The transition to university needs to be considered specifically for first year students in the planning of overall curriculum reform. To this end, transition pedagogy relevant to the first year experience should be considered. Kift and Nelson (2005) suggested several principles regarding transition pedagogy for first year students:

a. Students must be engaged as learners if they are to experience university success
b. Students’ learning needs that arise from the social and academic transition to university must be acknowledged and can be addressed through curriculum design and renewal.


a. The renewal focus should emphasise creation of engaging learning environments that enable students to make personal meaning of their learning.
b. Take a long term agenda-setting view of constructive alignment of the curriculum for students’ cumulative benefit.
c. Curriculum reform should be informed by contemporary realities of higher education context (e.g., knowledge of who the incoming students are, understanding of their fears, preconceptions, stressors; acceptance of their multiple roles and desire for workplace preparedness).
d. Individual units should be designed to produce cumulative benefits in terms of skills and development of graduate capabilities.
e. The curriculum should deliver learning environments and opportunities that emphasise development of reflective, independent, life-long and self-managing learners.
f. Foster student engagement by bringing together academic, administrative and support programs (e.g., Student Services supports) within the curriculum.

Zhao and Kuh (2004), Kuh (2006, 2009) and Kuh et al. (2010) identified examples of high impact learning practices for students across the years that focus on student engagement with learning such as:

- First-Year Seminars and Experiences
- Common Intellectual Experiences
- Learning Communities
- Writing-Intensive Courses
- Collaborative Assignments and Projects
- Undergraduate Research
- Diversity/Global Learning
- Service Learning, Community-Based Learning
- Internships
- Capstone Courses and Projects
It is also very important to understand your first year cohort; that is to know where your entry cohort comes from? What is their background? What pre requisite knowledge to they require for entry? What are their characteristics? What is their demographic background? Are there sub groups such as first in family at university groups, those from indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or international backgrounds?

It is important to be clear about what academic skills your entry cohort possesses in terms of their:

- communication skills
- ability to work with others
- assessment skills
- academic numeracy skills
- critical analysis/problem solving skills
- reflective/self monitoring skills
- managing university skills
- study management skills
- information literacy skills.

This will assist the teaching team to tailor courses and experiences for students in the first year to attend to areas of skill weakness and to build on their strengths as well as to focus on impactful activities that promote student engagement with a student and professional community of practice. See Case Study 16 in this series about Enhancing the First Year Experience at UQ.

References and Resources


With assistance of a Strategic Teaching and Learning Grant at UQ, a small group of academic staff worked with first year students to enhance the transition of students into a professional program with a focus on developing students' professional identity as occupational therapy students in training. Feedback from students in the past had suggested that first year was often overwhelming, particularly with service courses taught outside of occupational therapy such as anatomy, sociology and psychology, students were trying to find out more about occupational therapy and get a sense of whether this was the career for them, they were developing skills to manage study at university, and had to manage new learning management systems, large cohorts of students and significant quantity of content.

At the same time we were reworking first year gateway courses in occupational therapy foundations, communication and occupational therapy process. In the curriculum redesign we were also working with five key threshold concepts (Rodger & Turpin, 2011), one of which was professional identity as an occupational therapist. This provided a focus on looking at how we could connect students with a community of practice (OT students), a professional community (OT staff and clinicians) and to assist them develop their identity in their chosen profession. There were several key activities:

1. **Enhancing the orientation and welcome activities** - by scheduling sessions where representatives from OT Australia Ltd Queensland Division spoke about the profession, its role and student membership; The OT Board of Queensland who spoke about registration processes and public safety; a panel of occupational therapists who spoke about a day in their life as an OT at work. This augmented the university specific and administrative information provided during orientation and introduction to the OT Students' Association (OTSA) and welcome barbeque. This has enhanced the professional profile and started to build a connection with professional communities (Association and Registration Board) beyond UQ.

2. **Pizza lunch career forums** - two per semester are held that provide students an opportunity to hear about the careers of several occupational therapists since graduation. The focus is not on learning OT content but on the possibilities of where an OT career can lead and showcasing the exciting work opportunities, travel and varying career paths - clinical, research, private, international work and volunteer experiences etc. This activity has also introduced students to OTs beyond UQ who have varied and interesting careers and links them with a professional community of practice.

3. **Developing an online community** - of practice using social networking tools such as Facebook site OT@UQ and a community BlackBoard site.

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Specifically Facebook was chosen for the following reasons;
1) Facebook already hosts a number of occupational therapy professional communities of practice, thus students become familiar with the Facebook group format and learn to develop a professional online etiquette, 2) many students are already members and regular users of Facebook thus increasing the number of times a student interacts with the group, 3) students are able to view each others profile photos allowing students to make more meaningful connections with others in their cohort, and 4) allows students to actively contribute to the content of the site. It was considered that this may enhance their connection with the OT student community.

The site was made available to all students across the four year levels enrolled in OT at UQ. At the time of submission, the site currently has 324 student members and is primarily student led, with students from all levels able to contribute to queries posted by members. Weekly posts created by a project officer, are focused at promoting discussion and facilitating reflection based on common first year student concerns and current course requirements. The site enables further connections between new and existing friendship groups within year levels, between friendship groups and across year levels. The site provides informal mentoring from higher year levels and allows students to develop further connections within existing friendship groups and between groups and year levels where advice, ideas and support are shared.

This virtual community connection appears to have been very successful in engaging students in a community of practice that has both a social presence as well as forum for discussion of professional issues and answering of questions relevant to first year students. Students are directed to course specific BlackBoard sites and academic staff to answer specific questions/concerns but general student discussion occurs on this site and provides a useful forum for interaction. The site has been viewed very positively by students as a way of providing a student community of practice.

4. Development of an OT first year survival guide - tip sheets with tips from final year students and the 2010 first year cohort on surviving year 1 and links to useful career, student support, OT professional, study tips, assignment/exam preparation websites which are accessible at UQ and beyond. These provide websites that students can access at any time at their convenience.

5. Mentoring program - a mentoring program was implemented in two different formats over the course of the project. It was first run in semester 2 2010 as a six week mentoring program pilot consisting of first year occupational therapy students and final year undergraduate and graduate entry students. The students were paired with mentors during an initial breakfast training and information meeting. Support for the trial program was provided by the project officer. Contact between mentors and mentees was made through phone, email and face to face contact.
At the conclusion of the trial a final breakfast meeting was held and feedback was obtained through pre and post surveys and focus groups. The data analysis identified that student engagement with their mentors varied significantly between students and over the course of the semester. Contact was influenced by (1) extracurricular student activities, such as work commitments, (2) environmental barriers, such as living location and timetabling, and (3) student demographics. The use of the social networking site Facebook, was identified as a superior platform for peer mentoring by removing access barriers, and providing opportunity for more frequent contact with a greater variety of students.

In Semester 2 2011 a group of 16 final year students were recruited to provide peer mentoring to the first year cohort using the Facebook group site OT@UQ. Students were able to negotiate their level of contact with the mentors as the mentoring partnerships evolved and depending on student need. Mentors and first year students were provided with information and support throughout the semester. Final year mentors monitor the site and provide feedback to students ensuring that first year questions are addressed.

Thanks to Anna Rickard Project Officer OT First Year Experience, Dr Monica Moran, Dr Merrill Turpin, Melanie Hoyle, First Year Coordinator.