

Enabling parents, partners and friends to collaborate in student transition and success

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When students are the first in their family to enrol at university, enculturation into university life is an essential element of academic language and learning development. Now, with the widening participation agenda creating more flexible entry points to Australian universities, not only is there an increasingly more diverse student population and greater numbers of “first generation at university” students, but many students are more dependant for longer on their parents, partners and friends for everyday support. The capacity of family members to understand how they might provide their students with appropriate support may be limited, especially if they have no prior experience of university. This paper argues for an updated view of enculturation in which academic language and learning staff broaden their scope to educate and enable other stakeholders in students’ lives to help create conditions necessary for their academic success. The paper outlines a collaborative transition initiative at the University of South Australia driven jointly by an academic language and learning coordinator and counsellor in the Learning and Teaching Unit and involving three independent services units. This project uses a multi-modal approach to encourage parents, partners and friends to see themselves as active participants in the university experience.

Key words: widening participation, university transition; first year experience, first in family, parents, enculturation, academic language and learning development, cultural adaptability.

1. Introduction

Increasingly in recent years, global mobility, broadening of university admission criteria and twenty-first century shifts in social context have dramatically altered the student profile of Australian universities. Students entering university now bring with them complex social, economic and filial relationships which position them as members of multiple communities with ongoing responsibilities, all of which can affect their attitude to and engagement with their study (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). Consequently, it is time to build upon current approaches to transition that focus primarily on the relationship between the new student and the university by adopting an approach to transition that caters to the reality of students’ lives as they commence university. The idea that we should focus on acculturating students to their new environment (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988) overlooks the presence of influential others who can either support or frustrate students’ study aspirations. Transition discourse must also reach out to students’ parents, partners and friends and acknowledge their need to understand the learning and teaching practices that lie at the core of the university experience. Academic language and learning (ALL) staff, with their history of “involvement in university transition and work with

staff and students across a wide range of programs”, are well placed to contribute to transition initiatives that enhance student chances of success (Johnston, 2011, p. 146).

This paper discusses a current collaborative initiative at the University of South Australia (UniSA) that extends transition resources to parents, partners and friends (PPF) of new students. Inspired by a series of evening sessions for parents, partners and friends, the most significant output of this enterprise has been the publication of a *Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends of UniSA Students* (University of South Australia, 2013c) that illustrates the realities of student life for these influential stakeholders in the student experience. The project is based on successful collaboration between multiple teams across the University, in particular Academic Language and Learning and Counselling staff in the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU), administrative services staff in Student and Advisory Services (SAS), and the Marketing and Development Unit (MDU). The paper discusses various impetuses for initiating parents, partners and friends into the demands of university, the development and dissemination of the guide, and the value of multi-team collaboration to this project.

2. Shifts in the student profile

In recent years, the student population has changed significantly due to “widening participation policies, internationalisation, technological developments, a broadening of academic entry requirements, a rise in occupations requiring tertiary qualifications and changes in the demographics of Australia’s population” (Dunworth, 2010, p. 7). Not only is there a broader diversity of students, including more first in family to enrol at university, but new pre-entry and pathways programs have opened the university to many students who would have previously been excluded. At UniSA the growth in student numbers entering such pathways programs has been rapid, with enrolments at the newly established UniSA College increasing in their one-year Foundation Studies program from less than 400 in 2011 to almost 1000 in two main programs in 2013 (University of South Australia, 2013a). The College programs attract recent school graduates wanting to improve their pre-entry qualifications for their degree of choice, adult students retraining for new careers, some students with incomplete secondary education, and a high proportion of recent immigrants and refugees needing to improve both their English language proficiency and insights into Australian culture before entering mainstream programs.

The current social trend that sees adult children living in the parental home longer, when combined with the Australian student preference for local universities (Keevers & Abuadha, 2012), impacts on student attitudes towards and expectations of university. Unlike America and Europe where it is more common for students to live and study away from home, the majority of Australian students, and especially students of low socio-economic status (LSES), attend local universities and live with family or friends. While this is partly a cost-saving measure resulting from reduced government support for students (Devlin, James, & Grigg, 2008), it also reflects the higher levels of family interdependence seen today (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Large numbers of university students of all ages now combine study and paid work, with some supporting both themselves and their family (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011). Many, especially migrant and refugee students, continue to play important roles within their family and community and have complex, multi-layered domestic lives which compete with university for their time and attention (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). These competing interests and responsibilities can result in students minimising their time spent on campus (Zimitat & Sebastian, 2007) or exploring more flexible study options (Devlin et al., 2008). Both of these actions make it more difficult for students to develop the university-based friendship groups which inculcate a sense of belonging to the university or a discipline-based learning community (Tinto, 2003; Keevers & Abuadha, 2012).

The overall effect of these changes on students is significant. Whereas higher education institutions tend to see university entrance as the start of a new phase in a student’s life, students are more likely to consider it as simply a different stage of education and expect “to fit study into their lives” (Zepke et al., 2011, p. 229). Where once the majority may have shifted on to new friendship groups at university, now various social networking technologies encourage

students to both maintain and extend their pre-existing friendship groups (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). In fact, “inclusion and success in this new society is premised on students being able to function effectively” in this way (Kalantzis, Cope, & Fehring, 2002, as cited in Johnston et al., 2009). Apart from students who have moved away from home to study and therefore depend on new university-based networks, others may treat university as simply an add-on to an already full and busy life. It follows then that “what students do outside of university is of considerable importance, for this directly impinges upon the time, energy, and motivation students have for their learning” (Devlin et al., 2008, p. 114).

The effect of these changes on universities that are now expected to cater for a broader range of educational needs is profound. Recent changes in the federal funding model have further heightened the focus on engaging first year students with academic expectations and adaptation to their new environment as a means of improving student retention and success. This has encouraged universities to provide more comprehensive transition and early intervention programs, expand the provision of flexible delivery of courses to cater better to emergent needs, and improve facilities and services to increase student satisfaction (Krause & Coates, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

3. Influential others

With so many students leading complex lives, parents, partners and friends have increasingly become key stakeholders in the university experience. Parents of school-leavers, for example, may expect to build on the influential role they have played at the point of university and program selection (Briggs, 2006) by having more sway on academic achievement (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Adult students too, especially regional adult students, are strongly influenced in their choice of program and campus by location and their family needs (Ellis, Watkinson, & Sawyer, 2008).

Students’ significant others can exhibit a spectrum of aspirations and perceptions about university, ranging from being highly supportive to anxious, especially when students are the first in their family to attend university. Burgoyne and Hull (2007) explain that parents in immigrant families where there is little understanding of the nature of university education and culture can be over-protective, fearing the loss of “their children through some imagined harm, or of losing their children to the new culture” (p. 79). Others can be very aspirational, encouraging students to attend university, but their unrealistic expectations also putting students under such pressure that it sabotages any chance of success. For example, it is not unusual for students from refugee families to be expected to succeed academically while maintaining high levels of employment to secure economic necessities for the family, or they may be required to carry “the additional financial burden” of supporting family members left behind in their countries of origin (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007, p. 60). At UniSA, students are commonly advised that each course (known as subject in some other institutions) they undertake requires a time commitment of at least 10 hours per week, inclusive of in-class contact time, set reading, independent study and revision, and assignment work. Hence a full-time study load of four courses would entail at least forty hours of study per week. However, parents, partners and friends who are not familiar with how university works may only see the 10-12 hours of actual contact time per week (for lectures and tutorials on campus) and make unrealistic demands on a student’s time. In these instances, influential others might simply underestimate or not comprehend the significant time and mental commitment that university study entails.

4. Issues affecting students

While academic language and learning (ALL) staff are familiar with questions raised by the new university students attending their orientation programs and individual consultations, it is easy to overlook the fact that so many students, even recent school graduates, feel underprepared for university. Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordström’s (2009) study of the expectations and experience of first year, recent school graduates found that they anticipated there would be differences between secondary school and university but they did not know what differences to

expect. For example, they did not envisage the level of autonomy and individual responsibility expected of them and so many experienced early difficulties (Brinkworth et al., 2009). Some assume a higher level of support than is available, for example support with academic writing that includes previewing drafts, editing and proof-reading. This sort of mismatch between student expectations and reality affects students across the board, locals and internationals, and at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Hellstén, 2004). Gaps between expectations and reality impact when some students drop out, often within weeks of commencing and before attempting any academic work (Krause, 2005). Considering the amount of effort students can invest into qualifying for university entry, this outcome is unsatisfactory (Johnston, 2011).

Studies of student attrition reveal students report social and economic more often than academic reasons for leaving early or failing to thrive (Krause & Coates, 2008). Hence, supporting students at risk of early attrition or failure must consider the social and economic adjustments required of these students and involve input from the most appropriate student services when indicated. Krause's (2005) study of the characteristics of students who drop out and those who persist clearly points to the need for students to not only understand the commitment of university study but also use quite advanced management skills to balance conflicting commitments such as study and work. Many students regularly face choices between work and study with financial pressure driving them to choose work over university commitments (Devlin et al., 2008). Although many are confident they can combine work and study (Brinkworth et al., 2009), the quality of their work is at risk with less time available for study (Zepke et al., 2011). When such issues affect particular groups more than others, such as LSES students, there is potential for existing disadvantage to be perpetuated (Callender, 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). In these situations students need access to a range of advisory services to ensure that the door that students use to enter university does not turn out to be a revolving door (Tinto, 2008).

5. Extending the focus of transition

Currently, the widening participation agenda is one of the main policy directions impacting on the academic language and learning field among others, and one that clearly calls for increased focus on the early experiences of university no matter what the point or pathway of entry. Much of the literature about the first year experience, including that which refers to the teaching of academic literacies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; O'Regan, 2005), uses terms like "enculturation" and "assimilation" to describe the necessary transition to university. However, given the cultural diversity of current cohorts and the multiple stakeholders that continue to influence and inform their identities, a process of "cultural adaptability" is more pertinent. Campbell (2000) explains that this attribute allows individuals to accommodate change without compromising their "continuing connections to primary cultural groups, [or] their dependence on family and community networks" (p. 37). This means that students can be encouraged to make sense of differing information and expectations, and form new cultural identities as needed, to accommodate the past, present, and future rather than replace their existing cultural position with another (Appadurai, 1996; Kraidy, 1999). For staff this would mean incorporating the continuing strands of student lives and the many interconnections that will continue to inform their student experience.

Schreiner's (2010) notion of the "Thriving Student" provides a valuable model for redefining staff aspirations for students from the start of their relationship with the university. Schreiner (2010) describes thriving students as those who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally. The five elements associated with thriving include "engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship and social connectedness" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 4). Thriving students are not only academically successful, but also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that allows them to gain maximum benefit from their educative experiences through to and beyond graduation. Fostering these attributes can be achieved only through a whole of university mindset as distinct from different teams of staff working within their own silos of expertise and operating in isolation.

6. UniSA context

UniSA, with its long standing commitment to equity, generally outperforms the sector in access, participation and success rates for most equity groups (University of South Australia, 2013b, p. 3). It attracts a high proportion of South Australia's first in family students (Luzecy, King, Scutter, & Brinkworth, 2011) and consequently has a very diverse student profile. As well as four metropolitan campuses in and around Adelaide, there are two regional campuses attracting students in the northern and south-eastern regions of the state. In addition, UniSA College, with open entry for Australian residents and flexible modes of program delivery, has further diversified the student profile with many early school leavers, migrants and refugees among its intake.

As part of a broader drive to increase student retention and satisfaction, the University has intensified its focus on orientation and transition over recent years. ALL staff have been integral to various orientation and retention initiatives, working across the University with diverse groups of academic and professional staff and students. Academic Language and Learning Advisers, Academic Developers, and Counsellors, all based in the LTU, have played leading roles in the development of student focussed projects such as the award-winning Information Technology, Engineering and the Environment Orientation Program at Mawson Lakes (Duff et al., 2009), embedding professional team skills in unrelated engineering courses (Johnston et al., 2011), and the current University-wide early intervention project (Johnston, 2011). Through this work they have demonstrated capacity to contribute to "whole of institution approaches" to transition with academic and professional staff.

LTU staff experience of working across the university with diverse groups of academic and professional staff and students has provided staff with a helicopter view of the University's expectations and practices. It has also positioned the Language and Learning staff who have a designated widening participation role to collaborate with others from quite different parts of the university on initiatives that might help shape student expectations "...before they arrive on campus and throughout the critical first year of study" (Krause, 2005, p. 65).

As a central services point for various student services including language and learning, academic development, counselling, disability and careers advice, LTU staff have been able to cultivate a shared understanding of the issues affecting students and a holistic approach to meeting student needs. Consequently, students seeking assistance with a wide range of learning, social, and welfare questions can benefit from a shared knowledge base and cross-referral between various teams. Academic Language and Learning Advisers and Counsellors in particular are known for their insight into student transition and their contribution to orientation and transition programs across the university. This means they can also see that one of the drawbacks of a fragmented rather than a university-wide approach is that their reach can be limited and somewhat haphazard when the uptake of useful transition resources and programs relies on particular programs scheduling transition sessions or students being able to recognise their own needs and access self-help resources, workshops or staff consultations.

7. The Parents Partners and Friends project

7.1. The impetus

In early 2012 a Counsellor in the LTU was invited to develop a Parents, Partners and Friends (PPF) event that would be staged twice during Orientation for semester one 2012. The Counsellor, knowing that the Coordinator: Language and Learning (Widening Participation) would be interested, suggested collaborative development and presentation of this event. This initiative proved the impetus for a more extensive project because both knew from the outset that the attendees would represent only a small proportion of the families and friends of new students. Those living in regional areas or overseas, who could not attend such sessions, had an equal need for tailored information and advice.

Given UniSA's demographics, the audience for this PPF event was expected to be largely associated with recent high school graduates, unfamiliar with higher education, university study and the differences between secondary school and higher education. Staff agreed that the value of the session lay, not simply in providing information, but in recognising members of the audience as significant stakeholders in the transition process and enabling them to better support their students balancing study, work and other life commitments. This would engender wider involvement in ensuring "that student expectations are realistically shaped before they arrive on campus and throughout the critical first year of study" (Krause, 2005, p. 65).

The event was designed to be relatively informal and interactive, with a campus tour preceding an interactive panel session followed by refreshments for panellists and the audience. Attendees were encouraged to speak to each other and pose questions for the speakers. Panellists included academic and LTU staff as well as student participants. The question and answer approach also allowed presenters to collect valuable data on the "hot button" issues for each audience. One session was held at a city campus and the other at a suburban campus north of Adelaide with traditionally low access to higher education (Duff et al., 2009).

Both functions were considered moderately successful because they attracted families unfamiliar with university study including some who had travelled long distances to attend. Despite wide publicity however, these evenings did not attract large numbers. This was not unexpected because such events depend on factors largely out of the organisers' control (e.g. its accessibility to the target group at the advertised times). The University recognised that a more comprehensive approach using its online environment was required to reach a broader audience and enable "just in time" access to information and services.

7.2. The PPF Proposal

The Parents, Partners and Friends Project Proposal, developed by the LTU staff driving the Information Sessions, recommended the development of a focussed online Parents, Partners and Friends (PPF) website that would link to a wide range of existing and new resources relevant to the target group. The project would draw on the experience of the other university services heavily involved with prospective, commencing and current students, SAS: the hub for enrolment and administrative student services, and MDU which is responsible for recruitment, communications and promotional activities. While there were obvious synchronicities in the work of SAS and the LTU, the involvement of MDU added a new perspective from its involvement with recruitment drives as well as its extensive experience in project and publications management. Collaboration between these three units would bring the project an unprecedented capacity to deliver agreed content to the target audiences.

Following acceptance of the Proposal brief by all three units, a working group was formed to develop a new website under the Parents, Partners and Friends banner, and a suite of accessible, useful and more importantly, easily digestible resources. These would identify and convey useful information about university study in general, and UniSA in particular. Initially the first goal was website redevelopment, but this was not possible in the short term, so it was agreed that a guide would be developed first, and published in print and pdf formats in time for the following year's semester one orientation. The new website and other resources would follow.

7.3. The PPF Guide

The development of the *Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends of UniSA Students* (University of South Australia, 2013c) in late 2012 was a complex and detailed process as each of the main contributing groups needed it to serve their purpose. The Coordinator: Language and Learning (WP) and Counsellor wanted it to be educative and informed by their experience of key questions raised in the evening sessions; Campus Central needed to ensure that it provided essential financial and enrolment information; and MDU wanted it to fit into and extend the suite of resources used in recruitment meetings with parents of prospective students and school staff. While all these considerations influenced funding, format, design and length, there was general consensus that the content, tone and style would be coordinated by the LTU staff. The

Language and Learning Coordinator (Widening Participation) and Counsellor were principal authors to ensure its educative focus.

The completed PPF Guide provides readers with sufficient context for understanding what their sons, daughters, husbands, wives, parents or friends experience as university students, the time and mental commitment entailed in their study, and ways they can help and accommodate household and lifestyle changes required for supporting university study. The tone and style ensure usability by a broad audience and

- present the university as a safe and positive environment
- respect the continuing role that parents, families and friends play in sharing responsibility for each other's well-being
- defuse anxiety about university as an alien environment
- introduce the expectation that students will take responsibility for managing their own affairs and provide practical advice about students' new social and educational environment so that readers can accept the university as a valuable aspect of Australian culture
- address unrealistic expectations by making the workload demands of university study explicit for families, especially those expecting students to maintain high levels of employment
- normalise the fact that many students will change enrolment and workload options
- open eyes to the opportunities available to students and
- encourage "a better connect between students and the institution/courses" (Briggs, 2006, p. 718).

The authors realised that to successfully convey messages to parents, partners and friends, the guide had to be comprehensive enough to convey the many aspects of a student's experiences but delivered in a way that would command and hold attention. As the publication needed to be easy to read and appealing for a non-academic audience, the largely text-based guide was designed to be a handy ongoing reference, providing substantial information on each topic that is summarised and illustrated graphically on each page.

The finished *Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends of UniSA Students* (University of South Australia, 2013c), unveiled and circulated in early 2013, is 24 pages long, including internal and external cover pages. A number of these pages are image-based, while others are text-based and others still combine image and text in dynamic ways. These image-text hybrids, developed by an external publisher, were an especially useful means of synthesising wordy textual information, conveying it in dynamic visual form and decreasing the word count. By way of example, diagrams are used to help illustrate the trajectory of a student workload over the thirteen weeks of a semester (see Figure 1 below), the recommended number of hours to devote to study per week and how these hours should be distributed across on-campus and non-contact time, the qualities that make a happy student, and a checklist of important items for students living away from home. Other features include a two page photo spread at the centre of the document used to illustrate activities and attitudes which help make a successful student, a two-page table illustrating the differences between high school and university study, and a short introduction by the University's Vice Chancellor. More text-centric passages cover important topics such as "How many hours of study are required?" and "What do students actually do?" Another section provides detailed examples of ways in which parents, partners and friends can help students adapt to university, by for example providing a good study environment, facilitating computer access, and making allowances for study requirements. In addition to providing this general induction into the university environment, the guide provides brief overviews of UniSA-specific support services – for example, library, language and learning, counselling and security services – and developmental opportunities such as student exchanges.

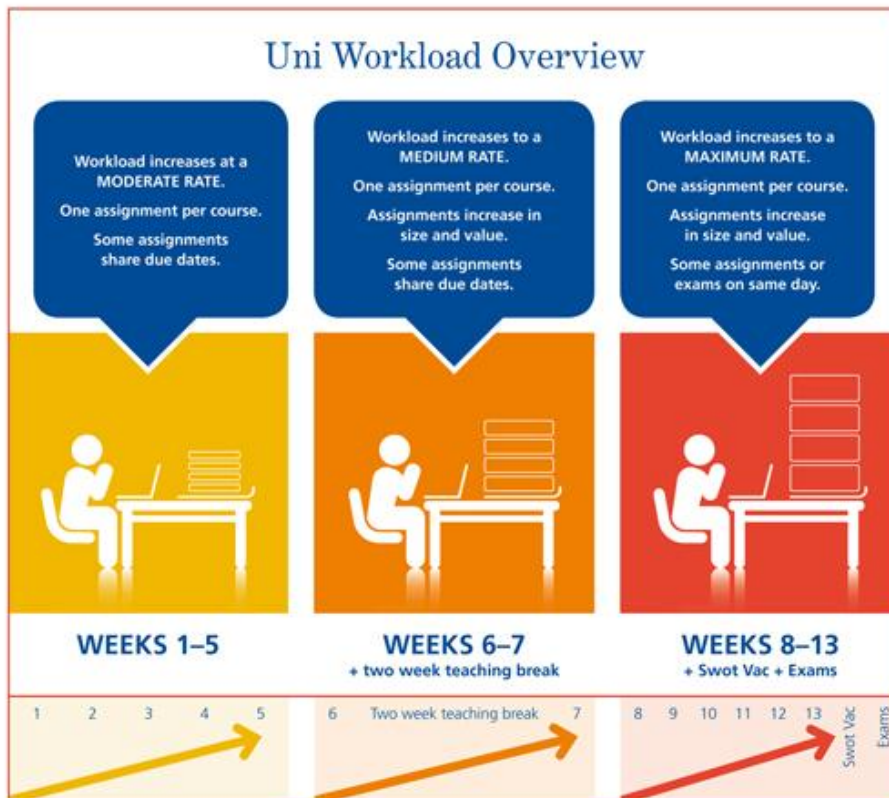


Figure 1. Image explaining a typical pattern of student workload (University of South Australia, 2013b).

7.4. Impact of the Guide

Measuring the Guide's impact through recognised means has proved difficult. External users of widely distributed booklets and online resources have limited investment in providing feedback and are difficult to identify. An online user survey linked to the current Parents and Advisors website has had a very low response rate (5 responses in three months), although the feedback received has been positive. All respondents (three parents and two staff) rate it overall as very good or good. The most popular section is "Getting started at uni" which illustrates the differences between school and university study and explains what is expected of students. The following are typical responses:

Lets me know what they have to do and how to support them (parent)

Allows me to navigate "topics" with my student – removing the perceived parent nagging (parent)

I now feel confident I can assist my student as she navigates her Uni journey (parent)

We need one for students (staff)

It is just as difficult to identify and collect feedback from students about the Guide's impact on their parents, partners and friends. The Counselling Team have been offering the guide to individual students expressing difficulties associated with study in their home environments and several counsellors have received positive feedback from those who have used it to inform their householders about university commitments. This limited anecdotal feedback indicates that adult students are using it to encourage better study support from their partners.

Positive feedback has been received in staff forums such as divisional and UniSA College Teaching and Learning Meetings and email messages to the authors such as:

I looked at your Parents' guide and it is absolutely brilliant, both in content and design ... you have nailed it (staff member with strong rural student orientation)

The main indicators of its impact and value to the University are the growing demand for the resource itself and the flow on of further resource development by the authors. The production of a similar guide specifically for commencing students is underway, as are other requested resources for parents. The Guide is being distributed at key points of parent/staff interaction within the University, used widely at various community and school events for parents and guardians, and in MDU recruitment events. It therefore appears that the Guide fulfils a valuable function in explaining what university study entails among parents, partners and friends of new students.

7.5. Further project work

The authors are continuing to work with their partners in the MDU and SAS on the next stages of the Project and on new work flowing from the success of the Guide. The new website will be the main outreach vehicle for the University to parents, partners and friends of commencing and current students. It will include key information and links to sites of known value, new resources, quick and easy online access to staff providing services and resources, and information about planned events. The development of a companion *Guide for new UniSA students* is underway as a key plank in the "Better Orientation" project recently initiated by the University's new Vice Chancellor. The Language and Learning Coordinator (Widening Participation) is an invited member of that university-wide project working group. Meanwhile, the current PPF project team will be expanded for the development of the website and the new student guide.

8. Implications for ALL

In opening the university to new groups of students, the widening participation agenda has brought in new groups of students, and with them, new communities of influence and potential sources of student support. In general, ALL staff aim to ensure that students have ready, early and easy access to advice that will enable them to thrive while they are at university. In acknowledging the potential of parents, partners and friends of students to influence students, the PPF project and its first product, *The Guide*, has effectively improved the capacity of ALL and Counselling staff to spread key and positive foundational messages about university life, "how to study at university", and "how to succeed". It also promotes the idea that the University works with and for its students. This fresh approach to transition, drawing on our understanding of the first year experience, demonstrates the value of collaboration as the publication effectively pulls together the complementary knowledge and experience of the three student-oriented services teams.

ALL programs, resources and staff that primarily target students from the point of enrolment will not reach the increasing number of students who enrol at university with limited insight into what they can expect or what they need to do to succeed. Some, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and first in family to enrol at university, may be so underprepared for university that they may not even attend orientation. Consequently, some never appreciate what university can offer them or learn how to find answers to their questions. Furthermore, if their parents, partners and friends are equally "at sea" and unable to suggest a way forward, the problem is exacerbated. Some will have little incentive to persist and be at risk of dropping out (Tranter, 2003; Krause, 2005). In other words ALL initiatives that are limited in scope and start at the point of enrolment, ignore important stakeholders and potential allies in supporting students, and are inherently limited in their reach and impact.

Brinkworth et al. (2009) recommend that universities should "seek out ways to incorporate greater intellectual and social integration among the student population" (section 4, para. 8). Instead of framing our work with terms like "academic engagement" and "intellectual

development”, we might explore opportunities to work more holistically with colleagues just as committed to student retention and success. Where staff from various student services groups are collocated as they are at UniSA, they have everyday contact and opportunities to discuss their shared interest in improving services to students. This can lead to deeper appreciation of alternative views of students and the student experience. Collaborative enterprises like the development of the *Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends of UniSA Students* (University of South Australia, 2013c) will include a previously overlooked group of stakeholders in our shared aim of promoting student success. By widening our reach to educate and harness the influence of parents, partners, friends and other key stakeholders in the lives of new and prospective students, we can achieve more and “exert greater influence over the nature of student [and parents’, partners’ and friends’] expectations rather than merely reacting to them” post-entry (Devlin et al., 2008, p. 120). Transition initiatives like the Guide extend the reach and impact of ALL staff, and strengthens their relationships with divisional academics and professional colleagues.

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