Report 2012
Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience

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Glossary — Abbreviations and Key Terms

**Abbreviations**
- ESL – English as a Second Language
- FYE – First Year Experience
- HEPPP – Higher Education Participation Partnerships Program
- L&T – Learning and teaching
- LSES – Low Socioeconomic Status
- M&C – Media and Communication
- SISI – Student Informal Spaces Initiative
- SSCCs – Student-Staff Consultative Committees
- WAM – Workload Allocation Model
- WASSLL – What a School Should Look Like

**Key terms**

**Co-creation:** Recognises that students actively co-create their university experience and should be genuinely engaged in processes and decisions that involve them, by providing feedback, and, where appropriate, creative input in the change processes.

**First year student:** A student who is yet to complete 96 credit points of study (equivalent to one full-time year) in their current program at RMIT University.

**Transition pedagogy:** A holistic approach to the FYE developed primarily in the work of Sally Kift’s Australian Learning and Teaching Council Fellowship, involving the integration of curriculum principles (Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment, and Evaluation and Monitoring) and strategies to engage and support students, as well as to foster a sense of belonging and develop sustainable academic-professional partnerships. Importantly, a transition pedagogy requires a whole of institution approach and the “seamless involvement” of academic and professional staff. (See Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010).

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elsewhere</th>
<th>RMIT Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Course</td>
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<td>Course</td>
<td>Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>College</td>
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The project team and acknowledgements
Academic Leaders

Rachel Wilson
Prior to undertaking a role as Program Director (Media) in the School of Media and Communication, Rachel was program’s Selection and Careers Officers. Rachel has also received a number of teaching awards. Rachel has been teaching within Higher Education sector for 19 years, specialising in the Screen Production discipline. Rachel is currently teaching media production and applied research in the School.

Rachel’s professional background is as a media practitioner. Rachel’s current research includes archiving, memory and representations of trauma. Rachel served as the President and National Secretary of the peak discipline body ASPERA (Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association) from 2010–11 and 2011–12 respectively.

Bronwyn Clarke
As Director of Programs in the School of Media and Communication, Bronwyn researches and reviews best practice models of selection and retention for Creative based programs in line with her study and experience as a Program Director and Selection Officer in the Communication Design program.

She is currently involved in a Learning and Teaching Project looking at embedding academic literacies with discipline specific skills and knowledge, to better assist creative arts students’ transition into higher educations. She has also been involved in offshore teaching for over 11 years, for the Communication Design Program in Singapore.

Bronwyn’s professional background is as a graphic designer and has held positions on the AGDA (Australia Graphic Design Association) Committee.

Associate Professor David Carlin
David is an Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication. David was Program Director, Media from 2009–2010 and is now a researcher, creative practitioner and teacher working in the fields of creative writing, media and interdisciplinary communication research projects. He has won awards for both teaching and research.

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

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

Project Team

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.

Karli Lukas, Project Officer
After graduating from the RMIT Media program, arli 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 as a student, graduate and professional staff member of the School of Media and Communication brings a unique perspective to the project.
Acknowledgements

The Belonging Project team would like to acknowledge the support and contributions of our colleagues who helped advise, shepherd and disseminate information about the project during our second year.

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Executive summary: findings and recommendations
Introduction

The Belonging Project is a four-year project to design and pilot an improved student experience in the School of Media and Communication. The second phase of the Belonging Project, *Focus on the First Year Experience*, consolidates and builds upon the work of our first phase (2011), *Planting the Seeds*. During this initial phase, we worked to develop our Belonging Narrative Model of student engagement, which proposes a three-tier student experience, beginning with a strong grounding in a *diverse disciplinary cohort* (Tier One), broadening out to encompass the *interdisciplinary community of the school* (Tier Two), and grounded in a sense of belonging as an *ethical global citizen* (Tier Three).

The Belonging Project, a grassroots and inclusive project to improve the student experience in the School of Media and Communication, has the following overall aims within an undergraduate Higher Education context to:

1. 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. Enhance student satisfaction and retention rates
3. Help develop and make known a distinctive RMIT student experience.

**Project Aims: Phase 2**

The Belonging Project’s specific aims for *Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience* were to carry out a series of pilot initiatives that would improve and support the student transition to university life.

Throughout 2012, the Belonging Project trialled and evaluated five pilot initiatives to improve and support student engagement as part of a holistic first year experience (FYE). These initiatives emerged from our Phase One research, which found extensive literature to support the importance of the FYE to student retention and success, something that was further confirmed by our qualitative research with staff and students in the School of Media and Communication. The details of these initiatives are outlined below along with the key findings and recommendations that emerged from the pilots.

![Diagram 1: The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement.](image-url)
Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience

Summary of Findings by Pilot Initiative

Initiative 1: Coordinated Orientation Week Activities

**Principle**
To create a positive, welcoming foundation experience whereby all new students, regardless of their background, can begin to engage with their program cohort, within a broader school and university.

**Properties**
A suite of activities tailored to the program cohort including:
- A Program Orientation Session timed prior to any larger school or University events to enable students to form initial social connections within their cohort group;
- A student-led school welcome session showcasing the range of formal, informal and interdisciplinary activities available to students; and
- Carefully timed and well-framed introductions to key student spaces (i.e. by hosting program orientation activities there), as well as to the university campus and Student Services.

**Findings**
Our research indicates that a more coordinated approach to orientation improves students’ sense of confidence and social connectedness during their transition to university.

Our findings also suggest that Orientation Week activities should focus primarily on students’ social transition, with the introduction of academic literacies carefully timed so as to avoid information overload and provide ‘just-in-time’ support.

Our suite of initiatives were, in the main, embraced by staff, as demonstrated through responsiveness to our suggested changes in process as well as by attendance at a professional development offering.

However, pockets of resistance suggest that orientation is something that requires a clear, coordinated vision and strategy at the school level and higher.

**Recommendations**

1. *(School level)*
   That schools define and create fractional allocations of leadership to existing staff positions as a team of dedicated Orientation and Transition Coordinators. (See Recommendation 6.3 and Appendix 1 for more detail.)

Initiative 2: A Cohort Day Out

**Principle**
Continue to build a strong program first year cohort through a collaborative curricular activity conducted outside normal classes.

**Properties**
An off-campus activity made available for the program cohort through a core course that links the formal and informal curriculum. Can take the form of a fun activity designed to build social connections and embed academic literacies. Ideally tied to an assessment task to encourage maximum student engagement.

**Finding**
Off-campus cohort building activities linked to the formal curriculum can be simple and low-cost. They can significantly improve students’ sense of connectedness to their program cohort, and can assist to develop key academic literacies, especially when part of a larger suite of well-timed formal and informal cohort building activities throughout their first year.

**Recommendations**

2.1 *(Program level)*
   That program and course design for first year core program courses should embed formal and informal cohort building activities, such as a Cohort Day Out within the first three weeks of a semester, and that it is critical that these be tracked and evaluated through the Program Annual Review (PAR).

2.2 *(Program level)*
   That Program Directors, First Year Academic Advisors and first year teaching staff consider, design and implement the ‘Cohort Day Out’ as part of a sequence of activities, beginning with orientation, and continuing across all semesters as part of transition and a whole-of-program first year pedagogy.

2.3 *(College level)*
   That support, in the form of targeted professional development and budget allocation is provided to program staff to better develop and embed these sorts of initiatives into the curriculum. This process should involve the recommended new Orientation and Transition Coordination team. (See Appendix 1).
**Initiative 3: Student Informal Spaces Initiative**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>To foster informal collaborative spaces which support a sense of belonging across the School’s student cohorts.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Properties</td>
<td>A space belonging to students for the range of informal activities they engage in on campus, including: private study, group work, socialising, preparing meals and running a range of cohort events. The space should be the cultural hub of the school, a place where students can connect with staff and other university services, rather than a ‘rumpus room’ solely for student use. Students should be engaged in the refurbishment processes as co-creators, providing feedback and recommendations, and, where appropriate, assist with the redesign. The room’s fittings should be ‘rough and ready’, so students feel they have ownership over the finishing touches and can evolve the space to their needs. Essential amenities include: lighting, a kitchenette (microwave, sink, hot water tap), vending machines, lockers and adequate power points for laptops. Tables and chairs should be comfortable, light, and in configurations adaptable to a range of needs. Multiple ‘zones’ allow for a range of uses, while some larger tables encourage informal social interactions.</td>
</tr>
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**Finding**
Refurbishing an existing but underused student space in the school, through a process of co-creation with students, was a low-cost but highly visible way to immediately improve the overall student experience. It can facilitate cross-program and cross-year connections.

**Recommendations**

3.1 *(University/School level)*
That the physical environment of a school should include informal student spaces to encourage a sense of belonging, as well as interdisciplinary and cross-year collaborations.

3.2 *(School level)*
That the design and refurbishment of student spaces is undertaken using a process of co-creation; making use of student feedback, and engaging students in the redesign where possible.

3.3 *(School/Program level)*
That a strategy is developed for engaging students in these spaces that promotes the purposeful use of the space for key transition and cohort activities.

**Initiative 4: Academic Transition Initiatives**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>To work closely with Student Services to deliver ‘just in time’ advice, support, skills, etc. for both staff and students.</th>
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<td>Properties</td>
<td>Informal, low-cost, face-to-face meetings with key Student Services staff that are open to all School staff.</td>
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**Finding**
Brokering relationships between School (academic and professional) staff and Student Services staff broke down barriers between university stakeholders, challenged staff assumptions about key services, and helped form new links that could be generative of changes in the classroom and the student experience.

**Recommendations**

4. *(School level)*
That schools provide simple, low-cost opportunities for face-to-face connections between staff to facilitate relationship building and improve engagement with Student Services. That this engagement strategy become realised through staff position descriptions, staff workplans and professional development.
Initiative 5: End of Year Festival of Exhibitions and Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>To foster a student-focused celebration of achievement and diversity across programs within the School, engaging industry and the wider community.</th>
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<td>Properties</td>
<td>A coordinated set of end of year activities that serve the purposes of programs representing diverse disciplines, which can be promoted together to staff, students, industry and the community through a range of marketing collateral, including posters, programs, stickers and digital media, etc.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Findings | Coordinating a whole-of-school festival is a large task requiring initial small steps. In 2012, we worked towards developing an umbrella name and brand for all of the School’s end of year events, and a related set of marketing collateral. While these first steps were welcomed by staff, further work is required to gather the student perspective.

Initial findings suggest that these events are more successful when they are embedded in the formal curriculum, and that the festival needs to be inclusive of the range of events adopted by different programs, including exhibitions, screenings, celebrations, etc. Regardless of their form, these events mark a key point of transition, whether from year to year, or from student to graduate.

Further, existing end of year events represent a rich bank of materials relating to the student experience which could be better leveraged by staff at all levels of the university to inform marketing to prospective students. |
| Recommendations |  
5.1 (University level) | That further research and pilot projects be conducted across the university to ascertain the added value to the student experience of coordinated end of year capstone events, linked to their transition: from year to year; from student to graduate; from alumni to member of the industry. |
5.2 (School level) | That a ‘whole-of-school’ as well as ‘whole-of-program’ approach is taken to the end of year festival, so that events do not become the sole responsibility of program staff but become ‘everybody’s business’: a concern shared by all staff, academic and professional, as part of a school’s core business. |
5.3 (School/Program level) | That end of year festival activities inform program renewal to ensure that they: are embedded in curriculum; engage students in a process of co-creation; and foster engagement across student cohorts from first to third year. |
Overall Findings

Finding 1: It’s worth it – for students
The evidence gathered from our pilots suggests that a more holistic approach to transition and the FYE can have a genuine and lasting impact on student cohorts. Through tracking and evaluating the initiatives piloted during 2012, we gathered a range of evidence that suggests that the student experience is qualitatively improved when transition becomes a central concern at a course, program and school level.

Finding 2: It’s worth it – for staff
While Phase Two of the project placed students at the centre of our efforts, our research found that a more clearly articulated approach to student transition also enhances the staff experience. A number of staff involved in our pilot initiatives reported an improved relationship with their student cohorts as a direct result of new and/or improved transition initiatives. For the bulk of the staff, engagement with the project was through discussion of the results of our work and the development of new ideas. Attendance at presentations and workshops, requests for presentation of our work to various staff communities across the university, and a willingness in our school and at the university level to look to our project for guidance around key transition issues suggest that staff are interested in improving the transition experience for themselves and their students.

Finding 3: It’s hard
While we have had success at the course, program and School level, our greatest challenge has been moving towards sustainable change to embed student transition as part of core business. Such a project requires a new approach to the student experience based on designing and implementing greater vertical integration between pedagogy in the classroom, program design, school management and planning processes, and university services. Overall what we are describing is a project of long-term whole of institution cultural change. At a school level, it requires targeted professional development for staff, and a review of position descriptions to better account for key responsibilities. For these reasons, the project team are pleased to note the university’s commitment to improving the student experience by funding the following additional key projects to facilitate such generational pedagogical change: the First Year Transition and Retention Project, the Inclusive Teaching and Assessment Practices Project and the What a School Should Look Like (WASSL) Project.

Finding 4: It works better when it’s embedded
To ensure sustainability, transition initiatives need to be embedded: in programs, in pedagogy, in position descriptions, in professional development and in induction processes across the university. This ensures that core work around transition and the student experience does not become something ‘on top of’ or an ‘additional extra’ to the existing student experience, but rather becomes adopted as core business for all staff.
Overall Recommendations

Recommendation 6: (School Level)
That each school review/develop a transition pedagogy and holistic approach to the FYE that is:

- Reflective of the school’s various program selection approaches and tailored to the specific cohort;
- Embedded in the formal and informal curriculum;
- Supported in the school through the formalisation of Transition Coordination Team positions (refer to Appendix 1 and Recommendation 1. above), resourcing, and professional development;
- Led by and evidenced in the school’s L&T Committee and strategic plan, School Plan, staff workplans and budget planning (both academic and professional); and
- Reflective of the University’s Transition Principles.

*RMIT Strategic Linkages:* RMIT Academic Plan; RMIT Equity and Diversity Plan; RMIT Statement on the Student Experience; RMIT Transition Principles; FYE and Retention Project; Inclusive Teaching Practices Project; RMIT Assessment Policy; RMIT Selection and Admission Policy.

Recommendation 7: (University Level)
In order for staff to create meaningful formal and informal inclusive learning opportunities, and in order to allow for better tracking of transition initiatives throughout the student lifecycle, we recommend that RMIT Statistics and Reporting develop a data package. This would be accessible to key program staff (both academic and professional) via a password protected database that provides the information required to better understand the diversity of their cohorts.

This information should include de-identified information such as:

- number of low SES students;
- number of SNAP and other equity students;
- geographic data (where they are from);
- information as to their English as Second Language status;
- first in family;
- age of students;
- educational backgrounds (e.g. are they articulating and from where)

This information should be made available to programs no later that two weeks prior to each semester’s commencement dates.

Ideally this information will be provided in such a way that programs can easily get a picture of the overall cohort, each commencing semester’s cohort and at the individual course level.

*RMIT Strategic Linkages:* RMIT Equity and Diversity Plan; Inclusive Teaching Practices Project; FYE and Retention Project; Student Cohort Experience Project.

Recommendation 8: (School Level)
That schools define and create fractional allocations of leadership to existing staff positions as dedicated Transition Coordinators. This collaborative team of professional and academic staff are to oversee, implement, evaluate and document the School’s transition and orientation strategy to achieve an integrated approach (see Appendix 1 for sample position description and recruitment methodology).

*RMIT Strategic Linkages:* RMIT Transition Principles; Student Success Program; FYE and Retention Project; WASSL Project.

Recommendation 9: (School/University Level)
That the importance of orientation and transition be acknowledged and made visible in: School Strategic Plans, academic and professional staff workplans, PARs and the School L&T calendar.

*RMIT Strategic Linkages:* RMIT Strategic Plan; RMIT Academic Plan; FYE and Retention Project; WASSL Project; Closing the Loop: Strengthening and supporting PAR Action Plans on the Ground Project.

Recommendation 10: (University Level)
That the Transition and Orientation Committee be reinstated to connect school transition teams between schools and across the university, so as to develop a resource network for the University.

*RMIT Strategic Linkages:* RMIT Statement of the Student Experience; RMIT Transition Principles; FYE and Retention Project.

Recommendation 11: (University Level)
That the university develop a suite of professional development modules around selection, transition and the FYE focussed on pedagogical frameworks and the student experience, made available to professional and academic staff through developMe.

*RMIT Strategic Linkages:* RMIT Academic Plan; RMIT Equity and Diversity Plan; FYE and Retention Project; Inclusive Teaching and Assessment Practices Project.
**Recommendation 12: (School Level)**

That schools develop an annual L&T Forum to:
- aid academic staff induction and professional development aligned to the school Plan and outcomes of its previous PAR Reports;
- showcase best-practice teaching and research on teaching.

**Strategic Linkages:** School Plan; School L&T Plan; School Program Annual Review Report.

**Recommendation 13: (School Level)**

That schools, working with the Academic Portfolio and their College Office, develop an L&T calendar of events to encourage staff development around the scholarship of learning and teaching via LTIFs, OLT, teaching awards, and other resources currently in development.

**Strategic Linkages:** RMIT Academic Plan; RMIT Academic Expectations.

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**Plans for Phase 3 (2013)**

Having trialled and evaluated five pilot initiatives to improve transition and the FYE in the School of Media and Communications in Phase Two (2012), during Phase Three (2013) we will focus on the interdisciplinary student experience (aligning with the Tier Two of The Belonging Project Narrative Model — see Diagram 1 (page 10) The ‘interdisciplinary’ is central to the cumulative, capacity building logic of our model. Having formed bonds and confidence within their disciplinary/program cohort in Tier One, students need to be given opportunities to broaden their experience to encompass the interdisciplinary environment of the school (or equivalent community), so as to develop capacities required in their future professional ‘real-world’ settings.

Our focus for Phase Three will be to investigate and explore this range of opportunities in order to develop a typology of interdisciplinary literacies that can be mobilised in strategic discussions around L&T and the development of new school, program and course models. This typology, and associated case studies, will be our primary outcome of Phase Three, and we aim to mobilise it as part of the School of Media and Communications’ ‘MC2015’ renewal process as well as in broader L&T debates and development within the School, across the University and the wider tertiary education sector.

While developing Phase Three, we will continue to observe and contribute to reiterations of earlier initiatives, such as the School Welcome and the EOYF, with the aim of ensuring their sustainability. We will also scope initial plans for Phase Four (2014), with its focus on Tier Three of The Belonging Project Narrative Model – the global student experience. By ensuring that these tiers are developed concurrently, we aim to further progress the successful implementation of The Belonging Project Narrative Model’s holistic narrative in the School of Media and Communication, as an ongoing test case for its broader application across the University.
Background, context and approach
Background: The Belonging Project Narrative Model

The broad principles and strategies of The Belonging Project Narrative Model, as outlined previously (page 10) are designed to be transferable to other schools and universities. Furthermore, these strategies are designed to be inclusive of all students, including those from international and low socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds. These more diverse cohorts are a by-product of the Australian government’s stated focus on attracting and retaining students from a range of backgrounds who have not traditionally undertaken Higher Education, most clearly articulated in the Bradley Review’s targets (2008). These include, for instance, a national target of at least 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at bachelor level or higher by 2020, and a national target of 20% of Higher Education enrolments at undergraduate level from LSES backgrounds by 2020 (Bradley Review 2008, p. xiv).

The Bradley Review targets, and the more diverse cohorts they will attract to universities, bring with them new challenges. For all students, the transition to university can be fraught, but even more so for students from LSES or international backgrounds. Research has found that for these students, “engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are students for whom the culture of the institution is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting” (Krause, 2005, p. 9). Further, students from LSES backgrounds “have less confidence in the personal and career relevance of higher education” and have been found to “experience alienation from the cultures of universities” (James et al., 2008, p. 3). For students like these, a sense of belonging can be vital in ensuring they persist and succeed at university (James, 2001).

As Baumeister and Leary (1995) outline, the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation and takes precedence over self-esteem and self-actualisation. The authors 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. While belonging has clear implications for the social experience of students, it also plays a crucial role academically. For instance, Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that belonging is a powerful influence on human thinking and “both actual and potential bonds exert substantial effects on how people think” (p. 505), while Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss (2002) outline the positive relationship between social connectedness and cognitive performance. Walton, Cohen, Cwir and Spencer (2011) argue that “the mere sense of social connectedness” enhances students’ motivation to achieve, as they respond to and quickly adopt the goals of others as their own within a group environment (p. 529). 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. 515).
Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience

Context

The Co-creation Context

The Belonging Project Narrative Model positions students not as passive consumers but rather as co-creators of their university experience, recognising the way in which universities are being reimagined as service providers, spaces where value is co-created by consumers within complex frameworks of actors and resources (Karpen, Hall, Katsoulidis, and Cam, 2011). In this environment, producers are reconfiguring their relations with consumers, away from the traditional industrial consumer-production relationship: “We are no longer simply designing products for users. We are designing for the future experiences of people, communities and cultures who are now connected and informed in ways that were unimaginable 10 years ago” (Sanders & Stappers, 2012, p.10). Engaging students in change empowers them as co-creators and ensures more sustainable solutions.

The Media and Communications Industry Context

The Belonging Project Narrative Model reflects and aims to prepare students for an industry in which collaborative work is the norm. To take our own disciplinary context as an example: future media and communication workers will enter an industry shifting towards a new operational model, the “collaborative digital enterprise” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011), which requires staff who are prepared to “work with others in transient team projects, adapt to new problems and situations, create digital content, and repurpose and customise content for multiple complementary platforms” (Peterson and Hansen, 2012). While in some fields this means the need for specialist production knowledge is stronger than ever before, in others, it is important to have broader knowledge and skills, particularly in those areas where traditional disciplinary boundaries have changed and continue to do so. Our model aims to prepare students for this sort of landscape, by beginning with a strong disciplinary grounding, ensuring students understand the borders and terrain of their discipline, before looking at the disciplines that share these borders, and beyond them, to the broader field in which they are situated. Further, despite a wealth of scholarship on transition and the FYE, there is little that addresses this work with specific reference to the domain of media and communication; our research hopes to fill this gap.

The Belonging Project Narrative Model: Phase 1 Context

During Phase One (2011) of the Belonging Project, we developed a model and tested it with staff and students in a specific school through a series of focus groups and workshops. We also undertook preliminary external scoping – for example with the First Year Transition Community of Practice Group from the College of Science, Engineering and Health – to test the model’s transferability, at least in principle.

Our research during this first phase confirmed our hypothesis that we should begin by focusing on the FYE. The majority of the students who participated in focus groups were first years, and they confirmed what a large body of literature has found (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010; Kift, 2008; Devlin et al., 2012) – that transition into first year is the most challenging for students and the most crucial for universities, to ensure retention and success in the long term. Our focus groups confirmed that the transition to university represents both an academic and social shift for students ‘on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners’ (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010, p. 3). We found that our students, often much to their own surprise, require the assistance of teaching staff to make social connections with their cohort peers. Another challenging transition was the introduction to a new academic environment. A number of participants expressed the need for assistance with transition to the academic environment of the university, particularly around key academic literacies that are often taken for granted by teaching staff.
The RMIT Context

Our decision to focus on the first year undergraduate experience was further supported by a number of concurrent developments that occurred within the broader context of our university. For instance in November 2011, Professor Owen Hughes was appointed to a new role at RMIT as Dean of Students, part of the university’s Academic Portfolio. Among Hughes’s list of aims, chief of which was to provide high-level leadership of the diverse Student Services area, was the aspiration to “strengthen all students’ sense of belonging to RMIT and their student cohort groups” (Palmer, 2011). Shortly after his arrival it was announced that Hughes would lead a university-wide ‘First Year Experience and Retention Plan’, which aims to implement the retention targets set by the University in the Strategic Plan of 5% above the national average. Alongside this target, the broad aims of the project are to: increase student retention in the first year of tertiary study; increase student satisfaction; and improve the financial circumstances of academic schools.

The School of Media and Communication Context

Providing one of the more prominent backdrops to our work was MC2015 Review project (MC2015), a large-scale School of Media and Communication renewal project. The aim of MC2015 is to map and implement a renewed undergraduate program structure across the School by 2015. The project aims to streamline the 12 programs in the school to simplify and streamline program delivery. To this end, while considering the range of possible program structures, the project is focusing on the possibility for more shared courses and cross-discipline links:

*Future graduates in Media and Communication will need to be connected across disciplines and borders; specialised in a particular disciplinary area and well versed in working across disciplines; and able to make and do things, as reflective critical thinkers. Overall, graduates need to be agile and change minded. The report recommends the move to streamlined program maps to enable continued specialisation, enhanced interdisciplinarity and internationalisation, greater use of capstone projects, and a diverse offering of Media and Communication courses available for students across programs. (Peterson & Hansen, 2012, p. 3)*

There are clear synergies between the Belonging Project and MC2015. Both are concerned with the undergraduate student experience and the timing and structure of key points of transition. We have used MC2015 as an opportunity to try and embed some of our research findings into the development of the new program structure and remain engaged in ongoing planning, as members of the Project Steering Committee.

This report documents and evaluates the key initiatives we undertook during 2012:
1. Coordinated Orientation Week Activities
2. Cohort Day Out
3. Student Informal Spaces Initiative (SISI)
4. Academic Transition Initiatives
5. End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibitions (EOYF).

It concludes with a series of recommendations, as well as some general observations and reflections.

**Diagram 2:** MC2015 Review Project Model – ‘Belonging’ becomes central to an improved student experience through intentional curriculum design.
Approach

As educators as well as researchers, we have adopted an action research methodology, informed by Kemmis (2007) and Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy (1993), allowing us to reflexively research our own institutional setting. We have also adopted a narrative approach, recognising that “stories are powerful tools in learning, because they are one of the most fundamental ways to order experiences and events” (Abma, 2000, p. 226). The contemporary university experience is increasingly fragmented, with students – particularly those from LSES backgrounds – spending less time on campus as they juggle a large number of responsibilities, among which their study is only one. In this environment, narrative becomes particularly valuable as a way to connect the range of disparate interactions students have with a university, and to give them a broader meaning:

“stories are ways of organising experience, interpreting the events and creating meaning, while maintaining a sense of continuity” (Gola, 2009, p. 337).

However, there is another, more simple reason that made narrative methodology an obvious choice for us, given our disciplinary location and background: the telling of stories is grounded in our everyday practice as media practitioners and teachers. It also connects to students’ training as professional ‘story tellers’ and enables them to contextualise their own experience as part of a broader narrative framework.

Continuing with the approach that had worked well in Phase One, we adopted a range of qualitative methods to evaluate our initiatives that included focus groups, interviews, observation and the use of existing de-identified data1. We chose to photograph and videorecord the School Welcome Events and refurbishment of the Student Atelier as part of our evaluation methods. We thought that an edited video compilation of student reactions to these initiatives would be the most meaningful proof that co-creating interventions to improve the student cohort experience was powerful and therefore worth it – especially to our School’s staff and students.

We decided to analyse the first year student lifecycle by reviewing existing data resulting from key academic and student administrative tasks associated to the School’s undergraduate lifecycle.

This process allowed us to establish baseline data for our initiatives, so that we will be able to measure their impacts on the School’s student cohorts over time. Secondly, following Kift, Nelson and Clarke’s third generation approach to the FYE (2010), we wanted to understand what adverse impacts (if any) these ‘interventions’ had on the first year student experience, and to establish potential risks – particularly preventable risks. When risks were identified, we then tested the validity of these findings by talking to staff.

We plan to continue such analysis into Phase 3 of our research, which will help us understand how to enhance the student experience of program completion and graduation.

Please see Appendix 2 for more details on evaluation methods used for each initiative.

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1 For instance; admissions and enrolment conversion rate data; retention and attrition data; public versions of Course Evaluation and Student Experience survey data; as well as committee proceedings, from the School’s undergraduate Student-Staff Committee Meetings and Student Progress Committee Meetings.
Pilot initiatives: detail and analysis
Initiative 1: Coordinated Orientation Week Activities

Background and Aims
Students in the focus groups reported a number of transition issues, both academic and social, including competition among their cohort, cliques, and a lack of social engagement with their peers. International students in particular struggled to connect with their peers outside of the classroom. Asked about orientation, students reported that they would be more likely to attend if told of its importance by senior students in their program, who themselves were more likely to recognise the importance of social connection and belonging to their success. One student remarked:

“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 start familiarising yourself with the faces of people in your course that you’re going to be with for the next two or three years”.

Given our Narrative Model’s focus on key points of transition, orientation was identified early on as central to our efforts to improve the first year experience, something that was confirmed by the data from our student focus groups and staff workshops in 2011.

A key recommendation arising from analysis of our 2011 research was that: ‘the School and programs work together to develop an improved, coordinated, holistic approach to orientation, in consultation with key University services.’

The aim was to create a positive, welcoming foundation experience whereby all new students, regardless of their background, could begin to engage with their program cohort, within a broader School and University environment.

In order to achieve this, we aimed to replace existing ad-hoc efforts with a better-coordinated whole-of-school approach, in which best practice models were understood and recognised, and the processes necessary to achieve them became part of core business.

We adopted four initiatives that together made up our overall coordinated approach to orientation:
1. Program Orientation Sessions (revised existing initiative)
2. School Welcome Events (revised existing initiative)
3. Orientation Passport (new initiative)
4. Student Informal Spaces Initiative (new initiative)

Figure 2: Student Focus Group Sample 2 (2011) – Too cool for school: challenges to a student’s social transition to university.
We aimed to implement these Coordinated Orientation Week Activities for both Semesters 1 and 2 of the Higher Education academic calendar year, as an important finding from our 2011 research was that students entering programs mid-year (Semester 2) did not feel welcomed to the School and would have strongly benefited from some kind of orientation activity. This corroborated evidence from our years of experience as academics and administrators: that students entering mid-year were more likely to experience transition issues and be academically ‘at risk’ than cohort peers who commenced at the start of the year.

Process

Program Orientation Sessions

In order to foster a more coordinated, school-wide approach to orientation, we began by focusing on Program Orientation Sessions. Ideally, each program holds an orientation session for commencing students during the University’s Orientation Week. While this is best practice, in reality there exists a huge variation between different Program Orientation Sessions, as well as an overall lack of information shared around what individual programs do in their sessions.

We encouraged all programs to hold a Program Orientation Session, as a number had not regularly done so in the past, and to hold these events early in O-Week, in order to allow students to make some social connections at the program cohort level before the School Welcome event and the University’s ‘Big O-Day’. We also asked staff to encourage students to attend the School Welcome, which we helped redesign, as outlined below. Importantly, we also discussed with staff the purpose of the Program Orientation Session: both in relation to the other events that combine to make up the student transition experience, and why it is of central importance to student transition as the first chance for students to make social connections within the program cohort they will be working with for the next three years.

In order to help staff to conceive of this event differently, we sought the assistance of Ruth Moeller (Senior Advisor, Learning and Teaching from the College of Design and Social Context), to work with us on the design and delivery of a training package for all undergraduate Program Directors, First Year Academic Advisors and Course Coordinators, as well as Orientation Coordinators in the School. The training package was designed to demonstrate a range of ‘ice breaker and transition teaser’ strategies that staff could implement at orientation or during

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2 Program Orientation Sessions serve a different purpose to the enrolment information sessions held earlier in the year; the latter are about course selection.
the first few weeks of each semester in core courses – either formally or informally. We demonstrated how to help students (and their program staff) make better connections to other cohort peers through the shared activity of telling stories to break down differences and assumptions, as well as to assist students project outward confidence and listening, and to begin the process of internationalisation in the classroom by foregrounding the diversity of cohorts.

**School Welcome Event(s)**

Alongside the Program Orientation Session, we also promoted the importance of the School Welcome Event to staff and students, by presenting it as a separate, yet equally central event in the student transition experience. We aimed to reinvigorate the existing School Welcome Event by making it more dynamic and relevant for both commencing students and the staff supporting their transition to university. Based on our 2011 research with staff and students, we changed the Semester 1 School Welcome from a formal staff-led occasion (with staff dressed in resplendent academic gowns) to a more personable, inspiring yet informative student-led event. We also introduced a similar if smaller Semester 2 School Welcome with a focus on articulating students. Aside from a brief welcome from the Dean, and the coordinating efforts of the School Communications Officer (supported by our team), the events were entirely student-led. A student MC hosted each event, introducing student speakers who shared their experiences of a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities including: the School’s ESL tutors; opportunities to get involved in student radio, TV and magazine production; study abroad options; and opportunities through the student union.

The events started with a promotional video of student work, which aimed to: inspire students; to communicate the range of disciplines in the school and the sorts of work they produce; and to plant the seeds of future interdisciplinary connections in students’ minds. We worked with a graduate of the Media program to develop the video, which has since been re-used in subsequent iterations of the event.

**Orientation Passport and Competition**

We learnt from our student focus groups that commencing students lack confidence around key academic skills and face a range of personal and social challenges upon the transition to university (refer to our previous report, 2011 Report. Phase 1: Planting the Seeds. However, they reported a lack of awareness about which university services could assist them with these challenges. Given the extra-curricular nature of these services, many are not promoted in classes or by program teaching and professional staff – or, if they are, the message is not well timed and so is often missed by students.

In order to tackle these challenges, we developed the concept of an orientation ‘passport’ consisting of a number of challenge questions relating to Student Services and the RMIT Libraries. We worked with a team of final year students in the Communication Design program to design the passport artwork. We also worked with staff from within the School, Student Services and RMIT Libraries to design challenge questions. The Orientation Passport was distributed to students at their program orientation sessions, completed over the following days – hopefully with a new friend from their program – and returned at the School Welcome event, where entrants were eligible for prizes including an iPad.

**Student Informal Spaces Initiative (SISI)**

The refurbishment of a key informal student space, the Student Atelier, was another stand-alone initiative for 2012, described in more detail as Initiative 3 (page 35).

To ensure that the refurbished Student Atelier space was introduced to commencing students as part of orientation, we encouraged staff to hold orientation events or include a tour of the Student Atelier as part of their Program Orientation Sessions. We also paid for a coffee cart to set up in the space on four days across the first two weeks of semester. Coffee vouchers were attached to the Orientation Passport, and extra vouchers were left at reception for students who had missed out. Table tops made from plywood were accompanied by prompts encouraging students to draw on the tables as they wish and make the space their own.

![The Student Atelier space before refurbishment (2011).](image)
Results and Analysis

Program Orientation Sessions
Our attempt to change the approach to Program Orientation Sessions within our School by introducing a more coordinated approach was successful. In Semester 1, every single program conducted a Program Orientation Session – an increase of two programs from the previous year – and ten of the eleven undergraduate programs scheduled orientation sessions before the School Welcome Event.

We interviewed students at the School Welcome and at the University’s ‘Big O-Day’ event, to ask them about their Orientation Week experiences, including their Program Orientation Sessions, and gauge their confidence levels. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with most students commenting on the social benefits of attending their session. Students reported that they found their teachers welcoming, and enjoyed making new friends with common interests. For instance, one student remarked: “I got to meet a lot of people who were interested in the same thing I was”. Another student commented that getting the time to meet their cohort before classes began was a valuable transition experience, given that they will be spending a lot of time with them over the coming three years.

In a one-on-one interview about orientation and transition, one Program Director we spoke to outlined their Program’s Orientation Session, and the way in which orientation activities are embedded into class time in order to “assist in making [students] feel welcome, making them feel at ease, making them understand that the people who are going to guide them know exactly how they feel”.

However, we did face a number of continuing blockers that limited our ability to implement this initiative, as well as to adequately track and evaluate its success. Despite our best efforts to communicate the importance of orientation, we were limited in our capacity to access basic information from staff about their past and present orientation practices. For instance, it was not always easy or possible to find out who the orientation coordinators were in each program, what happened during Program Orientation Sessions (and why), whether any changes had been made to the format of sessions of over time, and details of the budget allocation for orientation in each program. Overall, we observed staff resistance to: locking in the timing for the events and sharing their format and content, as well as to the idea of using orientation activities to anticipate and address broader transition issues. Under time pressure, staff often defaulted to previous practice and last minute planning.

In an attempt to address these issues we propose the introduction of a number of new leadership roles within the School through the establishment of an Orientation and Transition Coordination Team (see Recommendation 1 on page x, and Appendix 1). We are hoping that by adopting this approach we will start to embed the principle identified by Sally Kift as a key to sustainability in this area:

*Building on this ground-up approach, a model for institutional action may then be promoted, which can focus commitment to an enduring FYE culture as an institutional priority that is, both in rhetoric and reality, “everybody’s business”. (Kift, 2008, p. 2)*

We experienced similar success in our staff development efforts. We invited staff from all eleven undergraduate programs to participate in an ‘Icebreakers and Transition Teasers Workshop’, which was delivered in the week prior to Orientation Week of Semester 1, 2012: 20 staff participated from nine
programs. Evidence from staff and students indicates that this intervention was well timed and pitched, with many programs subsequently implementing ice breakers and transition teasers in the Program Orientation Sessions.

Less successful, however, were efforts to encourage staff to embed these strategies either formally or informally into their curriculum. We were aware of only two programs initiating strategies they had learned into the core first year courses or in Cohort Day Out activities in Week 3 of semester. Our College’s Senior Advisor, L&T (SALT) reported that no staff took up her offer of help to embed any activities within their courses during the online course guide update periods. We are also not aware of any course amendments arising as a direct result of this initiative.

School Welcome
Around 370 students (out of a commencing undergraduate cohort of approximately 1,030) attended the welcome event. Students were overwhelmingly positive in their feedback about the session. In brief interviews, they reported feeling more at ease and ready to begin their studies after the session, with one saying: “I feel a lot more settled… it makes it real. It’s happening and I’m excited”. Another student commented that the session made her feel more comfortable: “I’m so much more prepared…I was feeling really nervous, now I’m super comfortable, super ready”. The student MC was well received, and students were inspired and motivated by the range of activities on offer to them: “I thought it was so informative, I’m so excited about SYN and Catalyst and everything!”

One student noted with enthusiasm the diverse range of fields represented in the Media and Communication video, demonstrating that the message about the benefits of

3 SYN (Student Youth Network) is a community radio station for young people (its members must be aged 12–25). It has a long history with RMIT and so many students become involved, particularly those working in media disciplines within our School. Similarly, Catalyst is the RMIT student publication, operated by the student union, but often edited by students from the School of Media and Communication.
the interdisciplinary nature of the School was clearly communicated and well received.

Subsequently, we conducted a focus group with nine members of staff – academic and professional, including program directors, first year coordinators and the school academic services coordinator – to discuss their approach to orientation and to gather feedback on the changes implemented through our initiatives. We also conducted a number of one-on-one interviews with key staff whom were unable to attend the focus group session. The data gathered from these interviews demonstrated not only the strengths of our initiatives, but also the continuing challenges faced in the change management process.

Staff agreed that the less formal School Welcome was an improvement on the previous event. As one participant commented, “I think that that shift to actually making it student led was really, really key”. Another remarked that “it’s a really strong idea, [it’s] of benefit and it’s worthwhile pursuing and continuing”. Participants also pointed out some of the flaws in implementation that still need to be ironed out in future iterations. For instance, one indicated that the delivery by the student speakers was not always clear and targeted, indicating that better briefing is required. Another suggested that despite the challenges students might face when speaking at such a large event, it is a valuable opportunity for those who are asked to challenge themselves.

Other staff suggested that the program of speakers was ‘information overload’ at an early stage in the student experience: “what they hear is blah, blah, University, blah, blah, get involved, blah, blah, blah”. However it was mostly agreed that: “little things will stick” so that students will remember at least one key message that is relevant to them.

This broad discussion elicited an interesting debate about the need for an orientation event that brings students together as part of a wider school community, or whether students only need to connect to their program cohorts at this early stage in their student experience. One participant argued that the school is an organisational body that matters only to staff, and not students:

> The school is the school. It’s about RMIT. It’s about pooling resources. I don’t think it matters to students and I think it’s sort of an uphill and not necessarily that useful battle to get students feeling they belong to the school to be honest, we would be much better concentrating our efforts at the program level.

However, others believed that the School brings together students with a wider cohort that shares common experiences. As this participant noted, while students do identify primarily with their program identity and cohort, the school provides a form of broader affiliation that resonates with previous educational experiences:

> I think it’s very true that students identify with their programs. The thing about the School as well is – because a lot of them have just come from [high] school, especially at the start of the year – so being together in a big auditorium is a familiar experience. So even if they don’t identify with what we call a ‘school’, I think they do have a sense of being together with a whole bunch of different cohorts because that’s really where they’ve come from. So I think that’s a pretty important orientating activity.

While reinforcing the proposed new approach to orientation and transition for the most part, our focus group research uncovered some of the attitudes held by staff wary of or resistant to such change. To seek to address these issues, it became clear that we would need to begin to work strategically with the School’s Learning and Teaching Committee.

**Orientation Passports**

Of the 1,000 Orientation Passports printed and 600 distributed, 4.3% passports were returned at the School Welcome Event and 2.4% were eligible for the competition draw. These numbers indicate problems in the design and communication of the passport concept. For instance, while students responded well to the ‘look’ of the passport, there was confusion around competition rules and eligibility requirements, which could be partly attributed to the passport layout as well as to a lack of program staff confidence or ‘buy-in’ when explaining the passport concept to students. Similarly, only 7.2% students redeemed free drinks from our coffee cart trial in the Student Atelier during first three weeks of Semester One, with many not even realising that there was a coffee voucher attached to their passport.

Whether because of design, communication or both, students did not engage with the passport as had been hoped. This was confirmed both by student interviews and the fact that no discernible increase in contact with RMIT libraries or Student Services was reported throughout Orientation Week. Given the range of activities on offer during O-Week, the passport was not a key priority for students at that
time, reinforcing that what students really need is ‘just in time’ information, support and access to services. In other words, students are less likely to learn about something until they need it. The passport was not used again in semester two, 2012, although there has been ongoing discussion within the School and at the university level about developing an application for mobile devices that would serve a similar function.

**Student Informal Space Initiative (SISI)**
The refurbishment of the Student Atelier space was a great success – overall, as well as for student transition. We observed a significant increase in numbers of students using the space throughout 2012, in part due to a similarly significant increase in numbers of students being introduced to the space as a result of their Program Orientation Session. We also observed a marked increase in students across all year levels making cross-program connections in their use of the space. These results are outlined in more detail in the discussion of the SISI initiative further on (refer to page X [Initiative 3]).

**Further Information:**
Appendix 3: Coordinated Orientation Week Initiative – 2012 Case Study Report

Online Video Evaluation Packages:
- ‘School Orientation 2012’
- ‘School Welcome Promotional Video’
- ‘Student Atelier Refurbishment’


**Recommendations Arising**

**Recommendation 1 (School level)**
That schools define and create fractional allocations of leadership to existing staff positions as a team of dedicated Orientation and Transition Coordinators. (See Recommendation 6.3 and Appendix 1 for more detail.)
**Initiative 2: Cohort Day Out**

**Background and Aims**

Most students in our focus groups wanted transition activities that blended course work with the social aspects. A number of students, particularly internationals, craved an off campus experience to cement social bonds among their cohort. Students in studio-based courses generally commented that group work was effective at breaking down any early cliques:

> “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”.

The concept of the ‘Cohort Day Out’ emerged through workshops we conducted with undergraduate program staff in the School of Media and Communication in 2011.

From the first workshop, staff expressed a strong desire to implement intensive student cohort building activities across the School’s programs. They also believed that these activities should occur early on in a student’s transition to university life. Staff felt that such cohort activities would better harness diversity in the classroom, but also facilitate the development of:

- “A sense of belonging that changes over time as assumptions are challenged”
- Professional identity which is tied to reputation and kudos
- Peer-to-peer critiquing skills
- Collaboration skills
- Shared cohort aspirations
- Student engagement with staff and industry

Workshop participants raised ideas for various activities across the academic year. These ranged from one-day intensives around project work, to industry days and off-campus ‘camps’ with assessable outcomes. Participants came up with a ‘blue sky’ ideal: an un-timetabled week of activities early in the first year experience (ideally around Week 3 or 4), where basic skills and literacies could be developed through a series of events involving staff and students of the School. (A similar concept – “Week Seven: Learning Across Boundaries” – has now been implemented on the new Yale/NUS campus in Singapore: see [http://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/index.php/learning/week-seven.html](http://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/index.php/learning/week-seven.html)). Finally, the concept of the Cohort Day Out emerged as an achievable first step towards such formally structured off-campus cohort activities.

Thereafter, we aimed to work with key programs to trial an off-campus activity made available for the program cohort through a core course that linked the formal and informal curriculum. This could take the form of a fun activity designed to build social connections and embed academic literacies. Ideally, these activities would be tied to an assessment task to encourage maximum student engagement.

In 2012, we piloted the Cohort Day Out with two undergraduate programs, Photography and Creative Writing.

**Case Study 1: Photography**

**Process**

First year students from the program participated in a ‘Cohort Day Out’ activity at Hanging Rock as part of their coursework for Digital Imaging (COSC2372), a core first year course. As the program was trialling a student mentoring initiative, second year student mentors were also invited to attend.
The BA Photography program offers specialisations in three areas: portraiture, landscape and commercial photography. Hanging Rock was chosen as an iconic Victorian tourist destination, renowned for its inspirational landscape.

The activity was held in Week 3, replacing scheduled on-campus lectures and workshops. The day operated in part as a series of open-air tutorials, which also allowed students extended time to both interact with staff and go off on their own either in pairs or as part of a larger group. They were encouraged to apply demonstrated portraiture and landscape photography techniques in situ. Students also had extended time to relate to each other as well as staff on a social level, notably during a barbecue lunch, bushwalk (more photo opportunities) and on the return train trip.

Results and Analysis
Of the 90 students enrolled in the course, 50 attended the Cohort Day Out, a proportion of the cohort that might have been higher if the activity had been more thoroughly embedded in the course and its assessment tasks.

On the train trip to Macedon, students seemed very excited. Most said that they did not have any expectations about the day but were mainly looking...
forward to going somewhere they hadn’t been before with their classmates, spending more time getting to know their teachers, getting tips for their assignment and taking photos with others. A few students said that their program director’s enthusiasm for the day was motivational, while for many, the technical demonstration of a large format camera was the draw card. Interestingly when asked why they chose to apply to the Photography program, most students spoke about “the need to develop confidence and skills to share and talk about my own work”, but none made the explicit connection between this simple pre-enrolment ambition and their reason for attending the day’s activity.

Overall, staff and students seemed very friendly, jocular and engaged. Students were observed to have formed distinct friendship groupings since Orientation Week. The international students congregated in two groupings according to gender (many arrived in Week 1, after formal orientation activities).

We interviewed both a Co-Program Director and the Course Coordinator about the results of the Cohort Day Out and they reported that they were happy with the way the day ran. Specifically, they felt that the objectives of encouraging students “to be relaxed and have fun, mingle and bond” and to improve relationships between staff and students had been achieved. The program is planning to run another event next year; indeed would like to see it happen each semester. Ideally, staff would like the event to be extended to a three day camp, but staffing and the timetable for second and third year students makes this logistically difficult, requiring the support of all program staff. Staff interviewed also commented that they would like to build on the success of the first year event to develop a cross-program event in second year (aligning with The Belonging Project Narrative Model).

This Cohort Day Out was declared a success by program staff and provided students with a fun off-campus activity and opportunities to improve social connections with their program peers and staff. However, our interview data suggests that more work could be done to more explicitly embed such a cohort activity within the curriculum.

Case Study 2: Creative Writing

Process
First year undergraduate Creative Writing students participated in a Cohort Day Out as part of their curriculum for the Telling Stories (COMM2389) course, in Week 3 of first semester. The self-paced 1–2 hour outing, replacing a lecture, led students off campus and to the nearby Queen Victoria Market.

The activity had multiple aims, chief among which was to build stronger cohort bonds and to limit the possibility of cliques forming, which according to teaching staff have had a negative impact on senior cohorts in the program. The teaching staff also hoped the activity would encourage students: to develop confidence and the ability to share and critique work; to develop strategies to generate ideas; and to improve individual and collaborative problem-solving skills. Above all, it was meant to be a fun activity for both students and staff during what can be a stressful time of semester.

On the day of the activity, students met at a central point on-campus where they were briefed about the aims and logistics of the activity. They formed groups of 3–4 mixing Melbourne locals and students who had relocated from the country, interstate or overseas. Each group was given $5 petty cash (funded by the Belonging Project in this instance)
before heading to the market in order to purchase objects responding to three briefs. Students were asked to use the money provided to purchase an item that “whispers a story”, or could choose to pool their resources and buy a more expensive item as a group. These items were then to be brought back to class to be displayed, and creative responses written and shared with classmates.

The Cohort Day Out worked alongside a number of other activities to encourage practices around work sharing, critique and workshop, as well as to assist students make social connections. For instance, in the first week of class, the lecturer set an activity requiring students to document their work space and discuss their work in class. The next week, she picked the best three and showed them to the class in the lecture. The lecturer reported that when students realised that the best work was being showed in class, more and more students started doing the extra tasks even though they were non-assessed. The lecturer capitalised on this by asking students to respond to the two entries after their entry and write a critique that involved one positive comment about what they liked, and one suggestion of how to improve it. Students were very respectful in their critique, demonstrating that early work on embedding expectations around critique had been successful.

Results and Analysis

The Creative Writing program offered an example of how a suite of cohort building activities could be embedded to extend the transition principles of orientation across the first academic year, so as to develop and reinforce a sense of community among students. What was most successful was the way in which the activity worked as one of a number of continuing cohort building initiatives that were embedded into the curriculum. Staff identified that early in the first semester of first year was a key time to catch students before cliques formed, as well as to introduce clear expectations and practices around work sharing and critique. As one academic commented:

That’s why I’m trying so hard with these first year, first semester students, because when I taught the second semester students [last year], it was almost like the moment had passed for them to get over their nerves about [work sharing and critique], because they said that [...] in the classes, they hadn’t been doing any workshop [...]or if they were, it was to mixed results.

On the micro-level, one problem with the organisation of the Cohort Day Out was the way the groups were assigned. While the careful grouping of students from a mix of backgrounds encouraged students to make new connections, they also cut across tutorial groups, so that students weren’t working with their group mates after the initial exercise. And while groups could be organised around tutorial groups in future, this would eliminate some of the possibilities for broader cohort connections, so it was agreed that this requires further consideration.

It is indicative of the success of this Cohort Day Out that in second semester students began demanding their next excursion. The program staff accepted the challenge and decided to plan another event, albeit not an excursion. This time, the event was an after-hours, on-campus social event based around work done in class called Creative Readings – essentially an ‘open mic’ night for all students in the Creative Writing Program.

The second semester Creative Readings event helped build a sense of community among the program cohort, particularly among the first years who had already participated in the Cohort Day Out. When interviewed about the impact of the various cohort activities, the creative writing First Year Coordinator commented on the benefits of the sense of community they helped to build for the students:

"this idea of the community and developing a cohort community, or a program community [...] helps to kind of liven up the atmosphere. [...] I feel a lot of the students [...] they have a lot of problems and personal issues and they feel quite disconnected from the community. Or personal life takes over. Because they can just prioritise certain things like assessment and [...] just not come in at all."

The First Year Coordinator further commented that the various activities had introduced students to the important idea that their classmates are the first professional connections they will make, and that working with them is a key step to building up their sense of professional confidence. The First Year Coordinator also emphasised that the events are about fostering a sense of engagement through having fun, so that the students know "that there are other things, other than just assessment that they can think about, and engage in and have fun with. Its kind of another outlet, outside of the classroom to engage the students”.

**Overall Results and Analysis:**

**Cohort Day Out**

Analysis of these case studies suggests that Cohort Day Out activities can have a significant impact on building a sense of cohort in a program, with the added benefit of being cost effective and easy to organise. For instance, while the First Year Coordinator in Creative Writing wondered out loud about the possibility of doing a camp, or a larger-scale excursion, ultimately she was confident that a series of cheaper, more regular events would be just as effective: “Creative Writing has no money …[but] $200 goes a long way. A bus trip and a camp – it might not necessarily do as much as a series of events throughout the year”.

Staff also commented on the way in which Cohort Day Out activities contributed to building up a sense of disciplinary identity for the students, which is particularly relevant in a creative arts discipline such as creative writing or photography.

**Recommendations Arising**

**Recommendation 2.1 (Program Level)**

That program and course design for first year core program courses should embed formal and informal cohort building activities, such as a Cohort Day Out within the first three weeks of a semester, and that it is critical that these be tracked and evaluated through the Program Annual Review (PAR).

**Recommendation 2.2 (Program Level)**

That Program Directors, First Year Academic Advisors and first year teaching staff consider, design and implement the Cohort Day Out as part of a sequence of activities, beginning with orientation, and continuing across the year as part of transition and a whole-of-program first year pedagogy.

**Recommendation 2.3 (School/College Level)**

That support, in the form of targeted professional development and budget allocation is provided to program staff to better develop and embed Cohort Day Out initiatives (or similar) into the curriculum. This process should involve the recommended new Orientation and Transition Coordination team (refer to Appendix 1).
Initiative 3: Student Informal Spaces

Background and Aims
We asked students in the focus groups, “Do you ever use the Atelier space down on level two?” The response was: “The what?” Students who were aware of the space reported that it was underutilised and unwelcoming, while others weren’t aware of its existence, and many were uncertain who ‘owned’ the space and whether they were allowed to use it. 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, one that fills the gap between the library (used for private study) and nearby public spaces such as cafés and shopping centres (used for group work and socialising).

We aimed to refurbish an existing but under-utilised student space on campus, the Student Atelier space on Level 2 of RMIT’s Building 9, creating a space belonging to students for the range of informal activities they engage in on campus including: private study, group work, socialising, preparing meals and running a range of cohort events, including student-led exhibitions and industry events. We intended that the space would become a cultural hub of the School, a place where students could connect with staff and other university services, rather than a ‘rumpus room’ solely for student use. Students would be engaged in the refurbishment processes as co-creators, providing feedback and recommendations, and, where appropriate, assisting with the redesign. The room’s fittings should ideally be ‘temporary’ and ‘rough and ready’, so students feel they have ownership over the finishing touches and can evolve the space to their needs. Essential amenities include a kitchenette (microwave, sink, hot water tap), vending machines, lockers and adequate power points for laptops. Tables and chairs should be comfortable, light, and in configurations adaptable to a range of needs. Multiple ‘zones’ allow for a range of uses, while some larger tables encourage informal social interactions.

Process
In January 2012 we began refurbishments, using a process of co-creation with former and current RMIT students. We employed a graduate of RMIT’s Interior Design program, to come up with a ‘temporary’ design for the interior that would respond to feedback from students, but at low cost and within a tight time frame. We also employed three final year Communication Design students to design a visual identity and branding for the space, as well as to add some design finishes to walls and table tops. We were very pleased to have provided such a meaningful and rich work-integrated learning opportunity to these undergraduates, and gratefully received their generous, honest feedback about this and other 2012 initiatives.

Results and Analysis
Completion of the refurbishment took longer than anticipated. The drawn-out process of gaining the necessary approvals from Property Services highlighted the need for increased dialogue and cultural understanding about supporting the student experience holistically across the university.

Notwithstanding this, the student response to the refurbishment of the space was overwhelmingly positive. We first spoke to students about the Student Atelier redesign during Orientation Week in March 2012 – through informal one-on-one and small group interviews to camera in the space – about midway through refurbishments. Despite the space still carrying vestiges of its original, stark white design, students were positive about the first steps towards refurbishment, as this students’ feedback

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4 One constraint on the project was that any refurbishments needed to be ‘temporary’ and removable so as to work within requirements not to damage or change the architecture.
Enlisting students as co-creators was crucial to the success of the Student Atelier space refurbishment.

indicates: “I think it’s transformed amazingly. It’s a huge improvement on what it used to be”. Another student commented: “there’s a lot more life to it – it was just this big white quiet room before, and now, I don’t know, there’s a lot more possibilities”. However, students recognised that there was more to be done with the space. They wanted more colour, graphics and wall decorations: “I think it’ll look cool when everyone starts adding their own touch to it, that’ll make it look a bit more full. It’s a bit bare at the moment”. They also wanted more tables and chairs and urged caution in allowing the design to overwhelm the purpose of the space, suggesting that we “don’t go overboard” decorating the space with plants (which were placed on tables and hanging from a net divider in the room), and always keep it primarily as a functional workspace.

The Belonging Project team returned to the Student Atelier space again in September 2012, once the refurbishment was complete, to further evaluate this initiative. Again, we approached students who were using the space at the time for informal one-on-one or small group interviews, asking them how they found out about the space, how they used it, their thoughts on it, and whether they had any suggestions for improvement or general feedback.

A number of students reported finding out about the space at orientation: others through word of mouth from friends and fellow-students. “It is fairly spoken about” one student told us, while many international students told us that they were introduced to the space through student peers.

Students liked the DIY feel of the finishes, and the fact that they could write on the table tops as they pleased: “What drew me towards it was just that people could write all over the tables, just a small little thing like that drew me to it.” One student reflected that this made the room feel more lived in than it had previously: “it’s a bit more homely when things have graffiti on them. I love the fact that we can draw on these things”. Students also suggested that the room was fulfilling its aim of encouraging cross-disciplinary links: “everyone just talks to each other and everyone’s just got the same kind of interests – it’s a lot more vibrant”.

Engaging students across the range of degrees represented in the School and geographically dispersed across the many buildings of the city campus remains a challenge. On the one hand, evidence from Student Staff Consultative Committees (SSCC) minutes suggested that Media program students love the space but feel like external students are using it and making it too busy. On the other, students in the Animation program (based in an adjoining building) said that they are still not using the space because they are either unaware of it or feel intimidated to do so. However they did express a desire to meet other students in the School, which points to the challenges of communicating with the large and diverse student cohort within this multi-sited school. It also confirms the logic in The Belonging Project Narrative Model, as some students remain too shy to go beyond their program boundaries, demonstrating the need for further activities embedded in courses and programs that support ‘safe’ interdisciplinary collaborations.

Student comments suggest that the Student Atelier now fills a gap between the formality of the library and the informality of public space: “having a space that’s not the library, that we can come to and be as loud as we like and do our group work is really important and integral to us succeeding”.

The co-creation process of the refurbishment was also successful, with one student reporting that: “coming in here is quite communal, it feels like it’s the students’, like we own this place.” But students
still want more tables and chairs, more lockers, and commented that space is often at a premium, particularly for group work scenarios. This feedback, along with the continuing challenges of engaging a dispersed student body in a very large school, suggests that another informal student space is needed. However, with many program cohorts also expressing the desire through SSCCs for a space of ‘their own’ (a desire which might not be feasible for the university to resource), another challenge remains the need to communicate with students about the existence and purpose of shared spaces in the School, ideally by embedding their use in transition and curricular activities.

Further Information:
Online video evaluation package ‘Student Atelier Refurbishment’
www.rmit.edu.au/mediacommunication/belonging-project/outcomes

Recommendations Arising

Recommendation 3.1 (University/School Level)
That the physical environment of a school should include informal student spaces to encourage a sense of belonging, as well as interdisciplinary and cross-year collaborations.

Recommendation 3.2 (School Level)
That the design and refurbishment of student spaces is undertaken using a process of co-creation; making use of student feedback, and engaging students in the redesign where possible.

Recommendation 3.3 (School/Program Level)
That a strategy is developed for engaging students in these spaces that promotes the purposeful use of the space for key transition and cohort activities.

The Student Atelier space (2012) – From bare white box to 24/7 hub of activity.
Initiative 4: Academic Transition Initiatives

Background and Aims
Despite existing orientation and transition programs and activities, first year students in our focus groups still demonstrated difficulties with the transition to a university learning environment, commenting on the contrast with their high school experiences: 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, particularly among international cohorts. First year students also reported difficulty managing their expectations of the workload and self-directed approach to learning:

“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”.

Preliminary work with staff in our School indicated that many were unaware of the range of University Student Services and resources available to assist staff – not just students – with their teaching and learning, particularly strategies and skills around supporting academic transition to university.

The aim of the Academic Transition Initiative was to engage the range of university services and to connect with staff and students in our School to improve the delivery of ‘just in time’ advice, support, and resources. We worked with the University’s Study and Learning Centre (SLC), the Coordinator of the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) program, our School Library Liaison Officers, and our School ESL tutors.

Process
We developed strategies to foster informal, low-cost, face-to-face meetings with key areas of Student Services that were open to all School staff.

The Student Learning Centre (SLC)
The SLC is a University-wide resource for both teaching staff and students. For students, it offers: a free drop-in learning centre; targeted academic skills workshops; and a substantial online learning lab, including program-specific modules and English language resources. The SLC also consults with academic staff in the development of academic literacies in programs.

We initially met with representatives from the SLC to assess their interest in working more closely with our School. They reported that while students are good at self-initiating contact, particularly with the highly popular drop-in learning centre, many staff members are unaware that they too can make use of SLC resources. SLC staff were keen to collaborate with teaching staff on key academic literacies or subject areas to develop course resources that could be implemented through online modules, or through the development of specific strategies around course work and assessment.

In order to connect School staff with the SLC, we facilitated a simple and informal face-to-face meeting. We organised one morning and one afternoon tea for School staff to meet with SLC staff: the first was conducted in the SLC offices, and the second in the School building. The morning and afternoon teas attracted a small but engaged group of staff. Many staff were interested in the range of ways that the SLC could support their efforts in the classroom (for instance, around student Blackboard use, writing skills and formats, and groupwork). However, while staff could see the benefit of working with the SLC – for themselves and their students – they still tended to view it as something ‘on top of’ their existing workload, rather than something that could be embedded in processes of course development and review.

These workshops improved our understanding of how the SLC could support School staff to embed academic literacies within the first year curriculum in line with the University’s and Australian Quality Framework transition principles. They also helped us to develop closer working relationships with key staff at SLC and we now involve them as part of our School’s approach to orientation.

We will continue working with the SLC to develop ways of strategically involving them in School L&T developments, planning and discussions. The first step in this process is to invite them to facilitate a number of sessions at our School L&T Forum (refer to Appendix 4). We also plan to involve them in the development of our Phase Three research, with its focus on interdisciplinarity.
Other Academic Services

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)
The Belonging Project investigated the potential for courses offered by the School of Media and Communication to participate in the peer-to-peer mentoring program, PASS. PASS is a voluntary attendance academic assistance program that utilises peer-led group study to help students succeed in traditionally difficult courses – those with high unsuccessful completion rates or those that are perceived as difficult by students over time. This prospect emerged from the RMIT L&T Expo in August 2012, where four existing models of peer-to-peer academic mentoring programs were presented at a session to the wider RMIT community.

Following the Expo, the Belonging Project team discussed the potential efficacy of piloting the initiative within the first two courses of the School’s undergraduate ‘Communication Strand’ (major). These courses meet the PASS program’s selection criteria, as they are compulsory courses with a large number of students and a reliance on sessional teaching staff. Several meetings were brokered between the SLC PASS Coordinator and key School staff to assess suitability and commitment to trial a pilot initiative in 2013. However, due to a range of factors, a decision was made not to proceed with the initiative in the Communication Strand courses in 2013.

RMIT Library School Liaison Officers
In response to an announcement by the library that they were trialling a new approach to orientation, we brokered a meeting with the School’s Library Liaison Officers to discuss the way their services could be better communicated to staff and embedded in transition processes.

School ESL Tutors
During our 2011 student focus groups the School’s ESL tutors, Don Blackwood, Clare Ryan and David Browning were cited as a key transition resource – both academic and social – for international students in our School. However, we also became aware that they were not as widely known as they could be. We met with the ESL tutors to discuss possible connections between our project, particularly our focus group findings around transition issues, and their work with students. The tutors confirmed what we had learnt from students: that in practice their role extends beyond academic support — assisting with English language and providing essential cultural context when tackling assessment tasks — to providing key social support, occupying a quasi-parental role for many students who are removed from family networks.

As a result of this information sharing, we agreed that we would continue to work with the ESL tutors, in the first instance to better promote their services to students, by incorporating them in orientation. In first semester, we invited an international student who had used the tutors’ services to share their experience with commencing students at the School Welcome. We invited Don, Clare and David themselves to speak to students at the second semester School Welcome, which was predominantly aimed at international students.

Results and Analysis
Overall, the Academic Transition Initiative resulted in a small change in staff culture in the School around the perception and use of University services.

Recommendations Arising

Recommendation 4 (School Level)
That schools provide simple, low-cost opportunities for face-to-face connections between its staff and Student Services to facilitate relationship building and improve engagement. That this engagement strategy become realised through staff position descriptions, staff workplans and professional development.
Initiative 5: End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibitions

Background and Aims

Students in focus groups reported a sense of competition among cohorts as well as anxiety around work sharing and standards. They also craved deeper engagement with their peer group as they progress through their degree. One student commented on her desire for more interaction with the work of students in other (particularly creative) disciplines:

“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”.

A series of workshops with School of Media and Communication staff in 2011 confirmed that nearly all programs in the School had run or intended to run some sort of end of year event (e.g. exhibition, screening or industry night, prize giving, etc.). However, these events were discrete and mostly staff-driven rather than student-driven. Workshop participants at both the School Program Directors Retreat (August 2011), and the third Belonging Project Staff Workshop (November 2011) raised the idea of a School-wide End of Year Festival, which could:

- Consist of a series of independently curated program or course-specific micro-events, brought together through a cohesive festival program;
- Involve students at all levels of the event, whether through showcasing their work, designing the program and posters, or planning the key events;
- Have a book-end approach to events: opening with a launch night, which could also encompass a showcase of excellence; followed by an opening party to which alumni and industry would be invited; and closing with an awards night where the student work was more formally recognised.

The staff workshops confirmed that end of year academic activities were seen as a key point of academic transition for students, both academically and socially. We decided to work with staff in 2012 to clarify the purpose of these activities and to develop some School-wide umbrella branding that would promote these activities as part of a week-long ‘festival’ of events.

We proposed a coordinated set of end of year activities (Festival herein referred to as EOYF), serving the purposes of programs representing diverse disciplines, which could be promoted together to staff, students, industry and the community through a range of marketing collateral, including posters, event programs, stickers, etc.

The aims of the initiative were multiple (refer to Appendix 5). For students we envisaged that the EOYF would encourage more cross-year and cross-program interactions, inspiring students as they transitioned from year to year, as well as attracting prospective students. It was also proposed that students would develop professional skills in the creation and promotion of their work. For staff, the aim was partly to streamline existing workloads and reduce duplication of efforts around the organisation and promotion of events, as well as the collection of student work for Open Day and ‘external’ marketing. It was also envisaged that working together, School Junction ‘12 artwork – A result of a co-creation with final-year design students.
staff could strengthen relationships with College and University marketing, and leverage existing and new connections with industry by making events more visible and easier to attend (so that instead of attending three different show-cases for example, certain industry representatives could attend one). It was also thought that the EOYF could assist marketing staff at both the College and University level to better understand the range and diversity of events and outputs produced by the various program areas in the School, and to streamline connections with the School around promotion of events and student success stories.

**Process**

In order to realise the aims of this initiative, The Belonging Project formed an End of Year Festival Working Party to liaise with relevant School staff (both academic and professional), about the purpose and timing of their program’s events and to develop a communications and resourcing strategy that best supported all programs. We also invited members of the College of Design and Social Context’s Marketing team to these meetings.

Our efforts to initiate an EOYF ran alongside a University Marketing end of year marketing project called Creative Festival. We supported the Creative Festival via our School and College Marketing representatives to ensure the School’s event information had a University-wide online presence.

The Belonging Project team worked with the School’s staff and students (the team of final year Communication Design students) to identify and co-create a School-level festival brand. Our aim was to co-create a festival brand, design and communications strategy that resonated with students from their own perspective and that would support future iterations. The name chosen for the EOYF, suggested by our student design team, and agreed upon by the staff working party, was: **JUNCTION 12: between the lines**.

The design team produced and distributed a range of materials, including posters, programs, and stickers. A poster and guerrilla sticker campaign was thought to best support the branding launch: running alongside an event catalogue that mapped all School events as a stylised pocket-sized calendar.

**Results and Analysis**

The main outcome of the EOYF initiative was the development of a name and interactive branding identity for the EOYF, which has the potential to be developed in future years, as well as the production and distribution of the related marketing collateral advertising the School-wide program of events.

Ten out of 11 undergraduate programs and all TAFE program areas in the School of Media and Communication engaged in this initiative. Of special note was:

- The emergence of collaborative relationships between programs, most noticeably between the Games, Media and Animation & Interactive Media programs who decided to pool resources and take over ACMI at Federation Square for one night. Smaller project-based collaborations occurred between students in Creative Writing and Communication Design to produce the Creative Writing Anthology publication.

- Four programs each ran multiple events as part of the EOYF initiative: these were either year-level specific or prize nights (many prize nights were run in lieu of a formal School Award Event). However, there were also a number of student-led year-level events that were not attached to course curricula, making coordination of publicity difficult.

Early feedback from School staff and students at the end of 2012 indicates that the branding ‘Junction: between the lines’ and the overall design of the marketing collateral were highly regarded: it was considered creative and inclusive in approach and look, and appropriately marked the event as a meaningful transition period for those students leaving RMIT into the ‘real world’.

However, the marketing material was distributed very late (after formal classes had ended) and it was therefore difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the campaign in relation to attracting audiences to the events (reliable data as to audience numbers at individual events was not available).

Also, it is clear that further discussion is required between staff at College and School levels to determine how best to brand and market School and College-wide end of year festival activities in a cohesive and integrated way.
Further Information:
Refer to Appendix 5 (page 72)

Recommendations Arising

Recommendation 5.1 (University Level)
That further research and pilot projects be conducted across the University to ascertain the added value to the student experience of coordinated end of year capstone events, linked to student transition: from year to year; from student to graduate; from alumni to member of the industry.

Recommendation 5.2 (School Level)
That a ‘whole-of-school’ as well as a ‘whole-of-program’ approach is taken to the end of the year festival, so that events do not become the sole responsibility of program staff but become ‘everybody’s business’: a concern shared by all staff, academic and professional, as part of a school’s core business.

Recommendation 5.3 (School/Program Level)
That end of year festival activities inform program renewal to ensure that they: are embedded in curriculum; engage students in a process of co-creation; and foster engagement across student cohorts from first to third year.
Discussion
The attempt to enact and evaluate a range of practical school-based initiatives to support a holistic approach to the FYE consistent with The Belonging Project Narrative Model was both ambitious and challenging for a project with very limited resources. Because of these limitations, some initiatives worked better than others.

We were most successful where we could work directly with small cohorts or teams of staff and students. For instance, our work was enriched by our collaboration with the Coordinator of first year courses in Creative Writing, and we were pleased to observe a number of successes for this staff member and the cohort. To us, this series of simple, small, quickly and low-cost organised initiatives (including a CBD excursion and an on-campus reading night) best demonstrate some of the ways that staff can use simple strategies to implement significant changes for their students, as well as for themselves, when they place student transition and belonging as central to their curriculum design and development.

Similarly, our work with students to refurbish the Student Atelier space was low-cost and quick – notwithstanding the inevitable delays that occur within a large institution such as RMIT - and has made a significant impact on the sense of belonging for students in our School. By beginning and ending the refurbishment process with student feedback, we ensured that our process was always one of genuine co-creation with the student cohort. This process of co-creation was most successfully realised by employing three Communication Design students to work on the design finishes in the space: an experience that they reported was a validating and important instance of Work Integrated Learning (WIL), preparing them for client relationships and the resource limitations of professional life. We also ensured that students were informed about the changes taking place, and that they were student-led, by asking the student design team to speak about the project at both 2012 School Welcome sessions.

Feedback from students and observation of the Student Atelier space since the refurbishment, tell us that: the space is more lively and central to the life of the School than it was before; and that it offers students the opportunity for a real campus experience, including the chance to mingle with students in other years and disciplines – something that is distinctly absent from the online student experience that is increasingly touted as a likely future for Higher Education delivery.

Although our work to improve the approach to orientation across our School was successful, we have also learnt that achieving lasting change is the most challenging part of our project. While we successfully piloted and modelled our coordinated school and program approach to orientation in 2012, by the time orientation week approached in 2013, we observed many staff members reverting to old ways of doing things. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the face of a range of new changes and challenges – most significantly the continuing work of the MC2015 project, which requires for some, a substantial re-conceptualisation of program structures and pedagogies – a relatively new approach to orientation was too much to add to the load.

Therefore, many staff looked to The Belonging Project team for leadership around orientation processes and practices, despite the short-term nature of our role within the School. Our experiences demonstrated the need to embed leadership around this and other transition issues through our proposed Transition Coordination team.

Similarly, we recorded a qualified success with our Academic Transition Initiative. While a number of staff were keen to learn more about the University services available to them and their students, this is only the first step towards better embedding these services within the curriculum in courses across the School. This highlighted the importance of forming genuine links with key services such as the Study and Learning Centre (SLC). We know that through continued simple and informal engagement strategies that foster personal connections, such as on-campus morning teas, School staff will become increasingly aware of these services on offer and feel more confident in approaching SLC staff for assistance.

Further, now these connections have been brokered, SLC staff demonstrated their interest in being involved in ongoing School discussions around L&T. For instance, they were invited to facilitate a number of workshops at the School’s inaugural Learning and Teaching Forum in 2013, and will help inform our research around interdisciplinarity, as we develop our Phase Three research and continue to contribute to MC2015 Review project.

Finally, we discovered through our pilot that our plans for an End of Year Festival (EOYF) were too ambitious to fully realise in the first iteration, and will require another year of development to adequately test its success and future potential. Despite taking only first steps towards achieving the proposed EOYF, we have recorded evidence of staff enthusiasm and goodwill towards the concept, as well as to the initial branding and promotion. Our
research has also confirmed that when planning the festival, diversity must be adopted as a central principle. This means diversity of the range of student experiences, disciplinary backgrounds and outputs, as well as of the various needs that the event fulfills for different program’s students, including: celebrating achievements, showcasing student work, or marking a transition from one year to the next. As we further develop the EOYF in 2013, we aim to supplement our existing staff feedback with student data to ensure that our plans meet this range of student needs.

While we recorded varying levels of success across our five initiatives, we nonetheless noted significant impacts upon our School’s L&T agenda. After the overwhelmingly positive reception to our Phase One (2011) research report, as well as the prominence gained through our FYE pilot initiatives, The Belonging Project Narrative Model has become central to many discussions around the future L&T direction of the School. We have been invited to formally participate in the MC2015 process, both as members of the steering group, as well as contributing to discussions around key topics, such as interdisciplinarity, by providing scholarly materials and evidence from our project.

The Belonging Project team also supported innovation in L&T within the School of Media and Communication through the operation of one of our key principles – brokering relationships and promoting best practice. We have consistently worked to scope and recognize best practice in order to commission colleagues to design and deliver professional development to others within the School, and to nominate and promote colleagues for awards. This range of engagements with L&T has earned our project the committed support of our Deputy Dean (Learning and Teaching) and the School L&T Committee, and has seen our project become a central part of the School’s L&T Strategy 2013-2015. Phase Two of our research also enabled us to understand how varied the program experience can be across such a large and diverse school. In this environment, transparency and consistency in role tasks and responsibilities are vital if staff within a school are to work together to achieve change.

The release of our Phase One report and our continuing work to broker links also brought success in forming productive connections with a range of stakeholders both within and beyond RMIT. These included groups involved in our initiatives, such as staff from the SLC, our School Library Liaison Officers, the School ESL tutors, and the PASS Program Coordinator. But it also extended to include a range of new connections, including:

- **The College of Science, Engineering and Health (SEH) Transition Community of Practice Group** who invited us to attend their meeting as guest presenters;
- **The University Marketing and Communications Forum** who invited us to present our 2011 findings;
- **The DSC Retention/Attrition Project** who invited us to contribute our insights on School student cohort selection and admissions trends, and factors influencing conversions to offer;
- **Leaders in our scholarly field, Marcia Devlin and Karen Nelson** who invited us to attend the launch of Devlin, Kift, Nelson Smith and McKay’s OLT funded project and who acknowledged our project in their report.

Having successfully formed these links the project is well placed to leverage and build on these to connect our efforts with others across the University and the sector as we continue into Phase Three.

Overall, our work during Phase Two made clear that many of the issues we have sought to address are far more complex than they at first appear. The best example of this is orientation. Changing the culture around orientation involves complex networks of staff across the professional and academic areas, and from a broad range of disciplines, each representing different histories and ways of doing things. Attempting to implement such wide-scale change highlights the challenge of vertical integration: between grassroots staff who are at the ‘chalkface’ in the classroom, and often consumed by the continual demands of the academic calendar; university services who are at the frontline of student transition issues; and the various staff members at School, College and University level who are ensuring that processes and policies around admission, selection, enrolment and academic progress are followed correctly. It also demonstrates that, adopting Kift, Nelson and Clarke’s generational approach to developing a whole-of-institution transition pedagogy (2010), our work is still at a first generation level (Refer to Diagram 3 on page 21). This means we are the stage of introducing efficacious but still siloed co-curricular activities. As Kift, Nelson and Clarke outline, a well-developed and coordinated transition pedagogy requires a whole-of-institutional approach in order to produce:

> an environment which provides the potential for commencing students to achieve engagement, timely access to support and the development
of a strong sense of belonging. This is made possible by the bringing together of co-curricular and curricular strategies into an intentionally designed and broadly conceptualised curriculum; one which is implemented through the shared knowledge and skills of partnered academic and professional staff in an institutional environment that is committed to an optimal first year experience both at the policy and practice levels. (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010, p. 10)

This supports our finding that efforts to spark widespread cultural change require a holistic and sustained approach that targets both the grassroots as well as the strategic levels of the university.

These efforts aim to produce a distinctive RMIT experience based on The Belonging Project Narrative Model – one that begins for each student with a strong grounding in a diverse disciplinary cohort, broadens out to encompass the interdisciplinary community of the school, and finally grows to include a sense of belonging as an ethical global citizen. By adopting the concept of belonging as a central focus, our project produces a clear and distinctive narrative model that responds to the range of political, economic and social changes occurring within the Australian tertiary sector which have led to the current renewed focus on the student experience.

As Australia, along with many other developed nations, continues to affirm its belief in the value of building a ‘knowledge’ or ‘innovation’ economy (Australian Government, 2009), the necessity of training a broad base of future knowledge workers becomes a practical reality. Responding to this challenge, universities find themselves welcoming larger and more diverse cohorts in order to meet this demand. Set against these wide-ranging social changes, the concept of belonging works as a rhetorical device to draw together and narrativize the range of practical strategies we are developing to improve the student experience in our School. The concept of belonging has proved particularly meaningful given our desire to ensure a grassroots approach to change that is inclusive of diverse cohorts, including students from LSES backgrounds. Our project has worked to define belonging as a theoretical concept and idealised psycho-social state, and to develop a range of transferrable curricular and extra-curricular initiatives to achieve its application in practice. In this way, our project demonstrates the currency and value of the concept of belonging in the area of education, and in the development of student engagement strategies within the discipline of media and communication.

(Refer to page 14–16 in the Executive Summary for overall findings and recommendations from Phase 2 of the Belonging Project.)
Dissemination and outputs
Our project follows the dissemination framework set out by the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT), formerly known as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). As outlined below, we have grown our information provision dissemination, while privileging engaged dissemination – an “engaged-focused approach to dissemination, involving consultation, collaboration and support for ongoing dissemination both during the project and after the project is complete.” (ALTC, 2008)

We established a project website to maximise our research impacts, and house our legacy resources: www.rmit.edu.au/mediacommunication/belonging-project

Digital copies of our project findings such as Final Reports and video evaluations can be downloaded from this site at: www.rmit.edu.au/mediacommunication/belonging-project/outcomes

A comprehensive overview of our 2012 activities and achievements is set out below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Activity Purpose and Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Commenced refurbishment of Student Atelier Space.</td>
<td>Consulted with Student Services and other Schools for exemplars of Orientation activities, particularly ‘passports’.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commissioned and designed Orientation Passport.</td>
<td>Worked with undergraduate program staff and key staff in Student Services to establish a treasure hunt component for a School-wide Orientation Passport. The game encouraged students to make links with Student Services during the first half of O-Week, and go to the School Welcome on the morning of Big O-Day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established Orientation Passport and O-Pho Competitions.</td>
<td>Commissioned final-year Communication Design students to design Orientation Passport. Designed to make student engagement with university services and infrastructure a social, fun and interesting activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Ice Breakers and Transition Teasers Workshop (School of Media and Communication).</td>
<td>Professional development module outlining transition activities and practical advice on how to implement ice-breaker/transition activities in the classroom (either informal/formally). Facilitated by Ruth Moeller (DSC Senior &amp; T Advisor). Disseminated hand-outs at session, shared with university colleagues via DSC L&amp;T Blog ‘Teaching TOM TOM’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orientation Briefings for staff and senior students (School of Media and Communication).</td>
<td>Commissioned student speakers to participate in a student-led School Welcome Session on the morning of Big O-Day. Hosted morning tea for professional staff; conducted briefing meetings for key program academic staff. Video showcased exemplary work from students across the School in an upbeat, motivational way. Provided students and staff with an overview of programs in the School and what products its students are capable of producing. Shown at all School Welcome Events.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distributed Orientation Passports to program staff.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Produced a School Welcome video presentation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Conducted School Welcome Session (Capitol Theatre)</td>
<td>School Welcome Session an overwhelming success as evidenced by the Orientation video evaluation. The Orientation Passport and O-Pho competition initiatives were not very successful – design of collateral was well received by staff and students, but returns were disappointing – highlights the importance of ‘just in time’ delivery of information and services.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>including Orientation Passport competition draw and O-Pho photographic competition.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commenced video evaluations of Student Atelier refurbishment.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commenced evaluations of Orientation initiatives.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attended and evaluated School Cohort Day Out initiatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7–8 May 2012</td>
<td>Student Satisfaction in HE Conference (Sydney).</td>
<td>Conference paper and workshop delivered. Delegates included Vice Chancellors, Senior L&amp;T staff from a range of universities. Invited to participate and collaborate with Professor Marcia Devlin (OUA, formerly Deakin) to develop resources for teaching low SES students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 May–1 June 2012</td>
<td>Program Directors Retreat (School of Media and Communication).</td>
<td>Launched our 2011 Report, updated School’s Executive and Program Directors/Managers about our 2012 activities to date. Invited to participate in School working parties informing review of all UGRD programs in the School; invited to join School’s working party on retention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Activity Purpose and Outcomes</td>
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</table>
  - Referenced in Devlin’s 2012 Report and invited to her report launch  
  - Invited to speak at University Marketing and Communications Forum  
  - Invited to speak at the SEH Transition Community of Practice Forum  
  Held two planning meetings with academic and professional staff within the School, as well as DSC Marketing. Commissioned final-year students to design festival collateral. Gathered admissions and conversion of offers data for all programs with mid-year entry: also gathered all pathways data. Got all programs and key professional staff in one room to talk about their mid-year commencing cohorts and needs (never done before): agreed to hold an inaugural welcome in Week 3 to capture late enrolling students and recirculate our Ice Breakers/Transition Teasers materials. Shared our research findings and understandings with key stakeholders from the M&C 2015 Review. Gave us insights as to how we might support staff to fund curricular innovation using Belonging research outcomes. |
<p>| July   | Hosted 2 x Study and Learning Centre Workshop for School staff. Met with Arts &amp; Culture re orientation/transition initiatives. Briefed student speakers for Mid-Year School Welcome Session. | Designed to introduce SLC staff, and what initiatives they provide for staff. |
| 11 July | Presented 2011 findings at the University Marketing and Communications Forum. | Gained insights into how Marketing market the ‘RMIT experience’: gained validation of research outcomes and student engagement model. |
| August | Commenced contributing to the DSC Retention/Attrition Project. Student Atelier refurbishment completed. Attended and participated as panelists at the RMIT L&amp;T Expo. Attended School’s Mobility Showcase | Conducted analysis and interviews with School staff about Selection: obtained ‘on the ground’ snapshots about new mid-year selection/admissions process and conversions to offers. Information used to inform School’s/DSC’s WAM working party. Also gave insights into blockers around orientation/transition and resources staff may find useful. With DSC: Shared our insights and understandings with College on student cohort selection and admissions trends, and factors influencing conversions to offer. Final observational and interview footage with students recorded. Commenced compiling video evaluation package. Further testing of model and sharing/benchmarking of research outcomes. Gained useful insights into university initiatives that matched current/future initiatives; made useful contacts in other departments. Provided opportunity to gain insights into School’s current and future initiatives, and how these may fit into our model of student engagement. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Activity Purpose and Outcomes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 August</td>
<td>Guest presented to the SEH Transition Community of Practice Group.</td>
<td>Tested model and shared research outcomes with staff from different disciplines who are leaders in student transition at RMIT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Held inaugural School Mid-Year Welcome for New Students.</td>
<td>Commissioned student speakers and key staff from Student Services to speak about the student experience. Followed by drinks and nibbles in the evening. Postgraduates also invited to attend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Hosted professional staff morning tea ‘show and tell’ event.</td>
<td>We asked TAFE staff to showcase a new management resource to other sectors of the School – has potential to ensure effective, transparent team management and compliance re staff qualifications, workloads, and event planning around the student life cycle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commenced feasibility study of PASS initiative within the School’s FY courses.</td>
<td>Following on from the RMIT L&amp;T Expo, we had numerous meetings with SLC’s Carolyn Rundell and School staff about the suitability of the PASS mentoring model within the first year of our School’s undergraduate programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 September</td>
<td>Attended Marcia Devlin’s Project launch at her invitation.</td>
<td>Acknowledged and referenced in Devlin, Kift, Nelson et al.’s 2012 Report (OLT funded).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 September</td>
<td>Evaluated second iteration of Creative Writing Cohort Event.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18–19 September</td>
<td>Team Retreat.</td>
<td>Reflected on progress to-date, conducted strategic planning for remainder of 2012 – 2013, consolidated our work around interdisciplinarity (Tier 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Submitted 3 x proposals to School’s L&amp;T Committee.</td>
<td>Orientation and Transition Proposal – requested 2 x dedicated staff to oversee continuation of coordinated orientation/transition activities we established: for 2013 implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EOYF collateral designs locked off and distributed.</td>
<td>PASS Proposal – requested formal adoption of a peer-to-peer mentoring scheme within the FYE of the School’s undergraduate programs: that this be scoped for 2014 implementation.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School L&amp;T Forum Proposal – requested that the School establish this as a regular event in its professional development calendar. First iteration to be organised by The Belonging Project team in 2013 (refer to Appendix 4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 October</td>
<td>School Teachers @ Work presentation on the FYE.</td>
<td>Presented key findings from our research this year, and invited champions from programs to speak about the successes of their curricular cohort initiatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 October</td>
<td>Attended School’s Internationalising the Curriculum Workshop.</td>
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<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Continued planning for Tier 2 and 3 initiatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continued research and reporting activities for 2012 initiatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19 November</td>
<td>Attended the RMIT College of Science, Engineering and Health’s L&amp;T Forum.</td>
<td>To make contacts and get ideas for the School L&amp;T Forum we are conducting in 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Activity Purpose and Outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 November</td>
<td>Conducted a workshop on Interdisciplinarity with School staff.</td>
<td>To make contacts and get ideas for the School L&amp;T Forum we are conducting in 2013. To test our ideas on interdisciplinarity and hear the thoughts of others within the School: to identify ‘sleeper’ champions and linkages in this area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Continued planning for Tier 2 and 3 initiatives.</td>
<td>Continue research and reporting activities for 2012 initiatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presented a project update at the End of Year School Meeting, and launched our video evaluation packages.</td>
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### Regular Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Student Cohort Experience Reference Group Meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belonging Project Reference Group Meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School of Media and Communication L&amp;T Committee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>University Equity and Diversity Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Belonging Project Team Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad hoc</td>
<td>Regular planning meetings with key School staff and Student Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion
In Phase One of the project (2011) we worked to develop The Belonging Project Narrative Model, based on close research with staff and students in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University.

In Phase Two (2012), we drew on this model to introduce a new approach to transition and the FYE in the School through five pilot initiatives focused on orientation, transition, cohort building, student spaces and academic skills and literacies.

Our Phase Two research confirmed what we had learnt through our work with staff and students in Phase One: that students in their first year of study are facing a range of anxieties around the social and academic transition to university. But we also confirmed that these anxieties can be tackled, often with little expenditure of time and resources, and with significant impact.

Throughout this pilot period, we have been developing and revising our model, triangulating it against staff and student data, and feeding our observations into strategic projects such as MC2015 Review project (MC2015). From this work, the next phase of our project (2013) has taken shape as Phase Three: Focus on the Interdisciplinary Experience.

The interdisciplinary has always been central to the cumulative, capacity building logic of our model. Having formed bonds and confidence within their disciplinary/program cohort in Tier One, students are prepared to broaden their experience out to encompass the interdisciplinary environment of the school (or equivalent community) in Tier Two.

This logic was confirmed by our focus group research. Most students expressed a desire to develop a broader sense of belonging not just to their program peers, but also to the interdisciplinary community of the School. Many were keen to meet students in other disciplines, who they considered their ‘future co-workers’. As one student lamented: “we don’t get enough opportunities to meet other people [who] could help us in our jobs later on in life”.

Not all their interdisciplinary aspirations were instrumental however, with many expressing a desire to experience a broader university experience as part of their personal – rather than professional – development. For a number of students we spoke to, this was about broadening their horizons and their knowledge of the world, and knowing where they fit within the wider academic field. Many expressed a desire for ‘tasters’ of other disciplines/programs, through ideas such as lecture swaps to get a better understanding of their fellow students as well as to clarify the boundaries of their own discipline. For students in the more practice-based disciplines, interdisciplinarity was also seen as a way to curb creative isolation and connect across various studio practices. As one student commented:

“I think there would be a lot of people in Photography and Digital Art and Media that we’d get along 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”.

However, our participants also indicated that this sort of interdisciplinary connection needs to be facilitated in a way that balances students’ need to belong to a localised cohort before they are able to extend themselves to interact productively on an interdisciplinary level. It should also be noted that not all programs and industries represented in our School reflect trends towards interdisciplinarity: in a number of professional fields, specialisation is the trend, and so interdisciplinary activities need to be tailored to disciplinary contexts.

In Phase Three (2013) we aim to map these and other issues as they apply to programs within our School, along with exemplars of best practice to develop a working typology of interdisciplinary student experiences. This typology will be our primary outcome of Phase Three, and we aim to mobilise it as part of the MC2015 renewal process as well as in broader L&T debates and development within School and across the University and sector.

Work to develop this typology will fall into two categories: firstly, gathering data, through literature review and case studies on the existing theory and practice of interdisciplinarity; and secondly – through a close study of an interdisciplinary course (COMM2324 Interdisciplinary Communication Project), and through work with School staff to develop and articulate a working approach to interdisciplinarity – through processes of whole-of-school program renewal.

While undertaking Phase Three of our research, we will continue to observe and contribute to reiterations of earlier initiatives, such as the School Welcome and the EOYF, with the aim of ensuring their sustainability. We will also scope initial plans for Phase Four (2014), with its focus on the global student experience. By ensuring that these tiers are developed concurrently, we aim to further progress the successful implementation of The Belonging Project Narrative Model’s holistic narrative in the School of Media and Communication, and draw out its potential for wider application across the University and the tertiary education sector.


Appendix 1: Transition and Orientation Coordination Team Proposal

This document was submitted and endorsed by the School of Learning and Teaching Committee in the School of Media and Communication in 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal: School Orientation and Transition Coordination Team</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Draft Position Description</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Draft Process of Appointment</th>
<th>The School of M&amp;C Orientation and Transition Coordinators would be recruited via the following methods:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recruited internally through a call for expressions of interest, followed by an interview;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Appointed for a term of two years;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Appointment process is complete by the end of October to early November at the latest to ensure efficacy;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The workload for each team member be weighted as 10-15% of their workload (or as analysed by WAM Committee);</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The team works closely with the School Communications Officer and reports to Deputy Dean, Learning and Teaching.</td>
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</table>
## Appendix 2: Project Methodology Overview — Phase 2 (2012)

### Short-term Evaluation Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Evaluation Objective</th>
<th>Evaluation Method</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated Orientation Week</td>
<td>Increased attendance at the School’s orientation events. <em>(staff and students)</em></td>
<td>• Number of programs implementing orientation events</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation and number of students and staff at orientation events</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observations of School Welcome Events by commissioned ‘mystery shoppers’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interviews/focus group sessions with staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved quality of engagement in orientation activities. <em>(staff and students)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Number of orientation passports returned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved understanding of what services and activities students engage with during Orientation Week. <em>(staff)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Number of orientation passports completed and the quality of responses submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved usage of the School’s student informal space (the Student Atelier) by undergraduate commencing cohorts – as a direct result of our Coordinated Orientation Week Initiatives.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interviews/focus group sessions with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Number of entries in the O-Pho Competition</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Feedback submitted via Student Atelier feedback box</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Unsolicited feedback
- Observation
- Interviews/focus group sessions with students
- Interviews with staff from external departments
- Solicited feedback from Student Services (SLC) and RMIT Library staff
- Number of free drinks voucher redemptions (part of Orientation Passport initiative)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Evaluation Objective</th>
<th>Evaluation Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cohort Day Out</strong></td>
<td>Formation of new friendships and student groupings within year cohorts.</td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff and student interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Attrition/retention statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved quality of student</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships to staff in their</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff and student interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>home program.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee meeting minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved staff understandings of</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student cohort transition needs.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff and student interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(social and academic)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee meeting minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved skill development</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
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<tr>
<td>amongst commencing student</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cohorts. (peer critiquing, critical</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Course Evaluation Survey results</td>
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<tr>
<td>reflection, interpersonal</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee meeting minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>networking skills)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decreased program attrition in</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Admission/enrolment statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>the first year, first semester</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Attrition/retention statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the School’s undergraduate</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Progress Committee deliberations and ‘student at risk’ outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>programs.</td>
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<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee meeting minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff and student interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>**Student Informal Spaces</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative**</td>
<td>Improved usage of the School’s student informal spaces by its students, particularly</td>
<td>• Interviews/focus group sessions with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>first year undergraduate student cohorts.</td>
<td>• Number of entries in the O-Pho Competition</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feedback submitted via Student Atelier feedback box</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee meeting minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Transition Initiatives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improved understanding amongst School staff about the services offered by the</td>
<td>• Observation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University’s Student Services.</td>
<td>• Staff focus groups/interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Solicited feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increased ‘just in time’ transition interventions implemented by staff in</td>
<td>• Observation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>undergraduate programs, extending from orientation week into key first year courses.</td>
<td>• Staff interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee meeting deliberations</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Progress Committee meeting deliberations; student ‘at risk’ outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Solicited feedback from external staff</td>
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</table>
### Short-term Evaluation Approach

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Evaluation Objective</th>
<th>Evaluation Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End of Year Festival of Events and Exhibitions</td>
<td>Produce new School-level EOYF branded marketing collateral that reflects the diverse culture of the School.</td>
<td>• Staff and student interviews/focus groups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee meeting deliberations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Solicited feedback from external staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Number of EOYF catalogues taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased attendances at the School’s EOYF events</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Number of EOYF catalogues taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased traffic on the School’s EOYF event websites/social media pages.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Google analytics results on Creative Festival website pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased coverage of the School’s EOYF events within RMIT and external media outlets.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff and student feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Long-term Evaluation Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Objective</th>
<th>Evaluation Method</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less undergraduate students reported as experiencing preventable transition issues during their first semester of study within the School.</td>
<td>• SES results</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• PAR data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved staff engagement in orientation and transition initiative planning and implementation, which is also holistic in approach.</td>
<td>• Student Staff Consultative Committee feedback from the School’s undergraduate programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Analysis of School admissions offer versus conversion to enrolment data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved undergraduate student engagement in orientation and transition initiative planning and implementation (across all year levels).</td>
<td>• Analysis of School attrition and retention data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Analysis of School Student Progress Committee deliberations and ‘student at risk’ process outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased strategic collaboration between academic and professional staff within the School in matters supporting the FYE.</td>
<td>• Post-Orientation interviews with commencing students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Post-Orientation interviews and focus groups with staff involved with the first year undergraduate experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased and improved quality of intentional curriculum renewal supporting the FYE by staff teaching into undergraduate programs within the School.</td>
<td>• CES results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• SES results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Analysis of program and course amendments</td>
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<td>• Program Annual Review reports</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Staff interviews/focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student interviews/focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Coordinated Orientation Week Initiative — 2012
Case Study Report (School of Media and Communication)

Aim
To create a positive, welcoming foundation experience whereby all new students, regardless of their background, can begin to engage with their program cohort, within a broader School and University.

Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Provide opportunities to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Students        | • Develop relationships to their program’s year cohort  
|                 | • Develop relationships to their program’s academic and professional staff  
|                 | • Provide students a realistic snap-shot of university life and have academic expectations clarified  
|                 | • To be introduced to senior student cohorts both from within their own program and other programs within the School  
|                 | • Be introduced to interdisciplinary activities within the School and University  
|                 | • Gain confidence to self-access University resources  
|                 | • Resolve student and academic administrative issues by Week 1 |
| School staff    | • Reframe ‘Orientation’ and ‘O-Week’ as an experience valued as a vital foundation for student engagement in the classroom  
|                 | • Establish new ways of working collaboratively and efficiently to achieve University ‘best-practice’ initiatives in student cohort engagement and transition at RMIT  
|                 | • Develop relationships to the School’s new student cohorts  
|                 | • Develop connections with Student Services to ensure the potential of University resources are maximised. |
| University staff| • Gain reciprocal feedback on school-specific needs around Orientation  
|                 | • Contribute to development of activities and services to better resource school-specific needs  
|                 | • Contribute to development of activities and services to better resource all student needs |

Implementation Strategies: Overview
To create the desired staff and student engagement opportunities listed previously, we conducted a series of broader interventions which were embedded within the four key student engagement strategies (outlined below) across the School’s eleven undergraduate programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation Strategies</th>
<th>Goals</th>
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</table>
| Program Orientation Sessions (renewed existing initiative) | • Encourage all undergraduate programs to hold and resource Program Orientation Sessions  
| | • Encourage all staff and students to see these events as the first step onto the ‘transitioning to university path’ ('I belong to a program') |
| School Welcome Sessions (renewed existing initiative) | • Reinvigorate the School Welcome event by encouraging students to derive and deliver content  
| | • Encourage staff and students to value this event as a necessary second step along the ‘transitioning to university path’ ('I belong to a school') |
| Orientation Passport (new initiative) | • Encourage staff and students to value engaging with the university’s services and campuses as a necessary third step along the ‘transitioning to university path’ ('I belong to a university') |
| Student Informal Spaces Initiative (new initiative) | • Encourage staff and students to value and utilise these spaces for informal interactions and cohort bonding activities |
**Program Orientation Sessions**

From our 2011 research, we identified that Program Orientation Sessions were crucial to the successful development of a student’s sense of belonging, particularly to their program, in the first instance.

Interventions undertaken to support this strategy included:

- Meetings with academic and professional staff from all eleven undergraduate programs in the School, and encouraged each of them to hold and resource their orientation sessions early in Orientation Week. We encouraged programs to make these sessions fun, engaging and informative, and to involve key academic and professional staff to attend.

- Asking staff to encourage students to attend our repackaged School Welcome Session which book-ended the School’s Orientation Week program.

- Encouraging staff to approach the planning and advertising of their Program Orientation events as being more distinct in purpose from Enrolment Information Sessions. We did this by asking staff not just provide information to students, but to engage them in simple social interventions to encourage bonding amongst the student cohort.

- Supporting staff to achieve the previous goal, by developing and delivering a training package for all undergraduate Program Directors, First Year Student Advisors and Course Coordinators, as well as Orientation Coordinators in the School. Designed to demonstrate a range of ‘ice breaker and transition teaser’ strategies that staff could implement at orientation or during the first few weeks of each semester in core courses – either formally or informally – we demonstrated how to help students (and their program staff) to make better connections to other cohort peers through the shared activity of telling stories.

- Encouraging all programs to provide opportunities for commencing students to meet senior students from their program at their Program Orientation Sessions (e.g. inviting second or third year peers to relate their ‘one piece of advice’ to new students).

- Asking all programs to design a unique orientation activity specific to their program’s core discipline for the Orientation Passport, and embedding this activity within their Program Orientation Session (more information is provided under the passport initiative section).

- Asking all programs to distribute Orientation Passports at their Program Orientation Sessions, and brief students about the passport’s purpose and usage.

- Encouraging all programs to introduce their students to the refurbished Student Atelier as part of their Program Orientation Session. (The Student Atelier refurbishment was an part of our Student Informal Spaces Initiative, which is outlined separately).

**School Welcome Events**

We aimed to reinvigorate the existing School Welcome Event by making it more dynamic and relevant for both commencing students and the staff supporting their transition to university.

Based on our 2011 research with staff and students, we changed both the Semester 1 and Semester 2 events from a formal staff-led event (with staff dressed in resplendent academic gowns) to more personable, inspiring yet informative student-led events.

In order to implement these changes, we:

- Worked with School staff to determine the best timing for the event and how to best advertise it to students. We also worked with this group of staff to determine resourcing and communications needs for the events.¹

¹ In Semester 1, the School Welcome Event was held on the Thursday of Orientation Week, so as to coincide with the university’s Big O-Day. It was a huge event attracting approximately 370 students and an increased staff presence from across the School, including professional staff representatives.

In Semester 2, the event was much smaller and more intimate due to reduced commencing student numbers. We held this iteration in Week 3 to ensure that students who arrived to study late into the semester (commonly the case) were more likely to have experienced a welcomed by the School and their program staff. Traditionally, neither programs nor the School had run any orientation events for this undergraduate student cohort.

We worked with the School’s staff to advertise the event to students in both semester iterations via: flyers in Enrolment Information Packs, at School Reception and on the School website; by staff coordinating or supporting Enrolment Information Sessions, and in each program’s Enrolment Program Summary.
• Invited the School’s senior students to host and deliver the welcome program.

• Asked program staff to reframe their opinions of the School Welcome Event and the way they advertised the event to students as an ‘essential’ orientation event that book-ended a program of activities across the School and university.

• Asked program staff to advertise the School Welcome Event in conjunction with their own Program Orientation Session (i.e. by piggy-backing School Welcome Event marketing into their own sessions’ marketing collateral, and by speaking about the event to students attending Program Orientation Sessions).

• Refined the topics covered in the event’s program and ensure that only the most relevant topics to the first year student experience were addressed, preferably by the School’s own students (these refinements were based on our previous year’s research with students and staff).

• Recruited and briefed student speakers to ensure their stories about their own student experiences were engaging, relevant and genuine.

• Commissioned a School graduate to produce a promotional video for the School that was an inspirational, short, sharp and funky presentation of outstanding student work. Designed to be played at both the School’s future Welcome and Open Day events, our aim was to provide audiences with an overview of the School’s professional disciplines, along with the types of skills and projects commencing students could aspire to achieve.

• Invited all School staff to attend the Welcome Event.

Orientation Passport and Competition

This strategy aimed to encourage staff and students to value and self-initiate early engagement with the University’s services and city campus.

Conceptualised as a treasure hunt, an orientation passport was not of itself a new initiative. As with other iterations we had researched, we hoped our iteration would inject more fun into the School’s orientation and transition program. What was unique to our iteration however, particularly at RMIT, was the aim of testing whether commencing students could be encouraged to self-initiate contact with key University staff and services early in their transition period (or student lifecycle).

We hoped that our Passport would time this contact early, by asking students to engage with the activity during the Orientation Week period. The passport was designed to get students to undertake a series of unique but relatively simple question and answer scenarios or ‘challenges’. We hoped that more students would take their first steps towards a meaningful engagement with the key University service providers we identified as part of our 2011 research, as being crucial to supporting academic success.

To further encourage participation in our Orientation Passport initiative, we also gave students the opportunity to opt into the passport competition with the lure of winning an iPad. The competition required students to physically verify participation in each challenge either by writing answers or having their passport stamped by staff. Students were asked to correctly respond to a minimum of five out of six of challenges, and to return their passport at the School Welcome Event to enter the competition. Students were also required to be in attendance at the end of the School Welcome to remain eligible for the prize draw. We did this because we thought the passport competition would encourage better attendance at the School Welcome Event, as it book-ended the School’s week-long orientation event program.

Passports were distributed to students primarily at their Program Orientation Sessions, where program staff embedded their first passport ‘challenge’ or activity. A limited number were also made available at School Reception in Building 9 for equity reasons. Program staff were asked to design a unique program cohort challenge and answer that necessitated attendance at their sessions. The specificity of each challenge and answer was designed to also assist us with our evaluations of this initiative.

The activities we undertook to implement the Orientation Passport and competition are listed below:

• Liaising with areas of RMIT who had run previous iterations of scavenger hunts or passport type activities during Orientation;

2 These services were: RMIT Libraries, the School’s ESL Tutors, as well as the Study and Learning Centre, Hubs, RMIT Link: Sports and Recreation, and Arts and Culture departments, Student Housing, International Student Information and Support (ISIS), and Careers and Employment.
Phase 2: Focus on the First Year Experience

- Developing and designing the Orientation Passport and competition in liaison with the School’s undergraduate program and staff from Student Services and RMIT Libraries;
- Employing three final-year students from the Communication Design undergraduate program to design the passport;
- Meeting with School staff to develop and implement a range of communication strategies to ensure passports were distributed correctly and that its rules of use, together with the competition rules were understood by staff and students;
- Obtaining legal advice about running the passport competition, both from sources within and external to RMIT;
- Providing staff briefing sessions and take-away resources about how to distribute passports and explain their rules of use to students (this activity was combined with delivery of our Ice Breakers and Transition Teasers staff development module mentioned in the previously);
- Providing program staff with briefings about our ethics provisions, and how to assist us with gaining ethics clearances from students at Program Orientation Sessions;
- Providing support to program staff where needed, by distributing passports and briefing students about this initiative at Program Orientation Sessions;
- Providing support to program staff where needed, to obtain ethics clearances from both staff and students at Program Orientation Sessions;
- Meetings with key university services and their staff to further our own knowledge of their staff and services. We involved key staff from these areas in the designing of passport activities and officiating passport validation. We also invited them to help us evaluate impacts of these initiatives; and
- Validating Orientation Passport competition entries at the School’s Welcome Session, and performing the prize draw.

Student Informal Spaces Initiative

We wanted to encourage the School’s staff and students to value and better utilise its existing student spaces, for both informal interactions and cohort bonding activities. We envisaged these interactions and activities could take the form of, but not be limited to: study group meetings, casual lunches, student-led exhibitions, industry events, etc.

Following student focus group feedback in 2011, we identified the refurbishment of the Student Atelier space as being a key initiative for 2012. We thought that this action had the potential to greatly improve the student experience in the School for all programs, in a cost effective and highly visible way.

The aim of the refurbishment was to create a visually dynamic, comfortable and fun space that aesthetically reflected the diverse talents and personalities of students in the School. Equally important was ensuring the space catered to a variety of uses, and could be pulled down and/or replaced with a new look if required. We decided that the best approach towards refurbishment was through a series of temporary installations.

To test the impacts the refurbishment had as part of our suite of four key Coordinated Orientation Week initiatives, we aimed to ensure all commencing students became familiar with the Student Atelier. We did this by:
- Employing and briefing a team of four designers to respond to and carry out our brief;
- Coordinating the implementation of the Student Atelier refurbishment, in collaboration with School Management and Property Services;
- Encouraging the School’s commencing students to visit the Student Atelier during the first three weeks of semester (including Orientation Week) by:
  - Asking program staff to host catered events or at the least, include a tour of the space as part of their Program Orientation Session proceedings;
  - Offering limited opportunities for all of the School’s staff and students to receive for free drinks from a coffee cart we sponsored in the space, for limited times (four days staggered over two weeks);
  - Asking students to submit written feedback about the space via a feedback box located in the space;
- Inviting students to comment on the space by commissioning our student design team to make provocative drawings and comments on tables in the Student Atelier, and daring students to respond;

- Asking students to participate in an low-fi photography competition (aka the ‘O-Pho Competition’). We asked students to take pictures of themselves with their new friends throughout Orientation Week, and submit two copies of their favourite photograph of their experience: one via a feedback box mentioned above; the other displayed as a hard copy on the walls of the Student Atelier space. This competition was advertised online via the School website and by the student hosting the School Welcome Event.

**Evaluation Methods**

The Belonging Project is a four-year project designed to trial pilot initiatives into the RMIT student experience. We sought to measure the success of our interventions on the success and quality of the School’s orientation programs in both the short and longer term. In 2012, we conducted the following short-term evaluations in both Semester 1 and Semester 2 of the 2012 academic year.

As outlined below, we then aimed to evaluate our implementation strategies to check if we had achieved our goals of a more coordinated, ‘whole of school approach’ to student orientation through staff and student buy-in at a grass roots level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Objectives and Methods</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objective</strong></td>
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</table>
| Increased attendance at/participation in orientation events. *(staff and students)* | • Number of programs implementing orientation events  
• Observation and number of students and staff at orientation events  
• Observations of School Welcome Events by commissioned ‘mystery shoppers’  
• Interviews/focus group sessions with staff and students  
• Number of orientation passports returned  
• Number of orientation passports completed and the quality of responses submitted  
• Observation and number of students using the Student Atelier over the 2012 academic year  
• Number of drinks vouchers returned via Student Atelier coffee cart trial  
• Unsolicited feedback |
| Improved quality of engagement in orientation activities. *(staff and student)* | • Observations of students and staff  
• Interviews/focus group sessions  
• Interviews with staff from external departments  
• Unsolicited feedback |
| Improved understanding of what services and activities students engaged with during Orientation Week. | • Entries submitted to the O-Pho competition  
• Numbers of passports returned  
• Analysis of responses on Orientation Passports returned  
• Numbers of students redeeming free drinks (part of Orientation Passport initiative)  
• Solicited feedback from Student Services and RMIT Library staff  
• Interviews/focus group sessions with students  
• Unsolicited feedback |
| Improved usage of the School’s student informal space by its undergraduate students as a direct result of staff interventions in Orientation Week. | • Observations: increased student attendance  
• Observations: types of usage, which programs us the space  
• Interviews/focus group sessions with students  
• Number of entries in the O-Pho Competition  
• Amount of notes submitted via Student Atelier feedback box |
### Results

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<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Results</th>
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</table>
| **Program Orientation Sessions** | • 11/11 undergraduate programs conducted sessions in Semester 1: an increase of 2 x programs (solicited event collateral, observations, interviews).
  • No sessions conducted in Semester 2 (School event favored by programs with mid-year intake due to low commencing student numbers and resourcing issues).
  • Students responded best to sessions where staff tried the new approaches we suggested.
  • Example 1 – Student recall proved that stories related by staff and senior students were the most memorable and therefore more influential on their transition experience (e.g. stories about staff/student career paths, ‘traps for new players’ and common first-year issues) (commissioned and internal observations, interviews, focus groups, unsolicited feedback, SSCC feedback).
  • Example 2 – Staff and student feedback provided evidence of program staff implementing interventions we suggested to encouraged social connections between cohort peers (e.g. through ice-breaker activities, catered ‘down times’ during sessions, curricular-based student cohort activities supporting the Passport initiative and in Cohort Day Outs later in semester) (observations, interviews, focus groups, unsolicited feedback).
  • Video evaluation and Cohort Day Out evaluations corroborated evidence of programs attempting to implement social interventions within course curriculum as either formal or informal activities (observations, interviews, focus groups, unsolicited feedback).
  • Increase in awareness and potentially number of student-led activities occurring within the School (this needs further investigation); increase in stories being told about these activities within and between program cohorts (interviews, focus groups, unsolicited feedback, SSCC feedback). |
| **School Welcome Event**        | • 10 / 11 undergraduate programs scheduled Program orientation sessions before the School Welcome (solicited event collateral, solicited and unsolicited feedback).
  • Staff and students responded well to the new student-led approach; gave realistic impressions of the student community and diversity of student cohort and the opportunities available to them to enhance their program experience (interviews, observations, unsolicited feedback, SSCC feedback).
  • School promotional DVD well received by staff and students and provided clear evidence corroborating the need for a more coordinated, holistic approach the orientation within the School (interviews, focus groups, observations, unsolicited feedback).
  • Staff who attended better understood: (a) how the event was different in scope and purpose to their Program Orientation Session, and (b) the event as an additional ‘essential’ component of transition. Evidence of program staff conducting reflections and reassessing timeliness and relevance of topics/speakers to student experience, encouraged outreach opportunities from senior program cohort (interviews, focus groups, observations, unsolicited feedback).
  • Iterations implemented for both semesters: Semester 2 iteration was a first in the School’s history since its formation in 2009. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Results</th>
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</table>
| Orientation Passport                           | • 1,000 passports printed; 600 passports distributed  
• 4.3% passports returned at School Welcome Event  
• 2.4% passports eligible for competition draw  
• 7.2% students redeemed free drinks from our coffee cart trial in the Student Atelier during first three weeks of Semester 1 (voucher component of the Orientation Passport).  
• No discernible increase in contact with RMIT Libraries or Student Services (passport returns, interviews and solicited feedback).  
• No discernible increases in student attendance at the School Welcome based on this initiative alone (passport returns, interviews, observations).  
• Staff and students responded well to the ‘look’ of the passport, but not to the overall concept, and definitely not to its implementation (interviews, focus groups, observations, passport returns, drinks voucher returns).  
• Confusion around competition rules and eligibility requirements (interviews, focus groups, observations, unsolicited feedback).  
• Activity not repeated in Semester 2 due to lack of student engagement and resourcing costs associated to first iteration. |
| Student Informal Spaces Initiative (refurbishment of Student Atelier space) | • Significant increase in numbers of students using the space throughout 2012 (observations, interviews, unsolicited feedback).  
• Significant increase in numbers of students being introduced to the space as a result of their Program Orientation Session.  
• 7.2% of students redeemed free drinks during the coffee cart trial (part of the Orientation Passport initiative – Semester 1 only). (Orientation Passport free drink voucher returns, interviews with students).  
• No student entries submitted to the O-Pho Competition.  
• Significant increase in numbers of students across all year levels making cross-program connections/friendships as a result of using the space (observations, interviews, unsolicited feedback).  
• Students need staff intervention and support so as to further evolve this and other student informal spaces to reflect the School’s student cohort, and to better service their needs (observations, interviews, unsolicited feedback).  
• Students need assistance from staff to understand how to engage with student informal spaces encouraging self-expression in the décor (observations, interviews, unsolicited feedback). |
Outputs

Staff Development Module: Ice Breakers and Transition Teasers
We sought the external assistance of Ruth Moeller (Senior Advisor, Learning and Teaching from the College of Design and Social Context), to work with us on the design and delivery of this professional development module. Take-away resources developed for this training session, were also used to guide staff in future event iterations. This resource has since been circulated beyond the School via the University’s learning and teaching blog, the teaching tom tom (http://theteachingtomtom.wordpress.com). This blog was named by the UK Guardian Online in 2012 as third in the top ten of Australian social media influencers in Higher Education.

We invited staff from all eleven undergraduate programs to participate in the workshop, which was delivered in the week prior to Orientation Week. Evidence from staff and students indicates that intervention was well timed and pitched, with many programs implementing ice breakers and transition teasers in the Program Orientation Sessions. Less successful however, were our goals of getting staff to embed these strategies either formally or informally into their curriculum. We were aware of only two programs initiating strategies they’d learned into the core first year courses or in Cohort Day Out activities in Week 3 of semester. Ruth reported that no staff took up her offer of help to embed any activities within their courses during the online course guide update periods. We are also not aware of any course amendments in play as a direct result of this initiative.

Video Evaluation Packages
The most powerful evidence gathered as part of our pilot evaluations was our video footage of students undertaking orientation activities and using the refurbished Student Atelier space.

This evidence was edited into two video packages, to demonstrate the consistency of student reactions to our orientation initiatives in the students’ own words. The consistency of this evidence strongly corroborated our narrative model of student engagement for the most part, as well as the overall success of our Coordinated Orientation Initiatives.

Orientation and Transition Planning Tool
The ‘Orientation and Transition Tool’ was an unplanned initiative that arose as a result of our reflections about the previous semester’s Program Orientation and School Welcome initiative iterations. Development of this initiative was only possible due to the previous experience of the project team, and the diminished scale of programs and students involved in the intake period.

The tool enabled us to test how we might best build legacy resources in future – in terms of form, design and content – to affect improved understandings of commencing student cohorts amongst the School’s staff. We firstly collated all staff involved with the undergraduate student experience into a School-wide document, which included Program Directors, Selection Officers, professional staff contacts, and for the first time in the School’s history – relevant Year Level Advisors and Orientation Coordinators. We then collated and triangulated each program’s mid-year selection process, articulation pathways and admissions data together with enrolled student demographics into a series of accompanying worksheets in the same document.

In the process of developing the tool, we realised we had achieved the unanticipated outcome of providing new comparative and holistic insights into selection officer workloads across programs, as well as a preliminary baseline analysis of the School’s undergraduate admissions, selection, enrolment and retention trends. For instance, we were able to understand how the Direct Admissions processes impacted application to enrolment conversion rates (as opposed to offer to enrolment rates). Similarly, we were also able to understand the corresponding impacts on Selection Officer workloads: at a time when most program colleagues were on leave, the staff carrying out selection were also expected to carry out other significant program management tasks (e.g. manage student progress, enrolments). This realisation lead us to conclude that often there is little financial return on time invested by Selection Officers at program level, which often impacted student transition experiences overall for commencing mid-year cohorts. This exercise also allowed us to gain further insights into other more intangible organisational barriers that impact on both the School’s resources and the FYE.

3 These videos are available online from the project website, and have already gained much acclaim from senior levels of the university in late 2012. Go to: www.rmit.edu.au/mediacommunication/belonging-project/outcomes
School Welcome Session Event Collateral

Two iterations of this initiative allowed us to develop a suite of working documents and templates that have proven they greatly assist School staff to administer these events into the future. The most effective administrative resource developed out of our 2012 experience, was a strategic communications plan for the School’s orientation events across an academic year. Our evidence strongly points to this communications plan working well. With minor refinement in its 2013 implementation, the strategic communication plan could possibly be cited as best-practice at RMIT.

A much more visible outcome of our Coordinated Orientation Week Initiative for staff and students was the production of a promotional video for the School. We worked with a recent School graduate from the Media program to produce this collateral, which was designed to frame the School Welcome Events by:

* showcasing student work across a variety of professional disciplines
* increasing student awareness of the range of programs offered by the School
* increasing student awareness of interdisciplinary connections and opportunities through curricular and extra-curricular projects.

Based on our evidence this year, both of these resources will certainly help to embed our best practice FYE objectives into the future. However, time will tell how our legacy is impacted by factors beyond our project’s scope.
Appendix 4: School Learning and Teaching Forum Proposal

This proposal was submitted and endorsed to the Learning and Teaching Committee in the School of Media and Communication in November 2012.

Proposal:
The aim of the forum is to support the University, College and School’s strategic directions in Learning and Teaching to enable staff in the School of Media and Communication to engage in a focused conversation about Learning and Teaching ideas and practices in a discipline-specific environment. To this end, we propose a two-day, school-wide event, incorporating a keynote lecture, a range of practical workshops, research sessions, and a showcase of best practice (such as LTIF projects and Teaching Award recipients).

Aims:
1. To position L&T issues at the forefront of minds of teaching staff as they develop curriculum for the year ahead and 2015;
2. To create an environment of sharing and support around innovative L&T practice with outcomes and actions;
3. To provide opportunities and discussion on cross-discipline and inclusive interactions with aims and outcomes;
4. For the messages around L&T to be delivered in a timely and constructive manner;
5. To develop the School’s L&T culture to ensure there are events throughout the year that support and meet staff needs for ongoing PD, and collaboration opportunities.

We know that many L&T activities are offered across the university in a variety of ways, but evidence suggests that very few staff are regularly accessing these services. We believe that if it is packaged in a cohesive, approachable and relevant manner within the context of our school’s particular issues then we will have a greater level of staff engagement.

Proposed Forum Theme:
"Student Engagement through L&T".

Proposed Keynote Speaker:
To be announced.

Session Types:
- Key-note speaker
- Presentations (from other areas at RMIT e.g. Student Services)
- Workshops (in house/outcome orientated)

Possible sub-topics for sessions:
- [workshop] Inclusive teaching: What is it and how
- [workshop] Internationalizing the curriculum
- [workshop] Interdisciplinarity
- [workshop] Applying for L&T awards/funding (e.g. teaching awards, OLT grants, LTF’s)
- Cross University staff presenting examples of [presentation] Staff presenting examples of their scholarship of teaching
- [presentation] University staff presenting examples of relevant LTIF’s
• [presentation] from the Student Learning Center
• [panel discussion] Key principals for Renewing the curriculum
• [panel discussion] 1st semester transition and engagement (where ever it occurs in student lifecycles)

Sessions will be titled as catchy questions, for example: How can I get publications, money, and brownie points for my teaching? (This would cover L&T awards/funding, OLT and LITF’s)

We suggest that the day conclude with the first School meeting for the year, followed by first welcome/social event (e.g. a School BBQ).

Submitted by:
Bronwyn Clarke, David Carlin, Rachel Wilson, Karli Lukas and Lucy Morieson.
### Appendix 5: End of Year Festival Initiative — 2012

#### Case Study Report

**Aim**

To foster a student-focused celebration of achievement and diversity across the School, that engages industry and the wider community.

**Objectives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Provide opportunities to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Students**    | • Meet and inspire first and second year students from within their own disciplinary field through their own work.  
                  • Meet other year-level peers from across the School  
                  • Meet graduating students within and beyond their own professional field  
                  • Develop professional skills in the creation and promotion of their work and/or their peers work  
                  • Develop cross-disciplinary and internationalized skills in the creation and promotion of their work and/or their peers work  
                  • Have a ‘global and connected’ experience in the creation, promotion and final end-user experience of collected student work.  
                  • Benchmark their skills against cohort peers and industry, both within and beyond their own discipline.  
                  • Inspire prospective students |
| **School staff**| • Streamline efforts to reduce workloads for staff  
                  • Strengthen relationships with College (DSC) and RMIT Marketing, etc.  
                  • Streamline coordination efforts to source student work for other marketing purposes (e.g. Open Day and Orientation).  
                  • Leverage the School’s industry connections across all programs  
                  • Leverage potential for curriculum-based interdisciplinary student projects between programs across the School.  
                  • Leverage potential for future projects involving industry partners, partner providers, School-based researchers, etc.  
                  • Attract prospective students to the School (especially low SES applicants) |
| **Marketing staff** | • Better understand the diversity of events, and to adopt a more inclusive approach to marketing these.  
                       • Streamline coordination efforts to source student work for other marketing purposes (e.g. Open Day and Orientation).  
                       • More readily source and produce feature stories about students, staff, projects, etc.  
                       • Work with staff to review discipline-specific marketing avenues to ensure the School’s programs, staff and students are more effectively marketed to the wider RMIT community, prospective students and industry. |
**Implementation Strategies**

1. Establish and facilitate of a School-wide working party;
2. Coordinate a pilot initiative that maps and publicises the School’s end of year events and exhibitions under an overarching cohesive, unified brand (e.g. a School-wide brochure, poster campaign, website); and
3. Measure impact of the pilot initiative.

**Evaluation Methods**

We measured what success and impacts our interventions had on the development of the School’s EOYF initiative as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Objective</th>
<th>Evaluation Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Produce impactful EOYF branded marketing collateral for the School’s staff and students</td>
<td>• Staff feedback&lt;br&gt;• Student feedback&lt;br&gt;• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased attendance at School EOYF events</td>
<td>• Staff feedback&lt;br&gt;• Student feedback&lt;br&gt;• Observation&lt;br&gt;• Number of EOYF catalogues taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase traffic on School’s EOYF event websites</td>
<td>• Google analytics results on College Festival website&lt;br&gt;• Staff and student feedback&lt;br&gt;• Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase traffic on School’s EOYF event social media pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in coverage of School’s EOYF events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

All results for this initiative have been outlined in the body of the 2012 Final Report.

**Outputs**

**School EOYF Working Party**

This group was established in April 2012, and a total of four meetings were held over the 2012 academic year. All undergraduate and TAFE programs were invited to attend. We also invited the School Communications Officer and DSC Marketing staff to attend and contribute.

These meetings were instrumental in developing shared understandings about what activities programs undertook, as well as why, how and when. They also allowed us to gain early insight into the barriers that continually impede successful implementation of end of year program events. The act of bringing together this diverse staff group also provided opportunities for new collaborations between programs (mostly in terms of resources) – this was the first time this had occurred since the School’s formation in 2009. For all of these reasons, it is hoped that the working party continues to meet into the future, if at least to foster collegial interdisciplinary initiatives across the School’s programs.

**School EOYF Branding and Event Collateral**

The working party, which included industry experts in Advertising and Design, established that the School-level umbrella branding developed was high standard and likely to be effective. A poster and guerilla sticker campaign was thought to best support the branding launch, running alongside an event catalogue that mapped all School events as a stylised pocket-sized calendar. Given the short turn-around time and resources made available to this aspect of the initiative, this outcome was a major achievement.
As the collateral was distributed around the School much later than we had anticipated, further interviews with staff and students is highly recommended if we are to gain deeper insights into this outcome’s success and impact. This recommendation also comes in the wake of feedback obtained from the College of Design and Social Context’s 2012 Creative Festival Report, which claims our pilot had a negative impact on this wider university initiative to collate and publicise end of year student events.

**Online Collateral**

We decided not to develop a web or social media communications campaign due to limited time and resources and staff support within the School. Early discussions with DSC Marketing about the Creative Festival campaign was also a factor in this decision as we realised that our attempts would be a duplication of wider university-level efforts by Marketing staff.

To support the Creative Festival campaign, we asked staff and students not to include our Junction branding on any website collateral to facilitate clean evaluations of both EOYF initiatives.
List of Diagrams, Figures and Photographs

Diagrams
- Diagram 1: The Belonging Project Narrative Model of Student Engagement
- Diagram 2: MC2015 Review Project Model – ‘Belonging’ becomes central to an improved student experience through intentional curriculum design
- Diagram 3: Third generation model of FYE policy and practice (Kift, Nelson & Clarke; 2010)

Figures
- Figure 1: Student Focus Group Sample 1 (2011) – Challenges to a student’s transition to university
- Figure 2: Student Focus Group Sample 2 (2011) – Too cool for school: challenges to a student’s social transition to university
- Figure 3: Staff Workshop 3 Sample 1 (2011) – Student transition trigger points tracked against key university dates
- Figure 4: Student Focus Group Sample 3 (2011) – Challenges to a student’s academic transition to university
- Figure 5: Staff Workshop 3 Sample 2 (2011) – Mapping the Cohort Day Out against the academic calendar to enhance student transition

Photographs
- Enjoying the ‘Big O-Day’ at RMIT University
- The Student Atelier space before refurbishment (2011)
- School of Media and Communication students: ‘Big O-Day’ (2012)
- Students mingle at the School Welcome Session (March, 2012)
- Senior student discussion panel – An informal approach. Mid-Year Welcome Session (August, 2012)
- Free food: a great social facilitator at the School Welcome events
- The Student Atelier space – The hub of student transition activities: Mid-Year School Welcome (August, 2012)
- The Photography Program Cohort Day Out (2012) – The open-air tutorial experience
- The Creative Writing Program Cohort Day Out (2012) – An urban experience
- The Creative Writing Program Cohort Day Out (2012) – Problem solving at the Queen Victoria Market
- Small, unsupervised group interactions – Proof of early cliques
- The Student Atelier space before refurbishment (2011)
- Enlisting students as co-creators was crucial to the success of the Student Atelier space refurbishment
- The Student Atelier space – From empty white cube to 24/7 hub of student activity
- Junction ’12 artwork – A result of a co-creation with final-year design students