

# Why tutors matter: realities of their role in transition

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the role of tutors in the successful transition and engagement of first year students. It is clear that differing expectations exist about the tutor's role, from perspectives of the university, the tutors, and the students with whom they deal. Recently, increased training and tutor induction programs have been widely implemented in Australian universities, but it is unclear whether this training thoroughly prepares tutors to meet student expectations, especially those of first year students. The impact of casualisation as well as large student:staff ratios is still evident in the scarce resources available to tutors and the pressures under which they operate. This paper draws on interviews with current tutors and students as well as transition literature to investigate the tutor's role in transition, and proposes that the role is not only continually evolving, but a matter for articulated negotiation to facilitate the best outcome for students and staff.*

## Introduction

This paper examines the role of tutors in the successful transition and engagement of first year students. While many other factors such as course choice, support services and social engagement mediate new students' success and satisfaction with their tertiary studies, we propose that the tutor not only influences students' academic progress (James and Baldwin 1997), but also moderates their transition experiences. Recently, increased tutor training & induction programs have been widely implemented in Australian universities, and these are of assistance in developing tutors' teaching skills. Students are more satisfied with the quality of teaching at university level (Krause et al. 2005). However, it is unclear whether this training thoroughly prepares tutors to meet students' transition expectations, especially of those students coming directly from secondary school, where reliance on the knowledge and care of the (home room) teacher is a given. We observe that many tutors have scarce physical resources with which to fulfil both their academic and transition roles. This paper draws on interviews with current tutors and students as well as transition literature to investigate the tutor's role in transition, and proposes that the role is not only continually evolving, but a matter for articulated negotiation to facilitate the best outcome for students and staff.

## What is a tutor?

In many cases, the tutor is the most junior member of departmental academic staff in terms of experience and qualifications. The tutor is expected to be thoroughly engaged with the research agenda of the department and to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the subject that they are teaching. The tutor's main role is usually considered to be subject teaching. However, the

tutor is also, importantly, the academic staff member most likely to engage in face-to-face discussion with students either in small groups or individually. Thus the tutor realises the human face of the academic community in the eyes of the novice students; we consider that, to many new students, the tutor is the university. The tutor is integral to the engagement of the student with the university, the community, the course ([www.griffith.edu.au/landt/firstyear/advisors/fya\\_tutorials.html](http://www.griffith.edu.au/landt/firstyear/advisors/fya_tutorials.html)), and the quality of tutorials is central to this engagement (James and Baldwin 1997). We believe that the tutor's role in transition cannot be over-estimated.

In many Australian tertiary institutions, the tutor is also a student. Many postgraduate students undertake tutoring duties as they embark upon higher study. Working at the same institution where you are studying has many practical advantages, and is also a potential career pathway for students wishing to proceed to an academic career. Thus the tutor him- or herself is often in transition from student to teacher (Smissen 2003), and also to some degree an apprentice. The tutor is now faced with a greater diversity of students, some of them older than the tutor, or with more experience, or with more resources and technical skills than the tutor possesses. Some tutors also feel that they are used as workhorses to cope with large student numbers, or gap-fillers who are easily overlooked as soon as permanent academic staff become available to teach. While this paper does not propose to deal with the industrial relations aspect of casualisation, it must be recognised that this has effects on the performance and engagement of tutors with their students. Kift (2002, p. 2) considers that the need for 'a dialogue between university management, fulltime staff, students and casual academics that embraces a shared vision of program delivery has become pressing'.

### **What do universities expect of tutors?**

Universities have mixed relationships with tutors, sometimes complicated by the multiple roles of the tutor (for example postgraduate student, staff member, colleague, apprentice academic). James and Baldwin (1997) include a chapter on career development in their tutoring guide. Regardless of their future directions (and whether or not they are dedicated to teaching), tutors are the front line for student contact. Although 'the centrality of the casual teacher to program delivery' (Kift 2002, p. 11) is acknowledged, not all departments provide their tutors with designated office space, phone or computer access to facilitate their contact with students. Previous authors have noted the similarities between the experiences of the new tutor and the first year student (see Kift 2002, p. 11), and we have used a similar analogy when recruiting teaching staff to assist in transition programs. We sometimes talk about 'inducting' new students into university in the same way we would all like to be introduced to a new job.

At Melbourne we have found divergent expectations of the tutor's role in different departments, ranging from attending all lectures in their subject and assisting with the setting of assessment tasks, to keeping track of student attendance and following up student absence, facilitating student social interaction, staffing 'on-call tutor' desks, undertaking individual 'progress' interviews, and coping with the bulk of assignment marking and student feedback, among other more prosaic roles such as photocopying and researching/compiling subject readers.

As central administrative staff in the Transition Program, we realise that we also have expectations of the tutors as transition facilitators. Just as Kift (2002, p.6) considers the role of the tutor to be fundamental to the students' engagement with the academic challenges of their course, so do we envisage the tutor's role as integral to the students' transition to life within the university community as a whole. While tutors may not be the ones directly involved in the delivery of targeted transition initiatives (for example, in many transition schemes, later year students act as study group facilitators or mentors), we are very aware of the students' propensity to rely on their tutors to be their guides to the tertiary world.

This belief, and challenges to it, led us to include a session on the role of tutors in our 2005 Transition Forum, an internal Melbourne event. We created an audio-visual presentation from a montage of student and staff interviews about tutoring. Questions included 'What's the role of a tutor?'; 'What makes a good tutor?'; 'What is the difference between a lecturer and a tutor?'. We interviewed around 30 staff and students for the audio-visual presentation, which introduced a panel discussion with diverse tutors reflecting on their role in the context of transition.

One of the most controversial aspects of the ensuing discussion was whether or not tutors should be expected to know the full range of services the university provides for students. The Transition Program holds an expectation that tutors are aware of the wide array of transition issues that affect students, and are able to refer students to services appropriately. To encourage this approach we have widely disseminated our *Guide for Tutors of First Year Students* to staff at various levels across the university over the last few years.

We were interested to discover that some tutors considered extensive knowledge of the university and its services to be beyond their brief. For some it seemed impossible within the scope of their paid hours, and given the constraints on their time of other commitments to their department and their own study, they were unwilling (or unable) to volunteer additional hours. In keeping with the expectations of many other academics, some tutors considered that student support roles (and even knowledge of student support services) was the domain of administrative staff, for example in faculty offices.

### **What do students expect of tutors?**

As part of our preparation for the Forum, we interviewed both first year students and tutors responding to a range of questions about the tutor's role. The resulting material is in keeping with previous information gathered through student interviews and focus groups (see for example reports from the 'First years tell all: FYTA' project and Transition Summits, <http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/transition/unistaff/reports/index.html>).

As we expected, in general students rate the role of the tutor very highly, considering it one of the most significant relationships in their academic community. Indeed, it could be argued that today's student-tutor relationship is more important than ever, given that students spend less time on campus and have in general fewer contact hours than students of a decade ago (Krause et al. 2005). All quotes below are drawn from material gathered for the 2005 Transition Forum.

Tutors are very important. There is not much contact with lecturers, tutors are the first port of call, the face, the one you go to. I don't like it when they expect the whole tutorial to say everything. Lead the group but don't turn it in to a lecture.

Tutes are the most important part. You have to attend and a good tutor makes you want to go and to go beyond the boundary of the course.

[Tutors] ease the culture shock, set the tone for the rest of the uni experience, formation year, role models... create social impetus. They help get knowledge, expand on lectures, ideas, discussion in depth...go over what was done in the lecture and reader and mesh it together, make it well rounded.

Good tutors can understand different characters and personalities. Tutors find balance between students, encourage the quieter ones. They realise that this is a totally new thing for us so be open minded and forgiving if we are unsure.

[Tutors] should have depth of knowledge in all forms of queries, front line, accommodation etc.... take time out to be helpful to non-Melbournians, those international and from interstate, be aware that stuff happens in life and it is not all flowers and sunny skies

Engage with students, if they're interested, they will interest the students

In summary, it is clear that students rely on tutors as a personal conduit through which they navigate university experiences. The tutor's engagement with students, the subject material and the campus culture and services are each considered by students to be integral determinants for a positive first year experience.

### **What about tutors' expectations?**

The discussions we undertook with tutors were illuminating, showing that there are areas of discrepancy between the two sets of expectations on either side of the tute classroom, and across the University. A wide variety of responses indicated the different perspectives of different tutors. Some of these discrepancies are mediated by discipline perspectives, with the roles of science-versus humanities-based tutors being perceived as quite separate.

The discussion also highlighted an idea, most prevalent across student service departments, that tutors, as the academic staff members at the coalface, should take an active role in informing and referring students to support services on campus. Tutors are seen as well positioned to reinforce to students that assistance is available and that seeking it is a proactive response to a new environment, rather than a weakness or a sign of failure. The conversation elicited tensions between staff perceptions of a tutor as someone concerned strictly with academic delivery, compared to the moderator for a campus experience that encourages the transition to independence, which can underpin academic success. Tutors presented varying degrees of willingness and varying degrees of capacity to undertake this role due to time constraints or lack of awareness of the supports available.

In general, the tutors we interviewed were dedicated to their discipline and to the progress of their students, though often taking varying attitudes towards student input into tutorials and how to promote this. Most considered that students were becoming more demanding than in previous years. For example, the level of email contact with students is growing, and tutors have noticed

growing service expectations from students ('the student was upset because I didn't reply to their email in 24 hours, but I'm only here one day a week!'). Quotes below are again drawn from material gathered for the 2005 Transition Forum.

Tutoring is much harder than lecturing, the undervaluing is remarkable. [You have to] be on guard to take questions, [the] lecturer stands there...it really is twisted how undervalued it is compared to lecturing.

[We] break the lecture model to make an exploration of shades of grey, horizontal links with uni, we're different to the lecture, give confidence to express problems, understand subject, get knowledge.

I think they come to tutorials as places expecting to find the answers, not to this as a place to test my knowledge and learn to understand. So changing that expectation is very hard probably for the first year.

Knowledge is one of the daunting parts about being a tutor. You go in totally over-prepared when you start because you're terrified someone is going to ask a question and you don't know the answer. You get over that...you learn the confidence to say I don't know the answer.

Students [are] not prepared for first year in tutorials and preparation. Five to ten [are] prepared, the rest just can't follow what is happening...students must do their own part, be prepared, have discussion.

[Tutors] create a relaxed atmosphere to test knowledge. [It is] the one forum to make mistakes and to learn from those mistakes.

[Tutors are] very important because Melbourne uni is so large, so many students in lectures, daunting, tutors as one-to-one contact. Even if they don't use us...we are in a position to pick things up, students under stress, what's the problem, counselling.

I don't think it is my job to know those things. I only get paid for a certain number of hours per week and I have my own thesis to write. Tutoring already takes up more time than I get paid for.

Some faculties and departments offer commendable induction programs for their casual tutoring staff. However, for many tutors, tutoring is still largely an osmotic or 'jump in the deep end' process. As a result, tutors across campus are not always alerted to transition issues, and their understanding of their key role in the first year experience is patchy. These patterns are perpetuated because casual tutors sit outside the formal course feedback or performance review structures of the organisation.

### **Tutors and their role with first years**

First year students are by definition novices at university and in their discipline, and therefore present specific challenges. Some tutors consider that these features of first year students make them a more difficult group to tutor (Stevens 2001) as they require so much direction in how to interact in tutorials and how to deal with university administrative tasks. Our investigation has confirmed our suspicion of a dissonance between tutor and student expectations of the role of the tutor in the first year experience.

In student-directed transition materials, there are often basic explanations of what a tutor is. However, this perpetuates a one-sided equation which informs students, while leaving tutors relatively conflicted about their role: subject teacher or university guide? We are concerned that most definitions focus solely on the academic, content-based aspects of the tutoring role, whereas we envisage – and have discovered that today’s students expect – a more comprehensive role for tutors in the overall transition to engagement and independence at university.

The students we interviewed held similar ideas and expectations about the integral role of the tutor in their transition to University life. The tutor responses were more ambivalent, some focussed solely on the academic elements of their role, while others acknowledged the more holistic approach but did not feel able to fulfil these components. These distinctions are perhaps not surprising given the ambiguous messages received from the organisation.

There is an unresolved contradiction in that, while institutional awareness of transition issues has increased, it is the most under-resourced and the least qualified staff members who are at the forefront of the first year experience. This is not to disparage the enthusiasm, knowledge and skills of tutors. Some may be more empathetic to transition concerns than senior academic staff, having undertaken their own transition more recently; others have extensive experience in supporting the induction of new students into the university community. However, the evident mismatch between student and staff expectations should serve as a call for further discussion.

Our perspective would be to encourage departments to recognise the importance of the tutor in welcoming students to university life. This encouragement should, to our mind, be backed by policy that recognises the importance of transition at university, faculty and departmental level. We consider it the role of departments to ensure that tutors are explicitly informed, equipped and paid for their role in inducting students to the tertiary community; however we acknowledge that departments may need to be directed to do this by higher level policy. Should departments (or the institution) decide, however, that wide knowledge of the University and ability to refer appropriately are outside the role of the tutor (and perhaps better suited to administrative advisers in faculty or departmental offices), then this structure needs to be explicitly and consistently communicated to new students, and to the staff involved.

## **Conclusion**

Thoughtful induction of students into full membership of the university community is something that should happen as a matter of course, not an additional option dependent on the goodwill or enthusiasm of individual staff. The evidence we discovered on our campus in 2005 suggests that there is still some way to go in engaging tutors fully in their transition role.

Beyond our campus it is clear that tutor training programs have increasingly been implemented or teaching guides made available to tutors at universities across Australia; these strategies in the main address teaching quality. At the same time, there has been a growing awareness of transition in universities. Yet there seems to us to be a major deficiency in that these two spheres – the academic and the student engagement processes – have not adequately converged.

A survey of the few tutor resources and training manuals available on the web indicates that transition issues are rarely incorporated. There are notable exceptions (for example, see <http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t41/teaching/sessional/resources/tutbkv2.pdf>). Further research is needed into the efficacy of such training programs and resource materials as they are implemented at the coalface. This field of study could generate some very useful information and strategies for addressing first year issues.

We believe that good transition practices should inform all aspects of the student's experience, from administration to pedagogy. We would also propose that responsibility for successfully inducting students is not the sole domain of either administrative or teaching staff, but one that should involve all members of the university community. The spheres of transition – administrative, social, academic, and geographic – are overlapping and non-exclusive. By extension, this implies that those who have regular personal contact with students need, not only to understand these spheres, but to be equipped with a basic knowledge of support structures and processes. They also need the resources to enable them to assist students in transition. At the least, we would be glad to see that tutors could point students in the right direction to discover the assistance they require.

That said, we have seen a number of indicators that universities are at least travelling in the right direction in many of these matters. For instance, one large faculty at Melbourne (Arts) has instituted a transition support scheme whereby tutors are paid additional hours to enable them to meet one-on-one with each of their students for an informal chat about progress. Arts also doubled the hours of the new tutors' training program, included presentations from services and created a page about transition for staff (<http://www.arts.unimelb.edu.au/staff/academic/>). The Transition Program published the 2006 version of our *Guide for Tutors of First Year Students* and we were so inundated with requests from a wide range of staff across the University that we had to double our original print run (800) – a situation which had never occurred in previous years. The Student Housing Service is offering a popular '5 Minute Grab' to academic departments to keep staff updated on services and their role in referring students, and this has been demonstrated to be effective in increasing the number of appropriate referrals. Elsewhere, universities such as Flinders have taken the initiative to explicitly include transition information in their materials for new tutors.

For us, the message is clear: as a central program charged with responsibility for transition, we need to be more proactive in communicating the expectations of various groups to each other and assisting them to meet or to negotiate a clearer understanding. The implications of enlarging the responsibilities of tutors (resourcing, budget, time constraints) have yet to be thoroughly explored. The 2005 Forum was a first step in what will be an ongoing conversation aimed at continuing a cultural shift towards embedding a more cohesive and integrated approach to transition.

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## Presenters

**Clare Rhoden** is the Manager of the University of Melbourne Transition Program. This position involves extensive liaison with all members of the University community, from prospective and beginning students, to academic, services and administrative staff. With a background in speech pathology and academic skills advising, Clare has co-authored three study skills texts for commencing Australian law, science, and engineering students (published by Allen & Unwin), as well as papers on performance indicators for student services in higher education. She completed a study tour to the UK in 2005 investigating transition and academic support for students from under-represented backgrounds in higher education.

**Natalie Dowling** is a project officer with the University of Melbourne Transition Program and a tutor of first year students in the Faculty of Arts, History department, where she is undertaking PhD studies. Natalie has previously worked in a student support role with Student Housing Services, where she has seen first hand the effects of unsatisfactory transition experiences on student progress and satisfaction. Her current roles as academic, administrator, and postgraduate student give her a unique perspective on the effective engagement of new students with the university community.