include academics from all Faculties, and range from casual academics to full Professors, with a number of teams including academic and professional staff. This paper reports on an initial analysis of projects based on reports from the 2011 and 2012 grants.

### **Project outcomes and successes reported by grant holders**

Many of the successful FYE grants focused on the three principles of Transition, Diversity and Engagement, and others have focused on Assessment. Fewer focused on Monitoring and Evaluation, and Design, with most of the latter concentrating on an aspect of the subject rather than an overall curriculum change.

A number of the successful grants produced resources that were designed to enable ongoing sustainability. These include booklets (Maths for Chemistry); podcasts for clinical practice (Health); Independent Study Guides (Law); and tutor manuals (Design, Engineering). Other successful projects looked at embedding academic literacy into curriculum design, assessment activity and delivery (Economics, Education). In Nursing Education, academic teams designed an authentic learning case study with a progressive assessment design and iterative feedback. The use of technology to give assessment and feedback was a feature of a number of other grants. Projects to support students in their learning environments included time management activities, teamwork building through collaboration and cooperation, peer tutoring, and social media use to foster a sense of belonging.

Achieving academic engagement: supporting academics to embed first year transition principles into the curriculum, Nuts and Bolts session

The initial analysis of project reports showed that grant holders described their own success in terms of achievement of the above outcomes as well as improved student grades, better student subject evaluation, and improved classroom and curriculum engagement. Another stated achievement has been student willingness to be involved in focus groups and give feedback and recommendations for subject refinements. Also noted have been improvements in tutor understanding of transition issues for FY students. This growing awareness has noticeably informed their teaching. Most grant holders reflected positively that the process they defined in their application was workable and sustainable.

### **Examples of project successes**

Chemistry 1, a first semester core subject, has been completely overhauled, supported by two concurrent FYE grants (2012). One grant addressed maths preparation, developing a diagnostic test and online maths support resource. The online resource was so successful that it is being expanded to be used in all FY science subjects. The other grant was used to induct demonstrators in Transition Pedagogy practice and to re-design the subject to focus on student learning (discussion activities, weekly quizzes, re-alignment of lecture and lab material, and revised assessment tasks). Results were significant, with pass rates increasing from below 50% to above 80% in one semester. It is expected that since this subject is a key subject in FY Science, retention will improve in 2013.

Architectural Design is a first year subject that requires students to present their designs to class groups, and receive critical feedback. Students find this aspect of design culture stressful, resulting in withdrawal or failure. In the FY project, a group of second-year students were trained to act as peer mentors/tutors in the design workshop. Over seven weeks, the second-years were briefed on the weekly goals and worked with tutors to run the classes. At the end of each workshop, the coordinator de-briefed the second-years to ensure consistency of approach. Student feedback on the subject improved considerably, as did grades, with those in low SES categories performing better than the overall cohort. An unexpected bonus was that the second year peer-mentors also improved their grades. The project has been so successful that the faculty is using peer mentoring in their broader support programs for student success.

### **Project challenges reported by grant holders**

The challenges that grant holders have described were mainly around the difficulty in managing and engaging students and subject tutors, time, personnel and financial management. Many projects sought guidance from tutor and student focus groups, but have had difficulty as students and tutors are often too busy to meet up during the semester. Time was also an issue in a project in which volunteer second-year peer mentoring students became less available because of personal commitments. In a different project, the challenge was to get at-risk students to respond to emails from the academic staff. After several trials, using a peer mentor system to communicate with these students, had some success. A further challenge noted was the level of support and resources required for tutors in some projects that involved change in assessment.

### **Successes and challenges perceived by the FYE coordinator**

The small FYE scheme has proved to be a successful initiative. There is a growing understanding of transition pedagogy within the academic community, resulting in cultural change. This change is evident from the high level of interest and attendance in university-

wide FYE forums, and in the establishment of faculty FYE communities of practice and First-Year Transition Experience Coordinators. One noticeable outcome of the sharing of FYE project outcomes in the FYE forums has been a greater number of applications for FYE grants.

Perhaps the most significant outcome has been the adoption of transition pedagogy as an intentional and scaffolded process by teaching teams - academics, tutors and demonstrators. University wide, there is more emphasis on tutor induction sessions, tutor development and academic-tutor interaction.

Change has also been noted in the profile of grant applicants. Initially, the focus was on academics from all seven faculties. This evolved into partnerships between disciplinary experts, professional support staff and academic developers in 2012, with 2013 seeing the first applications from casual academics. Cross-faculty synergy indicates further success. For example, two tutors, one from Law and one from Engineering, are working together to introduce the peer-tutoring model used in Law into an engineering subject.

Challenges have included supporting academics in managing the grant process, providing timely reports and evaluating and monitoring projects. In many cases, grant applicants have been new to running a teaching and learning project. They have needed information on casual contracts, the option of employing UTS students, budget processes, requirements for ethical clearance, and alternate payment processes.

Mid-project reports are requested to identify early successes, challenges and budget spending, and inform the FYE Coordinator on how to best support grant holders. However, the challenge has been encouraging academics to meet the deadlines. The accountability requirements of the WPS strategy also meant that project reporting and budget management were particularly complex and challenging. Streamlined processes have been developed for 2013, along with planned meetings to support new grant holders.

## **Conclusion**

Offering small grants as an incentive to support academics has played a significant role in embedding first year (FY) transition principles into the curriculum, fostering student engagement, attending to assessment and feedback for learning, and promoting access to life and learning support.

The projects have also achieved significant academic engagement, creating cultural change around the FYE and attracting a wide range of academic and professional practitioners, who are supported and encouraged by a community that shares their passions. Grant holders have implemented changes that have resulted in benefits for their students, but also for their teaching teams and themselves personally. A number of grant holders have been promoted and others have won institutional teaching awards, using their successful FYE grant projects as part of the evidence to support claims for contributions to teaching and learning.

As Tinto (2012) states, institutions need to direct their efforts into the classroom, constructing environments that enable students to succeed. The FYE grants scheme contributes to one university's approach to achieving this goal.

## References

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## How the session will run

The session will alternate between an overview presentation and discussion. The timing may vary depending on the participants, but the proposed outline is:

- 10 mins: presentation of key ideas, framing the overall strategy and focusing on a more developed analysis of the successes and challenges of the FYE grants
- 5 mins: questions for clarification from participants
- 10 mins: small group discussion of the questions below (or others preferred by participants)
- 5 mins: debrief discussions and summing up

## Questions for discussion

What strategies does your institution use to engage academics in embedding transition pedagogies?

How do you judge the success of your strategies and what are the challenges?