



Transition as one step on a transformational journey

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Developing a sense of belonging is intimately linked to a successful transition and to student. The pandemic has exacerbated existing problems with students across the sector reporting difficulties connecting with each other and their universities. This paper reports a simple activity to encourage meaningful dialogue between students and teachers in the first weeks of study. The 'My journey' activity involves students and teachers discussing key points and decisions in their educational journeys. It has been successfully used in-class, and synchronously and asynchronously online. The journeys are also captured through an interactive map to celebrate diversity.

Keywords: Transition, belonging, engagement.

Importance of sense of belonging

Prior to the pandemic, students' sense of belonging had been established as intimately related to their academic success and how much they enjoy their studies and time at university (Freeman, Anderman and Jensen, 2008; Strayhorn, 2018; Eloff, O'Neil and Kanengoni, 2021). Those who feel accepted, valued, fit in and connected to their peers, teachers and studies, succeed. Those who do not are less likely to engage as well with the curriculum, even if it is well designed (Kift and Nelson, 2005). They are less satisfied, achieve lower grades and are more likely to leave. Figure 1 shows the clear relationship between overall satisfaction, grades and belonging at The University of Sydney in 2019. Unfortunately, as Figure 2 shows, the percentage of commencing and continuing coursework students who are positive about their sense of belonging, as measured through the national Student Experience Survey (SES)¹ is historically low at Sydney and across many Australian universities.

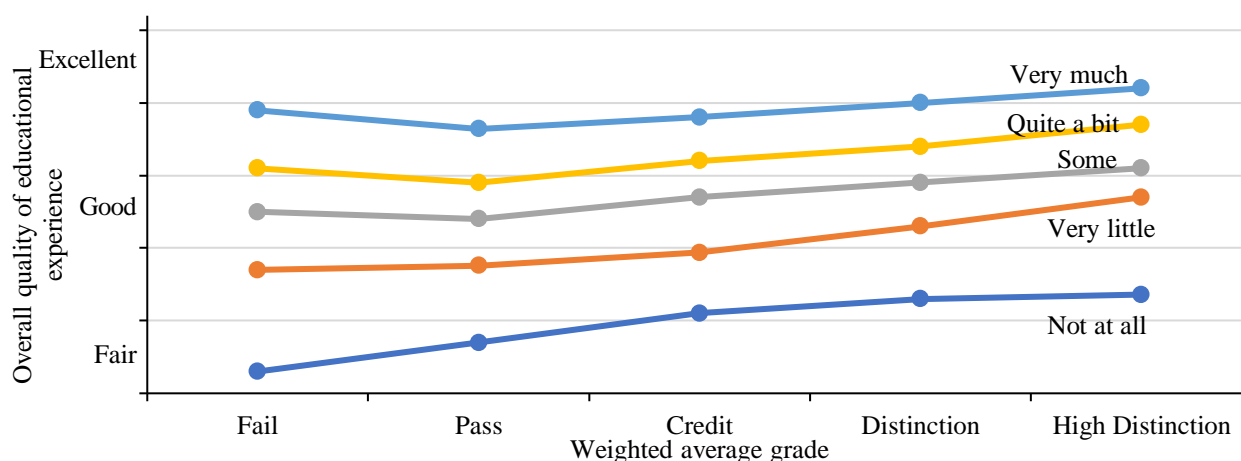


Figure 1: Mean overall quality of educational experience, by weighted average grade and sense of belonging. The overall quality of educational experience and sense of belonging are from the SES. The overall quality has been converted from the SES percentage scale to a 4-point scale (fair, good, excellent).

As widely reported in the media², remote learning and the wider impact of the pandemic led to a striking drop in sense of belonging in the SES for 2020. As shown in Figure 2, there was around a 10% decrease in student satisfaction at Sydney and across the sector. At Sydney, only around 30% of students reported feeling a sense of belonging. Whilst there was some improvement in 2021, the results suggest that students are struggling to make

¹ The SES is a government survey and results are available to the public on the [QILT website](#).

² For example, see articles in [The Guardian](#) and [The Australian](#).

connections and to feel part of our universities. As detailed by Pownall, Harris and Blundell-Birtill (2021), lockdowns and remote learning have further heightened the need to purposefully design relationship-rich educational environments and activities which are aligned to the ‘Five Senses of Student Success’ model (Chester et al., 2013; Lizzio, 2006). Further recognising that remote learning has likely to have exacerbated existing inequities (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2020; Moreno and Gortazar, 2020), it is important that we work to actively encourage a sense of belonging and connection in students (Bridgeman and Weeks, 2021).

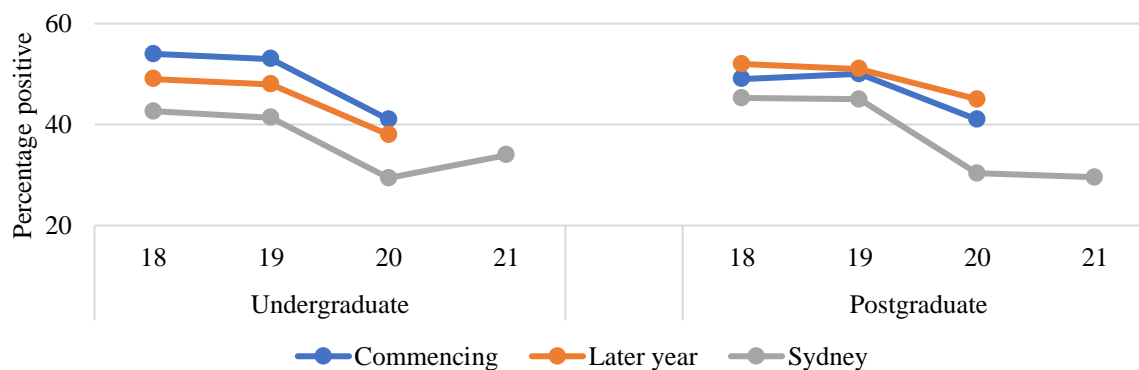


Figure 2: Percentage of students positive about developing a sense of belonging at university, from the SES.

Connectedness: imposter syndrome and sense of belonging

Students’ sense of belonging varies hugely by race, institution type and first-generation status (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). As many of us will know from our own experiences, the first year and especially the first few weeks are where students may struggle to establish a strong sense of belonging (Christie et al., 2008). This can impact the whole of their university experience (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Humphrey & Lowe, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2017) and contribute to attrition rates (Kift, 2015). As Kift & Nelson (2005) and Tinto (1975) have both stressed, the development of a sense of belonging, and transition generally, occurs in the curriculum and in the classroom. As current students have spent a large part of their formative years interacting through devices, opportunities to engage meaningfully with each other and with their teachers have to be intentionally designed into teaching activities. Belonging and resilience are built from real relationships and the first few weeks of class provide the main and potentially only place to achieve this.

Purposefully designed activities

Given the central importance of transition in developing a sense of belonging and in setting students up for success, evidence-based activities have been developed at Sydney and these are embedded in ‘transition units’ in every undergraduate degree, with the aim of ensuring that every new student experiences them as part of the taught curriculum. These activities were co-designed with students and staff from across the institution, using ideas from ‘wise interventions’ (Walton 2014) shown to help develop belonging and overcome the types of difficulties experienced by students new to higher education (Tinto 1975). Table 1 summarises these activities and their purpose. This paper describes the “My journey” activity which is both the most widely used and has proven the most successful in connecting staff and students during the pandemic. The aim of the activity is to provide an “ice breaker” that involves a meaningful conversation between students and teachers highlighting the struggles, successes and worries that all have faced as a result of the decisions and events that has led them to university. It aims to show students that their teachers (and vice-versa) are ‘real people’, who themselves found the transition to university confronting but ultimately transformational.

My journey - fostering a sense of belonging

This activity is simple and yet can be used and adapted to multiple modes and contexts. Ideally it is designed to be done during the first class or in the first few weeks of semester. It is designed to draw out the benefits of a diverse cohort and build lasting and purposeful connections with a shared sense of purpose. It can be combined with an Acknowledgement of Country to recognise the unique places on which our campuses are built and the ongoing connection of the traditional owners with its values and culture. It can be run in small classes (e.g. tutorials) or large classes (e.g. lectures) and online or face-to-face. Although originally developed to encourage meaningful, relationship-rich dialogue, it can also be run asynchronously. The synchronous version has also

been used equally successfully in work meetings as an ‘ice breaker’ activity. Although based on the interventions described by Walton (2014), the idea for the activity came through the authors’ experiences teaching large first year classes, where talking about mistakes and challenges from our own first days at university had proven effective in involving all students. By admitting to our own cases of imposter syndrome, such dialogue had proven useful in building initial relationships with practical benefits for retention and outcomes.

Table 1: Transition activities and their relationship to the 5 Senses of Student Success model (Lizzio, 2006).

Activity	5 senses	Brief description
Early in semester		
My journey	Connectedness	<i>Students share and reflect in a meaningful and reflective way on their own journeys to the University</i>
Values affirmation	Connectedness and purpose	Students identify their personal values and the relationship of these values to their life and career goals
Expected norms	Resourcefulness	Students co-develop a set of class norms for behaviour that meets class expectations
Professional purpose	Purpose	<i>Students develop an understanding of what their career-related values are, and how they can be developed whilst at university</i>
Time management	Capability	Students learn how to plan how to manage their time leading to an assessment deadline
Chatterbox	Capability	Students share and reflect on choices made or course content
Middle of the semester		
Academic integrity	Culture	Students develop an understanding of the nuances of integrity, and feel empowered in making future decisions
Facing challenges positively	Capability	Students learn how to approach assessments in a positive frame of mind and reframe challenges as a natural experience
End of semester		
My journey revisited	Purpose	Students reflect on their transition journey and how their studies are shaped by their values and professional purpose

Synchronous version

In the first part of the synchronous version activity, the teacher shares their own educational story by reflecting on the important steps in their journey to the University of Sydney. Teachers are encouraged to be brief (5 minutes), friendly and warm by thinking about:

- The places they have lived, schools (and universities) they have attended
- Their memories of the first days at university and the first 6 weeks (or so) of their time at Sydney – what were they worried, excited or confused about?

An example is available at <https://youtu.be/gu7WB2dG2Sw>. In the story described, the teacher (one of the authors) reflects on a transformational educational journey across institutions in the UK and Australia, as the first person in his family to attend university. The first days at university are described with an acquired realisation of classic imposter syndrome (Gadsby, 2022; Ramsey & Brown, 2018) - a recurring theme in many such journeys described by teachers at Sydney. The story is also designed to encourage humility, openness and empathy. Students are then requested to pair up (with their neighbour in a face-to-face class or in a breakout room online) and to similarly take 5 minutes to tell their story to each other, at a level they are comfortable with.

Asynchronous version

In the asynchronous version, a discussion board thread for each tutorial group is set up and the teacher posts a short piece of writing about their journey along the same lines. Students are then encouraged to post their own journey and to comment on other students' journeys that they find interesting or related to their own. Alongside being an opportunity to develop a sense of community in an asynchronous mode, this is a good opportunity to introduce a short writing task for diagnostic purposes. A text version of the same journey featured in the video linked above is available at <https://bit.ly/journey-to-sydney>.

Capturing class journeys in an online map

To capture and celebrate the diversity of learners, the Google Maps library and API (Google Maps Platform, 2022) was used together with some customised Javascript, server side code and a database. For each course (or

for each tutorial group), students click on their place of origin and then on each important step on their physical and/or virtual journey to Sydney. The journey corresponding to the example above is shown in Figure 3. After submitting, each journey is stored so that the results for the whole class can be displayed together, as shown in Figure 4. Teachers can use this visualisation to prompt discussion and celebrate the diversity that makes our higher education system so rich. Figure 5 shows a ‘heat map’ representation of the whole cohort for 2021.

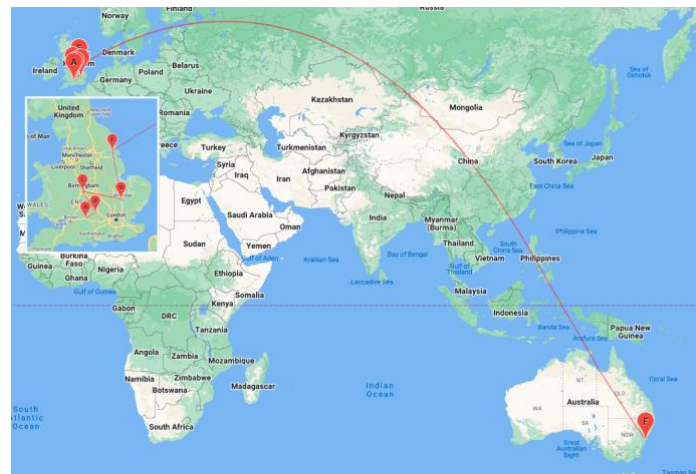


Figure 3: Example of a journey to Sydney, captured on Google maps. The inset shows the details for the teacher’s journey in the UK.

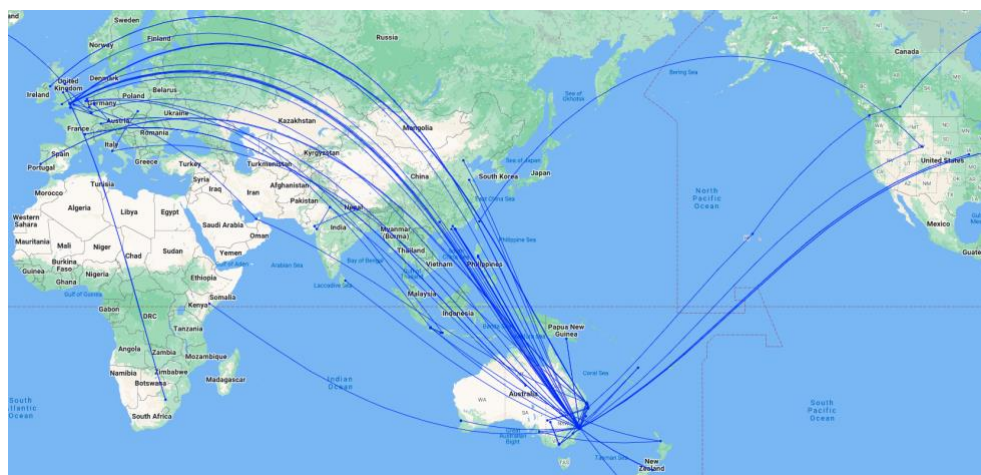


Figure 4: Example of the journeys of a class, captured on Google Maps.

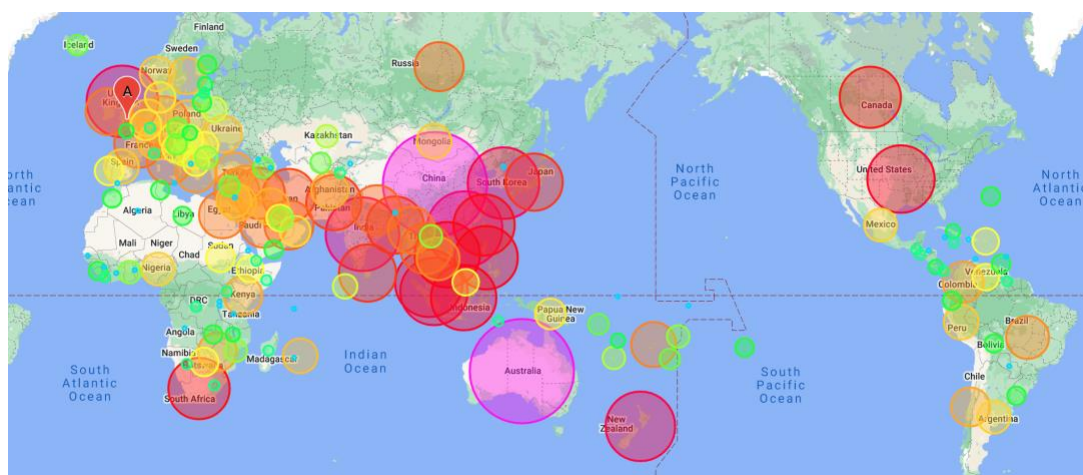


Figure 5: Places of origin for all students at the University of Sydney.

Conclusion

Since the start of the transition initiative at Sydney, the My Journey activity has been successfully implemented in around 30 units of study comprising around 10,000 unique students. Informal student and teacher feedback has been very positive with high levels of engagement in the classes. Plans to measure the effectiveness of the transition activities have been complicated by the pandemic with recent surveys highlighting students' struggles in making friends and developing meaningful relationships. The University plans to analyse data relating to the effectiveness of the transition activities over the next few years.

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