



THE
BELONGING
PROJECT



Report 2011

Phase 1: Planting the Seeds

Report Authors

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RMIT University

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Nomenclature

At RMIT there are a number of terms that are institution-specific and as such, do not have the same meanings to external audiences.

The following table sets out these differences to avoid confusion when reading this document:

Elsewhere	RMIT Term
Subject	Course
Course	Program
Faculty	College

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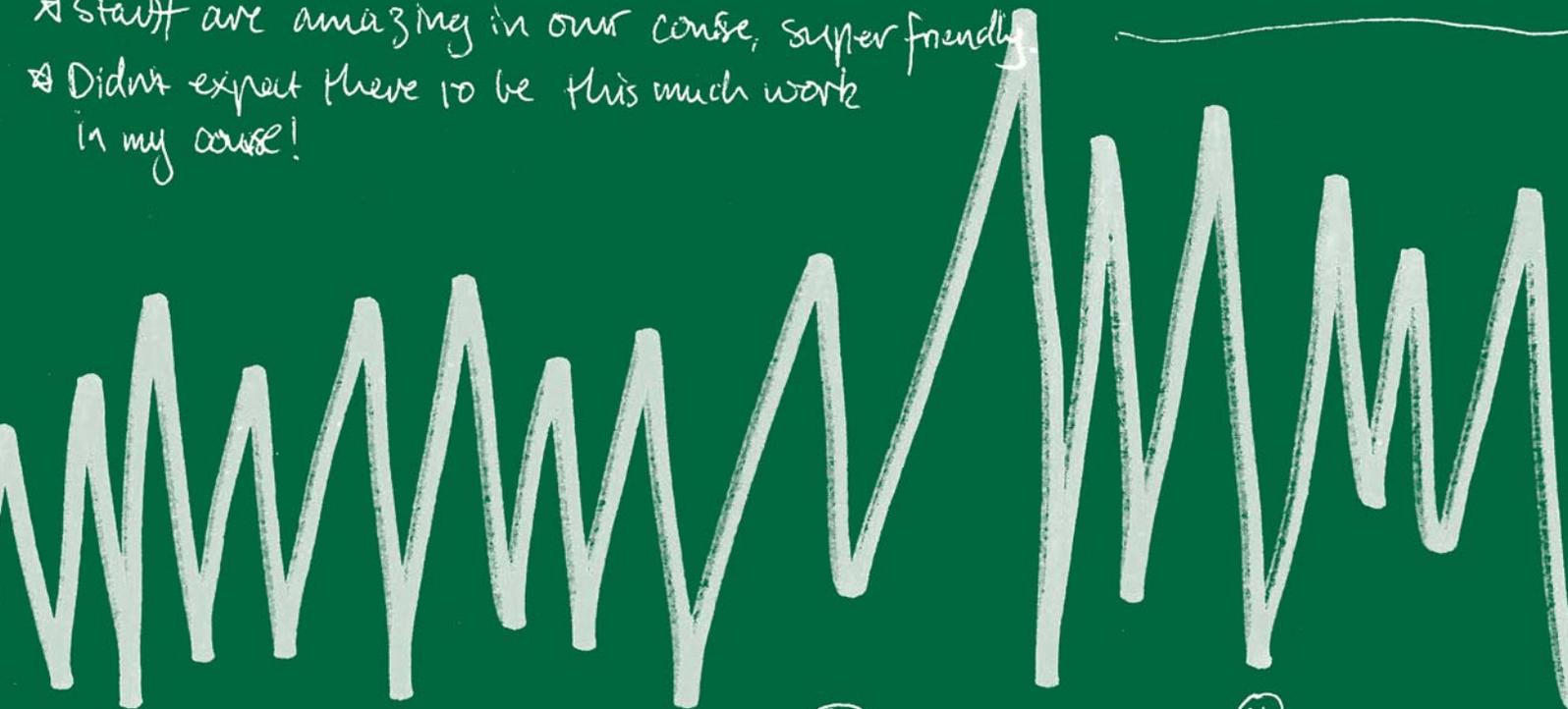
Executive summary

EXPECTATIONS

- * Excited but daunted, everyone else was so skilled!
- * RMIT was more communal than Melb Uni.
- * Staff are amazing in our course, super friendly
- * Didn't expect there to be this much work in my course!

I expected a technical pro but later learnt that is what uni was about.

Uni is about learning to think in a certain way



EXPECTED WORST

DAUNTED AT EXPECTED WORKLOAD

STARTING TO GROW AS A DESIGNER

SELF-CRITICAL STAGE

The Belonging Project Proposition

The Belonging Project is a four-year pilot project to investigate, design and trial an integrated program and school-based approach to enhancing the RMIT undergraduate cohort experience.

The Belonging Project was initiated by academic staff in RMIT's School of Media and Communication. Arising from the context of the School's formation after a merger of two smaller schools in 2009, the project aims to develop a model for an improved cohort experience aligned to the three-year undergraduate degree structure, which can be applicable more broadly in other schools and institutions.

In the Belonging Project narrative model (the model), each student's sense of identity and belonging is built incrementally across the three years of their undergraduate degree program. In first year students establish a strong disciplinary and professional base within their program cohort. In second year, students build on this disciplinary base, becoming more aware of their place within an interdisciplinary community (a wider school cohort). In third year, they are supported to test their disciplinary and interdisciplinary identity and knowledge by working in a wider world of intercultural and global links and experiences.

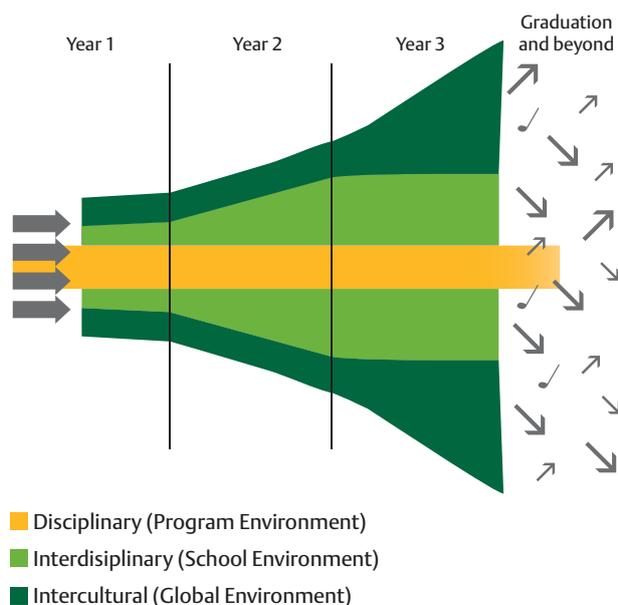


Diagram 1: The Belonging Project's Model of the Undergraduate Student Experience - 'The Trumpet'

Planting the Seeds

'Planting the Seeds' was Phase 1 of the Belonging Project. During this first phase, which took place across six months from July to December 2011, we tested and refined the model through a sequence of formal and informal interactions with staff and students in the School of Media and Communication. Through this process, we progressed from a theoretical model to concrete plans for its implementation. The first phase of the project culminated in the announcement of a number of pilot activities for an improved 'first year experience' (FYE) to be trialed in the School in 2012.

Our model and its pilot initiatives respond to the demands of a changing national higher education environment. The 2008 Bradley Review signaled that increasing numbers of students, particularly those from low Socio Economic Status (SES) and international backgrounds, will be taking part in degree programs to reach government tertiary education participation targets. Our model aims to help equip all students, regardless of their background, with the necessary cultural capital for their future careers. While we cannot ensure that every student has a successful university experience, it is possible to create an environment that is better equipped to deal with student transition, so that all students have the opportunity to make the most of the existing interdisciplinary, industry and global links offered by the School. This inclusive approach means that all students will benefit from our initiatives, but they are particularly designed to enhance the experience of students from low SES backgrounds, or those who have relocated (from overseas, interstate or rural areas) to attend RMIT.

Through piloting and reviewing initiatives for the FYE in 2012 (Recommendations for Pilot Initiatives in 2012, p. 38) and the development of subsequent initiatives for the second and third year cohorts in 2013-14, we aim to develop an approach to understanding and shaping a student cohort experience that can be applied beyond our School and College at RMIT.

The team

A WHOLE NEW WORLD!

LIVING INDEPENDENTLY, A WHOLE LOT MORE TEDIUSNESS
BUT ALSO AN ABILITY TO DEAL WITH MORE PRODUCTIVELY
I WILL LOOK BACK AND THOUGH I MAY NOT EVER GAIN
FROM RMIT WHAT I EXPECTED / AM EXPECTING WON'T MATTER
RIGHT NOW, IN THE FUTURE / AM EXPECTING WON'T MATTER
AND WHO KNOWS IF I'LL KEEP WRITING
IT WILL BE PROFESSIONALLY
YET I CAN ONLY
SING PRAISE

WHEN IT COMES
TO THE BEST
OF MY
LECTURERS
and
TUTORS

But I'm much more interested in producing
quality work than meeting deadlines. I value
comparative criteria.

Academic Leaders

Associate Professor David Carlin

David is an Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication. David was Program Director, Media from 2009–10 and is now a researcher, creative practitioner and teacher working in the fields of creative writing, media and interdisciplinary communication research projects.

David's professional background is as a writer, director and producer in film, theatre and circus.

David currently teaches an undergraduate course in Literary Non-fiction, and a lab in the School of Media and Communication's Honours program.

Bronwyn Clarke

Bronwyn is the Director of Special Projects, (Communication Design) in the School of Media and Communication. Bronwyn is researching and reviewing best practice models of selection and retention of students in line with her study and experience as a Program Director and Selection Officer in the College of Design and Social Context. Bronwyn has also been involved with RMIT's Equity Database Implementation as an advisor and database tester.

Bronwyn's professional background is as a graphic designer, where she sat on the ADGA (Australian Graphic Design Association) council as the Communications Manager.

Bronwyn has been involved in offshore teaching for over 11 years, most currently with the delivery of the Communication Design Program in Singapore, delivered in partnership with the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM). Bronwyn is also an advisor on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority review of Year 13 programs and assessment models and how this experience transitions into Higher Education.

Rachel Wilson

Rachel is the Program Director of the Media Program in the School of Media and Communication. Prior to undertaking a role as Program Director, Rachel was the Media Program's Selection Officer and Careers Officer. Rachel has also received a number of teaching awards.

Rachel's professional background is as a media practitioner.

Rachel has been teaching within the Higher Education sector for 18 years, specialising in the Screen Production discipline. Rachel is currently teaching media production and applied research in the School of Media and Communication.

Rachel's current research includes archiving, memory and representations of trauma. Rachel served as the President of the peak discipline body ASPERA (Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association) from 2010–2011, and currently holds the position of National Secretary.

Project Support Team

Karli Lukas, Project Officer

After graduating from the RMIT Media Program, Karli worked in various capacities in the film, television and screen culture industries before re-entering the tertiary education sector as an Academic Services Officer. Her extensive experience both as a student and professional staff member within the School of Media and Communication brings a unique perspective to the project.

Dr Lucy Morieson, Research Officer

Lucy graduated from RMIT's Journalism Program before working as a researcher and reporter, most notably at online news publication Crikey. Inspired by her work in the world of online publishing, she returned to RMIT to complete her PhD on the political development of online journalism in Australia. While pursuing her PhD research, she also taught extensively across a range of courses and programs in RMIT's School of Media and Communication. Her current role provides an opportunity to combine the writing and interviewing experience developed as a journalist and researcher with the insights into the student experience gained through her teaching work.

Project Reference Group

The role of this group was as follows:

1. To provide support, ideas and critical feedback to the Academic Lead Team in line with the project's goals.
2. To help open and maintain two-way lines of communication between the Project Team and all levels of staff and students within the School, as well as with relevant stakeholders beyond the School.

The Belonging Team met monthly with the following group of internal and external RMIT colleagues:

School of Media and Communication colleagues:

Bruce Berryman

Program Director, Professional Communication

Philippa Brear

Program Director, Public Relations

Helen Dickson

Program Director, Animation and Interactive Media

Kieran Doolan

Teacher, Interactive Digital Media

Mark Galer

Program Director, Photography

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Associate Professor Fiona Peterson

Deputy Dean, Learning and Teaching

Allan James Thomas

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Senior Advisor, Learning and Teaching,
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Project concept



Aims

The Belonging Project has the following overall aims within a higher education context:

1	To develop strategies to support the participation and integration of students from diverse backgrounds, circumstances and cultures, including in particular students those from low Socio Economic Status (SES) backgrounds
2	To enhance student satisfaction and retention rates
3	To help develop and make known a distinctive RMIT student experience.

Proposition: The Belonging Narrative Model

Background

The Belonging narrative model (the model) grew initially from a ‘brainstorming’ collaboration between Media Program academics Rachel Wilson and David Carlin at a strategic planning meeting in RMIT’s School of Media and Communication in late 2010, where program directors were asked to concretise the University’s strategic plan in an attempt to build a unique RMIT student experience. The model built on previous work undertaken by staff within the Media Program over a number of years to develop and document a common pedagogical approach, and create a unified learning and teaching narrative for staff and students of the Program. In early 2011, Bronwyn Clarke, then Program Director of Communication Design, whose current research is investigating questions of student transition and inclusion, joined the team in further elaborating the model.

The model proposes a three-tiered narrative, in which students are able to develop a sense of belonging:

Tier 1	To a disciplinary/professional cohort (at RMIT this is the ‘program’ level)
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Tier 2	Within an interdisciplinary learning environment (at RMIT, this is largely but not solely, at the School level), and
Tier 3	A wider world of global intercultural networks

The Three-Year Structure

The three-tiered narrative of student belonging is designed to overlay across the three-year undergraduate degree structure.

In **first year**, students most strongly identify with their program cohort (*‘I am a Journalism student’*). Therefore the first tier of the model focuses on building connections within that cohort (initially within their own year-group, but then also across year-groups). Crucially, this sense of internal connections within the cohort develops within the context of starting to build a sense of disciplinary and professional identity (*‘As a Journalism student, I am starting to get an understanding of what it is like, and will be like, to be a Journalist’*).

Interventions towards this first tier would build upon existing best practice for Orientation and Transition activities, extending beyond O-Week to include ideas such as camps and other off-campus cohort activities linked to the first year curriculum. Cross-year mentoring and events to introduce students to industry leaders and recent graduates might also be facilitated.

In **second year**, the aim is to broaden the student experience, building upon the strong program, disciplinary and professional identity established in first year. In this tier of the model, students begin to make sense of their discipline in relation to other disciplines; their languages, processes and outcomes (*‘I can see that being a journalist involves being able to work with and understand the perspectives of designers, media-makers, strategic communications people, etc.’*). This enables students to benefit from the rich interdisciplinary environment presented by schools such as Media and Communication, with its eleven undergraduate programs representing a range of disciplines (the eleven programs are: Advertising, Animation and Interactive Media, Communication Design, Creative Writing, Games, Journalism, Media, Music Industry, Photography, Professional Communication, and Public Relations). It also opens possibilities for collaborations with disciplines across school boundaries within the University.

Interventions to achieve this interdisciplinary experience might include activities within and outside the formal curriculum, such as; development of interdisciplinary course electives, shared projects across discipline-specific courses, fostering of shared informal student spaces on campus, shared exhibitions and presentations of student work. There are a number of formal and informal activities that could allow students to explore connections within the interdisciplinary environment of our diverse School, across the university, and to a broad range of industry connections.

Towards **third year**, students are beginning to think of themselves as future professionals working in a wider world that extends beyond their university connections. We aim to support and enhance this existing transition by centering the third tier of the model on global and intercultural contexts: on students developing their sense of disciplinary identity through immersion in the wider world. We seek to enable students to build their confidence and understanding of how to practice their disciplines across cultures and within ‘real-world’ industries and communities.

The aim of the third tier is to ensure that all students will have a global experience of some kind; whether it is, for example, an international project collaboration using technologies across distance, a collaboration or interaction with RMIT’s offshore campuses, a study tour, an international exchange or other form of study abroad.

Taken in combination, these three levels culminate to build a sense of cohort that begins with a strong, disciplinary base, and broadens out to encompass interdisciplinary and global connections. It works by making transparent the existing transitions and key stressor points where students have indicated that the university could be doing more to support and improve the student experience.

The ‘trumpet model’ diagram (refer to Executive Summary, p. 6) is an attempt to visualise the three tiers of our model – disciplinary, interdisciplinary and global – against the three-year structure of the undergraduate degree. It shows that the tiers are best thought of as a shifting focus across the three years, gradually broadening the student experience as it extends the student’s sense of disciplinary and professional identity. The three tiers do not follow one upon the other in a strict linear sequence, but operate to some extent simultaneously across the entire undergraduate experience (for example, the global and intercultural tier emerges from the very beginning of the student

experience within our School, since our classrooms are global and intercultural by virtue of the nature of our student cohorts).

Project Plan

The Belonging Project was conceived as a four-year enterprise, from 2011 to 2014. The initial project plan, subject to ongoing elaboration and review, is as follows:

2011	Phase 1: Planting the Seeds
2012	Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience
2013	Phase 3: Focus on the interdisciplinary environment
2014	Phase 4: Focus on global initiatives

The objective is to test and refine the model by rolling out a number of activities and interventions, both formal and informal, across the three years of undergraduate study and understand their impacts on the student experience. The initial proposition is that we will offer programs a suite of suggested activities – from, for example, a camp, to study support sessions and an end of year School festival – along with the necessary guidance and support for achieving them. Individual programs are able to adopt and tailor these activities depending on their specific needs.

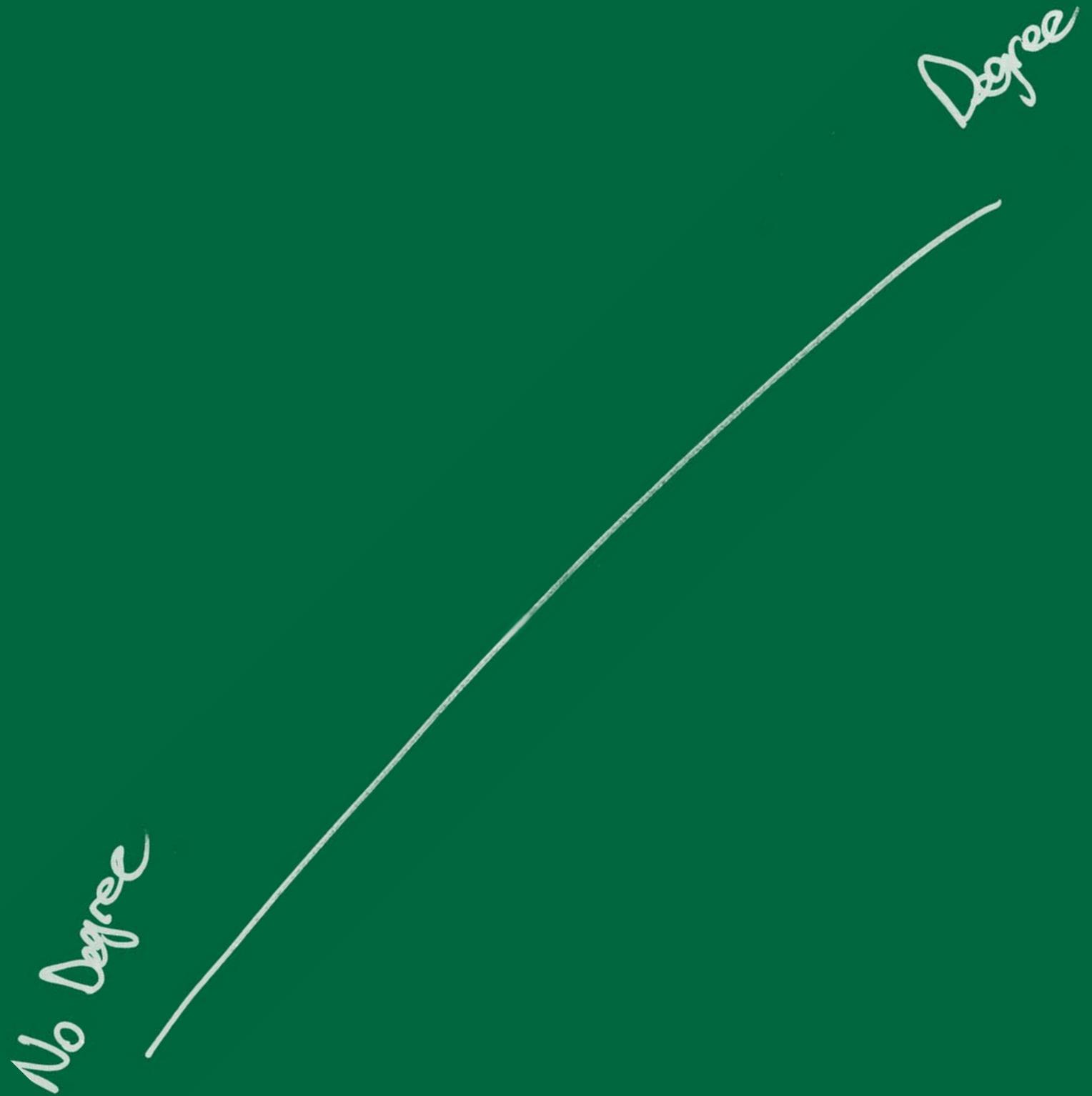
The model is intended to be flexible and agile. The aim of piloting these activities and interventions is that it may prove the model’s use of measurable benefit across the School, beyond the School, and across the University and the tertiary sector more generally.

Phase 1: Planting the Seeds

Aims:

1. Develop a model of student 'belonging', and test and refine through consultation with staff and students in the School of Media and Communication.
2. Promote a sense of belonging among staff from every program across the School, by engaging them in the project at a grassroots level.
3. Map current practices and activities across the School — formal and informal — that relate to student engagement.
4. Gather and analyse student perspectives on the current undergraduate student experience within programs, the School and the University.
5. Situate the project model and methodology within the latest literature and alongside existing practices.
6. Establish baseline data for the evaluation of pilot initiatives throughout subsequent phases of the project.
7. Develop a plan for piloting key initiatives in 2012 and beyond.
8. Develop networks of communication and disseminate project findings across the School and University.

Background



The Australian Higher Education Context

The Bradley Review

The Australian Government's Bradley Review into Higher Education (2008) outlined a number of recommendations to dramatically increase the percentage of the Australian population with tertiary qualifications – and in particular, participation rates of students from low SES backgrounds – by 2020.

Specifically the Bradley Review recommended the following:

- a national target of at least 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or higher by 2020
- a national target of 20% of Higher Education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low SES backgrounds by 2020

These recommendations are driven by the government's desire to increase overall participation in the Higher Education system in order to build Australia's skilled workforce, its research and innovation system, and ability to compete in the global economy (Bradley Review, p. xi).

However, to increase the rates of participation across the population as a whole, it is necessary to broaden access to the groups of people currently less likely to participate, including: Indigenous people, people with low Socio Economic Status (SES), and those from regional and remote areas (p. xi).

Attracting and Retaining Low SES Students

Currently, a student from a high SES background is about three times more likely to attend university than a student from a low SES background (Bradley Review, p. 7). Students from low SES backgrounds are particularly poorly represented in programs that typify RMIT's School of Media and Communication – creative arts and professional fields of study with competitive entry (ibid).

But overall, low SES participation is an issue of access rather than success once enrolled (Universities Australia p. 4). Overall, low SES students perform highly, achieving 97% of the pass rates of their medium and high SES peers (Bradley Review, p. 7). The challenge then begins long before university, as people from low SES backgrounds are “more likely to have lower perceptions of the attainability of a university place, less confidence in the personal and

career relevance of higher education and may be more likely to experience alienation from the cultures of universities.” (p. 3) Student engagement efforts, like this project, must target these specific anxieties.

Higher Education Participation & Partnerships Program (HEPPP)

The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) exists to support the federal government's aim for 20% participation by students from low SES backgrounds by 2020. Specifically, HEPPP's purpose is to generate activities and strategies across Australian universities to improve access, engagement, retention and success for people from low SES backgrounds in degree-level study.

This project sits within the *participation* arm of HEPPP, and is one of 3% of learning and teaching projects funded by HEPPP nationally. One of HEPPP's aims is to undertake and support research into activities that improve the participation of students from low SES backgrounds. As all programs and universities – not only nationally, but also internationally – prepare to accept a larger and more diverse student cohort, there will be a growing need for strategies to ensure their success of this new cohort. The Belonging Project aims to respond to this need: to offer a practical, flexible and transferable model for engaging all students, regardless of background.

RMIT University Context

RMIT University: Global, Urban, Connected

Within the fast-changing Australian Higher Education environment, RMIT has developed a strategic plan, mapping its goals to 2015. The plan includes a commitment to building “a diverse student population, reaching out to those who are disadvantaged, creating pathways through our programs, and providing opportunities for our students in employment and entrepreneurial endeavor” (RMIT, 2011). RMIT's three key strategic goals are to be *global, urban and connected*. The model translates these goals into concrete plans, activities and achievements – for our School, and, into the future, for the University as a whole.

The project connects closely with the University's broad vision, and intersects with its strategic goals in the following specific ways:

- **Global** – The third tier of the model, with its focus on the global experience, actively develops strategies to enact RMIT's commitment to internationally relevant curricula, incorporating cross-cultural learning.
- **Urban** – RMIT is committed to building “a diverse student population, reaching out to those who are disadvantaged, creating pathways through our programs, and providing opportunities for our students in employment and entrepreneurial endeavor” (RMIT, 2011, p. 12). Through a focus on building an inclusive environment that supports all students – including those from disadvantaged backgrounds – the model aims to create a sense of cohort and a student experience that will make pathways through our programs easier for those disadvantaged.
- **Connected** – First, through building a sense of cohort through student work: “collaboration and team work is encouraged and a sense of *belonging* for students and staff is supported” (RMIT, 2011, p. 7). Second, through active partnerships with networks of professions and industries aligned with our programs. The model builds on the first mode of connection – within the cohort – to create a strong foundation upon which students can build connections with the professional communities outside the University in which they hope to work.

RMIT's Student Cohort Experience Project

At RMIT, the Belonging Project sits within a broader university-wide initiative, the Student Cohort Experience Project, which aims to define the RMIT cohort experience. Operating out of the University's Academic Portfolio, the Student Cohort Experience Project brings together a number of efforts across the university working, in both sectors (TAFE and HE) and in a range of diverse ways, to improve the student cohort experience. The project is borne out of the University's Strategic Plan goal to enhance the student experience by building students' affiliations with their peers and future professions, and to create a sense of student belonging and commitment to the University.

The Student Cohort Experience Project identified a number of pilot projects for 2012 to enhance and develop current practices, and to help define the key characteristics of a successful and distinctive student

cohort experience at RMIT. The Belonging Project is one of these pilots, alongside initiatives in the School of Education, the Business College and the School of Engineering (TAFE).

A Changing School Environment

The Belonging Project was initially envisaged as a way to foster engagement and cohesion in a large, diverse and relatively new school. The School of Media and Communication, the largest school at RMIT University with approximately 215 fulltime staff, was born in 2009 out of the merger of the Schools of Applied Communication and Creative Media. The new School's size, combined with its geographically dispersed campus, presented challenges to achieving any sense of cohesion among staff and students across the various programs and disciplinary areas. The Belonging Project was in part an attempt to respond to this new environment by fostering a sense of community and encouraging better use of the latent interdisciplinary environment.

The Scholarly Context

Literature Review

During Phase 1 of the project, a wide-ranging and extensive literature review was conducted around a number of areas identified as central to our research.

Literature Review Key themes

- Student engagement
- Narrative methodology
- Capacity building
- Formal and informal curriculum development
- The first year experience (FYE)
- Low Socio Economic Status (SES) participation
- Belonging
- Cultural capital and capacity building
- The broader context of the shifting role of tertiary education internationally.

The collection and review of the literature was guided by three key aims:

1. To build upon already established best practice so as not to 're-invent the wheel' through our model and pilot initiatives.
2. To benchmark our project aims against international best practice.
3. To identify existing gaps in relation to student engagement initiatives both locally and internationally.

As outlined, the project's three-tier narrative model emerged after synthesising the findings of the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education lead by Denise Bradley (known as the Bradley Review) and RMIT's 2010 strategic plan. We believe that the 'meta narrative' of the Belonging Project is a meaningful way to make 'real' and 'concrete' the changes in expectations of academic staff and students that accompany these new developments. Many of the changes are predicated on shifts in how we understand the way people learn and the changing cultural and economic role of the university in more general terms. Particular to the Australian context is the growing expectation that universities will become proactive agents in both attracting students from low SES backgrounds and, of special importance to this project, in retaining them.

We have included a table of International Benchmarks (refer p. 19) that better visualises other projects and initiatives from around the world that intersect with our topic and aims. To date we are a yet to identify another project that approaches the student experience in the holistic manner that our proposed model does. There are, however, many exemplary projects that we have drawn upon to inform our practice, and the work of Sally Kift and Karen Nelson has been particularly influential.

It is important to note that "institutions [are] struggling to achieve cross-institutional integration, coordination and coherence of FYE policy and practice" (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010, p.1). Our project sits within the context of RMIT University's own current work to understand and define the unique RMIT student experience.

In their work on the FYE and transition, Nelson, Smith and Clarke (2011) outline Vincent Tinto's (2005) influential scholarship on student retention. Tinto outlines a model of institutional action, comprising of five conditions that can enhance student retention: "institutional commitment; institutional expectations; support; feedback; and involvement (Tinto in Nelson, Smith and Clarke, p. 2). Nelson, Smith and Clarke's work at QUT is instructive given its "whole-of-institution" approach. Kift (2008) also acknowledges and responds to the challenge of enacting a "holistic, systematically-managed, vision for the FYE that is truly student-focussed and is indeed greater than the sum of its many parts" (p. 2). In response, Kift suggests that institutions need to position the FYE as an institutional priority by making it "both in rhetoric and reality, 'everybody's business'" (p. 3) - an approach that QUT has evidenced a strong cultural shift across various levels of the university. Similarly, the three-tiered nature of our narrative model requires that transition becomes 'everybody's business', as part of the three-year undergraduate experience across all years and all programs.

Nelson, Smith and Clarke (2011, p. 5) present their model, 'Individual and Institutional Characteristics Influencing Student Retention and Engagement' (IICISRE), for scoping existing influences on the student experience as well as measuring outcomes. The IICISRE model takes into account: student factors, institutional context, and teacher factors as part of the range of 'input' factors on the student experience, as well as the academic, social and institutional factors that can have a transformative effect on the student experience; and then finally, the 'output' factors, such as the knowledge, skills

and attitudes that students hope to gain at university. This comprehensive model has shaped the team's approach to scoping, mapping, implementing and mapping new and existing student-centred initiatives.

First introduced in the 1970's, Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept of 'cultural capital' is now well established within literature around social mobility and has become a key part of approaching of low SES inclusion within Higher Education. Whilst the framework does have its limitations – as discussed by Rachele Winkle-Wagner in her book, *From Cultural Capital: The Promises and Pitfalls in Educational Research* (2010) – it continues to provide a compelling framework to explain the way cultural status signals are privileged in Higher Educational settings:

The idea of cultural capital does shift thinking in education toward structural notions of acquisition and perpetuation of privilege and inequality. Cultural capital can be helpful in identifying the “currency” that some students have and other students do not possess in educational settings. (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 111)

It is this definition that has informed the structural shifts required within RMIT and the School to mitigate the absence of particular forms of 'cultural capital' that might limit students from low SES backgrounds from fully accessing the range of activities on offer – particularly those relating to international exchange programs.

This notion of 'cultural capital' has also informed the work of Dr Patricia McLean from Melbourne University in her 2004 report *Investing in Cultural Capital: A Partnership Enhancing Transition for Equity Students*. Drawing on the work of Levine and Nideffer (1996), McLean reiterates the importance of early interactions with other students in helping shape or re-shape students' conceptions of what is possible and to build a sense of belonging.

In relation to theoretical notions of 'belonging' much of the literature resides within the domain of psychology (more specifically social psychology) and within the literature of inclusion and exclusion. Dr Roy Baumeister of the Faculty of Social Psychology at Florida University has written extensively on notions of identity, self-esteem, interpersonal processes and belonging. As Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) point out, the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation and takes precedence over self-esteem and self-actualisation. In relation to the 'belonging narrative', Baumeister and Leary argue that individuals working alone face a “severe competitive disadvantage” compared to those working as part

of a group (p. 499). When applied to the Higher Education sector it could be said that it is socially and professionally threatening not to belong, particularly within the post-university context. Similarly, there is evidence that interpersonal concerns affect cognitive processing and that “both actual and potential bonds exert substantial effects on how people think” (p. 505).

Walton, Cohen, Cwir and Spencer in *Running Ahead: Mere Belonging* (2011) outline the relationship between social connectedness and IQ performance (p 3). Referencing Aronson (2004), the writers also note that, “research on cooperative learning finds that structuring school assignments so that it is in students' interest to cooperate rather than compete can increase cooperation and improve school outcomes” (p 17). Developing robust discipline and professional social connections whilst at university are vital life skills that contemporary universities are well positioned to help develop.

It is worth noting that we are also working to ensure the model is reflective of quality frameworks for Higher Education and curriculum reform as outlined with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the newly formed Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). In addition we are working with the many areas of the University who deal with statistical data in order to better embed the transition experience and develop long term reporting systems that will inform the University's understanding of student engagement and the importance of individual school cohort belonging within the larger organisational structure. In this way we aim to support low SES, international, and indeed all students – transitioning, engaging and finishing their studies – and beyond as alumni and professionals.

International Benchmarks

Area	Institution	Initiative/Document	Details	Reference
First Year Experience/ Transition	OLT (formerly ALTC)/QUT (Sally Kift)	Transition Pedagogy	<p>This project articulates a transition pedagogy to scaffold and enhance the first-year learning experience in Australian Higher Education (HE), organized around six principles:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The first year curriculum should mediate and support transition; 2. Diversity should be recognised and supported; 3. Curriculum should be student-focused, explicit and relevant; 4. Learning communities should be promoted through peer-to-peer collaboration and teacher-student interaction; 5. Assessment should be designed around making a successful transition to HE assessment; 6. Evaluation and monitoring should be embedded in the curriculum. 	http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/transitionpedagogy/
	QUT	First Year Experience Online Portal	A comprehensive approach to the first year experience at QUT, encompassing retention and a transition pedagogy. A bundle of principles, linked to resources and strategies that are in place (such as the Student Success Program) to ensure it works.	http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/
	QUT	Transition Pedagogy Handbook: A Good Practice Guide for Policy and Practice in the First Year Experience	Outlines the principles of the first year curriculum at QUT and a wealth of resources, enabling teachers to design their own first year curriculum (FYC) in-line with these principles. Also includes a number of practical resources for various people involved in the FYE, including the course coordinator, unit writers, and tutors.	Nelson, K., T. Creagh, et al. (2010).
	University of Melbourne	Transition Resources	An online portal of transition resources for staff, including targeted kits for different teachers and cohorts, and a larger overarching transition document, 'Transition in the First Year Curriculum: Supporting student transition to university life and study'.	http://services.unimelb.edu.au/transition/staff/uni/resources
	University of Newcastle	My Journey website	A web portal for students at the University of Newcastle to support them through their FYE. It has tools to help them map and reflect on their personal, social and academic journey during their first year.	http://www.newcastle.edu.au/students/my-journey/about-the-guide.html

Area	Institution	Initiative/Document	Details	Reference
First Year Experience/ Transition	University of Auckland	FYE Targeted Learning Sessions	A mentoring space for students working on assignments, bringing together librarians, Student Learning staff, tutors, and FYE mentors in a session for first year students to workshop a major assignment.	http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/uoa/home/about/ourfaculty_1/first-year-experience-programme_1/recent-fye-events_1
	RMIT University, College of Science, Engineering and Health	Transition and first year experience	A collection of FYE and transition resources, governed by the university's six student transition principles: active learning; active challenge; engaging and vibrant learning environment; opportunities for enrichment; inclusive and supportive learning environment; work relevant experience and career development opportunities.	http://www.rmit.edu.au/seh/studenttransition
	Leeds Metropolitan University	Designing First Year Assessment and Feedback: A Guide for University Staff	A guide for designing first year assessment to increase retention and success and designing assessment to instill a sense of belonging. Tackles both the practical side of assessment design, as well as its relationship with the broader first year issues such as forming friendships and building self-belief.	Pickford, R. (2009).
	University of Texas at Austin	First Year Interest Groups (FIGs)	Groups of up to 25 who take two to four classes together, building a sense of consistency and cohort within a very large university.	http://www.utexas.edu/ugs/fig
	University of Wisconsin-Madison	Center for the First Year Experience	An online portal of FYE resources for staff and students, including training options and an annual first-year conference.	http://www.newstudent.wisc.edu/conference/
Student Engagement	Indiana University	First Year Experience (via the Office of First Year Experience Programs)	A comprehensive program for first year students, including orientation, welcome week, the IUBEGinnings program offering trips for first years before they get started, and a freshman year blog written by first years.	http://fye.indiana.edu
	Macquarie University	Engaging and Supporting Students	This website outlines the university's seven broad principles for student engagement and links to a number of important references – but no specific strategies to enact them. Macquarie also has a transition program including a mentoring program for first year students.	http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_development/engagement/
	Griffith University	Enhancing Student Engagement in the First Year: 10 Strategies for Success	Ten wide-ranging, generally practical strategies for enhancing student engagement, found on a portal that hosts a range of other good practice guides.	http://www.griffith.edu.au/gihe/resources-support/good-practice-guides

Area	Institution	Initiative/Document	Details	Reference
Student Engagement	Deakin University	Student Engagement resources	An online bank of resources around student engagement, with specific documents targeted at different groups, including academics, casual academics, general staff, staff leaders and students.	http://www.deakin.edu.au/herg/student-engagement/index.php
	RMIT University	Guide to Inclusive Teaching	This website outlines RMIT's inclusive teaching policy, based on a lengthier internal discussion paper outlining the benefits and various modes and strategies of inclusive teaching to best engage a diverse student body.	http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/inclusive
	Australian Government (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations)	Examples of good practice in assisting international students to integrate with Australian students and the wider community	A compilation of national benchmarks of international student engagement broken into four key areas: collaborative learning between international and domestic students, engagement with the wider community, orientation and information for international students, and cultural exchange activities.	http://www.aei.gov.au/Research/Publications/Documents/Good_Practice.pdf
Higher Education Research & Policy Groups	University of Melbourne	University of Melbourne	A handbook for teaching staff outlining the particular challenges facing international students as well as a collection of practical tools and recommendations for improving their student experience, in the following key areas: making lectures accessible, small group work, plagiarism, critical thinking, expectations.	http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/resources_teach/teaching_in_practice/
	Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)	ASHE website	The website of the long-running US-based ASHE acts as a central point of contact for the organisation's annual conferences and as a repository for related publications, as well as other relevant reports, essays and professional resources.	http://www.ashe.ws/
	The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA)	HERDSA website	The homepage of HERDSA hosts the organisation's member resources, including its associated journal, past conference papers, details on its fellowship and scholars links scheme.	http://www.herdsa.org.au/
	UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies - Higher Education Research Institute (HERI)	HERI website	HERI hosts the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and its website is primarily home to the CIRP's impressive annual surveys - of university freshmen, the first year experience, diverse learning environments, and of college seniors - as well as a blog and a range of other scholarly publications.	http://www.heri.ucla.edu/

Area	Institution	Initiative/Document	Details	Reference
Higher Education Research & Policy Groups	Deakin University Higher Education Research Group (HERG)	HERG website	The HERG website includes a range of practical and scholarly publications to support university staff in the development of their teaching and research capabilities, including a range of resources accessible only to members.	http://www.deakin.edu.au/herg/
	Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)	ACER website	The ACER website hosts the organisation's substantial body of research at every level of education (from primary school through to vocational learning), including information about their higher education survey the AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement), as well as associated annual reports and research conferences.	http://www.acer.edu.au/
	OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI)	CERI website	The CERI website is home to an extensive range of research reports, with a focus on innovation in four key areas: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Education and social progress 2. Governing complex education systems 3. Innovative learning environments 4. Innovation strategy for education and training 5. Innovative teaching for effective learning. The site also hosts information about CERI conferences and other activities.	http://www.oecd.org/site/0,3407,en_21571361_49995565_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

Phase 1: Approach and methods

- I've changed because I now spend more of my time on outside of career opportunities than on course work
- I needed strong connections between content and employment opportunities
- I'd have to find



RMTT had an awesome reputation for my course

Overview

Approach

The Belonging Project team has articulated a three-pronged research philosophy, aiming for a process that is ‘connected to the grassroots’, inclusive and iterative.

Grassroots	Grassroots, because for long-term success, initiatives must be driven from the ground-up.
Inclusive	Inclusive of staff, academic and professional, and of students: each so central to the development, implementation and sustainability of the project.
Iterative	Iterative, integrating cycles of reflection and evaluation into every stage of the research, as guided by an action research methodology.

Methodology

Action Research

Action research is “a form of research carried out by practitioners into their own practices” (Kemmis, 2007, p. 167). In the field of education, this means the ‘object’ of action research – educational practices – is positioned not as independent phenomena for investigation and testing, but rather as *praxis* – that is, the embodiment of theory in action. We adopted an action research methodology in order to investigate practices of student engagement within our own School. Action research provided us with a template to study, capture and analyse existing practices, and work alongside those we were studying – the staff and students in our School – as collaborators (Greenwood, Whyte, Harkavy, 1993). As a method, action research involves a “self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting” (Kemmis, 2007, p. 168). This cycle became an inherent part of our research and shaped our process, as we outline below.

Narrative Methodology

During the research process, we adopted a narrative methodology in order to conceptualise and convey our proposed narrative for undergraduate belonging in our School. Research suggests that narrative is a powerful tool for organising and making sense of shared experiences, and therefore central to learning (Abma, 2000; Bruner, 1990; Gola, 2009). As a methodology, narrative research can identify existing,

unhelpful or harmful narratives and seek to replace them with new, more constructive stories in order to effect organisational change. Narrative can be used to inspire organisational change, share knowledge across groups, and build identity (Mitchell and Egudo, 2003). This research has involved identifying existing narratives and attempts to shape new narratives with two groups of people – staff and students.

With staff, narrative was a powerful tool in our efforts to inspire grassroots change and to give meaning to the broad, long-term cultural changes we were suggesting. With students, we first identified existing narratives through the use of focus groups, before drawing on this feedback to refine a proposed new narrative that more clearly traces the contours of the three-year student experience in our School. However, while we hoped to ‘plant the seed’ of our narrative with both groups – staff and students – this is not something we can control. We hope that over the duration of this project and through our planned activities, a narrative of belonging will emerge from the shared language and experiences of the staff and students who make up the School community.

Phase 1: The Process

Phase 1 of the Belonging Project was condensed into a six-month process of developing the narrative model, staff consultations and workshops, gathering and analysing data from students, and preliminary dissemination:



Developing the Model

During preparation for the first staff workshop we realised we needed a way to visually represent our imagined three-tiered model of belonging. The first drawing of the model was very simple, with the three 'spheres' of belonging nestled inside each other with smaller circles within the central sphere denoting separate programs (the diagram became affectionately known as 'the telephone receiver' model):

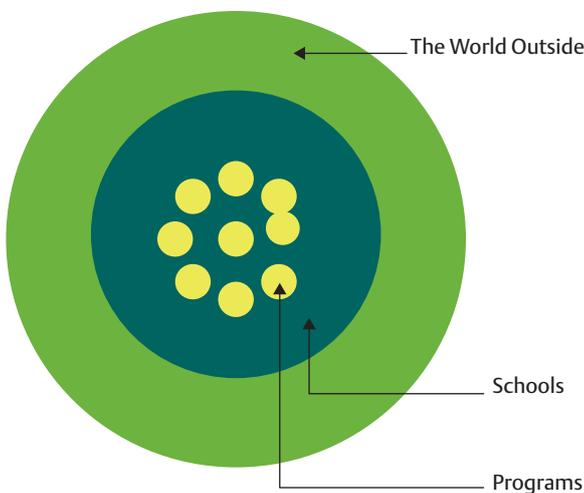


Diagram 2: Early Belonging Project Model – 'The Telephone Receiver'

Following the first staff workshop, and in preparation for the RMIT Student Cohort Forum, the team met to work on developing the model further, both conceptually and visually. Drawing on the range of suggested activities that emerged from the workshop, specifically the interdisciplinary nature of the School's programs, we realised that each tier of belonging would be made up of a mix of formal and informal 'interventions' across the year. Through the focus of these activities on the program, school and global spheres respectively, we came up with a vision of the three years coexisting but growing in emphasis depending on the student's year level. Thus, the first 'trumpet' model was born (see Figure 1).

It was at this stage in the research process that we first articulated the way the project intertwined the three tiers of belonging that are often already present in a program structure, but in a clearer and more explicit way. This was conceptualised as:

'A disciplinary and professional focus within an inter-disciplinary environment (uni/school/campus/local/regional), in a global/international context (the world)'

Early on in our process we noted that we were juggling three strands of engagement. The first two were obvious: staff and students. But the third became increasingly apparent through the course of our research: strategic communication. That is, while consulting with staff and students directly about our proposed model, we found ourselves in frequent consultation about our operational and strategic direction with key staff in our School (such as the Academic Services Manager and Senior Manager, Planning & Resources), as well as at the College and University level (for example; with Survey Services

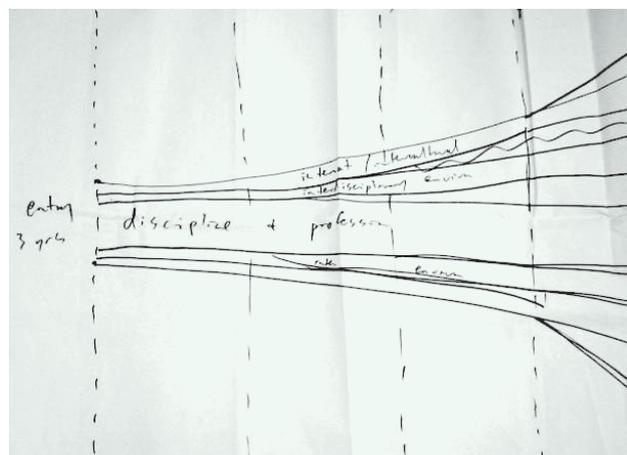


Figure 1: Birth of the Belonging Project Model – 'The Trumpet'

Centre, the Academic Portfolio, and Student Services, including Equity and Diversity).

Staff Engagement (Stage 1): Testing the Model

Staff Workshop 1

The first Staff Workshop was held at RMIT on 12 July 2011. A total of 20 staff attended the day-long

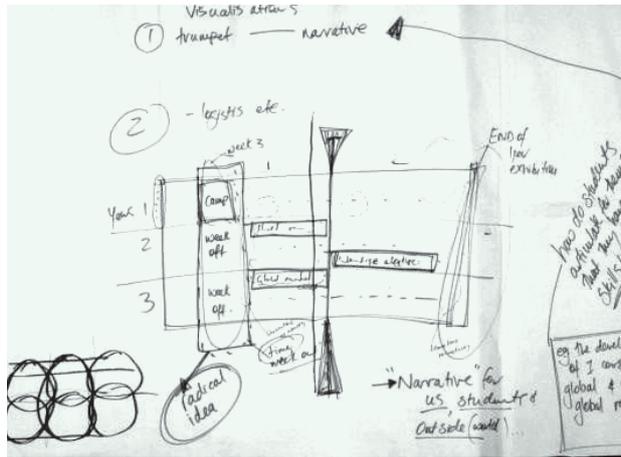


Figure 2: Mapping the Three-Year Undergraduate Experience

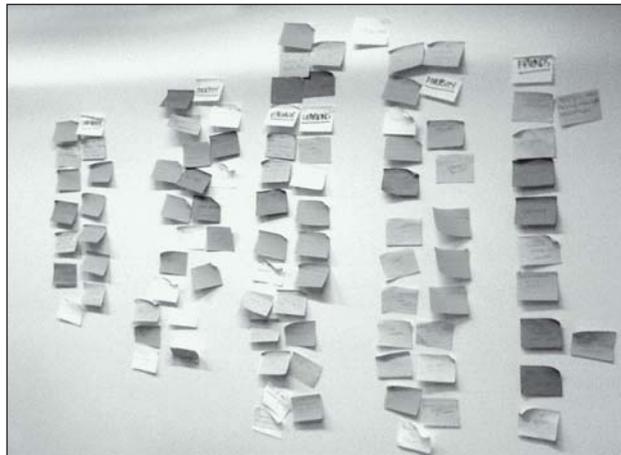


Figure 3: Staff Workshop 1 Snapshot – Brainstorming



Figure 4: Staff Workshop 1 Snapshot – Themes

workshop, representing eight undergraduate programs in the School, as well as TAFE programs, professional, executive, and College of Design and Social Context learning and teaching specialist staff.

The aim of this Workshop was to explore concepts of student ‘belonging’ with School staff and to test and augment the model.

At the Workshop, all participants were first asked to share a one-minute anecdote about an experience of belonging – or not belonging – in an educational context. This was a very effective technique, and we went on to use it again at the Program Directors Retreat and at the beginning of each of the student focus groups, as an icebreaker and focusing exercise.

Next, participants brainstormed responses to the following question: “Why might a sense of ‘belonging’ be important to a student?” Answers were jotted on post-it notes, which were then pinned to the wall for all to see.

Workshop participants, as a group, then identified the emergent common themes from the brainstorming session from the ‘post-it wall’ (see Figure 3).

These themes served to underpin subsequent discussions, conducted in a ‘World Café’ format (see Brown and Isaacs, 2005) in which participants rotated through three tables. Each table was the venue for workshopping the basis of one of the tiers of the model, configured as follows:

Three Spheres of Belonging:

1. Disciplinary
2. Multi-disciplinary
3. The wider world

Discussion of the first two tiers (the disciplinary and the interdisciplinary) teased out the values and strengths of ‘what makes us different’ — the specific disciplinary identities that are very much part of the RMIT ‘industry-ready’ learning and teaching philosophy — as well as ‘what we share’: where links across programs can benefit both students and staff. Discussion of the third tier drew the links between the global and the intercultural, ensuring we recognise that the ‘global’ is already enacted, implicitly, through the diverse international make-up of our cohorts.

Finally, the Workshop moved to concrete ideas for implementation across the three-year undergraduate structure, as well as a discussion of the challenges and potential ‘blockers’ to such action.

Many specific ideas emerged from the Workshop, some of which have been adopted, and are being piloted as a result of Phase 1 – for instance, the end of year festival, and the idea that second and third year students take a more active role at orientation for commencing students. Other more ambitious ideas were put on the agenda for later phases, such as the interdisciplinary ‘something week’ (a week of no scheduled classes allowing students to run and attend cross-disciplinary workshops and/or intensive courses based on themes and projects rather than specific programs).

More importantly, the Workshop affirmed the usefulness of the model as a means of strengthening student outcomes and participation, and encouraging and supporting innovation in curriculum and program structures. There was a clear sense of enthusiasm and energy about the suggested changes among the group. It was also evident that elements of the proposed model are already in operation in many programs, but could be made more cohesive and better communicated to staff and students through Belonging Project initiatives. In particular, the Workshop identified that further work is needed at managing existing points of transition.

Feedback and reflection from the first workshop paved the way for us to present our vision and model outside the School at the RMIT Student Cohort Forum (see Dissemination, p. 34), and for a second workshop conducted as part of the School’s annual Program Directors Retreat, held in August.

**Staff Workshop 2:
Program Directors Retreat 2011**

The Belonging Project lead team facilitated a half-day Workshop at the School of Media and

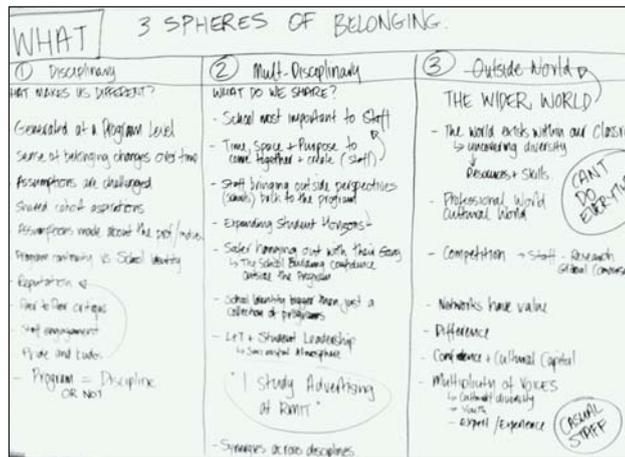


Figure 5: Staff Workshop 1 Snapshot – Mapping the Model

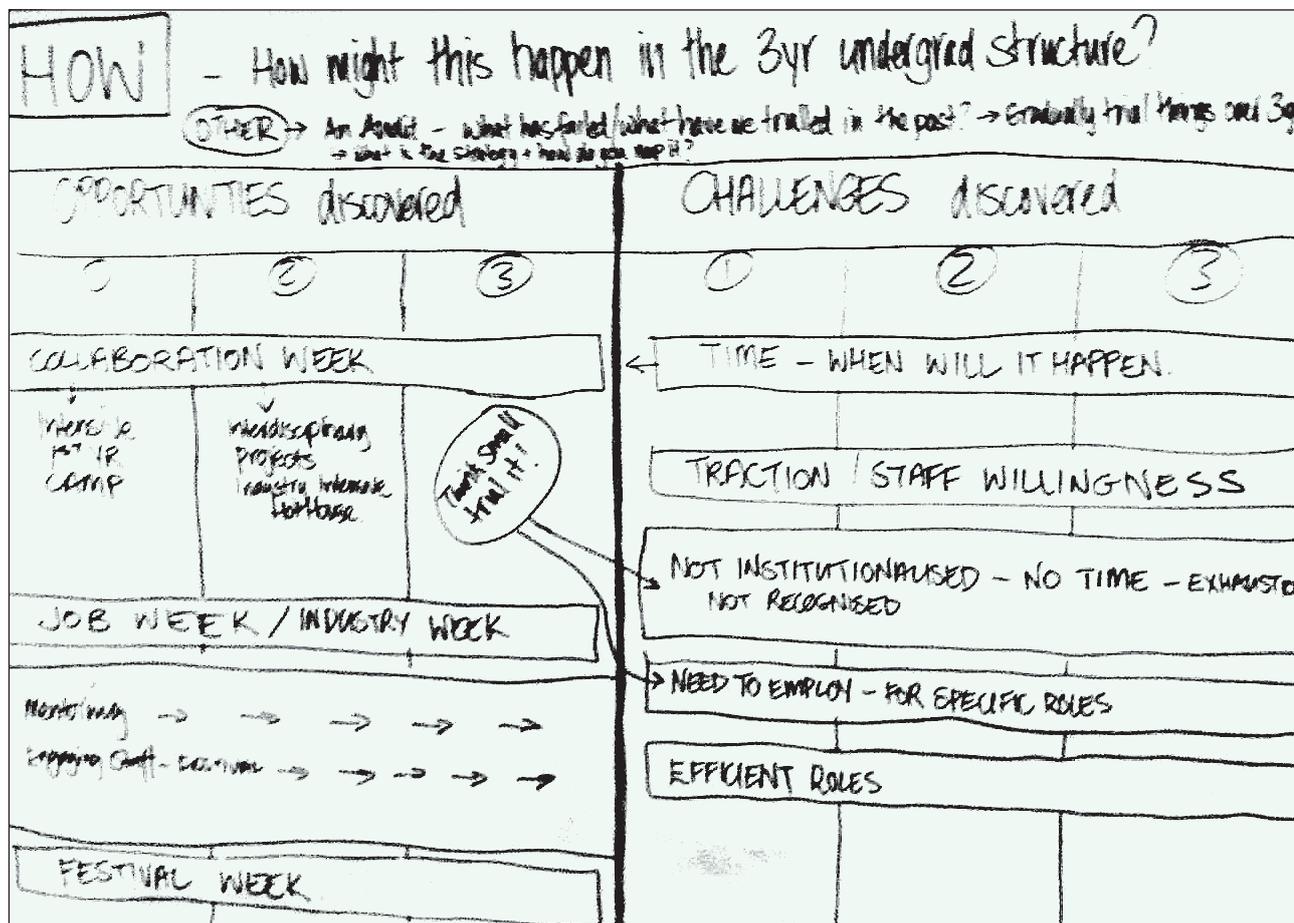


Figure 6: Staff Workshop 1 Snapshot – Mapping the FYE

Communication's Program Directors Retreat. The 2011 Retreat was themed: '(Re)imagining media and communication programs for the tertiary space: building identity, internationalisation and innovation'. The aim of the retreat was to bring together leaders in the School to work towards implementing a new five-year vision and plan.

The Belonging Project Workshop situated the project as part of the broader vision for the School, with a view to discussing how some of our shared aims might be achieved. We ran two generative group activities among the staff in order to gather data on current activities within the School, as well as to push our concept by further interrogating potential blockers and enablers of its practical implementation in the School.

Again, we began our session with our 'belonging narrative' exercise, asking staff to speak for one to two minutes about an experience, personal or observed, of belonging (or not belonging) in an educational context. Again, this exercise worked well to put the theme of 'belonging' on the table and mark this out as the focus of the session. Some staff spoke of their desire to 'not belong' to things, which opened up discussions as to the need to allow for, and indeed celebrate, the impulse to be maverick, to be separate: even those who do not want to 'belong' should, paradoxically, be allowed to!

All staff present, including Program Directors from HE and TAFE programs, were asked to complete a mapping worksheet we designed, structured around the proposed Model and its three-tiered structure, the exercise invited staff to indicate:

- Activities they were already undertaking, or had previously undertaken in their programs, that correspond with the proposed model;
- Which proposed new activities they would be keen to undertake to support the model: to rank these according to their most and least favoured options, and to indicate what resources would be needed.

The worksheet operated as a data-gathering tool, but second, and perhaps more importantly, a catalyst for broad discussions around the narrative and proposed activities following the worksheets exercise. These discussions elicited a number of salient observations in the form of both existing opportunities and perceived problems with the model and proposed 'interventions'/activities.

Some challenges posed to the model were also raised, with some participants questioning the apparent program-focused structure of the project.

This was particularly problematic for staff members who teach into the humanities based courses taught across multiple programs in the School. Further, examples of cross-program engagement can already be found in existing course and program structures. This underlines that different types of engagement are required across the School.

Following the highly focused work and discussion elicited by the worksheets, the final exercise at the Program Directors' Retreat was a more imaginative activity.

Participants formed groups, guided by their interest in three potential key interventions in the (formal or informal) curriculum that had emerged from the Staff Workshop 1 in July:

- **Orientation/Transition** - The orientation workgroup suggested that the School could offer something fun and social around transition. By removing the activity from the 'orientation' tag, it did not need to occur at the very start of the semester, but rather, sometime in the first half of the year, before the end of first semester.
- **End of Year Festival** - The end of year festival team imagined that the proposed festival could consist of a series of independently curated, program or course specific micro events, brought together through a cohesive festival program. Students would be involved at all levels of the event, whether through showcasing their work, designing the program and posters, or planning the key events.
- A **'Something Week'** - Two groups of staff worked on developing this idea. The first group envisaged it as a way to embed volunteer opportunities for students within the formal and informal curriculum. The second group proposed a student-run event modeled on the idea of an 'unconference'. That is; a participant-driven event, in which staff would provide the infrastructure (time off, space, equipment, and guidelines), and students would be in charge of planning, proposing and voting for their desired content.

Overall, the session at the Program Directors Retreat was a success. The Belonging Team shared our vision and Model, encouraged buy-in and participation, and identified potential challenges to its implementation. One participant who was initially skeptical ended the session talking about the "great possibility of The Belonging Project". Most participants were visibly enthused following the brainstorming sessions. One participant remarked

on how excited they were about the prospect of the 'Something Week', and a number of people have indicated they are keen to remain involved with planning at a big picture or specific level.

At the end of the Retreat, data gathered from the session was collated, analysed and incorporated into the project planning processes. Working with a clearer idea of some potential activities to trial in 2012, and more details of how they might operate, we were able to present some of these ideas to students for their feedback during the focus group process (see below). Also refer to Appendix 1 for full discussion of the workshop and its outcomes (p. 50).

Champions' Lunches

Driven by the aim to inspire grassroots cultural change and uptake, we identified project 'champions' from every program in our School to support and inform our project. We held a series of inexpensive champions' lunches (Yum Cha, off campus) with no formal agenda. It was remarkable how effective these lunches were in enabling informal discussion around the project, demonstrating appreciation for the advocacy of our champions, opening up new dialogues and networks, and building a sense of camaraderie among the group. They were particularly effective in both helping to achieve a broader sense of staff belonging, and to break down some of the communication challenges that come with a large, relatively new, and geographically dispersed school. We found that the simple act of bringing people together in an informal environment as a show of good faith (and for very little money!) achieved a surprising amount of what we aimed to do with staff.

Student Engagement: Focus Groups and Data Analysis

Student Focus Groups

Following the initial staff engagement process, it was well and truly time to talk to students. We embarked upon a series of focus groups with undergraduate and honours students in our School. The findings from these focus groups were used to test our proposed three-tier Model and to develop some preliminary recommendations, to be further developed into the selected initiatives to pilot in 2012.

Focus groups were selected as the most appropriate method for gathering student attitudes and opinion after some preliminary research and consultation with key staff and the reference group. We also received advice on a number of techniques used in collaborative workshops, some of which were

adopted as tuning-in activities and additional ways to collect data from the students.

We recruited students by presenting an initial call for interest to our School's Staff Student Consultative Committees, before inviting students to sign up in-class and via email. To ensure there was no ethical conflicts of interest involving teaching staff in power relations to students, this process was led by the Research Officer (Lucy Morieson), assisted by the Project Officer (Karli Lukas).

Aims

The focus group research was guided by three broad aims:

- To gather information on the various cohorts types within the School – according to program, year level, international and domestic, and other factors. Both demographic and qualitative data was sought to paint a full picture of the range of cohorts and their characteristics.
- To test our proposed three-tier Model and possible activities for further development. This was to happen through broad discussion of the student experience as well as direct probes about specific activities and the timing of student needs and expectations.
- Finally, while gathering data that relates directly to the student experience in the School of Media and Communication, we also wanted to collect 'big picture' data on the broader university experience of our students, in order to capture the wider role of university in contemporary life, and the way it sits alongside other expectations and demands, whether they be social, economic, aspirational or routine.

Question Guide

A question guide was drafted and refined (see Appendix 2, p. 56). Following advice from expert staff in the School, it began broadly and worked through to the specific. The guide was structured according to the model. It began with questions around broad expectations of university and RMIT, before asking students to reflect more specifically on their experience within their program, considering social and academic factors. It ended with more directed discussions about cross-year connections, interdisciplinary links, and industry and professional engagement.

In order to provide a 'tuning-in' exercise, as well as to gather some basic demographic detail about the participants, students were asked to record,

using large pieces of butchers paper and textas, relevant personal details, and initial thoughts and observations, before the group discussion (refer to Figures 7–10 for samples of student responses).

The Groups

Students were assigned to groups of mixed program but single year level. Separate groups were also run for international students – of mixed program and year level. The decision to keep international students separate was made to ensure that they could contribute freely, overcoming cultural and language barriers.

Participants by year level

First Year	32
Second Year	20
Third Year	9
Honours	13
Exchange	1

Participants by cohort

Local	64
International	10
Exchange	1

Participants by Program

Advertising	11
Animation	1
Communication Design	16
Creative Writing	8
Exchange	1
Games	8
Journalism	2
Media	9
Music Industry	2
Photography	6
Professional Communication	9
Public Relations	2

Analytical Approach

The focus groups provided two forms of data – audio transcripts and the informal ‘worksheets’. To identify the themes evident from the two sets of data, we were guided by Massey’s (2010) analytical framework. Massey argues that there are three levels to focus group data – articulated, attributional and emergent. These different types of data are, respectively:

- The data that explicitly answers the questions posed in the focus group (*articulated data*);
- The data that doesn’t necessarily answer the questions but does allow for the testing of the pre-existing hypotheses guiding the research (*attributional data*);
- And finally, the often unspoken data that emerges through the discussion that connect the broader themes guiding the research (*emergent data*).

Themes

The key themes that emerged from analysis of the transcripts and worksheets are outlined over. For a full discussion and analysis of themes, see Appendix 3 (p. 58).

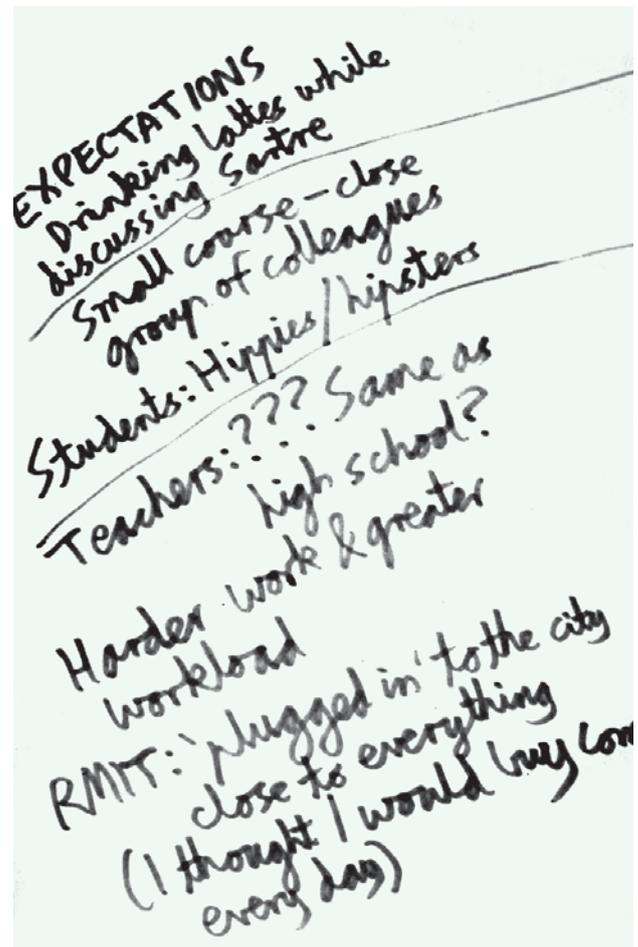


Figure 7: Student Focus Group Sample – Student Expectations

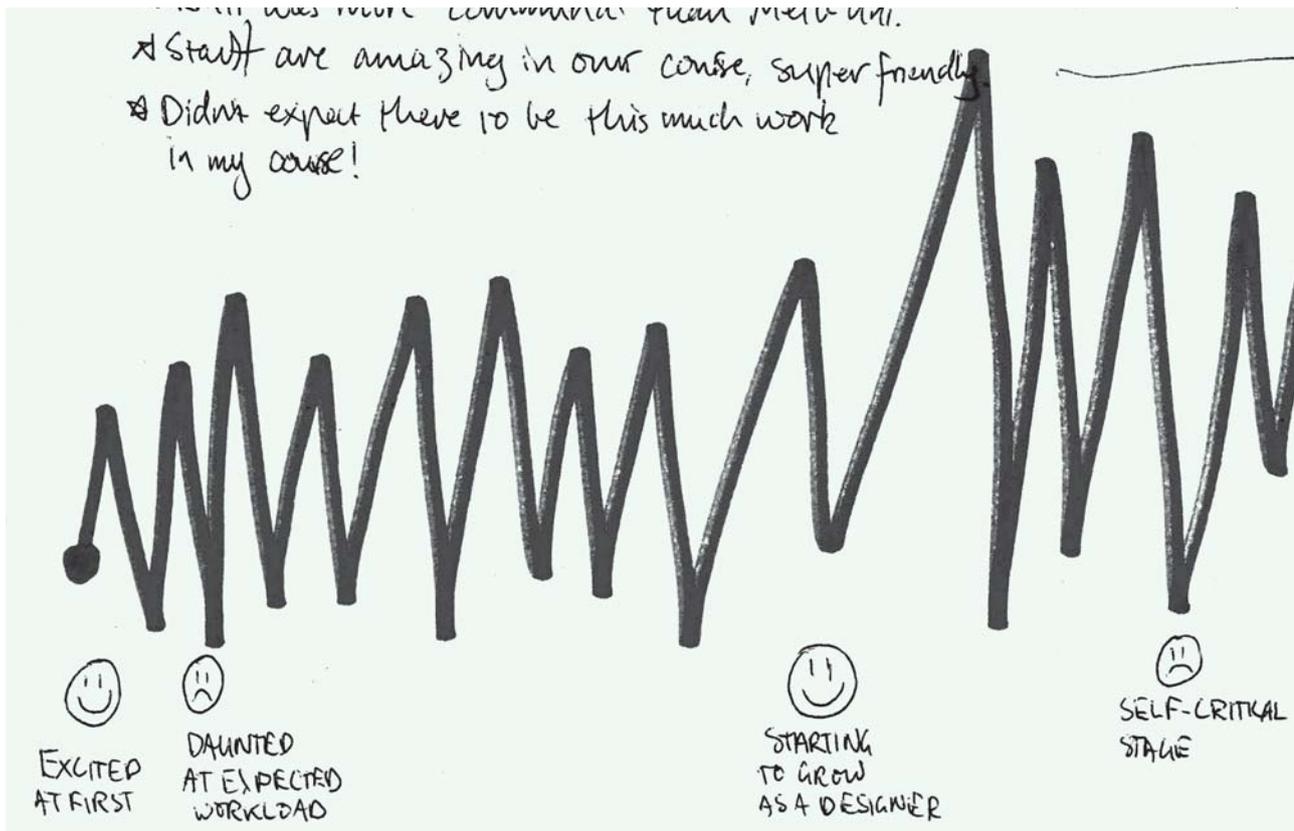


Figure 8: Student Focus Group Sample – Map of Student’s Pathway through University

University and RMIT

- Attending university was a ‘common sense’ decision for most participants.
- The decision is usually driven by employment goals, or encouragement from family, high school educators and peers.
- Participants had clear reasons for selecting RMIT – largely, strong program reputations and RMIT’s image as creative, innovative and industry focused.

Orientation Needs and Expectations

- We identified a gap between informal university orientation and information-driven program-run sessions.
- Students need further assistance making early social connections with their cohort peers.
- Desire for orientation sessions that mix social activities with workshop-style collaborative academic tasks.
- Desire for early information, feedback and advice from program peers in second and third years.
- Orientation camp was a polarising idea – some loved it, some hated it.

Social Expectations and Issues

- Reports of cliques and competition among program cohorts.
- Emphasis on importance of social ties to their university experience, especially from second and third years.
- Perceived barrier between domestic and international students with both groups needing assistance to work through cultural differences.

Academic Expectations and Issues

- High levels of anxiety over academic achievement overall, and particularly among first year cohorts.
- First year students were also struggling with transition to a different learning environment.
- First year students in studio-based programs demonstrated anxiety around skills, and a lack of understanding about the difference between a skills-based course and conceptual learning.
- Specific transition issues for international students facing a radically different learning style, even for those who have completed foundation studies at RMIT or elsewhere in Australia.

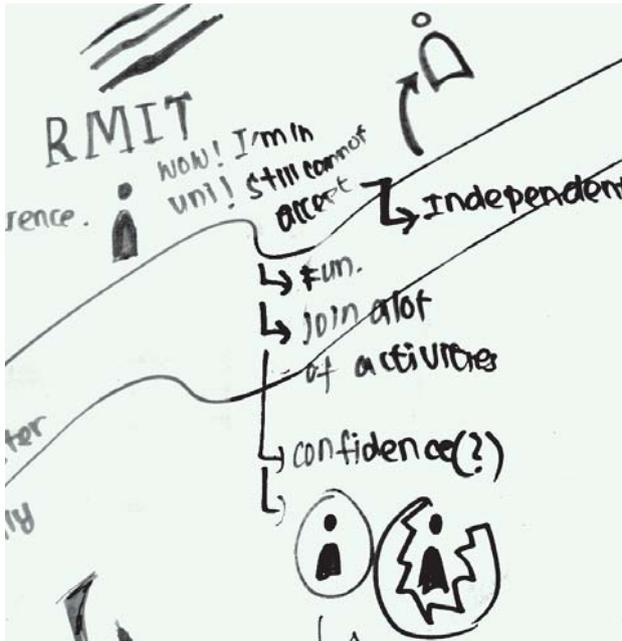


Figure 9: Student Focus Group Sample – ‘Emerging from the Shell’

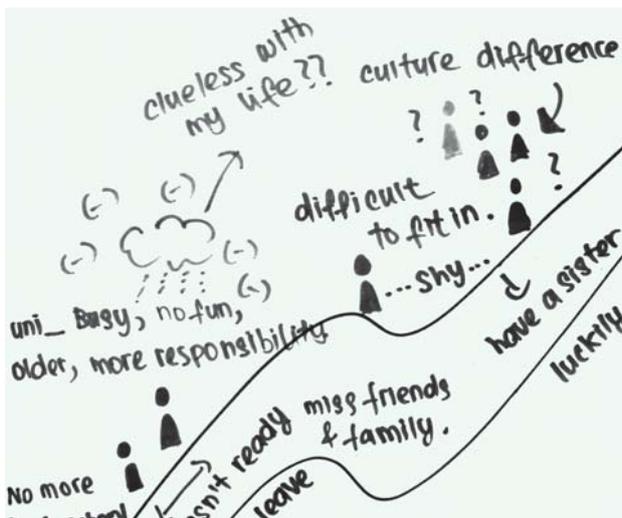


Figure 10: Student Focus Group Sample – Challenges to a Student's Experience

Industry and Professional Identity

- A lack of awareness and/or confidence around professional identity for most participants.
- A desire for more practical ‘how to’ information on industries and pathways, as well as basic information on approaching and getting started in the workplace.
- A desire for internships in all programs, and for those students who are offered them, support with finding and/or attending internships.

Cross-Year Connections

- At present, cross-year connection is limited. More junior students feel intimidated of or isolated from their senior peers. Others simply had no cross-year interaction.
- First years were keen for a mentor to allay anxieties about university assessment and standards, and provide guidance on what to expect from the later stages of their program.
- Students in programs that offer a number of possible course pathways were keen for connections with senior students to advise their choice.
- Students agreed that any sort of attempt to set up a mentoring system needed to be at least partly formalised to ensure its sustainability.

Interdisciplinary Connections

- Strong support for more or improved interdisciplinary connections as part of the student experience.
- Strong awareness of the future professional value of interdisciplinary links.
- Desire for a broader perspective of their School, university, and the wider world.
- Activities suggested included speed-dating nights, ‘lecture swaps’ and sample classes.
- Evidence that improved interdisciplinary connections could help break down strong cohort stereotypes and rivalries.
- Need to be formally facilitated and mutually beneficial to the programs involved to ensure sustainability.

Student Spaces and Resources

- Existing spaces under-utilised and/or poorly designed/resourced.
- Student hot spots – Pearson & Murphy’s Café, ‘the fake grass’, the Myer-Melbourne Central walkway (off-campus).
- Some disappointment around access to resources.

Student Communication

- Facebook, Facebook, Facebook! For academic and social purposes – the new study group.
- Prefer student-run for peer-to-peer advice and feedback.
- Acknowledge challenges – legal and privacy.
- Blackboard insufficient and unreliable.
- Email seen as ‘old school’ or for professional use.

Internationalisation and Global Links

- Hidden or real costs prohibitive for some.
- Needs to be a 'value add' for local students.
- International students already position themselves as global citizens.
- Linked to future aspiration; further study or 'plan b'.
- Seen as additional or post-university, not part of the undergraduate experience.

Alumni Perceptions

- No clear vision of future role for RMIT in their lives.
- Connection to RMIT and alumni dependent on future success.
- Early and growing awareness of peers as future professional networks.
- International students particularly keen to teach or guest lecture.

Conclusion

The data that emerged from the student focus groups was far richer and more detailed than anticipated, casting light on areas far broader than our project's immediate scope. In the first instance, the data has informed the selection and development of pilot initiatives for Phase 2 of the project in 2012.

It provides a qualitative baseline as we trial these initiatives for the first time. It will also be used for future scholarly presentations and publications.

Staff Engagement (Stage 2): Sharing Student Feedback and Focus on the FYE

School Staff Forum: 'But what do our students (really) want?'

This event, held in early November 2011, attracted 50 staff from across the School and Student Services to hear Lucy Morieson and Karli Lukas present data and initial findings from the student focus groups process. A great deal of interest and discussion was generated, driving participation in the final staff workshop for the year.

Staff Workshop 3

The third staff workshop, held in October 2011, focused on activities to be piloted in the School in 2012 that would centre on the first tier of the model and the FYE.

In attendance were representatives from every undergraduate program in the School, along with other key representatives from the School, College of Design and Social Context and the University.

The Workshop was split into two sections. The aim of the first half was to attempt to map across the timeline of a calendar year, the FYE in the School. Such mapping was then used as a reference

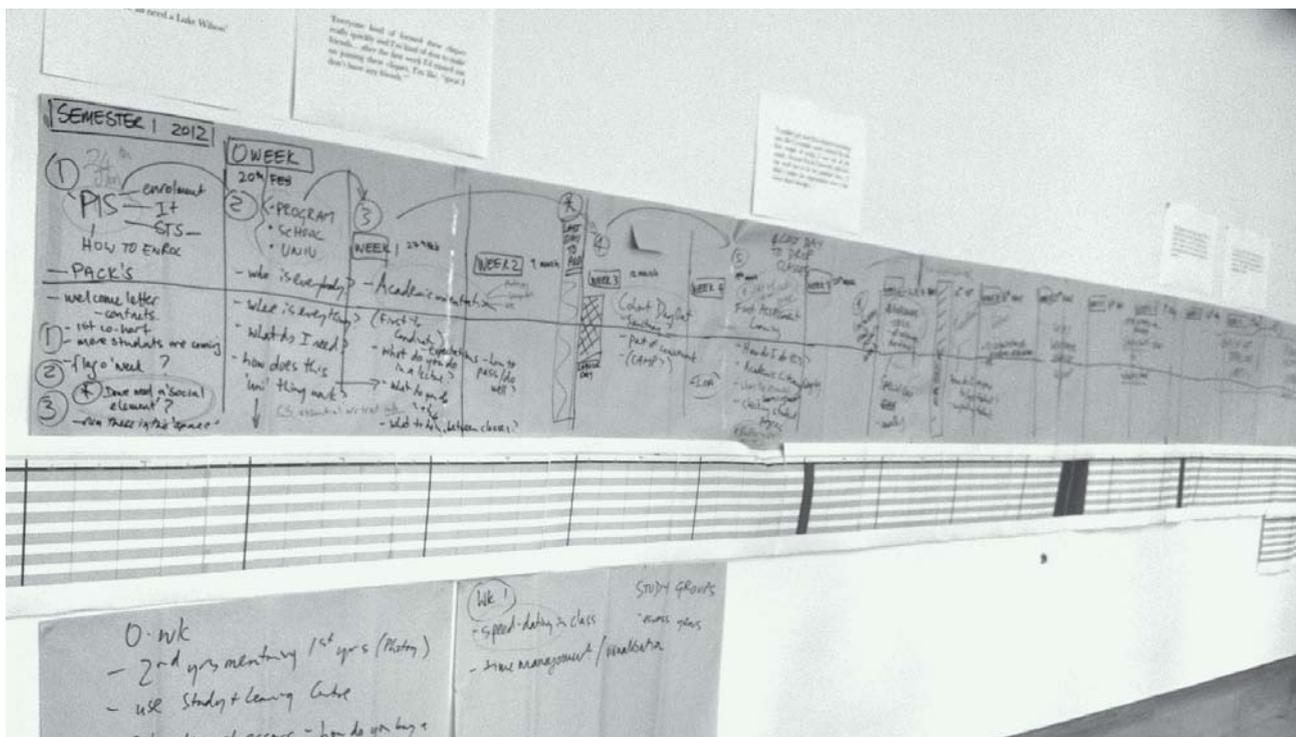


Figure 11: Staff Workshop 3 – Mapping the First Year Experience

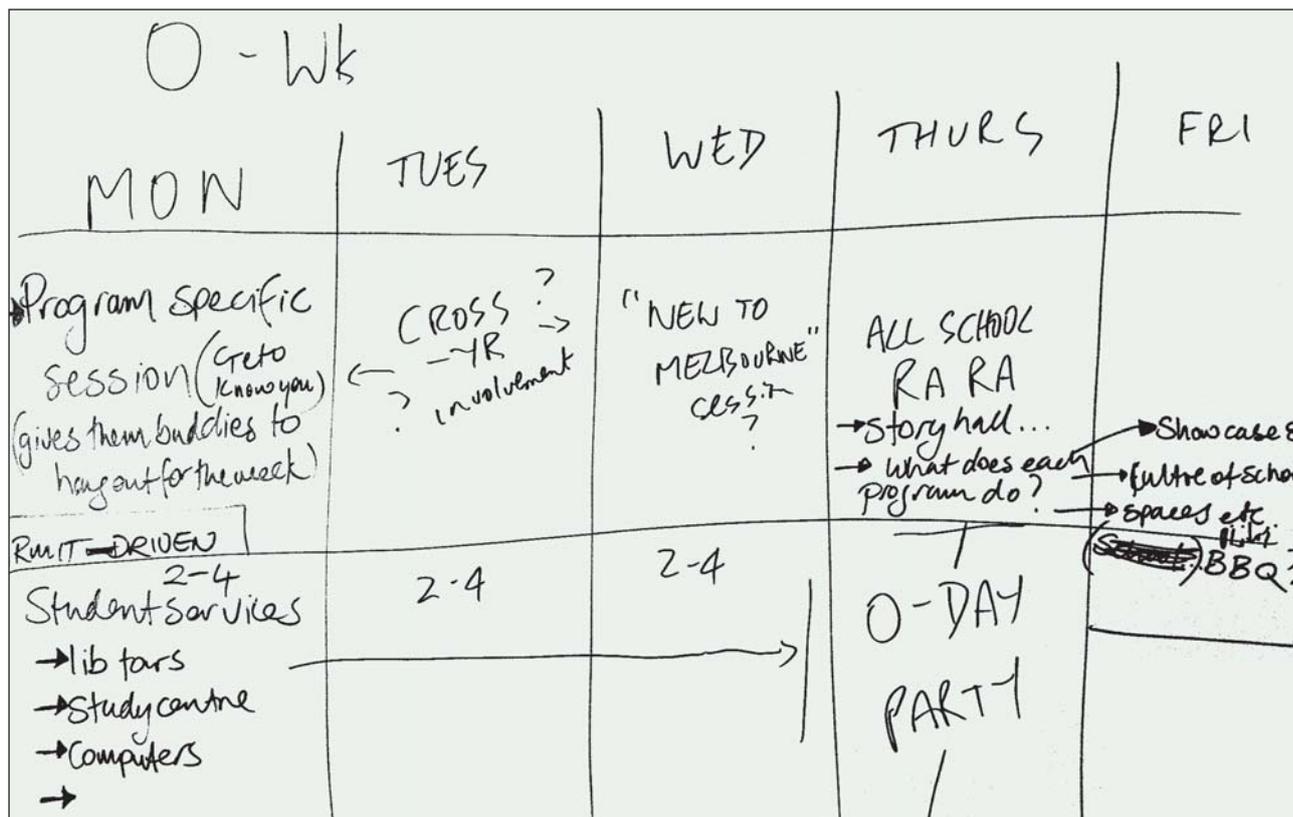


Figure 12: Staff Workshop 3 Snapshot – Mapping a Coordinated Orientation Schedule

for analysing how best to time proposed pilot interventions to improve the first year experience by building a sense of student cohort belonging and individual disciplinary identity.

Workshop participants worked collaboratively to chart the flow of interactions with students: from first Program Information Sessions to end-of-year Showcase events, and major formal milestones (enrolment deadlines, assignment workload hot-points); as well as the informed perceptions of staff as to the subjective ebbs and flows (and crisis points!) of the student experience. Using a large physical timeline, drawn on butcher's paper on the walls of the room (see Figure 11), the group worked through the entire FYE, from the first formal interaction to the final point of contact for that year (see Appendix 4 for these key moments and milestones, p. 68).

Next, the group brainstormed a range of activities that could enhance the FYE as part of both formal and informal curricula, timed to coincide with key moments in the calendar.

In particular, since Orientation-week occurs so early in the new year, attention was devoted to a micro-mapping of a holistic orientation week schedule, founded at the level of the program/disciplinary student cohort and integrated with School and University activities.

The other point for focused brainstorming was the proposed end of year School-wide festival. This was a significant point of discussion given that nearly all programs represented at the workshop already offered some sort of end of year screening, showcase, or event.

The Workshop was successful in generating a great deal of energy around the proposed pilot initiatives, as well as identifying key staff to involve in their development.

It paved the way for further work to refine the list of initiatives to implement in 2012, with a number of suggested activities being kept on hold for future development.

The workshop generated a way to conceptualise the current FYE, and highlighted key points for potential interventions. It also provided evidence for how existing resources and staff interests can be best mobilised to envisage and plan an improved FYE across the School.

Dissemination

The federally funded Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT), formerly known as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), provides a dissemination framework based on two modes of dissemination:

engaged dissemination and information provision dissemination (ALTC, 2008). The ALTC framework privileges the former, arguing for an 'engaged-focused approach to dissemination, involving consultation, collaboration and support for ongoing dissemination both during the project and after the project is completed'.

Most of the dissemination during Phase 1 of the project falls under the category of engaged dissemination. We anticipate working further on the information provision branch of our dissemination strategies during the second phase of the project onwards.

Engaged Dissemination - within the School of Media and Communication

The project's engaged dissemination strategies were largely situated within the School, to maintain staff engagement and to encourage grassroots uptake. They included:

- Three staff workshops
- Regular reporting to the School Executive
- Regular reporting to the Learning and Teaching Committee
- Belonging Project School Forum
- Regular items in the School newsletter
- Informal presentations and meetings with key groups of staff

Engaged Dissemination - beyond the School

At the same time, we had a number of more formal strategies for disseminating the research beyond the School:

- Strategic meetings with key stakeholders (including representatives of: the University's Academic Portfolio, Office of the Dean of Students, Survey Services Centre, Student Services, and Learning and Teaching staff within the College of Design and Social Context)
- Presentation at the RMIT Student Cohort Experience Forum
- Attendance at the RMIT Learning and Teaching Expo
- Launch of our Pilot Initiatives
- Monthly meetings of the Belonging Project Reference Group

RMIT Student Cohort Experience Forum

In July 2011, The Belonging Project was invited to present at the University's Student Cohort Forum, which was run by the Academic Portfolio. This was an opportunity to introduce our project to a large and diverse audience, including other Student Cohort Experience Project teams, student representatives and other key stakeholders from across the University.

Launch of Pilot Initiatives

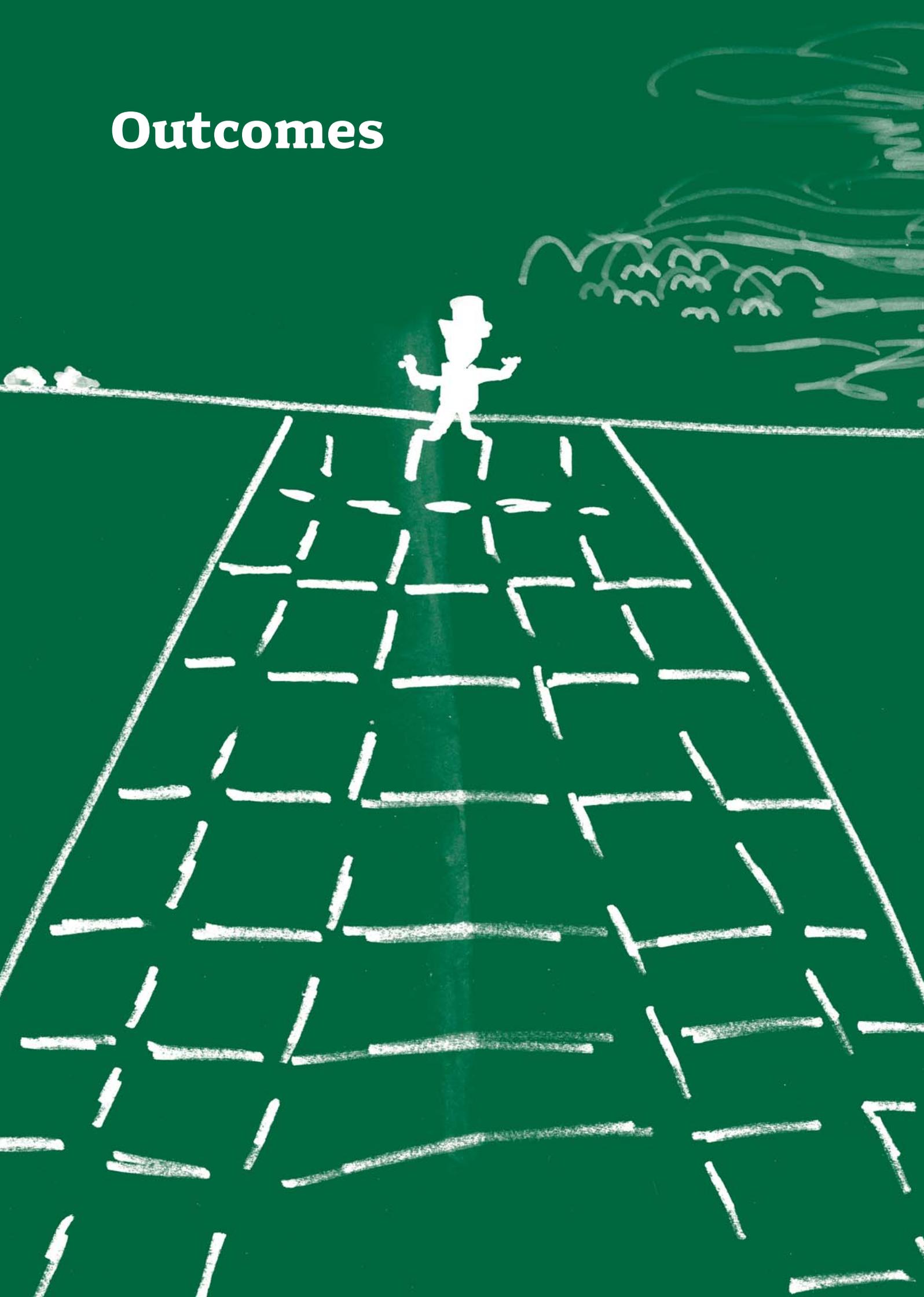
In December 2011, at a function at the Pearson and Murphy's Café on campus, the project team officially launched the pilot initiatives to be trialed during Phase 2 of the project in 2012. The launch was an opportunity to report on progress during Phase 1 to our community of stakeholders - both within the School and across the University.

The University's newly appointed Dean of Students, Professor Owen Hughes, formally launched the project to an audience including: the Vice Chancellor and President, Margaret Gardner AO; Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and Vice-President, Professor Gill Palmer; the Dean, Learning and Teaching, Professor Geoffrey Crisp; and staff from Student Services, each RMIT College, as well as staff from our own School. A number of students who had participated in the student focus groups also attended the launch.

Information Provision Dissemination

This report makes up the major form of 'information provision' dissemination undertaken during Phase 1. As the project continues into Phase 2, we plan to produce further research outputs: scholarly articles and conferences presentations.

Outcomes



Recommendations

General Recommendations from Student Focus Group Research

The following recommendations emerged from analysis of the student focus group transcripts. The recommendations are organised here according to the three tiers of the Belonging Project narrative model, with emergent data and observations grouped afterwards:

Tier 1: The First Year Experience - Disciplinary/ Program Focus

Improved Orientation

To assist with problems that first year students in particular encountered during their transition to university, we recommend that the School and programs work together to develop an improved, coordinated, holistic approach to orientation, in consultation with key University services.

We also recommend more work with staff around transition and orientation, to outline in more detail the range of issues that students have during this period. There is a need for further discussion with, and education and training of program directors, first year coordinators, academic advisors and all staff teaching first years (including sessional staff) about the concept of transition as a process, rather than orientation as a one-off cure-all. This training could work to embed the transition to a university environment and learning style within the formal curriculum, as well as providing suggested ways students could be supported through informal activities.

Continued Assistance To Form Social Connections

Students clearly articulated their need for assistance to make social connections during first year. While it is envisaged that some of this assistance will be facilitated as part of an improved orientation and transition pedagogy, there is also scope for work around formal and informal activities to support this need.

Further Assistance With Academic Transition

Again, while this is something that will be touched on in orientation, as well as during first year courses, there is scope for more work on supporting

commencing students with their academic transition throughout their first year – and beyond. We recommend that specific activities – in the formal or informal curriculum – be introduced to tackle this transition. Our benchmark references provide a number of possible examples of how this might take place, such as the University of Auckland’s ‘FYE Targeted Learning sessions’, where first year students workshop a major assignment with librarians, Student Learning staff, tutors, and FYE mentors. We recommend that the School consider a similar initiative. There is great potential to work with Student Services in developing activities in this area.

Tier 2: The Second Year Experience - Interdisciplinary Focus

Cross-Year Connections

Students are keen for cross-year connections but need help establishing and maintaining them. However, given the challenges with nomenclature, buy-in and sustainability, as well as evidence from past models adopted in the School, a traditional mentoring system is not necessarily the best solution. We recommend that staff begin incorporating cross-year links (no matter how minor) into their courses and programs where possible, and that the project team continue researching and mapping existing efforts as we work towards developing a better model.

Broader Approach To Work Integrated Learning

While students are generally satisfied with the level of industry connection within their program, they want more practical ‘how to’ information to supplement existing opportunities and examples. We recommend a broader approach to WIL that is less program-driven, and more focused on generic skills that students could use to make autonomous industry connections, consider a wider range of industry pathways, and develop their professional literacy and identity.

Interdisciplinary Facilitation

We recommend that the project team continue investigating ways to facilitate broader and/or improved interdisciplinary communication within and beyond the School. This involves exploring suggestions that have arisen from the student focus groups, as well as from the three staff workshops – for example, we could look further at a student-run website, consider installing an all-School photo board in the Student Atelier space, create an all-School Facebook page, assist in producing a networking event, or support the facilitation of cross-program

links at the course-level. The process should include the continued mapping of existing links, which could be further extended or integrated.

Better Reflection On Transferable Skills

More work is needed to identify and articulate transferable skills developed in all programs. This may be facilitated through the establishment of more or improved interdisciplinary links, but could also be built through generic skills or careers workshops.

Tier 3: The Third Year Experience - Intercultural/Global Focus

Enhancing Internationalisation In The Classroom

Our analysis suggests that further work is required to improve connections between domestic and international students, as well as to improve the global experience of all students on campus. As a strategy to improve both, we recommend that ways be found to more fully recognise and incorporate existing intercultural resources within the classroom, and as part of the School's existing global networks. This could take the form of, first, further research and mapping in this area, and also, the development of a focused workshop with key staff. This would also improve the global experience of those students who do not choose to take a global study option for a range of reasons.

Emergent Data and Observations

Refurbishment of the School's Student Informal Spaces

We recommend that immediate work be undertaken to improve the Student Atelier space so that it responds to student needs. This would provide a fast and visible way to show our commitment to improving the student experience in our School.

Early Graduate Outreach

A number of students expressed confusion around pathways into industry. In light of the previous comments about transferable skills, we recommend that the project team, programs and School consider implementing some sort of early graduate outreach, perhaps in the way of an 'exit interview' with graduating/graduated students. This would allow students to reflect on their skills, strengths, and possible career choice at the end of their degree, and receive guidance on the range of options and pathways available to them.

Clearer Guidance on Facebook Usage

Our analysis clearly suggests that there is a strong and

pressing need for further education and guidance on the use of Facebook – whether social or linked to class work. However, we are aware that we need to work within and alongside University policy on this matter. We recommend that the project team continue to closely monitor this situation – from both the student and University perspective. If possible within existing policy guidelines, we recommend that the School facilitate education and training for staff and students in this area.

Recommendations for Pilot Initiatives in 2012

The First Year Experience

'In keeping with our three-tiered model of student engagement, and its alignment with the three-year structure of the undergraduate degree program, we recommend that the focus of 2012 is the FYE and transition to university life. With this focus in mind, we propose to pilot and evaluate a series of key initiatives (refer to more detailed information in the Conclusion of this report, on p. 42):

Key Pilot Initiatives for 2012:	
1	A 'Cohort Big Day Out'
2	Coordinated Orientation Week Activities
3	End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibitions
4	Student Informal Spaces Initiatives
5	Academic Transition
6	Curriculum-based Initiatives
Other activities to be explored and evaluated:	
7	Week 10 engagement activities
8	Informal staff/student skill workshops
9	Cross School skills workshops
10	Student-led initiatives

Implications and Discussion

Alongside the recommendations above, several broader implications of the research can be noted.

Research Methods

The positive results achieved thus far, through engagement with the project's various stakeholders,

have reaffirmed that an action research methodology and a ‘soft’ approach to engagement suited our aims well. While this is of clear relevance to our continued research plans, it is also, arguably, of wider significance for this field of research in general. As the Belonging Project continues to develop a narrative model aiming to be relevant for a range of contexts, its contribution might extend to the methods for researching and implementation of such a model within a large and complex institution, along with the philosophy, initiatives and activities that constitute its elements.

Aspiration & HEPPP Recruitment

In line with the focus of the HEPPP, we began investigating our School’s engagement with students from a low SES background. Because of a lack of detailed available data, this was a far more complicated process than we anticipated. We were surprised to learn that few – if any – of our students meet the HEPPP guidelines for low SES status. It is clear that further work is needed – both within the School and with our colleagues in the Equity and Diversity area of Student Services– to investigate some of the possible reasons for this situation. We know, for instance, that Victoria has a small pool of low SES students in comparison to other states around the nation. However, through our student focus groups, we also found that our School attracts highly aspirational students from a range of backgrounds. This suggests that further work into how to better capture aspirational students from low SES backgrounds should become a key aim of our ongoing research.

The Belonging Project and Program/Course Renewal

The School of Media and Communication is currently involved in a process of large-scale undergraduate program renewal. This process has been informed by the work of the Belonging Project, and presents a significant opportunity for our model to be embedded on a larger scale.

Engagement of Professional Staff

Work during Phase 1 has reinforced the important role professional staff play in student engagement. Professional staff are often on the front line of contact with students and it is necessary to consider how these interactions impact on the student experience. Also important is clarity in the division and sharing of responsibilities between professional and academic staff in relation to student engagement activities: as

well as clarity in the complex relationship between the responsibilities of School administration staff and those of University administration.

Academic Staff Development: Learning & Teaching

There is scope for more targeted training of academic staff that repositions student engagement and student transition from ‘on top of the workload’ to being an embedded part of the curriculum. Working through new and existing forums (for example, the new seminar series in our School, Teachers @ Work), we aim for student engagement to be recognised as a legitimate and potentially rich area of scholarship and research outputs.

Sustainable Student Engagement Practices

There is a need for continued mapping and reporting of student engagement practices to ensure they become sustainable. This reporting would ideally be embedded in the existing Program Annual Review (PAR) process undertaken by academic staff in our School (with potential for further/improved assistance by professional staff). More work is needed to identify the best methods to gather and analyse this data in an efficient and useful way.

Phase 1: Summary of Aims and Outcomes

Aim	Actions	Outcomes
<p>Develop a model of student 'belonging', and test and refine the model through consultation with staff and students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tested the model with staff at two staff workshops. • Tested the model with students through focus groups. • Tested the model through consultation with external stakeholders and our project Reference Group. • Incorporated feedback: refined and developed model through an action research process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed a clearer and more refined model of student belonging in keeping with our initial three-tier model after testing with staff and students. • Selected a number of activities to pilots in 2012 as part of the first tier of the model, focused on the FYE in our School.
<p>Promote a sense of belonging among staff from every program across the School of Media and Communication, by engaging them in the project at a grassroots level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three staff workshops • Various informal presentations (e.g. to professional staff, technical services staff). • The Belonging Project School Staff Forum. • A number of smaller meetings and consultations with key stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff numbers engaged in activities (15 at Staff Workshop 1, an improved 21 at Staff Workshop 2, and more than 40 at the School Forum). • Project taken up at the higher strategic levels of the School and University. • Unsolicited feedback from staff. • Incorporation of the model in course and program renewal within the School. • Breadth of programs signing up for pilot initiatives in 2012 (Nine of 11 programs signed up for at least one pilot). • Observed attitudinal changes in School staff around student engagement and pastoral care.
<p>Map current practices and activities across the School — formal and informal — that relate to student engagement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered student engagement practices at the Program Directors Retreat. • Distributed an orientation mapping document to every program in School. • Mapped the FYE at Staff Workshop 3. • Consulted with a number of key staff about past and present practices not captured in the mapping exercises. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed a map of formal and informal activities as well as more specific orientation activities. • Identified key contacts for orientation and other student engagement activities in each program. • Established/improved communication networks with these staff in each program.
<p>Gather and analyse student perspectives on the current undergraduate student experience within programs, the School and the University.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertook a series of student focus groups. • Invited students from every program and year level to take part. • Organised focus groups according to year level and domestic or international status. • Asked participants about their broad university experience at RMIT, as well as questions that explicitly tested the model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong student participation in focus groups – 16 groups, 75 students, from every program in the School, local and international. • Yielded rich and detailed data on the student experience in programs, School and University. • Disseminated preliminary findings to a large School audience. • Flagged the potential for incorporating this data into various strategic processes at the School, College and University levels.

Aim	Actions	Outcomes
<p>Situate the project model and methodology within the latest literature and alongside existing practices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveyed and critically reviewed the literature surrounding our research project. • Investigated the School, university, national and international context to our research. • Surveyed and evaluated a range of benchmarks of existing best practice in our field (international and local). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitations to speak/attend various conferences and forums, including: the RMIT Student Cohort Experience Forum, the RMIT Learning and Teaching Expo, and the Student Satisfaction in Higher Education Conference (Sydney, 2012). • More precisely articulated how our project is situated in relation to a number of contexts, including: our School and University, the Australian Higher Education system, and an increasingly competitive global economy. • Developed a clearer and more persuasive rationale for our project for our stakeholders at all levels. • Developed a clearer understanding of how our project fits within an existing theoretical framework. • Project leaders are members of the following University-wide working groups: Equity and Diversity, and Transition.
<p>Establish baseline data for the evaluation of pilot initiatives throughout the following phases of the project.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered and undertook preliminary analysis of existing SES, CEQ and AGS data. • Gathered and undertook preliminary analysis of existing university equity data. • Consulted with the University's Equity and Diversity staff • Consulted with the following key areas of the University: Survey Services Centre, Research & Planning and Policy & Reporting units. • Mapped existing student engagement practices/activities within the School. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified key areas to track in the University surveys, particularly around orientation. • Established valuable links with Survey Services Centre and Equity & Diversity for continued collaboration. • Conducted an extensive literature review around our project's central themes. • Formed a more precise demographic profile of our School's students.
<p>Develop a plan for piloting key initiatives in 2012 and beyond.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selected pilots in consultation with School staff and students. • Mapped a number of possible pilots across the FYE of students in our School. • Worked closely with interested program representatives and other strategic staff in the School to ensure our plans are sustainable and work alongside to existing structures and processes. • Sought continuation funding for Phase 2 of the project: specifically, the implementation of our pilot initiatives in 2012. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot initiatives for 2012 were announced at our launch in December 2011. • The Student Spaces Initiative is already underway with work to refurbish the Student Atelier space due to complete early in 2012. • Plans are already underway for Co-ordinated Orientation Week Activities. • Developed a comprehensive action plan for 2012. • Received HEPPP funding through the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) for 2012. • Buy-in from School, College of Design and Social Context, University in the project's value.
<p>Develop networks of communication and disseminate project findings across the School and University.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held meetings with staff in the following key areas: Equity & Diversity, Student Services, the Academic Portfolio, the College of Design and Social Context, Survey Services Centre. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed closer links with Student Services. • University Executive and staff attendance at the 2011 Project Launch.

Conclusion



- PRACTICAL DOING

will be social, fun than school

It seems more practical than Arts

RMIT, do cash

- Cool CBD location
- Lots of crazy, creative real work
- Industry teachers
- Other students like me!

High workload, will be busy/busier than LIFE



PATH

RMIT

At the end of Phase 1 we have gained many valuable insights into the management of a large-scale long-term project. A central lesson concerns the necessity of ensuring sustained and continued engagement with staff around cultural change. A large part of our role, through this project, is to help staff to translate and make real the University's strategic direction. As part of this process we have gained an insight into the necessity of involving both academic and professional staff, acknowledging their existing knowledge and resources, recognising needs for further professional development and providing the necessary support to ensure the sustainability of our initiatives. This has supported our belief that the aims of the project cannot be achieved only from the top down; there is a need to listen to and incorporate grassroots expertise, practices, observations, and feedback.

One of our most significant insights has been the realisation that little things can make a big difference, and this has encouraged us to continue in our efforts to inspire cultural change and grassroots uptake of our project's aspirations – within and beyond our School. We have found that when working towards these goals, personal interactions are generally the most powerful, and can also be the simplest – but not always the most obvious – route to action. However, developing the necessary relationships can be a long

process, and working on a communication strategy to engage our various stakeholders has been an unexpectedly large part of Phase 1. We anticipate it will continue to remain central for the duration of the project.

The three-tiered Belonging Narrative model connecting the inclusive student cohort experience to developing students' disciplinary and professional identity has proved, thus far, to be a useful, generative proposition. It provides a coherent framework within which previously atomised interventions to improve the student experience can be coordinated. It has the potential to assist staff, and students too, to develop a new understanding of the unique benefits a university experience can, and *needs* to, offer in the changing 'knowledge economy' of the twenty first century.

Phase 1 of the Belonging Project has succeeded in '*planting the seeds*', establishing a new dialogue within a large and complex School on the nature of the cohort experience and conducting valuable baseline research with staff and students. It has opened the way for the pilot activities of 2012 and beyond, and cast light on the opportunities and challenges ahead in seeking to ensure that as many students as possible can get the most from their university experience

Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience (2012)

2012 Pilot Initiative		
1	A 'Cohort Big Day Out'	This key curriculum intervention will take place early in each semester and allow programs to link assessment outcomes to transition and orientation activities. Designed to take the students 'out of the classroom' and into unfamiliar situations where teamwork will be encouraged.
2	Coordinated Orientation Week Activities	Building on the already successful orientation activities offered by programs, the School and RMIT Student Services, we will trial a 'passport' system to encourage all students to access the variety of activities and services offered throughout the orientation period.
3	End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibitions	Many of the programs in the School have end-of-year events but traditionally these are not publicised beyond the small cohort of students involved. We will begin a process to encourage links across year groups and program cohorts, including a 'School wide' brochure and web presence.
4	Student Informal Spaces Initiatives	A project to furnish and rebrand the School's various Student Informal Spaces, including the new Student Atelier space in Building 9, will encourage students to feel ownership of these currently under utilised spaces. We will track formal and informal usage and begin to program a series of events in this space.
5	Academic Transition	We will work closely with RMIT's Student Services to deliver 'just in time' advice, support, skills etc.
6	Curriculum-based Initiatives	The development of partnerships with one or more programs in the School that run project-based courses for advanced level students in which first year and transition issues can serve as 'real-world' problems for design and communication solutions.

Other activities to be explored and evaluated:

7	Week 10 engagement activities	
8	Informal staff/student skill workshops	
9	Cross School skills workshops	
10	Student-led initiatives	

experience
recommendation

- Connection With Industry
- City Campus.

Bibliography



START

- Personal Letter =
- Very excited.
 - Expected to be very active and involved with industry.
 - Expected staff to have industry experience
 - Expected to be prepared for a job in the industry
 - Close friends, tight bonds
 - Work related to industry

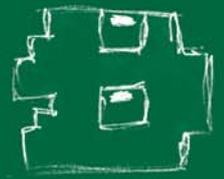
What did / didn't I get?

- + Experience with latest tools
- + Opportunities to meet industry
- + Connections with great people
- + Inspiration, motivation, influence
- Portfolio (lack of)
- Feedback
- Interaction with other degrees

YOU ARE HERE

HONOURS

PHD?



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Appendix 1

The Belonging Project Program Directors Retreat Workshop Report

Report Authors: David Carlin, Bronwyn Clarke, Rachel Wilson, Karli Lukas and Lucy Morieson
Published: September 2011

Introduction

On Thursday 18 August 2011, the Belonging Project team ran a workshop session for a group of Program Directors and other key management staff within the School of Media and Communication. The session was two and a half hours long, allowing the team to present their progress to date, and to run two generative group activities among the School's staff.

This report serves two purposes. First, it reflects on the progress made at the Retreat, outlining the activities used to direct the session, and their reception. Second, it outlines the result of these activities and provides some preliminary analysis of the material gathered. It describes the key trends and notable comments garnered in response to a number of prompts offered during the session, including a worksheet activity.

The report concludes by briefly reflecting on the event as a whole and the next steps in the research process.

Shared Narratives

The session began with nearly all participants (some were limited due to time) sharing a short one minute narrative about their experience of belonging – whether at university or elsewhere. Many staff shared strong and poignant anecdotes of belonging – whether their own, their students', or their children's, in the case of some parents in the group.

Equally resonant from the narratives though was the experience of not belonging. This emerged from staff members who have been through recent transitions, or who feel like they don't belong within the School intellectually or due to institutional structures. Those who had been through situations that challenged the mechanisms of belonging emphasised how important belonging was. For instance, one staff member shared an experience of

working at a remote and distributed university where orientation and transition activities engendered a strong sense of group identity and bonding. Similarly, a staff member whose course delivery is primarily online, emphasised that this can also engender a strong sense of cohort belonging despite the activities taking place in 'virtual' spaces. For another staff member, developing a shared sense of belonging with students was about sharing a physical space, by moving their office to the students' studio space.

Still other staff members were keen to point out that not everyone wants to belong, and that 'the outsider' perspective can be desirable and creatively productive for some. One suggested that there is a danger in belonging too much because it can stifle diversity, while another pointed out that belonging by nature is always defined in opposition to those who do not belong.

The Presentation

The aim of the presentation was to inform and update an audience that was largely unfamiliar with details of the project. Thus, the presentation began by introducing the project objectives, before outlining in some detail the proposed three-level model and associated narrative, explaining how this could be mapped across different year levels of the (formal and informal) curriculum. These were communicated visually through the 'Trumpet' model diagram (Diagram 1) and the Three Year Experience Overlay (Diagram 3).

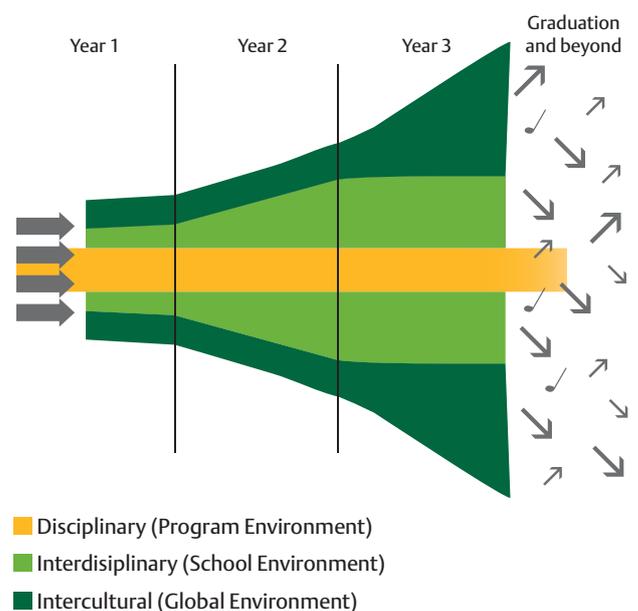


Diagram 1: The Trumpet

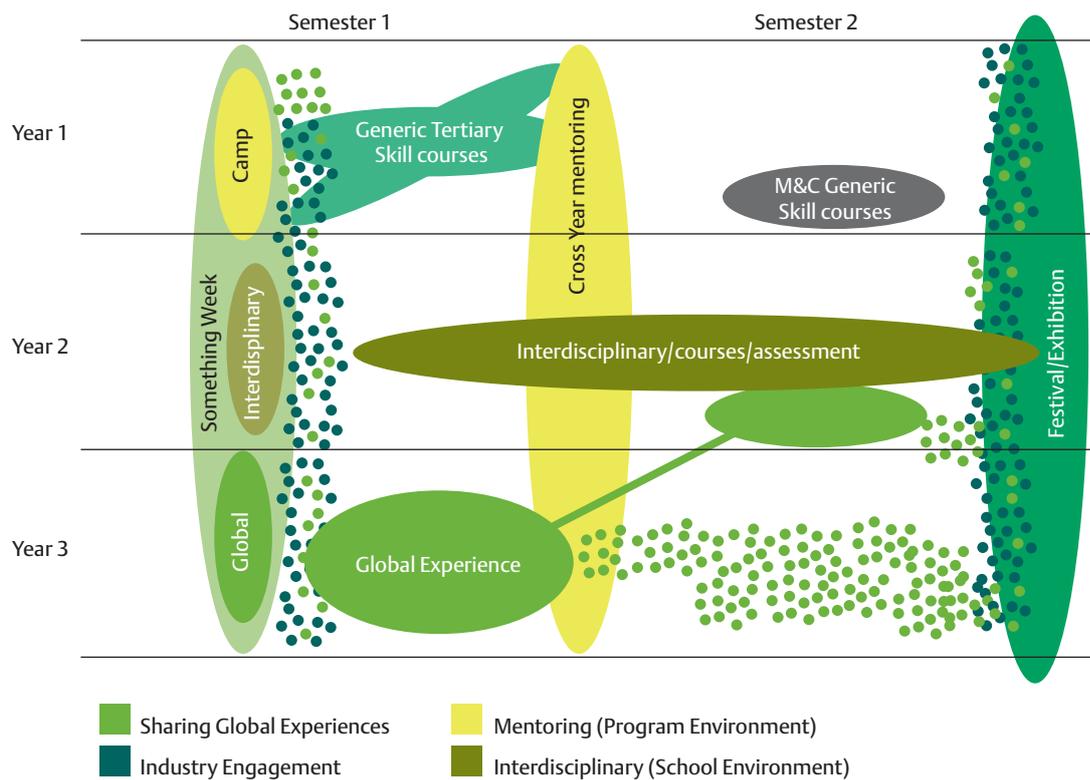


Diagram 3: The Three Year Experience Overlay

Exercise One: Activities Worksheet

After presenting the project’s vision and hypothesis in the form of the three-tiered narrative model, staff members were directed to work in small groups on a worksheet provided by the team.

The worksheet fulfilled a number of aims:

- It reiterated the proposed narrative and its three-tiered structure;
- It required staff to indicate activities they were already undertaking, or had undertaken in their programs, that work within the proposed narrative;
- And finally, it required staff to indicate which activities they would be keen to undertake: to rank these according to their most and least favoured options and to indicate what resources would be needed if they were to undertake these.

The outcome from this worksheet was twofold. First, it enabled us to compile an overview of staff interest in the specified activities and identify the resourcing issues associated with their implementation. Second, broad discussions around the narrative and proposed activities elicited a number of salient observations in the form of both existing opportunities and perceived problems with the model. These are summarised in the results section.

Responses to the Activities Worksheet

24 staff were asked to rate each activity on a scale of 1 (love it) to 5 (hate it). Percentage responses were then analysed.

Discussion: Response to the Activities Worksheet

A number of notable points emerged from discussion around the worksheets. Many of these were existing initiatives that could be extended with the right support. Others were concerns with the proposed narrative and existing structures.

The key initiatives, problems and points of discussion are summarised below:

- Vertical studios – Some staff members shared their experiences with vertical studios, and there was significant interest from the group about this as an initiative that could be extended across other programs in order to facilitate cross-year mentoring.
- In the example shared with the group, students from various year levels attend the same studios so students across different year levels can mingle. This allows for student-lead mentoring, can be related to assessment, and can also be fed into research projects. The point was made that if this style of learning is successful, it eliminates

the need for entirely sequential learning after a certain point. That is, with a pool of shared knowledge, students can learn the basics and then learn collaboratively according to need, rather than sequence.

- Shared skills courses (e.g. creative coding) – In a discussion around generic and shared skills courses that could be run across the School as a whole, creative coding was given as an example of a skill that could be taught to equip students with skills and to connect across disciplines. It was suggested that a constructive way to think about these matters was in terms of literacies – so, to consider which literacies are common to all students across the School, compared to the literacies that are discipline or program specific.
- Online as a space to share experiences – Staff members shared their experiences of online delivery, and particularly, their success in facilitating shared student knowledge and experiences online.

It was suggested that, even for those classes using physical delivery of content, the online space could be harnessed before the commencement of classes to help establish connections and build a sense of community.

- Industry partnerships – The success of industry partnerships, when they are well executed, was noted. A particular example was The Germinate Project, involving collaboration across schools and colleges, and between students and industry.
- Camps – The idea of a camp was suggested as a way to build a sense of belonging and to orient students to university life during a short, intensive period. It was suggested that this would be particularly good for forming relationships between domestic and international students. However, it was recognised that this would be most successful if the outcome was directly linked to course work, for instance, culminating in a finished project at the end of the camp.
- Existing opportunities – some staff reminded the group that there are already a number of existing cross-disciplinary and intercultural activities occurring within the School. The existence of these activities were interpreted in a number of ways: as a structural problem for the staff working in these areas, due to their anomalous nature; as a challenge to the proposed three-level narrative of The Belonging Project; or as existing opportunities that could be better acknowledged and potentially

extended.

One instance of this is the Professional Communication Program. Currently offered at two campuses, (and almost three, when it is extended to SIM), Professional Communication is already interdisciplinary, taking its core courses from three different programs in the first year.

This was raised as a problem because the idea of ‘disciplinary gangs’ does not fit with the existing Professional Communication structure. However, it also demonstrates the way in which students are already working across disciplines. The challenge is how students can experience belonging within a uniquely structured program like Professional Communication, while still making the most of the cross-disciplinary experiences inherent in such a Program.

This unique cross-disciplinary structure also offers opportunities in terms of **triangulating the learning experience**. A case in point is the Professional Writing course, currently delivered in three locations, onshore and offshore. This course offers opportunities to triangulate the learning at all three locations, through blended learning and teaching techniques, for instance, facilitating assessment that allows students to work together on a publication across the three campuses, making editorial/curatorial decisions collectively, to foster belonging to the program across the three different spaces.

Another example is COMM2384 Client Management (Advertising) or COMM2137 Client Relationships (Public Relations). In the case of the Advertising Program, Client Management is currently delivered in Vietnam and Melbourne, and will soon be offered at SIM in Singapore. Very similar content is taught in the Public Relations iteration, Client Relationships. These two courses offer an opportunity and present a challenge to staff to think about ways to teach creatively across spaces and cultures in a way that fosters a shared sense of belonging among the diverse cohorts.

Finally, the comment was made that programs are already laden with a range of ‘intercultural experiences’, but these need to be made more visible and explicit to students.

Problems

While in the point above the discussion around the limitations of disciplinary structures was raised as an opportunity, other participants found a problem

with the apparent program-focused structure of the project.

This was particularly problematic for staff members who teach into the Bachelor of Communication majors, which are taught across multiple programs within the Bachelor of Communication. For these staff, belonging is a problematic concept, particularly when it is linked to a program base, given the 'floating' nature of their courses. Further, a transdisciplinary approach can be found in a number of successful models within the School (most notably Honours), but also the Interdisciplinary Communication Project course, as well as Professional Communication, and broadly, the Bachelor of Communication itself.

More general concerns included that activities would continue to happen in disparate areas of the School, without the intended connection between staff and students, as well as concerns about the challenges posed by timetabling. Another question was raised about how the project could be extended to include postgraduate cohorts in future.

- Collaboration – Given the project's focus on collaborative activities in the second layer of the narrative, there was discussion about the best way to approach collaboration as a graduate outcome and method of learning and teaching. It was suggested that this was best thought of as a literacy that needs to be developed through a range of activities that work towards successful collaboration as the final point, rather than assuming students already know how to collaborate successfully. Collaboration needs to be recognised as an intellectual process, which means working in good faith and being invested in the project, and there was some discussion about how to best equip students with this recognition.
- Long-term induction process – While there was enthusiasm for many of the proposed orientation activities, it was strongly recommended that Orientation be repositioned as transition – a long-term process, embedded and built upon throughout the entire university lifecycle.
- Low SES students – There were questions about the project's aims in this area: specifically, whether this group represented students from inner-city Melbourne, or rural students relocating for university, or both. There was a suggestion that targeting high school students – possibly those studying a university subject in their final school year – could be a first step in the belonging process.

Exercise Two: Imagining Three Key 'Interventions'

Following the highly focused work and discussion required and elicited by the worksheets, the second exercise was a more imaginative activity.

Participants were instructed to form groups, guided by their interest in three potential interventions in the (formal or informal) curriculum:

1. Orientation/transition
2. The student festival, and
3. The 'Something Week'

These three activities had emerged from the earlier staff workshop, with orientation/transition activities and a student festival (positioned at the end-of-year to showcase student work) representing achievable extensions to existing initiatives in the School, and 'Something Week' – a proposed week in the curriculum when no classes are timetabled so students can undertake a range of interdisciplinary activities – representing something more radical.

Participants independently formed four groups: one focusing on orientation/transition, one focusing on the festival, and two thinking around the 'Something Week'. The ideas that emerged from each table's 'blue-sky' workshopping are summarised below.

Group 1: Orientation/Transition

Six staff: 1 x Deputy Dean, 1 x Assoc. Dean, 3 x HE Program Directors, 1 x TAFE Program Manager

This group saw transition activities fulfilling a very specific role. They emphasised that these activities should be clearly differentiated from University-wide orientation activities and Program-specific Information Sessions. Instead, the group suggested that the School could offer something fun and social around transition. By removing the activity from the 'orientation' tag, it did not need to occur at the very start of the semester, but rather, sometime at the beginning of year, before the end of the first semester.

The suggested activities were organised around food, as a social focus – but alcohol-free, to reflect cultural understanding – and films, allowing for intercultural engagement. Importantly, students would need to be involved in the implementation of these activities to ensure their success. While staff could provide the resources, students could work on delivering the details, such as planning, curating and promoting the events.

As there are approximately 4,000 onshore students in the School, these initiatives would begin as small events and build from there.

Group 2: Festival

Eight staff: 2 x Assoc. Deans, 4 x HE Program Directors, 1 x TAFE Program Manager, 1 x HDR Director

This team imagined that the festival could consist of a series of independently curated, program or course-specific micro-events, brought together through a cohesive festival program. Students would be involved at all levels of the event, whether through showcasing their work, designing the program and posters, or planning the key events.

One of these events would be the launch night, which could also encompass a showcase of excellence, followed by an opening party, to which alumni and industry would be invited. In order to bookend the festival with key events, the program could culminate in an awards night where the best student work was recognised.

The group identified some initial challenges to implementation: the key one being the availability of resources – particularly time – as well as the possibility of industry fatigue in relation to these events.

Group 3: Something Week (1)

Six staff: 5 x HE Program Directors (2 x offshore), 1 x L&T Officer

This group suggested that the proposed ‘Something Week’ could be a way to embed volunteer opportunities for students within the formal and informal curriculum. So, reflecting the narrative model and building from local to global, first year could involve volunteer projects at local primary schools, while second year might be a national volunteer project, and third year could be an opportunity to volunteer globally. In addition to enriching the university curriculum, this would also provide an opportunity to build connections with lower SES students at local schools.

It was recognised that in order for students to participate, these initiatives would have to be tied to a tangible outcome, possibly through developing a leadership module around these activities. Alternatively, it could be an assessable part of the curriculum, requiring only a pass grade, with preparatory and reflective activities built into the surrounding curriculum. All students would be required to undertake at least one of these

‘Something Week’ activities, but they could opt-in to more.

Group 4: Something week (2)

Five staff: 5 x Program Directors

This group also worked with the idea of the ‘Something Week’. This version of ‘Something Week’ would be a student-run event that would become a legacy project made for future cohorts.

This event would take place in second year, responding to the ‘second year slump’ syndrome and lack of identity commonly associated with that phase of university life. The event would be modeled on the idea of an ‘unconference’ – that is, a participant-driven event, in which staff would provide the infrastructure (time off, space, equipment, and guidelines), and students would be in charge of planning, proposing and voting for their desired content. All students would be involved on some level – if not presenting, then in the planning, production and recording of the event. The documentation and publication of the end product would be an important element to make the effort a legacy project, requiring reciprocity from future years.

The event would be interdisciplinary in nature not only because students would work across cohorts, but also in the freedom they would be given to be involved in any capacity they choose, regardless of their disciplinary identity.

In order to encourage participation by all students, the event would be linked to assessment. But it would also be made valuable by the investment made by staff, alumni and industry, who would be invited to attend, as well as the legacy value of the final product.

Conclusion

The Belonging Project Workshop at the School of Media and Communication’s Program Directors Retreat was successful on a number of fronts. One of the objectives was to share the project’s narrative with the program directors and identify potential champions in the School, and the team was satisfied that this was achieved. For instance, one participant who was initially skeptical ended the session talking about the “great possibility of The Belonging Project”. Most participants were visibly enthused following the brainstorming sessions. One participant remarked on how excited they were about the prospect of the ‘Something Week’, and a number of people have indicated they are keen to remain involved with the planning at a big picture or specific level.

With the momentum gained from the Retreat workshop, the team will move on to a number of smaller staff workshops and consultations around key areas of focus and specific activities. The next step however is to hold a series of student focus groups. The qualitative data gained from these sessions will be vital for triangulating results from staff workshops and the literature and existing benchmarks. This is an important point in the research process at which to pause to gather feedback from a range of sources, adjust the hypothesis accordingly, and continue shaping the proposed model and seeking further feedback.

Appendix 2

The Belonging Project Student Focus Group Guide 2011

Guide Authors: Dr Lucy Morieson and
Karli Lukas

1. Welcome and Housekeeping:

- Welcome and thanks
- Food and drink
- Timing
- Reminder about ethics
- Thank-you pack

2. Ground Rules:

- Listen respectfully
- No 'right' answer
- No 'dobbing'!
- Our role as researchers
- Anything we've missed?

3. Activity One: Belonging Anecdotes

- One minute per person

4. Activity One: Road Map (Beginning)

- Note on sheet: name, age, gender, international/local, school leaver/mature age/articulating
- Now, draw a path across the entire page ... it doesn't matter how it looks
- Think back to when you received your letter of offer and the expectations you had...
- Draw yourself as you were when you began ...
- Consider your expectations...
- From RMIT as a University?
- From RMIT staff?
- From other students?
- From the academic experience?
- Discuss these drawings and expectations as a group

5. Activity Two: Road Map (Now)

- Think about where you are along that path now ...
- How did your expectations compare to the reality?
- What did you get?
- What didn't you get?
- Reflect on your progress since you started ...
- How have you changed?
- What do you wish you knew then?

- What sorts of things make you happy?
- What sorts of things don't you like?
- How would you describe the sense of community in the _____ program? (& School & Uni)
- How do you communicate with each other outside of class? Email? Facebook? Text message? What else?
- What things, including activities, have helped you to develop friendships with other students at uni?

6. Activity Three: Road Map (Future)

- Draw yourself as a professional working in your chosen industry
 - Think about the skills you'll need at that stage of your life:
 - Which of them do you have?
 - Which of them don't you have?
 - Which are the things that you're stressing about getting in time?
- [Refer to list of activities – especially cross-year mentoring, collaboration with different programs, industry and alumni events, and global experiences]
- What role, if any, do you see for RMIT in your life after you leave uni?

7. Wrap-up Activity: Wish List and Reflections

- Each participant names one thing they would put on the 'wish list' to improve their RMIT experience
- Would you still apply to RMIT/your course, given the chance? Why/why not?
- Is there anything you want to say before we wrap up?

8. Conclusion:

- Thank-you
- Reminder of outcomes
- Collect ethics forms, worksheets
- Distribute thank you packs

Possible activities to prompt student discussion:

Orientation:

- Welcome events – e.g. BBQs, pub nights, ‘speed dating’, etc.
- Improved O-day
- Library tours
- Research skills modules
- Orientation camps
- Urban camps
- Return to uni events for 2nd and 3rd years

Social Events, Community Building:

- Social events – BBQs, movie nights, etc.
- Field trips
- New forms of communication – social media, a better student website, a program/school/building zine
- Industry and/or alumni events
- Improved/more communal spaces
- Camps

Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration:

- Cross disciplinary projects
- Generic skills courses – electives or intensives – e.g. creative coding, how to give a presentation
- Student-led collaborative projects – e.g. a zine, website, etc.
- School festival – exhibition/sharing of end of year work
- Cross-program social events
- Cross-program courses
- Cross-program projects
- Improved/more communal spaces

Cross-Year Mentoring:

- Cross-year mentoring projects (e.g. third years preparing materials for first years as part of assessment)
- Vertical studios
- Improved PIS – including senior students speaking to lower year level students, sharing what they wish they knew at that stage

- Hearing from students returning from global experiences (exchange, study abroad, study tour)
- Communal spaces

Global Experience:

- Student exchange
- Study abroad
- Study tours

Appendix 3

The Belonging Project

Student Focus Groups 2011: Analysis of Key Themes

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University and RMIT

We began by asking students the broad question of ‘why university?’ For most students, it was just assumed that university was the next step after high school. They saw it as necessary to be employable and to get ahead in their future workplace: “I feel like in this day and age you really need to have university in your resume to get anywhere because it’s so hard to get a good job and get money if you don’t”. Many cited school as a major influence in encouraging a university as the ‘next step’ in their education. Their parents’ level of education was also a factor – that is, if they were university educated, they often expected their children to be too; if they weren’t, there could be extra pressure on the child to get what they didn’t. “I think your parents educational experience does have a big impact. Neither of my parents went to uni so they were really keen for me to go. Now they are really keen for my sister to go as well. She’s turning 11 at the moment.”

For this ‘first in family’ student, it was a combination of home life and school that encouraged them to consider university:

There wasn’t really much focus on uni because not many of us end up going to uni from our school (...) even at home, my Dad, his brothers and his Dad, they are all tradies and stuff so they are like when you finish school, come to us, we’ll take you on the worksite. I’m like; “I can build stuff, I can build chairs and tables and whatever but I don’t want to do that sort of thing”. So I thought like why not uni? So that was my inspiration.

We asked students for their broad expectations and impressions of RMIT and their answers revealed a strong emergent theme about the distinctiveness of the RMIT experience. Most students who chose RMIT had very specific reasons for doing so. A number

of students stated that RMIT had been the only option they were considering: “I was quite uncertain about my course choice, but RMIT was never really questioned. I just always kind of assumed I’d be at RMIT.”

Part of the pull for RMIT is its image. It is seen to be more innovative and industry-focused than other universities, particularly the University of Melbourne, which was often brought up by participants as a comparison: “I always thought that RMIT was the coolest uni. I felt the other ones were so stuffy and boring, just theory based. So that’s why I liked RMIT, you actually get out there and do stuff.

Aside from the reputation of the university, students are often drawn more specifically to a particular program. They often cited the reputation, strong industry focus, and hands-on practical nature of their chosen program as what attracted them to their choice. Most said that they specifically wanted a focused program and university experience after the ‘broad’ experience of high school. In particular, they wanted to learn a set of practical skills, rather than a broad knowledge base that they might get under the Melbourne Model offered at the University of Melbourne, for instance:

I’d choose a Bachelor of Communication at RMIT any day, because I know at the end of the day, it’s so much more focused, and you actually know what you are doing, rather than “Do you want fries with that?” at the end of your degree.

My friends are doing arts at Melbourne and they don’t have anything specific, they all don’t really know what they are going to do and that’s the same with the ones that are doing science ... I want to learn what I’m going to do in real life.

This image of RMIT as innovative and industry focused often seemed to come from careers counselors and their high school peers: “when I was in Year 12 heaps of girls were like you know Melbourne, Monash but the more interesting, creative types were like all RMIT”.

Another factor was the inner-city location of RMIT (we only interviewed students at the city campus, where our school is located). It is seen to be more urban and cosmopolitan than universities with suburban or rural campuses, and convenience is a factor.

Others participants we questioned were not sure where this reputation came from, so there is potential for future work to be done on the impact of recent branding efforts.

Orientation Needs and Expectations

Orientation was an articulated theme in our focus groups, as we asked students directly about their experiences at orientation, in order to gather feedback on how it impacts on the overall student experience. Overall, we found evidence of a number of problems with the approach to orientation, both at a program, school and university level.

A number of participants were not comfortable with the current university-wide approach to orientation and its associated drinking culture:

Most orientations are really cheesy like everyone running around getting drunk, pub crawls, like not my thing and I think that uni culture, that let's get trashed, I don't like that, that needs to be changed. I felt that all the things that were organised involved drinking and partying.

This poses a challenge not only for those students who are not interested in that style of university culture, but also for those who enter their first year aged 17 and under the legal drinking age.

For those who see their degree as a form of professional training and a time to make professional networks with their peers, “It's not the best way to know your peers, people that you might actually be working with in the industry one day”.

Some participants discussed a number of orientation activities that they had experienced or would have liked offered at a program-level. For instance, one talked about a speed dating activity that worked well in their program; another described a hypothetical orientation scenario they would like to have experienced, based on a more professionally and program-oriented workshop format, with built-in team-building and social activities.

When prompted, most participants responded that there was no need for full re-orientation sessions in second and third year, replicating the activities of the first year orientation. But they did suggest that some sort of ‘refresher’ session would be useful. It was felt that it would be useful to identify new students who enter at different points of the year, whether through transfer or articulation, in order to integrate them into their cohort.

Students were clear that they generally benefit from encouragement or incentives to attend, and suggested that the best way to achieve this was by changing the nature of the orientation activities, and positioning these as vital to proceeding successfully in their program:

Yeah, if they make it like you have to come to this before your course starts, it's really vital that you come to this: I think it would be really beneficial, and you sort of start familiarising yourself with the faces of people on your course that you're going to be with for the next two or three years as well.

There was also evidence to suggest that if told of the importance of such events by more senior students, new students would be more inclined to attend.

From our groups with international students we found specific expectations as well as particular challenges around their successful orientation – they arrive at unpredictable times, often after formal orientation activities, and are provided with inadequate resources. Sometimes, international students require particular information that is not covered by traditional orientation:

I did think there's something missing in the orientations especially for international students about the actual city, stuff like our rights and... basic information about Australia. For example I've had a lot of friends, they've had fines from ticket inspectors, because they really have no idea...

With the discussion of orientation, the topic of a camp was often raised. Camp was a polarising idea. Some loved it, while others were horrified at the thought of being trapped in the forest with people they do not know. Of those who loved the idea, often camp was one thing they felt they missed out that friends at other, more ‘traditional’ universities got to experience. The expectation of a camp for international students often captured their desire to attend a traditional Western-style university, and given that they often narrowly chose to come to Australia rather than the United States, was something they felt they were missing out on, especially compared to their friends – whether at home or abroad.

Social Expectations and Issues

We asked students about their broad expectations and experiences of the social side of university life and discovered a strong emergent theme about cliques and competition within program cohorts. But we also found that many students, particularly by second year, have a growing appreciation of the centrality of social support in their success.

Some students reported a sense of competition within their program year-level cohort around work and standards, and a lack of desire to share work among their peers. Those who spoke about cliques in their program cohorts commented that they formed very quickly, before they were able to make any strong social connections:

I found in the course I was in, everyone kind of formed these cliques really quickly and I'm kind of slow to make friends. So when I felt after the first week I'd missed out on joining these cliques, I'm like, "great I don't have any friends."

Others found that they could only get to know their peers in a superficial way, and found it difficult to break across established groups.

Mature age students in particular were less concerned with making social connections and more focused on work or making professional contacts rather than friendships.

However, students in studio-based courses generally commented that group work was effective at breaking down any early cliques:

The whole doing group work straight off was really good because you're surrounded with like-minded people, you don't really find people that you dislike, because it's such a small group and because everyone has kind of similar interests.

Those who did make friends within their program cohort reveled in the chance to meet people with shared interests, something they had not experienced at high school, and a definite benefit of the university experience.

Overall, second and third year participants were more able to see the value of making social connections at university. For some, it was about a growing awareness of the need for social connections in their approaching professional lives, but for a number of others it was about realising that friendships and social connections were able to enhance their university experience in previously unanticipated ways:

I just wanted to come here to get it done, to be honest. I just wanted to get the degree done. I didn't realise how much I actually cared about having friends here until I was here and didn't have any.

It's been a massive difference actually, sort of having heaps of friends at uni now: makes it more motivating to go to class if you know you're going to have fun and that sort of thing. You catch up before and afterwards. Like, we often just sit on the grass now and hang out, that sort of thing.

I've learnt probably as much from the other people I'm studying with as I have in the actual course itself.

Another strong emergent theme was the existence of a divide between international and local students. Local students perceive a barrier between their local and international peers, one that they reportedly lack the skills and literacies to overcome. Some remarked on this, and the homogeneity of their program cohort in general, as something of a disappointment: "I sort of thought I'd meet people from different walks of life [but] there is sort of like a segregation between internationals and the local students".

The gap is observed by international students too: "There is quite a gap, like whenever you walk into a classroom most of the time you see like Asians at one table and then like other races at different tables." However, for international students, the divide is more striated, as they observe numerous divisions between every cultural group, rather than just a gap between 'locals' and 'internationals': "the way I see it there isn't really a barrier between local and international it's more of a culture one, you always see Chinese with Chinese, the Thais with the Thais, the Indians with Indians".

Some international students lamented the perceived division, as well as their fellow international students who failed to make an effort to bridge the gap. Many of the international students who participated in our focus groups said that they were making a conscious effort to get to know their Australian peers, and to improve their English and cultural knowledge in the process. However, this may well be a reflection of the sort of students who were interested and confident enough to volunteer and take part in our groups. And even those who reported forming connections with students in class

commented that they found it difficult to sustain these connections outside of the classroom. This was partly because the cultural barrier remained a challenge, or because they found local students too hard to pin down, and less interested in spending time at university after classes:

I still have a lot of anxieties; like I can group with people, I can communicate with them about the project and stuff, but the thing is after uni you don't have much common topic to talk about. That is a really big deal for me, like I'm trying to figure out why it's like that all the time.

They go in a class, they're done and they disappear, literally. It's like they, it's not everyone, but it feels like they don't have time for anything.

From this emergent theme it is evident that both local and international students require further assistance to break down existing barriers, including cultural differences, cliques and competition, and to develop social ties that will support them throughout their degrees and into their professional lives.

Academic Expectations and Issues

We directly asked students about their academic experience and found that for first years in particular, this is still an area associated with much anxiety and uncertainty, and requiring improved communication from staff around key points of transition.

For students in creative or studio-based programs, this anxiety was often focused on the attainment and possession of technical skills, often related to specific software. As one first year student explained:

I think that would have been really helpful if they were like; 'look everyone's coming from different levels, different places. Connect with that and understand that before you enter this course.' Because I think it creates a lot of unhappiness actually.

This expectation was also reflected in our discussions with international students, who see skills training as an essential part of the cost of attending university, and are surprised when they are directed to YouTube videos or online forums to learn the skills required to complete conceptual assignments – suggesting that there needs to be more scaffolding around the need for this sort of self-directed learning.

By second and certainly third year, this is less of an issue and students demonstrate an understanding of the value of a conceptual rather than technical education: “when I was starting the uni course, I was expecting some form of technical training and I later learnt that uni is not about technical training; it's about learning to think in a certain way”.

There is evidence that students need assistance with other transition issues. For instance, a number of participants reported that it's “easy to slip” when attendance is not mandatory, and that they struggled to adapt to less contact with lecturers and peers. This was a particular issue for second years, perhaps linked to the ‘sophomore slump’. International participants also reflected on this issue, saying that in comparison to their previous education experiences, “it's easier for people to make excuses with our Uni system because it's more relaxed here”.

Despite existing orientation and transition programs and activities, first years still demonstrated difficulties with the transition to a university learning environment, commenting on the fewer contact hours, less time with teaching staff and less feedback from teachers, fewer ‘drafts’, and uncertainty around assessment. The view that “we're trying to please the teachers rather than trying to have our own work” was not uncommon.

A large part of this first-year anxiety seems to stem from the experience of VCE, which nearly all local participants referenced in some way, often describing it as the “hardest year of your life”. Upon beginning university, they assume that the academic expectations will be just as demanding:

I assumed it would be even harder than VCE. It's not that it's easy but it's nicer than VCE because you are doing something you actually want to do and you feel like you are controlling it instead of it's controlling you.

However, what they find is that it is not necessarily as hard, but rather, requires a different style of learning and approach to assessment:

I heard uni was an absolute bludge and that it was awesome, it was going to be great but we'd get heaps of work... but it's more the out of class work that builds up, so a lot of stuff that has to be done that we don't get time for in class.

By second and third year, students seem to be more relaxed with the university workload and learning style, but increasingly unsatisfied with the

level of engagement among their peer group, which can be a disappointment and impediment to deeper engagement with the academic experience.

For many international students the transition to the academic experience is even more challenging because the learning style is radically different to what they are accustomed to. While many had completed a Foundation Studies program, this had not completely prepared them for the university experience because the learning style is still classroom based.

For many, the lecture and tutorial system represents huge shift in thinking, learning and participating, particularly when it is at odds with the cultural norms of their home country:

In most Asian countries they don't really – not encourage – but they don't really promote asking why. It's like this is your textbook, you do this and you just like learn that! And if you don't pass your exam or get an 'A', you suck!

While many staff may assume that students are prepared for this transition through foundation studies or orientation, this is not necessarily the case and it can be extremely challenging for some international students to accept the new norms and standards of the Australian education system: “[my teacher] is all like ‘it’s okay, you are on your first year, you can make mistakes’. But for Asians, like if you make a mistake, you are going to die!”

Industry and Professional Identity

This was an articulated question; we directly asked students to think about their professional lives and what they felt they needed to equip them for working in their chosen industry. We found that not many participants could answer this question in much detail, and those who could were mostly third years.

For first years, uncertainties about their future profession are less about forming connections and gaining experience and more about the basic practical information to prepare them for those later stages. They want to know what skills they will need along with ‘how to’ guides on some of the basic stages of getting experience.

Part of this will necessarily be learnt along the way, which participants were generally aware of. But there does exist some misunderstanding of the extent to which they need to seek practical experience on their own and how much support the university should provide. While some were realistic, acknowledging, “... there’s only so much the Uni can do,” others

want more support from university when they form links themselves, or need better explanations of why connections need to be officially sanctioned.

First years are also very anxious about selling themselves to employers in a competitive market. This is mostly about confidence, and is much less an issue for second and third years, suggesting that it is perhaps an unavoidable part of their professional development over the course of their three-year undergraduate experience. Nonetheless, some more signposting of what is to come, perhaps through interaction with their second and third year peers, could help allay some of their fears.

Like first years, second years still want the practical information about how to get where they want to go. While they like guest lectures for the career options they demonstrate, there is also a need for more practical information to back this up:

There is not nearly enough focus in my course on ‘these are the industries and pathways you can choose’, ‘this is how you get a job in the industry’. It’s all very much people in the past have worked in this industry and been very successful and enjoyed themselves. It’s not anything to do with how you get there.

Third years, while more confident than the first and second years in general, in retrospect still expressed a wish for more practical advice and experience built across the three years of the degree – “like I wish it was the third year back in the first year if that makes sense”.

We gathered a range of feedback about the industry experience of teaching staff. Some students were very satisfied with the strong connection their teachers had with the industry – for example, a number of participants were impressed that they were given real life briefs to work on in class. But others were disappointed, not only with the limited experience of their teachers, but also with the attitude that they perceived in their teaching staff that what they were studying would be a ‘hobby’ rather than a profession. But on the whole, participants were quite realistic about their options after university, accepting that they will have to work their way up, and keen to gain the skills to do that.

Cross-Year Connections

We found that currently cross-year links are limited but with pockets of success. There was strong support

for extending these further. Students saw the value in mentoring as a way to equip them for what was to come, as well as to build confidence and a sense of belonging. For instance, some students described a sense of disconnection from other year levels, or even a sense of intimidation.

We asked students what they would consider the role of a mentor, and they said, “someone who can give you guidance about what paths you can take” someone you can bounce ideas off. Students suggested that an informal mentor or buddy would be particularly helpful during transition periods:

Student 1: *“You need like that guy in Legally Blonde that comes out and tells you which teacher expects you to sit in the first row.”*

Student 2: *“Yeah!”*

Student 3: *“We all need a Luke Wilson.”*

There are some existing connections that speak of the value of encouraging these sorts of connections through both the formal and informal curriculum. For example: a second year Animation and Interactive Media student had had the opportunity to speak to a first year class; there was mention of the success of vertical studios; we are aware of a cross-year project used in Communication Design. There has also been the recent student-led establishment of the Public Relations Society, which aims to facilitate cross-year links.

Mentoring seems especially necessary for students who need to choose major pathways through their course:

I guess in my case ... I can either go down a few different pathways and ... I thought that could have been discussed a bit more because it's kind of like determining your career for your life and it wasn't really discussed and now I'm sort of in a creative sort of area, hate it and I just want to get out of it and I wish I knew this last year before I picked which area I wanted to go into.

For first years, mentoring is also about establishing work standards. Given the general anxiety among first year cohorts about assessments, standards and pleasing teachers, mentoring could help guide these students through this stressful period by providing examples as well as by talking about the broader purposes of assessment as part of their overall learning experience.

Practically, mentoring could operate as an elective or through specific cross-year projects (as it already does in some programs), but feedback from students suggests that it needs to be facilitated. Our participants told us that if it is completely informal and student-run, it will not be sustainable in the long term.

Students who had studied Communication Design in its former building talked about its success in facilitating cross-year links:

You got to see what everyone was doing and that was really interesting, you used to go check out the third year stuff all the time, second year stuff all the time, and you established a really good connection through that without it actually getting quite personal.

However, cross-year links need to be balanced with advice from teachers, as students reported that they were wary of “hearsay” from students and wanted advice to be confirmed by teaching staff. A mentoring system also has to be mutually beneficial. More advanced students are unlikely to sign up to be a mentor unless it offers a benefit for them – whether that is personal or linked to their assessment. A final challenge is selecting the right nomenclature – the word mentoring sounds overly serious and could be off-putting to both mentors and mentees. The term ‘buddy’ was preferred, but further research could produce better options.

Trans-Disciplinary Connections

We asked students about existing trans-disciplinary connections within their programs, and tested the possibility of extending these connections in future as part of our model. Overwhelmingly, students demonstrated a strong desire for interdisciplinary connections and an awareness of their future professional value:

I feel like we don't get enough opportunities to meet other people which could help us potentially in our jobs later on in life, like to work as partners which a lot of courses in media and communication need anyway.

These sorts of connections were seen to be of particular benefit to students in creative disciplines, who anticipate working in a studio setting in the future, or who feel isolated within the School and crave a broader sense of belonging:

I think there would be a lot of people in Photography and Digital Art and Media and stuff that we'd get on really well with because we are all in the same kind of artistic, creative scheme of things: but we just haven't had any exposure to anyone else.

We found strong support for formally facilitated trans-disciplinary connections, as students felt they needed encouragement and support in this area. They also recognised that any links formed need to be mutually beneficial in order to be successful and sustainable. Through our questions, we discovered that a third year student had already designed a website (not yet operational) to facilitate connections because of an existing need. The website was designed to enable students in creative disciplines to identify possible collaborators in other programs at RMIT – for instance, an Advertising student might work with a Communication Design student on a advertising brief, creating a design that could be used in each of their folios.

There are some existing successful points of connection within our School and beyond, for example, between Photography and Fashion Design students, Journalism and Photography students, and Games and Sound Design students.

Other existing examples include student-run activities such as the Communication Ball/The Mingle, which have been formally embedded in the curriculum of the third year course, Interdisciplinary Communication Project. Other instances of interdisciplinary interaction currently occur in courses across the Majors and Communications courses offered to all Bachelor of Communication students (Journalism, Public Relations, Professional Communication, Media, Advertising) and the Bachelor of Design (Communication Design) students.

Students in our groups also identified many potential areas of connection, such as between:

- Advertising and Communication Design, or Advertising and Photography, to prepare and design advertising briefs and campaign mock-ups
- Public Relations and Journalism, on mock press releases
- Creative Writing and Media, on screenplays and production
- Creative Writing and Communication Design, on the design of the Creative Writing students' final manuscript.

One suggested way to facilitate these links was through speed dating evenings, where students could speak about their work, and give short pitches to students in other courses.

Other students were interested in a less strategic form of trans-disciplinary work, in order to gain a better understanding of the breadth of the School, and a broader worldview. These students suggested activities like 'lecture swaps' and the option to take sample classes from other programs, disciplines and majors in order to get a taster of these different areas in the school, and a better understanding of their fellow students. This was partly driven by a desire to have a better professional understanding of what their fellow students would be doing when they were colleagues in the industry (e.g. Journalism students working alongside Public Relations students), as well as to broaden their University experience.

This sort of less formal or strategic connection could also help break down strong stereotypes of program cohorts. Some existing collaborative projects (such as the student union magazine Catalyst, which is often edited by a group of journalism students) tend to be dominated by these strong 'types' or sense of elitism.

However, the challenge of maintaining these sorts of links is that these connections are not always sustainable:

I ended up making good friends with people in my cinema tute but then you change classes for the next semester and ... you kind of feel like everyone's already made their friends, you kind of just feel on your own for the next semester.

You get close working with people and stuff from whatever discipline or faculty when you are doing these projects, but then at the end of the term that's it and it's hard to develop, even if you had a good relationship with people, because it's so quick like one semester then it's over.

When developing activities to try and create or enhance trans-disciplinary links, it will be essential to consider their sustainability, as well as ways to support it.

Student Spaces and Resources

This was another articulated theme as we asked students directly about their use of various spaces. This sometimes led to amusing responses, for

instance when we asked a group of students, “Do you ever use the Atelier space down on level two?” the response was, “The what?” Overall, we found that students don’t fully utilise those spaces available to them. Many students didn’t know about the Student Atelier space in Building 9 (a common area for all students in the School, with lockers, a sink and microwave, and space for quiet study), were unsure whether they were allowed to use it, and those that did use it, described it as “cold”, “sterile” and “a waste of space”.

Many students said they would appreciate a more inviting space that they could feel a sense of ownership over; the Games student lounge in Building 14 was often cited as an example of a successful student space. Students said they would use the Atelier space more often “if it was a good lounge with actual couches and not just geometric boxes”.

Another reason for the underuse of space is timetabling. When students have a long break between classes, they often return home or use the library for quiet study: “it’s such a big gap I either turn around and go back home or I work in the library”. It seems the library fulfills the need for a quiet workspace, a re-imagined Student Atelier space could be a place for group work, or just to hang between classes.

There are some existing spaces that students report using and enjoying, including the Pearson and Murphy’s Café on campus, ‘the fake grass’ in the courtyard next to the café, the alumni courtyard (though the ball games played there are seen as an annoyance), empty classrooms in Building 9, and the pop-up space in the Myer-Melbourne Central walkway off-campus. However some students did say that university was not about ‘hanging out’ outside of classes: “I’m pretty much here just to get my degree and get out: I know that sounds really harsh”.

Some Communication Design students who had worked in the program’s former open-plan building lamented the lack of community with the move to building 9. For these students, their disappointment was not with their new spaces – which they acknowledged was ‘nicer’ than their old space, which had previously been a floor of an office building – but with the loss of a shared experience through a shared space. In the old building they were able to keep up with the progress of their peers across all three years, through the ability to observe lectures and tutorials as well as through the display of work on the walls.

Finally, some first and second year students felt they did not have the access to spaces and resources they expected, desired, or had seen at Open Day.

This seemed to be a communication problem more than anything else, with students feeling frustrated that they couldn’t access resources reserved for more senior students. It appears further explanation is required around the need for specialized training with particular tools and devices from early on in first year.

Student Communication

Student communication was an articulated theme from the focus groups. Students were asked directly about how they kept in touch with their cohort. However, we did not anticipate such a strong response, particularly about their use of Facebook. We found that students overwhelmingly rely on Facebook for both group work and to develop a sense of community within their program year level. As one student commented on the use of Facebook during the orientation period:

The Facebook group really helped, because I got to Uni and I was really lost, like I didn’t know where to register or where to go for my classes, I just didn’t understand anything, and I didn’t feel comfortable going up to these people who were essentially strangers that I only saw for one hour every week just briefly in class. So doing it online I felt like less of an idiot asking, so that really helped.

Most program year levels have student-run Facebook groups which they prefer to the staff-run ones, which they described as “lame” or which go missing in their feeds and become “invisible” because of a lack of posts.

The reported benefits of Facebook for students are both academic and social. They use it as a place to ask questions and seek guidance - “Facebook is always our first port of call for if you have a problem or a question, you just immediately go to Facebook group and someone’s usually able to answer” – as well as to share work by tagging their peers in images, and for organising social gatherings.

However, students acknowledge that Facebook is not without its challenges. Not all program year levels have a Facebook group, and because most year levels start a new group, it restricts cross-year links. It can also entrench divisions. For instance, some Professional Communication students reported that they tried to join the Public Relations Facebook group (because they take a large number of Public Relations courses) but were rejected by the students who run the group.

Students also talked about challenges to do with privacy and uncertainty around personal and legal risks online – whether around ‘friending’ someone they would not usually add to their social network, or whether they still owned the rights to any work they posted online. But more seriously, a number of students talked about incidents in which their cohort peers posted negative comments about teaching staff or fellow students on the group’s Facebook page, and the resultant divide between those students who thought the behavior was acceptable, and those who were seriously troubled by it.

Facebook was not the only communication tool that was discussed. Email was also raised, but that was seen as a more professional medium, and not something for student-to-student contact. Facebook was preferred to Google Docs because of the record of interaction it left and the ability to see if classmates were online: “If someone in your group is lounging around doing nothing, usually they’re on Facebook and you can just hop on and be like, “Are you doing your work?””.

Some students did say they would prefer the functions of Facebook on the university’s Blackboard platform, as it would circumvent the problems that arise around personal privacy and negative comments. However, they acknowledged that at present, Blackboard is too limited in its functionality to be considered a real alternative to Facebook, so the social networking site is expected to continue to dominate in the short term at least.

Internationalisation and Global Links

The topic of global links came up in some groups, but not all. For most local students, developing global connections through travel, work and future study is something that comes in addition to, or after their undergraduate degree, and not as a part of it.

As a topic and future consideration, it was more prevalent among second and third years than first years. For some of the creative programs, and particularly games students, working overseas was a major consideration:

The big ambition is to move over to America and work on television cartoons... I can expect at the most six months of unemployment and running around Burbank California to various studios trying to get my portfolio and foot in the door...

However, there was a clear difference between the attitudes of local students and international students,

who already see themselves as global citizens, with travel as an inevitable part of their future:

I plan to go on exchange to Canada next year and when I finish my degree. My Mum is making me go to China for one semester to do a refresher course in Chinese and then after than maybe travel and then get a job: but I don't think I'll go back [to Singapore]. I want to go to different countries and sort of work in different places.

In comparison, local students see overseas as a second option if they cannot find a job locally, or an option to explore later in their careers.

We asked participants about whether they took or considered an international exchange as part of their degree, and many referenced the barriers to this option, including financial and structural/institutional challenges:

I had to fight tooth and nail to get approval to go on an exchange program... In the end I had to apply in second year and had to soak up every single elective that I had on offer just to go for a single semester and I had to then delay a semester when I came back.

Another more surprising reason students were reticent to go on exchange, was the uncertainty of the benefits and anxiety about academic standards in the exchange institutions:

... It would be dependent on the benefits of what I would be learning over there or what I would be achieving academically. I don't know. I think I would rather work and live overseas than study overseas.

Ultimately, because of this perception, global connections remain something that domestic students perceive as being about ‘after uni’ rather than ‘at uni’.

Alumni Perceptions

This was an articulated question, asked in light of RMIT’s recent efforts to improve links with its existing alumni. However, we found that many students are unsure or unclear about the role RMIT could play in their lives post-graduation.

There was some awareness of the way alumni networks might be useful in a future professional context:

I would probably be more likely to hire somebody that's gone to the same uni as me as well. In that connection just because I know exactly how they've done things. Hope they haven't changed things much. In that sense there's a kind of connection.

When students did respond to questions about future connections to RMIT, this was often dependent on success. As one student puts it:

It would be nice to come back just to meet all the classmates just one more time again, after you graduate... That's if you get a job. Because if you don't get a job and you come and see everyone's got a job and I don't have a job...

Asked about any sort of future connections they could imagine having to RMIT, a number of students mentioned they were considering postgraduate studies and would prefer to stay at RMIT because of their familiarity with the institution. International students were particularly keen to teach or guest lecture after graduating. But asked about what sorts of activities they would like to take part in with their alumni network, students lacked a clear idea: "That's a good question. Ask me in five years".

Appendix 4

The Belonging Project Staff Workshop 3: Mapping the First Year Experience

Report Author: Dr Lucy Morieson

Report Date: November 2011

Participants at the third Belonging Project staff workshop worked together to map a holistic plan for an improved first year experience within the School of Media and Communication.

The following document outlines chronologically the existing key points of interaction between the School and students, as well as the anticipated possible activities that could respond to these moments. As a whole, it presents a more detailed map of what an improved FYE could look like in the School of Media and Communication.

Semester 1

January

Interaction: First formal interaction with students at the Program Information Session (PIS).

Focus: Successfully enrolling the new student cohort.

Program Information Session (PIS)

It was agreed that the first formal interaction students have with the school and program – aside from those who attended open day – is the PIS.

Staff agreed that the central aim of the PIS is to ensure students are successfully enrolled. Therefore, information is focused on how to enroll, introduction to IT services, and the Student Timetabling System (STS).

Participants agreed on the need to develop a better PIS Pack, including a welcome letter, key contacts, and information flagging upcoming O Week activities.

There was also discussion about whether the PIS session should include a social element, or whether with the focus on enrolment, social activities are reserved for the orientation period. This was of particular concern given that the cohort would not be complete at this stage, with later intakes still to come.

However it was agreed that the PIS should be held in a room that students would later use, such as a classroom or the Student Atelier space, in order to familiarise them with their space.

February 20-24

Interaction: Orientation activities.

Focus: Orientation to the program, school and university.

O Week

It has been established that there are a range of orientation activities and levels of interaction represented by the various programs in the school – and this variation is anticipated to remain. However, it was agreed that there should be a minimum level of orientation for all Media and Communication students and that programs could tailor and supplement their orientation offerings as they see fit.

Interactions during O Week are about orientation to the program, school and university. Students need to know about student services, and answers to basic survival questions, such as:

- Who is everybody?
- Where is everything?
- What do I need?
- How does this uni thing work?

Overall there was agreement that there would be an all-school activity, a program activity, and information about the availability of university activities offered by Student Services. It was suggested that students could be provided with a ‘passport’ at the commencement of orientation and required to collect stamps for the various activities they complete. The presentation of a full passport would lead to a reward – such as food at their program BBQ, or entry into a draw for a larger prize such as an iPad.

Further, while school and program orientation usually focuses on practical information, it emerged from the focus groups that students are keen for some early assistance in forming social connections with their new cohort, so any activities to encourage this are welcome. In order to orient students to their surroundings and introduce them to their spaces, it was suggested that orientation take place in the Atelier, with each program allotted their time in the space. This could be extended to include social activities, or cross-program ‘meet and greet’ sessions, where every program runs a fun session in the space for other programs.

Some participants discussed strategies that they have successfully adopted in the past, with some interpretation of a ‘speed dating’ scenario being the most popular amongst the group.

Another idea with broad purchase among the group was the development and extension of a version of the mobile location game (similar to a treasure hunt) used in the orientation to the games program. Given the enthusiasm for the idea and its evident potential for extension to other areas, Jen Lade and Christian McCrea of games suggested that their students could design a template during 2012 for all students in the school to use during orientation in 2013. Its success would then be tracked and evaluated by the Belonging team, using student feedback groups.

February 27

Semester 1 begins.

Week 1

Interaction: First week of semester, formal curriculum commences.

Focus: Orientation to the new academic environment.

First Week

The first week of semester is also about orientation, but in comparison to O Week, the focus is on academic orientation. Thus, the sorts of questions students are anxious to have answered at this stage include:

- Where's the photocopier, computers, classroom, etc.?
- What do you do in a lecture?
- What do you do in a tute?
- What is there to do between classes?
- How do I do well?

This sort of academic orientation usually takes place on a course-level, and it was suggested that it was the role of first year coordinator to ensure that this was happening.

Week 2

March 9

Last day to add classes for Semester 1

Week 3

Interaction: Students beginning to form friendship groups and/or cliques, and may need assistance making connections with the wider year-level cohort.

Focus: Breaking up cliques, establishing a sense of cohort, assisting with social connections.

Cohort Day Out (around Week 3)

By the third week of semester, students are done with basic orientation and starting – or struggling – to form friendship groups. Thus it was decided that this would be a good time to encourage more social interaction across the first year program cohort and to break up any cliques that may be forming.

A suggested way to achieve this was the 'Cohort Day Out'. This was envisaged as an excursion – whether primarily 'fun' (e.g. a trip to Healesville Sanctuary), industry-relevant (a field trip to a work place), or an urban adventure, the aim was to bring students together outside of the classroom.

It was agreed that to ensure success – both in terms of attendance, as well as making the most of the available teaching time – the event would need to be tied to the formal curriculum. Those who want a more extended experience could develop the idea into a camp (which is already on the cards for photography) but everyone present agreed that a Cohort Day Out would benefit their program and could be easily and usefully built into the curriculum.

Programs interested in further work around the 'Cohort Day Out': Journalism, Photography, Communication Design, Professional Communication, Media and Advertising.

Communication Strategies

A number of suggestions fell into the broad category of an improved communication strategy with and among students.

These included:

- Installing a notice board in the Student Atelier space and communicating to students that they are free to use it for their own purposes.
- Establishing a student council that is less formal than the Student Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC), providing a platform for cross-program links and planning for all-school student-run events.
- The development of a communication pack for students made available at the school's student online portal or at each program's Facebook group.

While these suggestions all represent discreet activities, they were all made in the spirit of improved student communication, both staff-student and student-student.

Staff interested in further work around 'Communication Strategies': Alex Syndikas, Jen Lade, Romy Kelly, Rachel Wilson, Karli Lukas.

Week 4

Interaction: First assessment(s) approaching. Students require support as they encounter university-level assessment for the first time.

Focus: This is the time for guidance and assistance with resources and building academic literacies.

First Assessment (around Week 4)

At week four of first semester, most students are facing their first assessment. This is the time for guidance and assistance with academic literacy and integrity. Students want to know:

- How do I do this?
- Where are the resources?
- What sort of learning support is available?

Two types of activities to implement to tackle this challenge were informal study groups, and a buddy system. Indeed, they could work together. The informal study group was something that would be established around broad course areas, with some staff assistance, but then left to be self-run. Given that they would be around study area and not year-level, they would be made up of all year levels, and thus facilitate cross-year connections and informal 'buddying'.

Staff interested in further work on 'First Assessments': Adrian Miles and Lucinda Strahan.

Week 5

March 3

Census Date (Semester 1)

Confusion about Easter break

Assessment Crisis Point (around Week 6)

At this time in semester there is an avalanche of assessment and it feels as though, after an initial lull, all assignments are due at once. In light of this, students need to know about extensions, special consideration and counseling services – information they have probably already received but not paid attention to earlier on in the semester, when it was still smooth sailing.

Week 6

Interaction: Avalanche of assessment - a possible crisis point.

Focus: Providing information about extensions, special consideration, counseling services.

Skills Workshops/Skills Labs

Staff in a number of programs agreed that their students would benefit from the existence of a number of informal, extracurricular skills labs/workshops.

These would be organised around software common to a number of programs, such as Photoshop and InDesign, which students admit to struggling with if they have no prior training in such programs.

These workshops could be cross-year and staff or student run, the latter allowing for the generation of further cross-year links and mentoring.

Programs interested in further work around 'Skills Workshops/Skills Labs': Advertising, Communication Design, Professional Communication and Photography

Week 7

Interaction: Students are starting to get work back and so the new challenge becomes feedback – how to get it and how to respond to it.

Focus: Re-orientation around academic standards and expectations, and assistance with the transition to a new learning (and assessment) environment.

Week 8

Interaction: First week of semester, formal curriculum commences.

Focus: Orientation to the new academic environment.

Winter approaching – drop in attendance due to colder weather and illness

Week 10

Interaction: Late-semester slump, students are exhausted and hanging out for end of semester.

Focus: A cohort activity to reward those students who are still around to help get over the slump.

Drop-in Sessions or Industry Panel (around week 10)

Those students who are still turning up and making an effort need a late semester booster to keep them engaged and give them a reward. One suggestion to counter this late-semester slump was to run drop-in sessions at the Student Atelier space (or other spaces). These could be study sessions where one or two teaching staff would be present to answer questions about assessment, but also just to ‘hang out’ – the session would also be social, and pizza could be provided.

Another suggestion was an industry panel, also run in the evening in the Student Atelier space, followed by a networking session with food and drinks provided.

Staff interested in further work around ‘Drop-In Sessions/Industry Panels’: Adrian Miles, Rachel Wilson and Lucinda Strahan.

Week 12

End of semester deadline stress!

Week 12 -13

Interaction: Last point of contact with students for the semester as they finish classes and submit final assessments.

Focus: Cohort activities to provide a sense of ending and celebration.

Celebration and Relaxation (around weeks 12 and 13)

By the end of week 12 or 13 there is a sense of ending and celebration for most students, so this is a good point at which to once again gather for social activities.

One suggested way of facilitating this was through so-called ‘R Week’ (Relaxation Week) workshops. These were imagined as fun, informal workshops that students could choose according to interest, rather than program. For instance, they could be workshops on graphic novels, creative writing or life drawing, and open to all interested students. They would be cross-year and cross-program, and staff might even be involved. If students wanted to run these themselves in future, they could apply for a RUSU student initiative grant to do so.

Programs interested in further work around this: Games (Jen Lade), Communication Design, Advertising, Photography and Music Industry.

July 9

Results published

July 19

Semester 2 timetable opens

Semester 2

July 16

Semester 2 begins

Week 1

Interaction: Mid-year intake cohort begins.

Focus: Orienting these students to ensure transition and integration with existing cohort. Perhaps the social element could be covered by the cohort experience outlined in Week 3 below.

Week 2

27 July

Last day to add courses for Semester 2

Week 3

Interaction: Re-orientation around academic and social expectations

Focus: Encouraging further sense of cohort (building on the cohort experience of first semester), providing social orientation for mid-year intake students, and building a sense of program cohort (both academic and social) beyond the year-level by involving senior students.

Week 4-5

Interaction: Open Day.

Focus: Identifying students to assist on the day, a chance to present the program to the public.

Week 6

Mid semester break

31 August

Census Date (Semester 2)

Week 7

Interaction: By this stage of first year, students have a growing sense of their future professional identity and are keen for industry input, particularly in the way of practical advice.

Focus: An industry event (tailored to the program).

Week 8-9

The sun is out – start losing students again

Week 10

VTAC close for change of preference

Week 12-14

Interaction: First year is ending; students are about to leave First Year behind.

Focus: Celebration of ending and progression; celebration of achievement, for example, exhibitions and screenings.

End of Year Festival

Nearly all programs in the School already run some sort of end of year exhibition or screening of their student's work. There was discussion around the challenges of combining all of these events given their diverse nature and immediate relevance to a specific program cohort and industry. However there was agreement that a positive step to take would be to present the various separate events as part of a single program, thus maintaining the autonomy of each. The next step could be to consider a single opening and/or closing event.

Following this discussing nearly all programs were on-board, with Journalism signaling their willingness to operate a press office for the event, and Professional Communication to consider running an industry panel. However for Public Relations the event poses a challenge, given the diverse range of roles their students are equipped for and the problem of typecasting them as 'event managers'.

Programs interested in further work around the 'End of Year Festival': Advertising, Professional Communication, Journalism, Photography, Games, Creative Writing, Music Industry, Media, Communication Design.

