# Making the connections: transition experiences for first-year education students

**Chris Perry and Andrea Allard**
*Deakin University, Burwood, Victoria, Australia*

## Introduction

For first-year students, making a successful transition into university studies can be an exciting challenge and a daunting proposition. Recent research in Australia (McInnis et al 2000) and internationally (Bridges 2000; Pargetter et al 1998; Tinto 1994, 1998), suggests that many first-year university students, particularly those coming directly from secondary schools, find the transition into academic life difficult, often feeling a lack of connection to the university context. Successfully managing these feelings, assisting students to quickly develop a sense of 'belonging' and connection, is vital for a number of reasons.

Firstly, high attrition rates have financial implications for first-year students who drop out mid-year and for the universities, in terms of student places and long-term planning. Secondly, making connections – finding the relevance and sense of membership within the university climate – is critical for students to develop effective learning habits, positive attitudes and openness to new knowledge. In addition, establishing positive practices in the early months of studying at university can enable students to utilise these experiences and knowledge as a part of their lifelong professional habits.

However, in order for students to make this transition, relationships must be built between students and their new peer groups and with the wider academic community. Students also need to make connections between the experiences they bring with them to their new setting and their new knowledge.

In 2001, the Faculty of Education at Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia) began the development of a new three-year Education Studies Major program. In 2002, all incoming first-year education students were required to enrol in the first two units of the new course: 'Understanding Children and Adolescents' and 'Understanding Learners'.

As Chairs of these units, we viewed the implementation stage as a 'pilot study'. In agreement with the teams of colleagues involved in developing and teaching these new units, we believe that doing research on our own practices is critical to ensuring that we are meeting the needs of our students. To this end, we sought to teach collaboratively; monitor how the units were 'unfolding' on a weekly basis; listen actively to what our students had to say about how they were feeling, including their concerns and their anxieties; and to evaluate the implementation process from a student and staff perspective at the end of each semester.

In this paper, we discuss the ways in which the first two units of this new educational program were designed to address some of the issues that students face when making the transition into university life. Through the teaching and learning processes trialled in these units, we endeavoured to help our students to develop a sense of belonging and to find ways to enable them to see themselves as actively engaged in 'producing' knowledge. We also hoped to challenge stereotypes of university learning as 'passive' or transmitted knowledge only.

Here, we discuss some of the pedagogical strategies, resources, organisational structures and 'grounded' experiences that were trialled as part of the new Education Studies Major, to help students make connections. We consider the ways in which these approaches aim to build important relationships among students, and between students and staff, in light of the literature addressing first-year student transitions. As well, we outline some strategies used to help students connect their prior experiences with new knowledge. We report on the student evaluations of each of the units and consider what implications these have for further research in the area of transitions for first-year education students. We show how the knowledge and application of research understandings can inform course development and enhance students' experiences of transition.

## Issues of transition

Transition can be described as a process or period in which something (or someone) undergoes a change and passes from one state, stage, form or activity to another. While transition may be viewed as a movement from the known to the unknown, it can also be seen as a series of related transformations. For particular people, some transformations may be similar to those previously experienced.

However, it is also vital to recognise that some transformations may be very different and new. As Latham and Green (1997, p 2) declare:

> (s)tudents in transition must contend with, adapt to, and learn about, many differences. They need to read the culture of the new setting, and to seek out culturally appropriate ways of participating according to peer groups and others.

While university study is sometimes understood as a preparation for life, it can also be argued that university is a life in itself. As such, on entry

into university, the student becomes an active agent who shapes – and is shaped by – the university experience (Astin et al 2002; Peat et al 2000).

The successful transition of students from prior educational settings to and through the first year of tertiary education has long been a focus of concern for those in universities who work with this cohort of students. Gilbert et al (1997) assert that for as long as there has been some form of post-secondary education, there has been, broadly defined, an 'educational experience' for new students.

In a summary of research on transition experiences from the USA, Canada, UK, Israel, Asia and Australia, Pargetter et al (1988) note that successful transition is linked not only to success in assessment, but also to student demographic and psychological characteristics; student prior performance; and social and institutional factors.

Gilbert et al (1997) note that changes in perception as to who should and could enter universities has meant that, over time, the structure and content of the first year of study has also changed. Specifically, they refer to the move away from the 'elitist, limited access origins' of universities to a view that has become 'much more egalitarian with open access to all types of new students' (p 2). Bridges (2000) also comments on changes in higher education that have disrupted traditional identities of place, time and community. As Macdonald (2000, p 7) notes

> Times have changed, and more students than ever before are entering the tertiary education system, with a wider range of backgrounds, a greater range of abilities, and more diverse expectations.

Reporting on a key national project in Australia, McInnis & James (1995) noted that universities were still coming to terms with the implications of student diversity, motives and interest, and that the academic abilities of students are not well understood. Of particular significance, their study indicated that a large number of students did not feel connected either socially or academically to their courses or to the university. This study also suggested that while many first-year students did make a successful transition into university studies, others experienced little more than a fleeting connection with their institution from the car park to the lecture theatre and home again (Pargetter et al 1998). We found this focus on 'connectedness' of particular interest when thinking through what the first year of the new Education Studies Major might need to offer our students.

Drawing on their earlier study, in 2000, McInnis and colleagues again surveyed first-year students to determine whether any patterns of stability and change had occurred over the five-year period. Some benchmarks established in the first study remained the same. For example, there was little change in the considerable number of students experiencing an uncertain start to university and, while there had been effort to improve links between schools and universities, about one third of first-year students still did not feel well prepared for university study.

This study highlighted other changes, although not necessarily positive ones. The proportion of students who reported having gained satisfaction from university study had decreased, and the proportion reporting difficulty in motivating themselves had increased. In addition, a greater proportion of students were engaged in full or part-time work and were working more hours in such employment.

This increasing number of first-year students enrolled full time whilst also engaged in paid work (either full or part-time) is a significant change. McInnis et al (2000) report that, between 1994 and 1999, there was a 95% increase in the proportion of full-time students who worked part time. There was also an increase in the hours of that paid work – a 14% increase in the mean number of hours worked. At Deakin University, a recent report on the *University's First Year Initiative Survey* (2002) indicated that 81% of students in the Faculty of Education were in paid work at the time of the survey. Because of their time commitment to this work, these 'earner learners' present a challenging profile for the success of first-year programs.

These changes impact on student retention rates and thus increase the need to focus more on the nature and quality of the first-year experience. In addition, the rising costs associated with operating universities have also led to attention being focused on the prevention and/or reduction of unnecessary attrition of students.

While there has clearly been an increase in the diversity of the student population, there has also been a change in the function and role of the university staff. Prior to the changes to higher education of the late 1980s, faculty staff were often responsible for a diverse range of student support services such as personal and course advice, counselling, administration of courses and course entry; and wider support beyond their teaching areas – such as administration of student residences, and organisation of social, recreational and sporting events. More recently, the roles of faculty staff have changed to respond to the requirements of a more academic research model, leaving less time for direct contact with and support of students.

Thus, while the student cohort has grown in numbers and presents a more complex profile, there has been a reduction in the time and resources academic staff can afford to assist students in their induction. In addition, in recent years the number of specialised support services offered on university campuses has increased. Although the universities can at times be seen to provide more specialised services – for example, counselling – these services can also be viewed as more impersonal and less responsive to individual needs, by virtue of the necessity to respond to a large number of students across all university courses.

For the reasons noted, it has become extremely important to focus on the early experiences of undergraduate students in mass higher education systems.

> As recent research shows, the formative experiences of students are pivotal in establishing attitudes, outlooks and approaches to learning that will endure beyond the undergraduate years. (Deakin University 2001, p 1)

Tinto (1994) argues that the strength of commitment to quality education by an institution and that institution's ability to build a strong sense of social community are the keys to effective student retention. Some researchers, however (eg Barefoot 2000), query whether educators are really achieving their goal of improving the experience for the first-year student at university, and whether they are making the transition easier and more rewarding.

Tinto (1998), drawing on information from American institutions, suggests that higher education institutions have attended to research detailing ways in which students can be supported to 'persist' in their studies, and that this has resulted in a 'proliferation of a wide variety of 'retention' programs designed to enhance the likelihood that students will persist to degree completion' (p 167). Tinto notes, however, that while these programs have focused on issues such as student affairs or transition seminars, they have not attended in the same degree to the student experience in terms of an academic or course organisational perspective.

Involvement matters. If a student becomes more involved academically and socially, he/she is more likely to persist with the course. The more students interact with other students and faculty, the more likely they are to stay in the program (Mallette & Cabrera 1991; Tinto 1998). Rendon (1994) observes that the more a student sees these interactions as positive and validating, the less likely she or he is to leave her/his course.

Following a review of a variety of studies into the experiences of students in their first year at university, Gilbert et al (1997, p 4) argue that student success can be related to progress made in educational and personal goals, such as:

- developing academic and intellectual competence

- establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships

- developing personal identity

- deciding on a career and lifestyle

- maintaining personal health and wellness

- developing an integrated philosophy of life.

## The study in context

Deakin University, like many other tertiary institutions, has taken seriously the need to review existing first-year programs and to develop concerted support and intervention strategies that involve all areas of the University.

One of the stated aims of the new Education Studies Major is to ensure that students make meaningful connections – academically and

socially – from the start of their university experience. Therefore, each of the new units was developed collaboratively by teaching teams who aimed to address not only the academic content that forms the basis of Education Studies, but to design a program with inbuilt strategies that would enable students to make the important links with each other and with university learning. The theoretical frameworks that have shaped the new Education Studies Major have been elaborated upon elsewhere (Collins 2002). In summary, it is argued that educators must focus on a new kind of knowledge base and clearly outline the 'epistemological status we are going to give to the concepts and theories we offer students as a resource for reflective practice' (Collins 2002, p 18).

In developing and defining the content and the processes of what would engage the students positively in such a program, the unit planning teams aimed to address such personal and educational goals outlined by Gilbert et al (1997), as noted above. We also focused our planning on what we knew about the importance of providing a program that would address the negative transition experiences of some first-year students (for example, McInnis et al 2000). We wished to develop and support educational experiences that 'promoted shared, collaborative learning experiences within the university classroom so that students learn together rather than apart' (Tinto 1998).

Early in semester one, we suggested to first-year students that while at times they may feel like 'strangers in a strange land', they should consider their university years as a journey that they have embarked upon to become 'educational professionals'. As part of learning about themselves as new university students and viewing themselves as future educators, we frequently used the metaphor of looking through 'multiple lenses', to encourage students to look at what was happening in their own lives from different perspectives, and to reflect on how their own experiences of change might help them to manage their future experiences of transition. For example, we asked that they, as future educators, reflect on their present experiences of transition and their own fears and anxieties as first-year students, in order to better understand how their future students might feel as newcomers to their classrooms and schools.

Three weeks into the start of semester one, 2002, all first-year teacher education students were asked to

> write a brief autobiographical account of at least one major experience that was a transition point in your life, preferably in your educational life, although you can interpret 'education' broadly here if you wish … (EXE101 Study Guide 2002, p 22).

In setting this hurdle task, we aimed to help students begin to understand that this 'transition into university life' was not entirely removed from transformations or transitions they had already experienced – for example, in moving into education when starting primary school, or moving from primary schooling to secondary levels of education. We sought to help our students reflect on the resources they had already developed through

previous transitions and to understand the ways that these resources could help them with their current negotiations.

'Where in the world is room N101?' was a question that began one student's reflective writing piece. We find this simple question a useful starting point to think about – and through – the issues that are raised in this paper. For us, 'where am I and where should I be?' seems to epitomise the most basic level of anxiety that incoming students live with as they try to navigate their way through the (at times) overwhelming experience of 'coming to' and 'belonging in' the world of the university.

At a more metaphorical level, the question 'Where in the world is room N101?' also evokes the voice of a 'stranger' coming into a 'new world'. For those of us who spend so much of our lives working in the university, it is easy to forget how daunting the different culture and ethos of this 'new world' may be for those who lack a 'familiar' to guide them, an easy map to read, an early warning of 'dangers ahead', or clear signposts of what to expect.

## Education Studies Major: first year, first semester

### 'Transitions and Connections'

As an integral part of the first semester unit in the new Education Studies Major, the first three week 'module' of the new course focuses on 'Transitions and Connections'. The aim of this is to reassure students that what they are feeling (anxiety, hope, concerns) is a 'normal' part of the transition experience. The module also aims to help first-year education students to begin from their own experiences and to think about their (future) roles as educational professionals.

In the first few weeks, in the two-hour weekly tutorials, students begin the process of getting to know each other. Warm-up activities, including name games and cooperative group work, are utilised. These activities work to establish a sense of comfort within the group and also aim to help students understand the ways in which they can use their own prior educational experiences to think about the resources they bring to their current transition. Videos and CD-ROMs that track children's transitional experiences into prep grades and primary school are also used as topics of discussion, to assist students in making the overall 'connection' related to transitional experiences.

Readings have been chosen to open up students' own experiences for discussion. For example, in an excerpt from Salzberger-Wittenberg's (1999, p 8) Hopeful and fearful expectations in the emotional experience of learning and teaching, students consider the argument that:

> Even if we have mastered other like situations, we dread that our abilities will not be adequate this time or to this situation … It would seem that at every turning point we feel threatened with not knowing where we are, what we are, who we are …

By making overt the 'what' and 'how' of their feelings and new experiences, we endeavour to assist students to recognise the commonality of their feelings and to value how such experiences, while daunting, can also be quite exciting and potentially very satisfying.

Salzberger-Wittenburg's statement that '… we have come to know ourselves not in isolation, but in relation to others…' (1999, p 8) serves as a useful start for considering how important making 'connections' with new people is as part of managing personal transitions to university life and building a supportive learning environment. The value and importance of working collaboratively and cooperatively is also explicitly considered through the readings (eg Johnson & Johnson 1999). Through a series of jigsaw cooperative activities and/or problem-solving activities, students have the opportunity to practice and evaluate the benefits of making connections with others in these practical ways.

## Syndicate groups

These early personal connections become vital as students move into the next five weeks of the unit, where they are required to form 'syndicate' groups of five or six people. Each group gives their syndicate a name. They also organise when they will meet outside of tutorial time, for a minimum of an hour per week, to complete the weekly tasks each group is set before the next tutorial. Working closely together to achieve a common end was a process intended to provide students with the social connectiveness to help them make the transition and adjustment to university life, and provide them with academic support to explore new ideas in a relatively safe and comfortable environment before having to present their ideas at the larger (30-student) tutorial meetings each week.

As noted earlier, the first task students are asked to undertake requires them to reflect on a 'moment of change' in their own life history. These are assessed as either 'Satisfactory' or 'Not satisfactory' and used as a means to enable the teaching team to:

- understand a bit more about the individual perspectives of students and the experiences they bring to the classroom;

- identify any problems or concerns students may have regarding written expression of Standard Australian English, so that, if necessary, they can be promptly referred to the Academic Skills Unit for assistance; and

- clarify their expectations concerning students' future assessment tasks.

A rough estimate suggests that about 25% of the 500 first-year education students wrote about their current experiences of trying to make sense of their strange, new environment. From the teaching team's perspective, these autobiographical pieces proved to be particularly useful in identifying how anxious and overwhelmed many of the first-year students

were feeling. In turn, this enabled the teaching team to better address students' particular concerns.

## Modelling of teamwork

In addition to the weekly tutorials, various members of each teaching team present the weekly lecture. The team approach works from an administrative perspective (that is, seven staff members at one campus work collaboratively to plan and evaluate the sessions on a weekly basis), and is also intended to serve as a model for the students to see how different lecturers work together to plan and present materials. One of the aims is to emphasise to students that skills of collaboration are needed not only for making connections to others, but for planning and producing work in their own professional lives.

## Academic skills

Along with the above pedagogical practices, the teaching team build in and check off a number of requirements for students to develop or demonstrate their academic skills as the unit progresses. This is another means of inducting students into the 'strange' world of academia.

For example, in the first semester, all first-year students are required to undertake library tutorials and do an 'Introduction to ITS workshop', which helps them to access the online environment. During several of the early lectures in the first module, explicit academic skills are addressed or demonstrated. Personnel from the Academic Skills Unit at Deakin University conduct a 25-minute session on how to take notes in lectures; and a 25-minute session with the IT Manager is offered on how to access online resources such as 'First Class' and Education Studies Online (ESO), an ICT resource developed specifically for the program. The aim of integrating these 'skills' into the weekly lectures is to help students do the tasks set for them in the tutorials.

In this way, we are attempting to set students up to succeed, by addressing the key first-year objectives, as noted earlier, that relate to progress made in educational and personal goals, such as:

- developing academic and intellectual competence,

- establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and

- developing personal identity (Gilbert et al 1997).

At the end of the semester, students are asked to complete a five-page survey in which they rate their tutorial activities, the use of syndicate groups, the required readings, the lectures and the assessment tasks.

Of relevance here, 90% of students completing the survey rated the tutorial activities undertaken in the first module, 'Transitions and Connections', as either 'very valuable' or 'valuable', with 6% stating that they were 'unsure' about the value of the activities and 4% stating that they found the activities 'not valuable'. Students appreciated the opportunity and time to get to know each other and to build a sense of group belonging, and

commented frequently in their written responses that the activities in this module helped them to feel comfortable and able to contribute to the wider discussions.

Working in syndicate groups to prepare and present set tasks between classes was rated as either 'very valuable' or 'valuable' by 60% of all students who completed the survey. How students rated the use of syndicate groups differed widely, depending on the tutorial group they were in, with some groups rating the use of syndicates much more highly than others. One possible explanation for the difference is that some members of the teaching team were more adept than others in utilising the work of the syndicate groups as a basis for learning. Even when they did not rate the use of syndicate groups highly, students often commented that they thought they were a 'good idea' as a means to get to know and to work with peers.

The reasons given for not seeing the syndicate groups as 'valuable' included: 1) time constraints – eg in one tutorial group, students seemed unable to find a common hour to meet; 2) 'personality clashes' – some members of groups didn't seem able to get along; and 3) the complaint that not all members took equal responsibility for attending and working through the set tasks. Additionally, a small cohort also saw working with their peers as a 'waste of time'; comments here included: 'Just tell us what we need to know'.

The overall student response to the design and the pedagogical processes used in semester one suggests that progress was being made in addressing some of the major issues faced by first-year students in their transition to academic life.

## Education Studies Major: first year, second semester

In developing the unit for second semester, we continued to acknowledge the need for strengthening the students' sense of community, and considered the tensions of time and commitment resulting from their outside work. We also aimed to attend to supporting students as they progressed in their development of academic and intellectual competence – noted by Gilbert et al (1997) as essential for student success.

Focused on 'Understanding Learners', the starting point of this unit is designed to encourage students to understand themselves as learners, on the premise that if they are able to reflect on their own learning styles and processes, they will gain some insight and better understand others.

The unit covers a variety of topic areas related to cognitive development and effective learning. The structure of this unit is the same as that of the first; a weekly lecture and a two-hour tutorial. The objectives of the lecture and tutorial follow those previously noted. Our teaching team continues to share the presentation of lectures and to meet regularly to plan, discuss and evaluate the progress of the unit. Following first semester, we continue to alert students to changes from secondary school to university in institutional factors such as teaching pedagogy (Pargetter et al 1998).

The requirement of structured syndicate groups for tutorial work is not continued into the second semester. Rather, in acknowledging the growing confidence of the students, the teaching team remove this support or 'scaffolding', and encourage students to form their own working or discussion groups. Some students choose to continue to follow the syndicate group format they formed during the first semester unit, or make new groups as an outcome of working together in a school setting during the observation of learning activities (described below).

## Unit resources

In this unit, we emphasise learning as a process. We model this, in part, through choice of unit materials and supporting resources. The students are issued with a workbook – a series of notes related to the unit. Each weekly topic contains an overview, discussion and a set of related readings. Students are encouraged to read beyond the set readings. Students are also asked to make 'connections' between their learning experiences and those of others – other students, the teaching staff, and students observed in educational settings (discussed below). Through the inclusion of reflective questions throughout the workbook, students are encouraged to reflect on practice and reflect through practice.

Students are required to present their workbook as a looseleaf ring binder, to encourage them to incorporate additional materials during their participation in the unit. As stated by the Unit Chair: a final workbook that is messy and bulging with additional pages and material is a sign of an independent and self-directed learner!

## Academic skills

Again, as another means to enable students to develop necessary academic competence and the skills they will require as education professionals, the university has developed structures to ensure that students learn to work with Information Communications Technologies (ICT). As we previously noted in detailing the semester one program, the Education Major is supported by Education Studies Online (ESO), an ICT resource developed specifically for the program. In acknowledging the need to support the development of academic and intellectual competence, noted by Gilbert et al (1997) as important for first-year students, the requirements for each topic direct the student to additional resource material provided on the ESO site. This gives students direct access to:

- additional discussion and readings related to each topic;

- links to web-based resources;

- links to Snapshots – written vignettes of each concept 'in action'; and

- links to a discussion site for posting responses to the Snapshots and other questions.

In providing access to online resources, we are acknowledging and giving support to the 'earner-learner' student who is making choices in organising her/his time. These online resources, in conjunction with those provided by the University Library, allow students to choose when they want to work.

## Observations of learning and learners

It is important that students in their early university experiences are given opportunities to develop a personal and professional identity and to understand important aspects of the career choice they have made (Gilbert et al 1997). In the main, students choose our course to gain the qualifications to work as teachers. Along with understanding the culture of university life (Latham & Green 1997), it is important for these student teachers to understand the culture of a teaching life. We also wish to support positive formative experiences of their professional lives as teachers.

In linking the content of the unit to their future roles as teachers in classrooms, all students take part in task-directed observation in educational settings. Students are grouped for these observation sessions, and keep field notes following directions in their workbook related to each topic. While the educational observation requirement is not related to teaching experience, the majority of students will do their observations in schools. This allows students to focus, early in their education course, on a school as a possible career site.

In their evaluation comments, students noted:

- The observation sessions gave relevance to the topics and concepts, they came to life.

- It was good to establish a relationship with the school and the teacher by having something to talk about.

- It reminded me of why I was at University.

- It gave me a chance to apply what I was learning.

- It helped create a relationship between the teacher's work and my learning.

Spending time in observation allows students to see a school from a professional perspective rather than from that of a former student. Here, again, is another 'site' for a transitional experience, for making connections; ie moving away from viewing the classroom from a students' perspective to viewing it from a teaching and learning perspective. This part of the unit affords students support as they explore and 'read' the cultures of new settings (Latham & Green 1997).

This second unit is planned to be another significant 'moment' in the journey of first-year education students. To this end, the second unit provides the students ample scope to: reflect on their own observations in classroom settings; share and compare these with their peers; and begin to ask questions

concerning what they don't know and what they might need more information about.

The aim of this unit is to enable students to see themselves as active learners and producers of knowledge, and is central to the success of their transition experiences. The conversations that follow on directly from their weekly observations of learners in educational settings are intended to further develop the processes started in first semester, where students utilised different 'lenses' to make sense of personal observations in light of their own educational experiences. Again, the intent is to heighten (or deepen!) their reflective processes in the journey of becoming education professionals. In evaluating the unit at the end of this first year, students made very positive comments about the value of these observation sessions.

In designing this unit, in addition to the intended learning outcomes, we aimed to facilitate and enhance students' feelings of academic and intellectual competence. By working in groups and tutorials and in undertaking observation sessions, students continue to establish and maintain the interpersonal relationships with other student colleagues they started through the syndicate group work in semester one – relationships critical for a successful first-year experience.

## In summary

In developing our Education Major Studies program, we drew from the research literature related to experiences of transition. We noted changes in the role and function of universities: increasing student numbers, and the diversity of student demographic, social and psychological characteristics.

In evaluating the success of our efforts to develop an effective program, at this early stage we can already see some productive outcomes. A university First Year Initiative Survey undertaken at Deakin at the end of first semester 2002 indicated that the first-year attrition rate for the Faculty of Education was the lowest across all faculties. Across four key aspects of students' experiences of transition to higher education (adequate time for assignments; academic advice; satisfaction with results; and the ability to contribute in tutorials), first-year Faculty of Education students were more positive in their assessments than students from other faculties.

Both these units, along with the other units in the newly developed Educational Studies Major, will be continually monitored and evaluated to ensure that students build important relationships with each other and with staff, and that they are assisted in connecting their prior experiences with new knowledge – thus hopefully making their first-year experience a successful transition.

Those of us involved with students in their initial experiences of tertiary education will also need to continue to research those issues that make the first-year experience positive and successful. One issue that requires further research is how best to work with the values and views of the

increasing number of students who are 'earner learners', and whose working hours continue to take up a significant proportion of their life.

While much has been done at Deakin, and elsewhere, to understand the benefits that can be gained by properly developed online resources, we continue to explore this in relation to the first-year experience. Additionally, we need to understand more about how to further deepen the connections students make with the process and the content of their courses, and how to build on these connections throughout their tertiary experience.

However, we can be encouraged by the outcomes of this trial of our new units.

As one of our students finally wrote:

'Maybe I should just admit defeat and ask somebody where I can find Room N101 … Wait … I've found it! I knew I could do it!'

## Endnote

This article has been developed from a paper delivered by C Perry and A Allard at the 2002 Australian Teacher Education Conference in Brisbane, titled: 'Where in the world is Room N101?' Engaging with first year education students' experiences of transition.

## References

Astin A, Keup J & Lindholm J (2002) A decade of changes in undergraduate education: a national study of system "transformation". *The Review of Higher Education,* vol 25, no 2, pp 141–162.

Barefoot B (2000) The first-year experience: are we making it better? *About Campus,* January/February.

Bridges D (2000) Back to the future: the higher education curriculum in the 21st century. *Cambridge Journal of Education,* vol 30, no 1, pp 37–55.

Collins C (2002) *Envisaging a new education studies major: what are the core educational knowledges to be addressed in preservice teacher education?* Paper presented at the Teacher Education Conference, University of New England, Armidale, February.

Deakin University (2000) *Teaching and learning management plan.* Deakin University.

Deakin University (2001) *Neither here nor there: issues in the transition experience for first year undergraduate students at Deakin University.* LITF Project Report.

Deakin University (2002) *First Year Initiative Survey.* Institutional Research Group, Deakin University.

EXE101 (2002) *Deakin University study guide: understanding children and adolescents.*

Gilbert S, Chapman J, Dietsche, ??, Grayson P & Gardner J (1997) *From best intentions to best practice: the first experience in Canadian postsecondary education,* National Resource Centre for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition. University of South Carolina, Monograph Series, no 22.

Johnson D & Johnson R (1999) *Learning together and alone: cooperative, competitive and individualistic learning* (5th ed) Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Latham G & Green P (1997*) The journey to university: a study of the first year experience.* (http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/dec97/greenlath1.html) Accessed 30 June 2002.

Macdonald I (2000) What do we mean by transition, and what is the problem? *Australian Journal of Engineering Education,* vol 9, no 1, pp 7–20.

McInnis C & James R (1995) *First year on campus: diversity in the initial experience of Australian undergraduates.* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

McInnis C, James R & Hartly R (2000) *Trends in the first year experience; in Australian universities.* Centre for the Study of Higher Education, the University of Melbourne.

Mallette B & Cabrera A (1991) Determinants of withdrawal behaviour: an exploratory study. *Research in Higher Education,* vol 32, no 2, pp 179–194.

Pargetter R, McInnis C, James R, Evans M, Peel M & Dobson I (1998) *Transition from secondary to tertiary: a performance study.* (http://www.detya.gov.au/higher/eippubs/eip98-20/contents.htm) Accessed 10 May 2002.

Peat M, Grant A & Dalziel J (2000) *The importance of forming social and academic networks for students in transition to university study.* (http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/itl/docs/work/docs/firstyear/peat.etal_pacrim2000_paper.pdf) Accessed 30 June 2002.

Rendon L (1994) *Validating culturally diverse students: Toward ??,* vol 9, no 1, pp 33–52.

Salzberger-Wittenberg I (1999). Cited in I Salzberger-Wittenberg, G Williams & E Osbourne (eds) *Hopeful and fearful expectations in the emotional experience of learning and teaching* (2nd ed). London: Karnac.

Tinto V (1994) *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Tinto V (1998) Colleges as communities: taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education,* vol 21, no 2, pp 167–177.