The Concerns of Commencing Students at Adelaide University

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Abstract

A survey of commencing students at Adelaide University during their first day in the new role of university student in February 2000 provided rich material on which to develop orientation day programs that are targeted and effective. A valuable insight into the concerns of commencing students at the university was gained and future orientation day programs can be better designed to address issues and concerns identified through this study. Evaluation of the effectiveness of future orientation programs is also possible now that categories of new student concerns have been established.

Introduction

The needs and experiences of students attending university for the first time have been the focus of considerable investigation over an extended period of time. The work has a lengthy history in North America and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom. More recent inquiry in Australian universities on issues affecting students’ retention and study success has also begun to contribute an Australian perspective to the research literature.

Studies into student retention and persistence have been undertaken and have focused on specific disciplines, such as nursing (Burgum, Martins and Northey, 1993), medicine (Tutton and Wigg, 1990) and education (Hart, 1992). There have been large-scale studies (for example, Clark and Ramsay, 1990, Calderon, 1997), and some other studies that have focused on study mode (for example, Long, 1994) or student type (for example, McJamerson, 1992). There have also been studies that have been types of comparative analyses (for example, progress rates in Dobson, Sharma and Haydon, 1996). The focus of studies has been diverse and the methodologies of many have been criticised (see for example, Braxton et al. 1995) requiring that their results be viewed with caution and discernment.

Previous research into new students’ transitional experiences and success at university

The excellent summary of Australian-based research provided by Pargetter, McInnis, James, Evans, Peel & Dobson (1998) shows that investigation into issues affecting Australian university students’ transition and persistence has been a relatively recent phenomena. If the number of writers in the field of Australian university student transition issues and factors affecting student persistence are any guide to the level of interest amongst researchers, there appears to have been frantic activity in the closing decade of the old millenium compared to the previous three decades. In the three decades between 1960 and 1990 fifteen investigative writers were identified who had some focus within their investigation on the nature and impact of transition issues on new university students and their academic success (for example, Hogben, 1965; Elsworth and Day, 1983; Carpenter and Fleishman, 1987). The decade beginning 1990 saw an intense period of investigation and writing in the field. Pargetter et al (1998) identified thirty-eight new writers appearing in the literature within that decade (for example, Abbot-Chapman Wyld, 1992; McClelland and Kruger, 1993; Stanley and Oliver, 1994; Dobson and Sharma, 1995; Muckert, 1996; O’Dowd, 1997).

The work of Australian-based investigations is essential to the development of student orientation and success activities within the Australian tertiary context. Whilst the work of researchers from North America can contribute to program development in Australian universities there are also significant differences between the university cultures of North America and Australia. The most apparent differences between the two tertiary contexts are the selection processes of a student into a university or college as well as the significant numbers of residential students in North American universities and colleges compared to the largely commuter-based student populations of Australian universities. Hence investigations based in one culture need careful translation and interpretation to be of value to another culture. Locally developed investigations that provide an Australian perspective eliminate the need for such cultural re-interpretation by practitioners. It increases the
immediacy and relevance of findings to student support personnel in Australian universities. Studies conducted in the Australian university context, for example the work of Green and Latham (2000) at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), promise important insights and understandings that can shape the direction and content of orientation programs in Australian universities.

The findings of Australian and North American research are summarised by Pargetter et al (1998) who remark that studies from both reach two similar and basic conclusions. First, there are generic transition problems, especially in regards to changed teaching and learning environments and the match between prior expectations and early experiences (both academic and social), and general strategies which will most likely help most students with those problems. Second, transition to university is nonetheless, a highly differentiated process in which a range of personal, social and institutional factors (and their complex combinations) produce highly specific pathways into tertiary environments which are themselves more and more diverse (15).

Research question

The question the present project was designed to address was ‘What are the issues and concerns of commencing students attending Adelaide University?’ In light of the summary of major findings as summarised above by Pargetter et al. (1998) can generic and group specific issues for commencing students at Adelaide University be identified and described?

The setting

Approximately 2,100 students commenced studies at Adelaide University on the twenty-first of February 2000. The commencing students came from a variety of geographical locations including rural, urban, local, interstate and overseas. They were from various age groups and family backgrounds and had diverse cultural, ethnic and religious origins. The majority of commencing students were first year undergraduate students although post-graduates also figured amongst the population.

During Adelaide University Orientation Week (O’Week) the university’s faculties and the student-run Students’ Association of the University of Adelaide (SAUA) endeavour to induct commencing students using a variety of time-honoured strategies. Faculties have a focus that is primarily on subject content and assessment as well as specific faculty administrative practices. Faculties and departments typically provided information seminars and introductory lectures for commencing students throughout O’Week.

The focus of the SAUA during O’Week was clearly towards the social and non-academic elements of the university experience. The SAUA conduct a variety of events throughout the week. The activities would include free barbeques, the provision of both free and cheap alcohol, and diverse entertainments including a film night, and an O’Ball at the end of the week. General campus tours for commencing students were organised by the SAUA and were operated by student peers throughout the week. The SAUA produce a publication targeting all students and it would include articles on topics as diverse as safe sex practices, gay and lesbian issues to reviews of various bands and venues. Whilst the above is descriptive of orientation practices at Adelaide University, similar patterns of orientation for new students have been observed to exist in most Australian universities.

Implicit in such approaches to the orientation of new students have been assumptions about the needs of commencing students. These assumptions were more often based on historical practice and the personal preferences of the people planning orientation programs for new students and were rather less founded on an explicit and conscious examination of the needs and concerns of the new student population. If orientation programs ‘provide an opportunity for institutions to assess, at a very early date, the needs and concerns of students, and to help students understand the culture of the institution’ (Hadlock, 2000, 29) it seems essential that investigation of needs and concerns of commencing students occur regularly. The rapidly changing profile of commencing students at
Australian universities make it even more necessary than in times past to understand the concerns and issues that may affect their successful transition to university.

The project

The purpose of the current project was to use an opportunity when most new students would be on the central city campus to ask them about their issues and concerns on the first day of their new education experience. Trained senior students would gather data from their respective groups of new students that could be collated and analysed for emerging themes and ideas.

In the year 2000 all commencing students of Adelaide University were invited to attend a faculty-based peer run orientation day known as Freshers’ Day. New students were invited to attend the Adelaide campus on Monday the twenty-first of February for the inaugural university wide Freshers’ Day program. After attending a brief series of welcoming speeches from university senior management and student representatives, the students were engaged by their faculty for a half to three-quarter day orientation program. Each faculty program had been structured around the use of trained senior students called Peer Advisers who acted as leaders of small groups of commencing students. The new students with their Peer Adviser worked together on a number of different activities. Some of the activities had been designed to introduce the students to each other. For example, ‘ice-breaker’ activities were used by many of the Peer Advisers as a means of providing a non-threatening opportunity to encourage new students to talk to each other. Some structured activities were designed to provide information to the new students. For example, how and where to access computer suites, where to go for assistance with mathematical based problems, and where to find pigeon holes for university correspondence.

The Freshers’ Day program provided a unique opportunity to gain access to a large number of commencing students in one place on one day. The actual numbers of commencing students who attended Freshers Day is unknown; however the estimate is approximately 1,900.

Method

Data was collected from commencing students at three different stages of the Freshers’ Day program using paper and pencil activities during the small group activities. Following a group introduction and ‘ice-breaker’ activity, the students were asked by their Peer Adviser to work in pairs to draw up a list of the questions that they had about being at university – Instrument A. They were handed an A4 size sheet of paper that had the heading ‘All the questions we have about being at university’. The students were asked to brainstorm with their partner in making up a list that was then shared with the larger group. The lists created by the students provided a guide for the Peer Adviser to then talk with the group to address preliminary questions.

A second questionnaire, called the ‘About You Survey,’ was completed individually and was designed to collect a range of data, both quantitative and qualitative, at mid-point in the group time (Instrument B). One question designed to provide detail about new students’ concerns was extracted from the instrument. The question used for the project was Question (10) *My biggest concern about being at university is:*.

A paper and pencil activity at the close of the group time provided the third source of material. Students were invited to respond individually to the following request printed on an A4 sheet of paper (Instrument C)

> Students often begin university with some deep concerns and worries that are not about where to find the library or the refectory. Please take some time to write down your worries and concerns. The information collected is anonymous and voluntary. It will be of great assistance to the University Student Services as they develop programs to help new students like you more effectively. Thank you for helping with this research.

All three Instruments were collected by the Peer Advisers and handed to the researcher at the end of the day.
Instrument A was designed for use as a discussion starter for the Peer Adviser as well as being used to promote discussion amongst the student pairs, the majority of whom were strangers to each other. The task was designed to elicit responses that were of low personal threat and would also highlight a commonality of concerns. That is, it was intended to assist commencing students understand that other new students had similar concerns thereby normalising their concerns. Collection of the papers at the end of the activity allowed the questions to be collated and analysed for themes. The low number of papers returned (n=155) was probably due, in part, to the activity occurring in the early part of the day when the Peer Advisers had their attention on forming the group and developing a level of comfort within the group. However, the returned papers do reflect the responses of 310 new students when it is considered that they worked in pairs on the activity. All responses were included in the analysis of data.

Instrument B was an A4 size double-sided questionnaire designed to provide a wide range of data including age, gender, place of residence and means of financial support. Responses to one of the questions which were, by design, open-ended were extracted, collated and analysed for the current project. Question 10 - My biggest concern about being at university was designed to be broad in interpretation by the student. Whereas Instrument A was completed in pairs and designed to produce questions that might be in the forefront of a new student’s mind, Question 10 hoped to elicit individual responses that were more affective in orientation. The focus was on the feelings and emotional responses a new student might experience on their first official day as a university student. The response rate was satisfactory (n=1,447) and, for the purposes of analysis, a random selection of responses was made (n=334).

The final instrument used to collect data from the commencing students was Instrument C, used at the close of the group’s time together. It was open-ended and was designed to encourage students to express concerns they had that might not have been otherwise identified in either of the other two instruments. The response rate (n=637) is probably indicative of the time of day that the instrument was administered. The students had been together for most of the day, had been subject to a variety of activities and, possibly, had had some of their concerns addressed through the program of events they had participated in. The blank sheets were removed from the sample leaving a number of 494 responses from which a randomly selected sample (n=124) was analysed.

Findings and discussion

The qualitative data gathered from the three instruments was analysed for emerging themes and ideas. Two themes, Personal and Academic, were identified within the students’ responses to all three instruments. Other separate themes emerged from the various instruments. The themes, and the various categories within the themes, will be discussed in the following section.

Academic theme

Six categories were identified within the Academic theme from student responses to Instrument A. Three categories within the same theme were distinguished from Instruments B and C (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 1: Instrument A – Academic Theme and identified categories
The number of categories within the Academic theme was highest for Instrument A, the activity that was completed in pairs. Listing questions, as students were asked to do in Instrument A, invited them to identify and specify issues that were of immediate concern. It is not a surprise that the students chose to largely specify concerns that were of low personal threat and were consistent with an academic focus. Working on the task with another new student, unknown to them before Freshers’ Day, would lend itself to a reluctance to reveal concerns that might be perceived as revealing some personal inadequacy. Focusing largely on matters with an academic orientation fits with the scenario new students face of becoming a university student without being personally threatening.

A large number of the students’ comments in the Academic theme reveal a world-view of university that had been shaped by their school experiences. Expectations of university are logically shaped by the most recent educational experiences of the traditional student, that is a student straight from secondary school. Such was evidenced through the language used by numbers of commencing students. ‘Who are our teachers?’, ‘Timetables! How do we figure them out! Where do we get them?’ and ‘What do you do for homework (if any)?’ are examples of the ‘academic’ confusion many students faced on the first day of their university experience. Other questions also revealed an uncertainty about university academic culture, for example, ‘Do I have to attend all my lectures?’ The previously structured, rule-based and smaller school community experience of many commencing students did not appear, at first glance, to fit the new larger university experience.

Many students expressed a view that the way students learn and are taught at university was different from their school experience. They were uncertain about their ability to manage their time and maintain the personal motivation they perceived as being needed as a university student. ‘Staying motivated to finish or pass my course without pressure from teachers/lecturers’ and ‘Lack of guidance from teaching staff’ are sample comments from students. They portrayed a widely held view that they felt they were flying solo as a learner at university and that university academic staff had minimal involvement with them and their learning. ‘Worried about adjusting to new style of learning and with study skills associated with lectures’ was a further example of the perception expressed by many students that learning at university is somehow different to learning at school.

Time Management (see Figures 2 and 3) was a category found to be common in two of the three Academic themes and was illustrated by a comment from a student who wrote that he/she was concerned about ‘Juggling work/study. Finding time to do readings.’ Students expressed an awareness of competing time demands, some of a social nature, many indicating a concern to achieve a balance between competing demands of work and relationships (family, friendships) alongside study. Juggling a number of competing demands was identified by new students as a source of concern and pressure and was succinctly expressed by the words of a student who wrote, in response to the question ‘My biggest concern about being at university is,’ ‘Fitting everything in’.
Analyses of demographic data from Instrument B enabled a profile of the student population to be developed. It was evident that the number of students working part time, full time or looking for work far exceeded the number of students not working (see Table 1). Students combining university studies with work face pressures that can compromise their academic performance: indeed, their commitment to continue their studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full time Students</th>
<th>Part time Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full time work</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time work</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Working</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for Work</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Making the Grade (see Figure 1), a grouping within the Time Management category, was expressed by students who wrote, ‘Keeping up with assignments’, ‘that I may fall behind in my work, that my work may be too much’ and ‘failing’. A sense of urgency or pressure to keep up with studies alongside an acute awareness of competing time demands was evident from the comments made by commencing students.

The Workload category (see Figures 1, 2 and 3) was a common thread running in all three of the Academic themes. It revealed there to be a widely held perception amongst new students that the study load at university is weightier and significantly more difficult than previously encountered.

Other concerns expressed within the Workload category were related to the nature of assessment (see Figure 1), ‘How are our courses assessed? Continuous?’ and ‘Can I know the examination format?’ Students also expressed concern about their ability to understand the work (see Figure 1), for example, ‘Being able to understand the course work’, and ‘Knowing as much as I need to know about my course’. Linked to a concern about understanding the work was a concern about the level of study skills (see Figure 1) perceived as needed in university, expressed by comments such as, ‘oral presentations and interactions with peers’ and ‘doing the project work’.

Coping (see Figure 1) emerged within the Workload category as an area of considerable concern and links with the Time Management group. Coping with the workload, keeping up with the load of study and managing the workload were often expressed in student responses.

Timetables (see Figure 1), how they were structured, where they were available and whether timetabling was done for Semester Two subjects at the beginning of the year was another area of concern. Questions related to specific courses were expressed. For a medical student the concern was when they would begin looking at cadavers and, for some students studying music, concerns were expressed about the types of tests used for assessment.

The Staff category (see Figure 1) is linked with Rules and Resources but also has some unique features. Students asked questions about accessibility of staff, what they could approach them about and what lecturers were like. Examples of students’ question included, ‘Who are our teachers?’, ‘Is it easy to find lecturers out of class?’ and ‘What are lecturers like?’ The language of many students was obviously that of a school-leaver attempting to make sense of the new learning environment using a language that suited their previous educational environment.

The Rules category (see Figure 1) that emerged consisted of questions surrounding attendance at classes and homework, for example, ‘What happens if you don’t turn up to lectures? Tutes?’, ‘ Do I have to attend all my lectures – is there a compulsory passing quota of lectures?’ and ‘Talking to students in lectures’. Concerns were also expressed about the rules surrounding class attendance as well as the rules that allowed for continued financial support through Centrelink payments.

The matter of Resources (see Figure 1) emerged as a group within the Workload category and was illustrated by frequent questions about accessing text books, access and use of the Computer.
Assisted Technology suites and where to find booklists for topics. Students wrote, for example, ‘What books do we need?’ and ‘What can we access after hours?’

The Future Planning (see Figure 1) group of concerns arose from questions of students about progression to higher degree studies, for example, ‘How easy is it to get into honours/Masters/PhD?’, ‘not being able to get into hons/masters’ and ‘transferring to law next year – will I be accepted?’ Clearly some students were thinking beyond their first course of university study.

Personal theme

Within the Personal theme the sum of categories of responses jumped from two categories identified within Instrument A to seven categories from Instrument B and nine categories found within Instrument C (see Figures 4, 5, and 6). Completing Instruments B and C individually seems to have allowed students to express concerns outside of the scrutiny of their new peers. The increase in categories within the Personal theme for Instruments B and C indicates the students were sensitive to how their peers might perceive them when completing Instrument A. The material distilled from the three instruments provides a fertile array of material illustrating the diverse nature of personal concerns of commencing students.

The Social category (see Figure 4) identified within the Personal theme was expressed by students who wrote, for example, ‘Where do students usually hang out?’, ‘When are happy hours?’ and ‘How do I join a club?’. Fitting In (see Figure 4) was expressed by numbers of students with the following types of comments, ‘Fitting in and getting used to the lifestyle’ and ‘What do you do for lunch?’ Linked with these two categories was the category of Friendship (see Figures 5 and 6) exemplified by comments from students who wrote, ‘Not making many friends’, ‘My only real concern is about making good friends who can support me throughout the course’ and ‘I hope I’m...
able to meet lots of new people and make lots of friends’. Within the Friendship category a group of concerns emerged that were labelled loneliness. Whilst many students expressed a sense of excitement at the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends concerns about friendlessness were also expressed by some students as evidenced by the following remarks, ‘not making many friends’, ‘no mates’ and ‘being alone’. A strong theme emerged in the material of students wanting, hoping and expecting to form new friendships whilst fearing loneliness and friendlessness.

A Lifeskills category (see Figure 5) emerged as a number of students expressed doubts about their ability to organise themselves and their studies as well as concern that they would not be able to adjust and adapt to what they perceived to be a more independently driven learning environment. ‘Slacking off because it’s easier to’ summarises the comments made in this category. The category of Acculturation (see Figure 5) has a similar emphasis but a slightly different focus. Students expressed concerns about ‘getting into the rhythm of uni life’ and ‘getting used to the lifestyle (ie self learning, meeting new friends, etc)’. There was more generalised concern but within both categories students’ identified a sense of personal transformation that they linked intimately with being at university.

Individual Needs (see Figure 6) emerged from comments made by students with specific physical needs, for example, ‘Being left-handed using a right-handed tables in lectures. Coping with long practical sessions’ and ‘temperature in buildings’. Students with specific disabilities (for example, hearing impairment) expressed concerns about being able to access lecture materials other than through the usual lecture setting.

The Differences category (see Figure 5 and 6) is reflected by comments made by students aware of being a female in a predominantly male course, and expressing concerns about ‘discrimination against race/religion’ and ‘not participating in exams on Saturdays due to religious reasons’. The diversity of the student population is reflected by some of the comments made by students aware of differences and concerned about their impact on themselves as students.

Another concern that emerged from the written questions was to do with Post-Course Employment options (see Figure 6). Awareness that the completion of a degree is no guarantee of future employment or employment in the field studied reveals that there were students who were thinking beyond their years at university. It maybe, although this is not explicit, a reflection of some students’ concern surrounding the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt incurred by most students as they progress through their university course. The theme of costs emerged under the Financial category (see Figure 6) where students asked about the costs incurred while studying. Questions were also raised about the availability of financial advice and assistance when dealing with Centrelink issues as well as sources of advice on financial assistance available through the university in the form of scholarships or grants.

Balancing Demands (see Figure 5) was reflected in comments students made about the impact of studying on family life, for example, ‘how much time will be taken away from my family life’. Whilst this type of concern was expressed by numbers of non-traditional students, it was not limited to the older group of students. Balancing work and study demands produced a further cluster of questions revealing students’ awareness of competing demands and diminishing time availability.

A specific category of concerns emerged within the Acculturation category (see Figure 5). Students from non-Australian cultures expressed a concern about understanding Australian slang amongst their student peers as well as lecturing staff. Some students also commented on a perception that teaching and learning in Australian universities was different to that of universities in their home country and wondered about their ability to cope. Within this category were also comments made by a number of local and overseas students about getting used to the ‘uni lifestyle’ and ‘adjusting to different environments’. Such comments reflected a fairly widely held view that there is a lifestyle associated with being at university that is somehow different from that previously experienced by the students.
A few students expressed concerns about Safety (see Figures 5 and 6), both personal safety connected with moving around campus and returning to accommodation after dark as illustrated by the following comment, ‘The only thing that tends to bother me is safety on campus after hours, I want to know that I’ll be safe’. The safety of personal property when on campus was a further safety concern.

An interesting category emerged from within responses to Instrument C that has been labelled Peer Pressure (see Figure 6). Comments made by a number of students showed a heightened awareness the role peers may have as an influence on an individual’s behaviour. Examples of such comments included, ‘Being pressured into drinking’ and ‘being bugged by irritating people and getting offered drugs’. Another concern about peer behaviour that was identified by some students was a fear of being bullied, ‘Not to get bullied at all’ was one such comment.

The category Access to Information (see Figure 6) centred on the anxiety expressed by a number of students who were concerned about missing out on information that would then impact on their academic performance: for example, ‘I am worried about finding everything and not missing out on important information regarding mainly lectures, tutes etc’. This category is strongly linked with the theme that was identified from Instrument B that has been called Lostness that will be described more fully in this paper.

The Personal theme reveals that the student population is diverse in nature by the very diversity of the issues raised. A theme labelled Specific Student Group Themes (see Figure 7) was created from response to Instrument B as a result of the specific nature of some of the issues raised by particular groups within the commencing student population (see Figure 7). Specific groups of students were identifiable from the data collated from Instrument B and provided another level of analysis of student responses.

The Traditional group of students (that is, those commencing university studies immediately after high school) frequently mentioned their concerns about the lack of staff support at university and doubts about their ability to be a self-directed learner. Comments of the following reflected these concerns. ‘I am scared that without teacher support etc, which I was used to at high school, I will develop some bad study skills and slack off’, and ‘I’m concerned that there will be a heavy workload which will be difficult to endure. I’m a little worried about not knowing what exactly to learn for my course, since requirements aren’t as “spelled out” for you in uni as in high school. I’m worried that if I don’t manage my time correctly that I’ll fail first year’.

The Non-Traditional group of students (that is, those commencing at university other than straight from high school) expressed concerns that were reflective of their multiple roles as well as their sense of inadequacy to learn. ‘Being mature age I wonder if I would fit in with younger people and the fact not having studied for years whether or not I can cope with the workload’ and ‘My major problem is my 21 month old baby because my husband is working part time and studying part time as well and I have 3 kids and also cannot afford child care’. Further types of issues mentioned by this group of students included limited access to computers in the university due to competing child care demands as well as uncertainty about information technology skills, specifically computer use skills.

Overseas students expressed a cluster of concerns corresponding to their unique situation. These included; getting used to the Australian accent; making friends amongst the local students and developing a sense of acceptance; fitting in (as a new, but third year student) with local third year
students who were part of a specific faculty twinning program and finally; a fear of causing offence by inadvertently breaking a social norm.

Students from Interstate were identified by concerns that centred on loneliness and adjusting to a new environment lacking the support of family or friends. Examples of students’ comments included, ‘Starting college and settling in – moving interstate with no family, and stop wanting to go home – wanting to make friends’ and ‘There are so many new people. Not knowing anybody (coming from interstate’.

Administrative/procedures theme

Students had questions about a variety of university administrative practices (see Figure 8) including questions about amending enrolments, transferring to a different degree course and who to see to ask about procedures and processes within the university. Questions about accessing resources within the university had a procedural focus with students wanting to know how to get their student identification cards and student e-mail accounts as well as how to use the university student ‘Smart Card’.

Resources/places theme

A significant number of students had concerns and questions about the location and accessibility of resources (see Figures 9, 10 and 11). Confusion about the location of rooms, people and materials figured largely amongst the concerns expressed. The following is a sample of the queries expressed by students within the theme of resources and places, ‘Where is the facilities, rooms and halls located? Which level in which building? Where to apply for this and that? What time does the uni open and close?’ and ‘Whether there are enough computer terminals for word processing and surfing the internet?’ Being unable to locate lecture rooms and tutorial rooms was expressed by a number of students as a cause of anxiety. ‘Getting lost and being late for lectures’ and ‘getting lost – where is everything?’ were samples of the anxious expressions of students feeling overwhelmed by the physical size of the campus.
The issue of Lostness (see Figure 12) or uncertainty about locations was, numerically, the single largest group of concerns expressed by students. Concerns about getting lost between lectures and physically navigating around the campus were repeatedly expressed by the commencing students. The size and organisation of the campus was clearly perceived by commencing students as confusing and anxiety provoking.

Financial theme
The Financial theme (see Figure 12) emerged from comments made by students to Instrument B and had two major groupings. There were immediate concerns and concerns with the future. Students expressed worries about the need to have part-time employment to fund their study and juggling the time demands of the course alongside the necessity of working with the possibility of jeopardising their studies. Some students expressed concern about surviving financially as a student. A number of students recognised the burden of debt they were incurring through their HECS commitment and expressed concerns about the impact of that debt on their future ability to borrow for a car or house.

Conclusion
The findings from the data provide ample illustration of the issues and concerns experienced by commencing students at Adelaide University. It is evident that there are issues common to most new students as well as issues identified by specific sub-groups from within the total student population, consistent with the summary of Pargetter et al (1998). Most students expressed a sense of physical lost-ness and disorientation to the physical layout of the campus. Most students had concerns about their ability to cope with the workload at university and held to a perception that the style of learning and teaching was significantly different to any they had known previously. Many students commented on concerns about their ability to manage their time at university alongside competing demands of work and relationships. Many students had a perception that there was a style of living that was loosely described as ‘a uni lifestyle’ and expressed a concern as to whether they would fit in and adjust to the ‘uni life style’. Making friends and discovering where and when social events occurred on campus was another concern expressed by a number of students. Specific concerns about courses were also identified as were concerns expressed by non-traditional students and those from overseas or interstate.

The themes identified from this study provide a basis on which first day orientation programs at Adelaide University can be shaped and measured. Assisting commencing students adjust quickly to their new environment can greatly aid in their retention. Adjusting the environment to meet needs of commencing students should be explored, for example, maps of the campus that are clear and simple, and virtual university tours. Providing information about courses, procedures and ‘university life’ in amounts and ways that are sensitive to the emotional stresses and confusion many new students experience when first attending university can aid students absorb the information they seek and provide models of the language of their new environment. That there are concerns for specific sub-sets of students is clear and developing specific support and information sharing strategies for these students will assist in reducing the stress experienced by numbers of students from overseas, interstate and form non-traditional backgrounds. That there are specific concerns for students enrolled in some degrees (for example medicine) raises the need for some faculties to provide information and, possibly, senior student peers able to address course specific concerns and questions.
The negative perceptions held by many students about the learning and teaching styles and the relationships between students and lecturers in university were potentially quite anxiety inducing. Consideration as to how and where such perceptions are formed and whether indeed they are well founded is an area for future investigation. Means of addressing these possibly incorrect perceptions is another field for future exploration.

The information gained from this project provides a useful framework for first day orientation programs at Adelaide University. A limitation of the study is that the information was gathered from students on their first day. As students progress through their first weeks, first terms and first semesters different issues are expected to arise. Assisting student retention and success at university needs more than a well-developed first day orientation program. Gathering information from new students during the early weeks and months at university would provide a rich and progressive picture of the issues new students face as they move through their university experience. Such longitudinal research could provide the information that would assist in the development of strategies and approaches aimed at assisting new students remain and progress in their studies. Paper and pencil surveys would be well supplemented by the use of interviews, both individual and group, of students as they move through their first university year. Interviewing all students who exit university in their first year would also provide an important and, at this stage, largely untapped source of information.

As Federal funding to universities becomes increasingly tighter and dependent on specific outcomes such as the numbers of students graduating, universities are realising the need to look at the first year experience of their students. Successfully retaining a student to the end of the first semester is a strong indicator that the student will complete their course. Putting in place orientation strategies that minimise new students’ negative experiences and provide the information, resources and supports that are aimed at assisting students experience success early in their academic life are the means recognised as fundamental to new student success in many colleges and universities. The tradition of the Adelaide University O’Week has the potential to positively assist commencing students adjust to their new learning environment. Attention to what is done, why it is done and by whom would maximise the benefits of the week to new students and make optimal use of the resources directed towards the week.

References


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