A COMPULSORY IT TRANSITION SUBJECT EXPERIENCE:
zero credit points leads to zero future

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In 2002 the Faculty of Information Communication Technologies (FICT) at Swinburne University of Technology made a commitment to student transition to higher education by mandating that incoming undergraduates complete a transition subject (HIT0103 IT Transition) as part of their degree. This paper describes how this zero credit point transition subject has evolved over four years. It commenced as a one-semester length compulsory subject in one of the faculty’s degree courses, and extended to all first year degrees by 2005. As a result of systematic evaluations, and the burden to the faculty of self-funding, a one-week intensive program will replace HIT0103 in 2006. Some of the main curriculum components from HIT0103 will be embedded in core subjects, in particular a continuing focus on the group work process, presentation skills and reflective writing. The authors discuss HIT0103’s implementation through the design, development, review and evaluation phases drawing on the reactions of students to this compulsory pass requirement of a zero credit point subject in their undergraduate degree course.


Academics in the Faculty of Information Communication Technologies (FICT) were consistently troubled by the fact that high achieving secondary school students often did not translate into high achieving first-year university students. Research into student transition to higher education indicated that if students have a smooth start to their course there are increased chances of a lower drop-out rate and better academic results. The advantage of belonging to a cohesive group with provision of a support network leads to increased student success (Gardner, 2001; Tinto, 1998). HIT0103 IT Transition was introduced in 2002 in response to this concern.

The primary objective of HIT0103 IT Transition was to produce higher achieving students. It was also obvious that a program providing weekly tutelage on transition topics would not only help the cohort of international students adjust to the learning environment in Australia, and students articulating from TAFE, but also benefit the academic outcomes of students from the more teacher-led education environment of secondary schools.

The Faculty already had an existing academic orientation program for students during Orientation Week. This one day non-compulsory program delivered a general academic and administrative introduction as well as a hands-on laboratory session to introduce students to the learning management system (Blackboard) used to deliver much of the course materials. HIT0103 IT Transition was designed to complement these orientation activities by addressing learning and communication skills, group work processes and written reflection, rather than specific IT skills. It also pro-
vided an important vehicle for students to create early links with others in the same degree course through small tutorial sessions led by both an academic staff member and, as the subject developed, a peer tutor.

**Placing Subject in Context**

The university campus of early 21st century is a constantly changing environment. The student cohort can vary between predominately young school leavers, international students or more mature part-time workers. There is a strong international presence; various ethnic groups mix freely, and have their own clubs and their own food outlets in the student food hall. The demographic profile of students attending tertiary institutions has changed considerably over the last forty years (Astin, 1998; Kuh, 2001; Marchese, 1998; McInnis, 2001; Pascarelli & Terenzini, 1998; Tinto, 1998). Instead of young full-time students living on campus, many students are now older, often enrolled part-time and commuting to campus. The career aspirations and overall dedication of students to their studies have also altered focus, in some cases to the detriment of the pursuit of a generalist higher education and more in favour of maximising potential earning capacity in the employment market. Research into the learning experiences of students in universities resulted in the “Seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education” (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996). The principles involved establishing good communication links with academic staff and peers; the use of active learning techniques by involving students in the learning process; prompt feedback on assessment; adequate time on task; the communication of high expectations and appreciation of diverse talents (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996 p.2-8). However, these principles were the outcome of research on a cohort of students that were “a homogenous group of middle-class on-campus residents” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998, p.162) and perhaps no longer have currency in today’s university. In 1996 the seven principles were revised to include the part technology can play in their implementation.

Kuh (2001) investigated what makes a good institution, using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as a tool for seeking national benchmarks. This survey did not assess learning outcomes but instead the extent of the use of good educational practices. Based on the seven principles of good learning, Kuh focused on five benchmarks, and used a credible variety of survey techniques at a wide selection of institutions in the USA to gather data. The five benchmarks are: the level of academic challenge students experienced; the amount of active and collaborative learning undertaken in courses; the level of student interactions with academic staff; the number of enriching educational experiences; the perception of a supportive campus environment. The results of this US survey showed that substantial proportions of students are experiencing active and collaborative learning (90% of students reported working with other students on projects which may or may not have included collaborative learning). However, poor student interactions with academic staff were reported as well as 56% of respondents spending only 15 hours a week in preparation for their courses, half the recommended amount of time. While this survey relied on self-reporting, steps were taken to ensure that the tool elicited truthful and recent responses. These included clearly worded questions referring to recent activities that did not intrude on private matters. An acceptable response distribution for most items was evident on analysis adding further credibility to the tool (Kuh, 2001). The survey results indicate that students are spending less time on campus and less time engaged in learning than that expected by academics. The results of the Kuh survey contribute to the belief that students are becoming increasingly less engaged with tertiary learning in the sense that they are spending less time in preparation and reporting limited interactions with academic staff.

Marchese (1998) was convinced that students were becoming more materialistic in their educational expectations, as was Astin (1998). In 1966 Astin asked students to rank the importance of particular values; “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” ranked number one by more than 80% of students surveyed, and “being very well of financially” ranked in
sixth place. In 1996 the position of these two statements had reversed, 74% of students ranked the economic value first, and the value of a meaningful life philosophy sixth (Astin, 1998 p.11). In “Your First College Year” survey a similar question on developing a meaningful philosophy of life was asked and more than half the students (52%) responded that this was important or very important to them (Sax, 2002 p.31). Sax also reports that close to 70% of first year students experience concerns about financing their education in the first year of college, and nearly 20% experience serious financial difficulty. This need to finance education through working off campus, or supporting loans could contribute to a preoccupation with financial matters, and could well account for the increase of importance of economic stability in the lives of students (Sax, 2001p.26). Marchese’s attack on the decreasing values of today’s college student could be founded in economic realities of paying day-to-day living expenses and bills.

Recent research supports the decreasing levels of engagement of students; the convergence of career aspirations between males and females; a greater use of technology by both academic staff and students and a change in the philosophical outlook of students. Students have always tried to negotiate their level of involvement, however this trend is increasing due in part to the reactive rather than proactive way universities have been dealing with student demands (McInnis, 2001p.14). Technology is increasingly being used to change the delivery mode of courses, the interaction between students and academic staff, and students and peers. The use of electronic mail, asynchronous discussion boards, electronic submission of assignments and delivery of lectures via the internet increases the immediacy and reach of educational institutions while also contributes to the decreasing amount of time students need to spend on campus if they so choose (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996).

Tinto challenges universities to acknowledge the changes in their cohort and use the curriculum to negotiate the level of involvement they demand from students (Tinto, 1998). In commenting on the community colleges in the USA, institutions offering two-year programs, he suggests that co-registration and block scheduling need to be introduced so that a homogenous learning community could meet two or three times a week for four to six hours each time (Tinto, 1998 p.170). McInnis suggests that a number of different approaches need to be taken by universities to deal with the decreasing engagement of students. Using the curriculum as an organising device, not to the extent of increasing the myriad of choices students are currently faced with, but to create a more cohesive and integrated learning environment (McInnis, 2001p.10). Students are no longer a homogenous group. There is a need for several different solutions to cater for the different cohorts of mature part-time students, young local part-time and full-time students, and the international student cohort. Marchese states that universities now need to recognise that there is a problem and they are a part of the problem (Marchese, 1998). He suggests that they need to understand the problem; develop more imaginative teaching methods; work more closely with secondary institutions, help students “recapture the joy and power of deep learning”; and keep thinking of ways to bring “value-added roles” to students (Marchese, 1998). This would encourage students to want to become more engaged with their institutions.

The challenge for universities to take a leadership role in managing the expectations of their changing student cohort, while maintaining their integrity informed the development of the HIT0103 course reported on in the following sections. This was enabled through curricular change, timetable change and the use of technology to support the seven principles of good learning. This subject was created to encourage a level of engagement in first-semester students from varying backgrounds that was not necessarily provided in any of the core curriculum subjects in their courses.

**INTRODUCING HIT0103 IT TRANSITION**

The first iteration of HIT0103 was introduced to Bachelor of Computer Science and Software Engineering students (CSSE) in 2002. This degree course was considered the most technical
of all offered by the Faculty, and it was thought that these students would most benefit from a smooth start to their course. Students attended a weekly lecture and tutorial, and submitted weekly reflective journals on their transition experiences.

Curriculum planning involved faculty academics, an academic educational development advisor from Learning and Teaching Support (LTS) and expert support staff from the Language and Learning department. Initial weekly topics were designed from responses to an email asking first year lecturers and tutors what skills they felt their students needed most. In the majority of cases these were generic skills such as time-management, written communication, and presentation skills. The use of the Blackboard system also allowed the introduction of electronic submission of the reflective journals and online discussion spaces for group collaborations and project presentation preparation. Problem solving tasks and critical thinking exercises further extended the academic learning capabilities of students. Tutorials on plagiarism and how it could be interpreted differently in various subjects complemented a library skills session and referencing standards.

The assessment requirements of the subject were clearly outlined to the students in the first lecture and consisted of individual weekly journals to allow for reflection, written communication practice and regular feedback; an individual presentation to the class on a subject of the student’s choice to improve and enhance presentation skills and finally a group work activity that involved research into a subject relevant to first year transition presented to the whole group in a lecture situation. There was also an 80% attendance requirement.

The group activities were an enforced way of accelerating a feeling of cohesion and belonging as well as a vehicle for instilling group work methodologies early in the course. None of the exercises and activities that were undertaken in the tutorial sessions was carried out individually, for example the plagiarism activity involved discussion with three other students, the problem-solving tasks involved working in pairs and so on. The final journal submission at the end of semester was submitted in hard copy to display enhanced word processing features of table of contents, pagination, referencing, title page and executive summary. While there were no scheduled computer skills sessions, apart from a session in the Library Training Room that re-enforced citations skills, journal feedback throughout the semester encouraged students to correctly format their submissions.

Curriculum development, evaluation and refinement
Over the first four iterations of HIT0103 IT Transition, when reading the student feedback and final reflective journal entries, it was obvious that the journal aspect of the subject was considered the most tedious to students, and the group work experience the most enjoyable and beneficial to them. One student, who had obviously had a negative group-work experience, commented that this had taught him who not to choose to work with for the rest of his course, an invaluable piece of knowledge in his opinion. Taking student feedback into consideration, the assessment load of the subject was reduced over the various semesters, and the timing of presentations and submission adjusted to allow for maximum benefit while having minimal impact on other assessment and exam preparation. In 2005 the subject was compressed into ten weeks, to ensure that preparation of the final journal did not overlap with exam preparation time. The provisional weekly outline of the subject, at its most refined (current) stage, can be seen in Table 1.

The journal has proved a most valuable tool not only for the students to reflect on their current learning experiences, practice and enhance their written communication skills, identify areas for improvement but also as a mechanism for feedback and evaluation of the subject. Students expressed positive, negative and mixed experiences on a variety of themes. The following selected verbatim responses are representative of the range of positive, mixed and negative comments collected from the final reflective journals submitted at the end of semester one 2004.
Comments were varied and covered subject management and organisation; subject content and delivery method; group work and presentations; assessment and reflective journals; and commitment to the subject. The range suggested that most topics were considered relevant and useful and achieved their objectives.

Attending this “Transition” subject has helped me realise what university is all about and how it functions and I am grateful to be doing this subject. The ongoing journals have given me a chance to stop and reflect on my life and also where I intend on going and what I intend of doing in my later years. (Ex-secondary school student)

Students commented on their transition experience from secondary school or TAFE to university education and their need to become more responsible in their approach to learning.
rather than rely on being guided closely by their teachers.

At uni no one offers you help, they wait for you to ask, which is one of the major differences between TAFE, secondary school and uni. Although TAFE they expected (sic) you to ask, but with a course, which follows a set path, that never deviates it is hard to come unstuck. What I mean by all of this is that at uni you have more responsibility towards your learning, you choose your timetable, you choose your electives and you choose to go to lectures. (Ex TAFE student)

The group presentation activity resulted in a positive outcome for most students with several commenting that it was an advantage being able to meet other students and assisted in developing presentation, research and referencing skills. Although some students commented that they “hated doing group work and presentations” and that they had done these “many times before” generally comments suggested that were they happy that they had been made to do it.

The reflective journal has been used to assist in the thinking process enabling students to enjoy the learning for learning’s sake rather than concentrating on end results. Students were initially very vocal about completing a journal. They were concerned about the amount of time they needed to set aside to do it and that journal writing was not perceived as useful. Throughout the course of the semester attitudes changed and final reflections in the journals identified the contributions journal writing had made to their learning.

The thing that I liked about the subject were the journals because they were not that difficult to complete but they allowed you to reflect on how you are studying and were you could improve. (Ex-secondary school student)

The value for many of the international students was evident in the progressive development of their writing during the journal process; their understanding of Australian university life; and information about Swinburne’s resources and services available for students gained through listening to some of the group presentations and researching and citing references for their own group presentations. Their ability to clarify their needs was important. The small group tutorials, the involvement of a peer tutor and the availability of an online discussion group further assisted and supported international students in their learning.

Finally I am saying that this Transition subject was very useful to me not only as a first year student, but also as being an international, non English speaking student. I am feeling more confident about using resources and services in the university and more confident about being a tertiary student, because of the guidance that we got from this IT Transition subject. (International student)

As is to be expected, commitment to the subject varied within the student cohort. Many changed their minds as the semester progressed as they gradually saw the benefits of the subject. Many saw the subject as a means of finding more about university life, its services and resources, but as the semester progressed students gradually understood the relationship between the journal writing process, group work and presentations as a means of assisting their learning and study skills in other subjects. Another of the aims of the Transition subject was to encourage students to enjoy the process of learning rather than always focussing on the final results. As such the content has been based around the qualities and skills that students will need during their course such as time management, group work, problem solving and plagiarism.

Game (2003) in her book “The First Year Experience; start, stay and succeed at uni.” lists expectations, anonymity, bureaucracy and procrastination as major factors affecting a first year students experience at university, whether they are exit VCE, TAFE/other university or international. While the book offers some tips and advice for students it also confirmed the validity of the HIT0103 IT Transition because it addressed these issues through the curriculum offered. The structure of HIT0103 IT Transition allowed for first year transition issues to be handled sensitively during the tutorial sessions as well as through informal
discussions and formal presentations with the tutor and student mentors. It is also interesting to note that many of the issues raised and discussed as part of HIT0103 IT Transition were shared and published in editions of Swinburne Student Union newspaper “The Swine”. Front page headlines in 2004 included “Avoiding Plagiarism and Cheating”, “The Great Group Work Scam”; and “First Year Hanging in There”.

**Peer Tutoring and Modelling**

In 2004, for the first time, second-year students were employed in first semester as peer tutors for each of the tutorial groups and assigned to an academic staff member for each of the tutorials. This decision was made to add validity and credibility to the advice given, and to allow these students to train as tutors through direct modelling. In semester two, as a result of this intensive and individual tutelage, they were re-employed as tutors in their own right, with the sole responsibility of running the tutorials. Each of the peer tutors were also obliged to take the compulsory sessional tutor training provided by the Faculty, and had completed the subjects themselves in the previous year. The peer tutors were not necessarily the best achieving students, but had a commitment to ensuring that incoming students had a smooth transition experience. One of these second-year students in particular had been a vocal critic of the program when he was forced to attend the classes initially, but grew to see its benefit over the course of the program to the extent that he is now one of its strongest supporters.

Informal discussions with academic tutors (lecturers and program directors) identified that their relationship with the peer tutor varied between individuals. Some academics met regularly with their peer tutor face to face for collaboration on tutorial activities; some used the Blackboard system discussion forums to facilitate communication. Some academics guided their student mentor towards a more responsible role, and others were keen to keep control and did not relinquish many responsibilities. The differences in perceived expectations and roles of academics and in turn their expectations of the role of the peer tutor affected communication and sense of accomplishment for some. The following quotes were taken from an end of semester on-line anonymous survey of the peer tutors.

- at times it seemed almost pointless being there with the amount of involvement the tutor was willing to involve me in
- I would like to have had more involvement
- Might have been good if we as mentors had more of a go at teaching for part of a session, as it’s a bit of a step going from mentoring, helping out a bit, to running the classes a lot more

The academics in the same survey, expressed that the best thing about their role was “seeing students grow in confidence”, “interaction with students”, and “seeing them develop during the transition process”. Some responses from academics however, indicated a lack of commitment to the program which reinforced perceptions of some student mentors.

The peer tutor experience was generally felt to be most rewarding and allowed a number of students to gain confidence in their tutoring abilities by modelling on an academic in a shared responsibility role. Some of the initial peer tutors have gone on to tutor in other subjects within the faculty.

Across the faculty some academics viewed the subject as the sole responsibility of the convenor demonstrating a lack of commitment to the objectives of the program. Throughout each evolution of the program, while the subject convenor had tried to involve as many academics as possible, this did not always eventuate. The success of the program required a shared involvement and responsibility across the faculty and across all levels of courses offered.

**Zero Credit Points Means Zero Future**

In today’s university environment, a zero credit point subject has a zero future. The proposed changes for 2006 allow for up to 12 hours of orientation, transition and learning skill development for incoming students (6 hours in Orientation Week and 6 hours in week 1 of semester), but will not incur an on-going cost to the faculty of an academic being responsible
for this program throughout the semester. While students will be given set timetables in Orientation Week, promoting the 6 hours of additional transition activities in week 1 of semester, attendance will be totally optional. The transition sessions in week 1 will make use of already scheduled but previously unused timetabled laboratory and tutorial sessions in core subjects (traditionally laboratories and tutorials have not started until week 2 of semester). It is proposed that lecturers and tutors will deliver pre-designed transition activities instead of course work in these sessions, facilitating the transition to higher education of new students. The involvement of wider faculty in this new program spreads the responsibility for student transition of students across a number of academics.

The 2006 program will also pre-enrol new students in cohorts of 15 to core lectures, tutorials and laboratories so that by default they will see the same faces in at least 3 of their 4 classes thereby reducing the potential feeling of isolation and increase connectivity in the cohort. The advantage of pre-enrolling students, while incurring an extra administrative cost, will ensure students know their timetable early, and will give them the most advantageous timetable possible (e.g. lectures before tutorials and a four day week if possible). This administrative activity is a small change that logically will increase sense of belonging in students, a key aim of the HIT0103 IT Transition subject.

The growth and evolvement of this program has been an interesting and challenging activity is a small change that logically will increase sense of belonging in students, a key aim of the HIT0103 IT Transition subject.

The growth and evolvement of this program has been an interesting and challenging development and provided many positive experiences for the convenor, tutors and peer tutors, and importantly the students themselves. However, without the commitment of a credit point load to give the subject validity in its own right, its future was always doomed.

CONCLUSION

In general the positive outcomes of this subject were the experiences and understandings the students gained from their reflective journal writing, their improved team work and communication skills and the knowledge gained of the need to become more responsible for the management of their learning. These are important benefits of the IT Transition subject in meeting its objectives and far outweigh the negative factors of a compulsory pass, weekly attendance commitment, assessment and lack of credit points. However, the fact that there were never any credit points allocated to the subject has led to its demise.

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