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## **Abstract**

The transition into university presents very particular challenges for students. The First Year Experience (FYE) is a transitional liminal phase, fraught with uncertainty, ripe with potential. The complexity inherent in this initial phase of tertiary education is well documented and continues to be interrogated. Providing timely and effective support and interventions for potentially at-risk first year students as they transition into tertiary study is a key priority for universities across the globe (Gale et al., 2015).

This article outlines the evolution of an established and highly successful Transitional Training Program (TTP) for first year tertiary dance students, with particular reference to the recent 2015 iteration of the program. TTP design embraces three dimensions: physical training in transition, learning in transition, and teaching for transition, with an emphasis on developing and encouraging a mindset that will enable information to be transferred into alternative settings for practice and learning throughout life.

The aim of the 2015 TTP was to drive substantial change in first year Dance students' satisfaction, connectedness, and overall performance within the BFA Dance course, through the development and delivery of innovative curriculum and pedagogical practices that promote the successful transition of dance students into their first year of university. The program targeted first year BFA Dance students through the integration of specific career guidance; performance psychology; academic skills support; practical dance skills support; and specialised curricula and pedagogy.

## **1. Introduction**

The transition into university presents very particular challenges for students. The First Year Experience (FYE) is a transitional liminal phase, fraught with uncertainty, ripe with potential. The complexity inherent in this initial phase of tertiary education is well documented (Harvey et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Krause and Coates, 2008; Kochanowska and Johnston, 2008; Nutt and Calderon, 2009; Lumsden et al., 2010; Mehdinezhad, 2011; Kift 2009; Kift & Nelson 2005; Kift et al. 2010; see also Kift & Field 2009; Kift 2008) and continues to be interrogated. Providing timely and effective support and interventions for potentially at-risk first year students as they transition into tertiary study is a key priority for universities across the globe (Gale et al., 2015).

This article discusses the evolution of an established and highly successful Transitional Training Program (TTP) for first year tertiary dance students, with particular reference to the recent 2015 iteration of the program. Designed in response to consistent and sustained staff observations of first year student engagement, an examination of first year student results, and student feedback, this latest version of TTP draws from current research and thinking around FYE

programs, emphasising sustained and holistic approaches to student transition into tertiary study.

Students looking to study dance at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) have the choice of two very different courses: the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) Dance Performance course and the BFA Dance course. The BFA Dance Performance course prepares students for performance based careers and as such, this prescriptive course provides a clear trajectory for students. The BFA Dance course is far less defined, providing exciting opportunities for students to move into and create, diverse dance-based careers. Without the same clear career focus that the Performance course offers, some first year students struggle to find relevance and meaning within the BFA Dance course, leading to a general dissatisfaction with the course and higher levels of attrition. QUT Dance lecturer, Avril Huddy, developed the recent iteration of TTP to address first year student engagement and retention issues within the BFA Dance course.

TTP design principles embrace three dimensions: physical training in transition, learning in transition, and teaching for transition, with an emphasis on developing and encouraging a mindset that will enable information to be transferred into alternative settings for practice and learning throughout life. These key design principles are privileged in this latest version of TTP which has been extended from its traditional format of four weeks, to a semester long program, facilitating the integration of key TTP themes, activities and approaches within all semester one Dance units.

This current program targeted first year BFA Dance students through the integration of specific career guidance; performance psychology; academic skills support; practical dance skills support; and specialised curricula and pedagogy. The aim of this program was to drive substantial change in first year Dance students' satisfaction, connectedness, and overall performance within the BFA Dance course, through the development and delivery of innovative curriculum and pedagogical practices that promote the successful transition of dance students into their first year of university.

## **2. Research Methodology**

In shaping this research, an interpretive paradigm with a bifocal viewpoint was implemented, to investigate the efficacy of an extended TTP as a vehicle for effortless transition into tertiary dance training, and to hear the participants' unique voices and experiences within the Program. Furthermore, it was informed by the multiplicity of previous studies in the field that have explored the FYE (Kift & Nelson 2005; Kift 2008; Kift 2009; Kift & Field 2009; Kift et al. 2010).

This research project embraced a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, celebrating the diversity of experience, knowing and difference amongst the participants acknowledging that

‘...learning is a process of individual construction of personal knowledge, rather than an assumption that the teacher’s knowledge of a subject can somehow be transferred or copied into the minds of the students in a class.’(Taber 2011:118)

The research utilised evidence-based qualitative and quantitative research methodologies including questionnaires, focus groups and ongoing reflection by the researcher and teaching team to measure the impact of the project upon student learning and performance.

Twenty-six female first year BFA Dance students, between the ages of 17 and 22, volunteered for this study. Data was collected using two mechanisms: a questionnaire and a focus group. The Student Engagement Questionnaire (Kember, Leung & McNaught 2005) was utilised in this study because it provides insight into not only students’ perception of the teaching and learning environment but also their perception of the influence of this environment on the development of eight generic capabilities: critical thinking, creative thinking, self-managed learning, adaptability, problem solving, communication skills, interpersonal skills and group work, and computer literacy (Kember, Leung & McNaught 2009).

Student participants completed the questionnaire at the end of week four of semester one, and again in week ten of semester one, just prior to sitting their exams. The questionnaire was completed at the end of week four as this marked the end point of the traditional four-week intensive program and signaled the beginning of the trial to expand TTP across the entire semester. Of the twenty-six students involved in this study, fourteen students volunteered to participate in the focus group at the conclusion of the study. All twenty-six participants provided signed informed consent in accordance with the institutional Human Ethics Research Committee’s approval for this study.

### **3. The First Year Dance Student Transition**

#### **3.1 Background**

QUT Dance courses were established in the early 1980’s utilising traditional tertiary dance models from the UK and USA. The philosophies and practices embedded by staff during these formative years underpin the current innovative courses and practices, ensuring QUT’s position as a leader in tertiary dance training in Australia (Boughen & Huddy 2009).

As a boutique area of study, QUT Dance courses operate with small numbers of students and demanding teaching and learning schedules. Low student to staff

ratios, high contact hours, and face-to-face delivery formats afford very particular and intimate teaching and learning environments. Within QUT these conditions are specific to the Dance, Acting and Technical Production disciplines and replicate the industry conditions and protocols within which the students will work. Although these conditions also duplicate in-part, the students prior dance training, where typically they are one of few students in a class, participate in many hours of extracurricular dance training per week, and develop a reasonably intimate relationship with their dance teacher, the transition into full-time tertiary dance training is difficult for many.

Entry into the tertiary dance training environment marks, for many dance students, a shift from amateur dancer to professional dance artist. The prospect of translating hopes and dreams into the realm of possibility is laden with excitement, pressure and anxiety. Key to this shift of focus and approach is a re-evaluation and understanding of dance studio practice. The dance studio is the creative meeting place for dance artists. Within this professional space autonomy, creativity, problem-solving skills, and high-level verbal and non-verbal communication, negotiation and analytical skills are prized and considered integral to the success of the choreographic process within a creative ensemble (Crampton 2005). These skills are nurtured within the university environment and across the entire undergraduate Dance degree, through a unique and considered approach to the design, delivery and integration of dance theory, practical dance activities and assessment.

Although Tertiary dance training occurs within similar structures and settings as those experienced in pre-vocational contexts, the experience of the dance student is often very different. Difficulties arise for those first year dance students transitioning into tertiary training who are primarily extrinsically motivated. These students are often passive learners schooled in the traditional autocratic approach to dance teaching. Here, class goals, expectations, progress, pace and focus, are teacher directed and group oriented. Curriculum is prescribed with very little consideration for individual learning styles or needs. This approach to dance training is widespread and fails to prepare the dancer to successfully meet either the current physical and intellectual demands of tertiary training or those of a professional dance artist. Without an understanding of self-reflective practice and autonomous learning, many first year Dance students find the complex ecosystem of the tertiary dance studio difficult to negotiate.

### 3.2. Student Transition: a holistic approach

Dance student wellbeing has long been a departmental priority with specific approaches and activities integrated at both a whole of course and unit level. Within individual units, Dance staff implement many activities to support student participation and success. These include a focus on the development of a

community of practice, nurturing a sense of belonging within the students as individuals and as important members of their cohort; providing multiple opportunities for feedback and feed-forward; early-warning systems for at-risk students, personalised, individual contact via face-to-face meetings and email; and scaffolded learning activities connected to timely and relevant assessment.

At the whole of course level, staff mentor individual year groups providing important pastoral care; students have access to the PASS (Peak Achievement Skills and Strategy) team including specialist performance psychologists and physiotherapists; staff participate in regular Professional Development activities regarding dance teaching practices; and holistic student learning is recognised through the inclusion of alternative approaches to dance teaching and learning, i.e. Mindfulness Meditation, Tai Chi, Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Technique. Despite these ongoing investigations into the particular and complex challenges encountered by dance students entering the university system, many students continue to struggle with the transition.

The Transitional Training Program (TTP) was developed in 2004, in response to ongoing staff observations of students' struggles to adapt to the demands of full-time tertiary dance training (Boughen & Huddy 2009). It marked a substantial shift in the approach of Dance staff to this important issue. TTP is based on the sports model of periodization used in the training of elite athletes. Periodization privileges the whole person and is an approach that incorporates the physiological, psychological, biomechanical and skill development of an individual: the sum of the whole (Wyon 2010: 67). Although, operating within a narrow jurisdiction, the holistic approach to student wellbeing underpinning the QUT Dance first year transition intervention has been endorsed by the findings of many significant Higher Education research projects, for example, The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009 (James et al. 2010) and The Australian Learning & Teaching Council's Good Practice Report: Student Transition into Higher Education (Gale & Parker 2011).

TTP content changes from year to year and is somewhat dependent on cohort needs and availability of staff. Cross training content may include pilates, yoga, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, conditioning, performance psychology, massage, imagery and visualisation classes, Latin dance classes, funk and hip hop classes, aqua aerobics, aerobics, kick boxing and aero box, nutrition, music and teaching and learning theory. The importance of warm-up and cool-down practices is embedded in all classes alongside basic functional anatomy, through guided practice. Central to the design of TTP is the suspension of formal dance training for the duration of the program. This period is key to creating the space for students to experience and consider their bodies differently, through engagement with alternative, complimentary physical practices. Specialist instructors and trainers with dance backgrounds create and deliver the Program

activities.

Technique labs are fundamental to the program. Using a somatic approach, elements of ballet and contemporary techniques are scrutinized and often experienced or considered anew. Using experiential activities and partner work, students spend time identifying their habits of doing, thinking, hearing and being in the dance studio (Boughen & Huddy 2009). Reflective practice is encouraged and students write journals documenting their learning journey. Central to these reflections is the identification of destructive or unhelpful patterns of movement, approaches that will limit their progress or put them at risk of injury, alongside the identification of new insights and ideas, helpful imagery and new movement experiences.

The TTP sessions offer students multiple access points and pathways for learning, facilitate shared understandings and provide an excellent trigger for discussions involving more complicated issues of performance and aesthetics. This holistic approach to dance training contrasts the traditional academic approach to teaching and learning which atomizes learning into small elements. Although a relevant and common approach in dance for basic skill acquisition, this method discombobulates rather than synthesizes the learning, promoting the mastering of individual skills over an ability as Taatila (2010: 55) describes to ‘...control the ligaments between them.’ Of significance to this context is the identification of coordination and integration of individual skills, as components of entrepreneurial learning (Rae in Taatila 2010: 55) - coveted skills in the 21st century dance arena.

The resulting pedagogical framework underpinning TTP celebrates student autonomy, creative problem solving and wellbeing. This focus is reflected in the program content which was influenced by information derived from several areas: data from QUT Dance injury records, elite dance and sport performance training research (i.e. Performance Psychology and Periodization), teaching and learning theory, feedback from students and anecdotal information from teaching staff (Boughen & Huddy 2009).

### 3.3 The student population

The BFA Dance course has been identified for two consecutive years through QUT course evaluations, as an at-risk course due to performance indicators (e.g. attrition, student satisfaction ratings). Course entry information and student feedback, have identified that this course tends to be a second preference to the BFA Dance Performance course. The BFA Dance Performance course has a very clear career trajectory. The course structure offers limited opportunities for students to explore other interests outside of the prescribed Dance units. The majority of students are very comfortable operating within these boundaries as

they mirror traditional professional dance training and practices, and reinforce the value proposition promoted by their private dance studio training.

Until recently, the BFA Dance course has traditionally provided a clear pathway into Dance Education. This version of the course, like the current BFA Dance Performance course, was prescriptive and provided little room for study selections outside the required units. Recent changes to the BFA Dance course have resulted in a move away from the singular focus of Dance Education to encompass a broad and innovative view of dance employment. The new course outline is less prescriptive. Students completing this course can undertake majors from a large variety of disciplines. For example, animation, architectural studies, creative and professional writing, fashion, journalism, media and communication, advertising, marketing and public relations. This open structure provides opportunities for students to create their own unique educational pathway and ultimately, dance-based career.

The current BFA Dance course reflects the entrepreneurial nature of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century workforce where success is not reliant on what you know but what you do with that knowledge and how you apply it in novel and innovative ways (Silva 2008). Unfortunately, relevance to the broad 21<sup>st</sup> Century workforce is of little significance to the potential dance student who only wants a career on stage. Additionally, although employment potential is of high concern to parents when considering their children's post-secondary pathways, parents' often struggle to understand what any career involving dance, an activity still relegated to the hobby and entertainment arenas, might look like. For the student with little direction or an inability or refusal to enact their own agency, the BFA Dance course structure can cause anxiety, dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Ultimately, students entering this course with little understanding or awareness of their broader interests and motivations, struggle to thrive.

Despite the breadth of activity within the student support arena offered by QUT Dance, and the depth of its integration throughout TTP, the first year BFA Dance cohort have continued to experience problems during their transition into university that hinder their motivation, performance, success and ultimately, their wellbeing.

### 3.4 Learning and unlearning

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is concerned with the effects of our innate psychological needs and positive developmental tendencies, in conjunction with environmental conditions, on self-motivation, social functioning and personal wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As such, SDT has application to the pedagogical approach and curricula design of TTP. Of significance is the integration, within TTP, of workshops that foster guided student self-explorations of motivation and



personality traits. With the support of expert teachers, the students then investigate the impact of these on their individual learning styles and engagement within the dance studio. These investigations also lead to an examination of the Dance departments teaching and learning environment and culture. They encourage the development of shared understandings and a supportive framework within which students can operate autonomously. TTP content and delivery is responsive and privileges student competence, relatedness and autonomy: essential ingredients for ‘.... facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal wellbeing (Ryan & Deci’s 2000:68)’.

TTP curriculum design, integration and delivery are multi-dimensional. The first dimension, learning in transition, is founded on the recognition of all of our capacities and intelligences and their integration into dance practice. That depth of influence and thought is necessary for a thriving dance culture inhabited by responsible and responsive dance artists. Students are engaged in critical discussions concerning their practice and approach to practice, through multifaceted activities. Reflective practice, performance psychology and teaching and learning theory encourage first year students’ to explore their personal values and self-motivations, and the development of strategic coping mechanisms, organisational skills, communication skills and autonomy.

The second dimension, physical training in transition, outlines information and activities designed to facilitate injury-free physical transitions into the pre-vocational university environment. The educational approach incorporates the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 2006) and the primary role of the body in perceptual and conceptual learning. The application of sports science, anatomy theory, somatics, mindfulness meditation and safe dance practice to the moving body through experientially based curricula stimulates heuristic learning: curiosity, enthusiastic engagement and independence – necessary skills for life-long learning.

The final dimension of the Program, teaching for transition, explicitly conveys the dance department’s expectations and objectives for learning and integrates strategies to facilitate student success. For example, one session focuses on use of language and methods of learning appropriate to the tertiary dance studio. Students are supported as individuals to unpack prior learning experiences through engagement in learning activities that involve investigation into new ways of doing and thinking. This timely introduction to research-led learning is supported by ongoing formative feedback opportunities and forms a thorough basis from which students can progress through their course to achieve a degree of success in each unit.

TTP acknowledges that dancers are kinaesthetic learners. Curriculum encourages embodied learning and kinaesthetic understanding through experiential activities in studio-based teaching environments. These activities and approaches facilitate the identification and deconstruction of familiar movements and concepts, demystify the body and entice students to experience their bodies through movement.

TTP celebrates the transitioning students' knowledge, learning styles and prior learning experiences while attempting to highlight for the individual student, that successful transition relies on the integration and application of new and relevant approaches to learning, alongside a need to unlearn some previous learning and approaches to learning. The ability to '...unlearn and 'forget' certain practices, processes and at the same time learn and embrace others' (McWilliam et al 2006:25) is fundamental to a successful transition into university and considered by McWilliam et al. as essential to a young person's ability to navigate the current employment arena.

Although successful in its traditional structure of four weeks, TTP problematises the first year Dance student transition as temporary, implying an expectation that transitioning students will adjust to their new teaching and learning environment and practices in a very short period of time, if not immediately (Hagan & Macdonald 2000). Current FYE research suggests a sustained and coordinated approach to supporting first year students' transition into university is warranted. In response, the 2015 iteration of TTP provided both an immersive and expanded program. The activities and format integrated into this version of TTP provide the groundwork for more rigorous investigation into the development of specific transition curricula and pedagogy for implementation across the entire first semester of the first year of study in an undergraduate Dance course.

#### **4. TTP 2015: a sustained and coordinated approach**

The aim of the most recent iteration of TTP was to enable a comprehensive transition for students from the established four-week intensive Transitional Training Program, into normal semester activities. Key foci underpinning this process included the desire to embed important TTP principles and activities within all first semester Dance curriculum; provide first year students with more guided and appropriately paced academic and kinaesthetic support; foster a community of practice within the cohort; and, increase student access to staff, resources and knowledge. The resulting 2015 iteration of TTP included a four-week intensive (weeks one to four of semester) for all students entering first year Dance units, and an additional six-week package (weeks five to ten of semester) integrating specific activities at regular intervals across the remaining semester, for BFA Dance students.

The current iteration of TTP was developed in accordance with the approach and theoretical underpinnings of previous Transitional Training Programs. The four-week intensive program included pilates, yoga, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, conditioning, psychology, Latin dance, dance fitness, hip hop, Capoeira, aqua aerobics, nutrition, safe dance practice, Technique laboratories, music and teaching and learning theory. Reflective practice, career guidance and performance psychology were identified as positive contributors to the development of, amongst many things, self-confidence, resilience, motivation and focus. Specific reflective practice, career guidance and performance psychology sessions were designed and integrated into the four-week program with the view to ensure that all students regardless of course, understood the potential of these elements to influence their success as both university students and dance professionals. Additionally, these initial sessions incorporated into the four-week program underpinned the ongoing delivery of the subject matter across the entire semester for the first year BFA Dance students.

The majority of activities within the intensive component of the 2015 TTP were delivered in 90-minute blocks. Students participated in two 90-minute sessions per day, every day of the week for the duration of the intensive. The scheduling of the program is strategic in its intent to mirror the standard scheduling for dance technique units across the semester, and therefore, support students' transition into mainstream classes at the completion of TTP. Moreover, this facilitated the seamless delivery of the expanded TTP within the existing timetable, promoting the recognition of the TTP activities as standard, needing regular and ongoing attention and commitment, rather than unusual: a once only activity.

Activities incorporated within the additional six-week (weeks five to ten of semester one) TTP were also delivered in 90-minute blocks. The content of the activities within this Program included reflective practice, performance psychology, career guidance, academic skills development, and technique laboratories. Of these, reflective practice and the technique laboratories were integrated within the BFA Dance students' weekly schedule due to their ability to foster the continued development of the curious, autonomous individual and a supportive environment that stimulates enhanced performance and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The education and artistic communities value reflective practice as an essential component of engagement within each domain (Yoder 1993; Zeichner 1987). Reflective thinking precedes reflective judgments and promotes, for the artist and teacher, rigorous investigation and meticulous explorations (McCormack 2001). Critical reflection fosters positive self-perception, professional identity, and self-efficacy, relevant skills for success with the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce (Silva 2008). Reflective practice is integral to the first year BFA Dance students' success within

their practical dance units. These students do not participate in daily dance classes. Recalling, considering and synthesising information and feedback between classes is key to these students' ability to retain information, pick up material quickly, repeat and replicate material effectively, consistently perform material correctly and improve from one class to the next. Regular critical reflection is key to this process. Reflective practice promotes the development of curiosity, creativity, innovation and autonomous thinking, transferable to a variety of learning contexts (Dirkx 2006) and enables students to succeed in highly specific situations.

The Dance students' reflective skills are utilised and refined in the Technique Laboratories. These workshops provide a safe and respectful environment in which students can practice their developing critical reflective skills. These weekly workshops provide students and staff with the space and time to revisit challenging dance concepts or movements and unpack relevant pedagogical and curricula issues. Technique Laboratory activities involve the detailed analysis of dance technique, anatomical and biomechanical information, teaching and learning theory and the application of imagery and somatic information. Students often work in pairs or small groups to investigate their individual area of concern or interest. Working in this way encourages students to consider a variety of ways of looking, seeing, thinking and doing within the dance studio. It develops a community of practice within an environment that is often regarded as having a singular focus. During these workshops students develop their communication skills, sharpen their critical analysis and reflective skills, and become more empathic toward their dance learning colleagues. Furthermore, student expectations shift and broaden through the use of pedagogical approaches including guided discovery, inquiry and individualised and small group instruction.

Managing expectations within the first year university Dance environment is difficult because teaching praxis is significantly influenced by traditional dance teaching styles. The first year Dance student, often views that which questions the status quo or challenges the known, with skepticism and reluctance. These students often perceive feedback as personal criticism: criticism of themselves and their previous studio dance teacher. The Technique Laboratories and reflective practice workshops are crucial to initiating student questioning, understanding and development. A lot of the learning within these sessions involves unlearning: dismantling what is understood and reconstructing knowledge. A teaching and learning environment that is supportive and celebrates risk taking and change is key to this process.

For many first year Dance students the student-centred teaching and learning approach utilised in TTP provides a new and unsettling experience that can lead some students to question their motivation and desire to study Dance. With this in mind, the expanded TTP acknowledges the value of providing explicit personal

and professional support through resources external to the Dance team and program. Central to this approach was the integration of the QUT Academic Skills Advisors, QUT Career Counseling Services and the QUT Student Success Program. Access to these adjunct support services was purposefully designed to cater to a variety of student needs and preferences. Students interacted with these services in face-to-face, telephone, and on-line formats.

First year BFA Dance students received support from the QUT Student Success Program through emails and telephone conversations. The QUT Student Success Program employs experienced current students as Student Success Advisers, to provide advice about a broad range of issues influencing student success. The Student Success Advisers highlight the support mechanisms available to students and encourage students, where appropriate, to access them. For example, QUT counselling services, library support programs, language & learning support, disability services, careers counselling, and financial support.

The Student Success Program staff work in conjunction with unit coordinators to design relevant support plans for the students in question. The Student Success Advisers contact individual students by telephone or email to, at the outset, inquire about how the student is going. First year BFA Dance students were contacted during week four and week nine of the semester. These dates were chosen as they corresponded with the University cut off dates for withdrawal from units without academic or financial penalty. Initially, the Student Success Advisers contacted only those students who were flagged as at-risk in a formative creative writing task completed in one of their Dance theory units. These students were asked a series of questions about their general wellbeing and about their progress within the theory unit. They were referred to relevant support services, i.e., Academic Skills Advisors or Counseling Services. The second and final telephone call was made to all first year BFA Dance students. In addition to questions regarding progress, engagement and wellbeing, students were asked if the course was meeting their expectations? Of the twenty-five students contacted, 98% were enjoying all aspects of the course and confirmed that the course was meeting their expectations.

Furthermore, students were very positive about the academic writing and examination preparation workshops incorporated into the expanded TTP. Much consideration was given to the content of these workshops to ensure that they complemented the information already covered within academic skills workshops delivered during the first week of the Dance Theory units. The timing for the delivery of the workshops was also intentional. It was assumed that, although appropriate and practical, the delivery of the initial Academic Skill Development workshops in week one, well in advance of an assessment item, provided little impetus for students to practice, retain or apply important facts about academic writing.

For the purpose of the 2015 iteration of TTP, the QUT Library Liaison and Academic Skills advisor created and delivered two 90-minute academic skill development workshops. These interactive workshops engaged the students in a variety of activities. The first workshop was focused on academic writing skills. Students participated in activities designed to develop their skills in referencing, citing, quoting and paraphrasing. The second workshop discussed techniques to assist students prepare for and complete short answer examinations. Both workshops were directly related to impending assessment items, which in this case were both written theory exams, and were delivered in close proximity to the examination dates.

The final two components of the expanded TTP provided a coordinated approach to student wellbeing and success. The first year BFA Dance students participated in two 90-minute Performance Psychology workshops in week eight and nine of the semester and one 90-minute Career Counseling and Guidance workshop in the final week of semester, week ten. These sessions were incorporated toward the end of the Program to ensure relevant and timely support for students heading into the semester examination block and ultimately, the completion of their first semester of study. The first Performance Psychology session looked at stress and anxiety with respect to, but not limited to, examination preparation and the finalisation of semester one. The final session looked at motivation and asked the students to reflect on what motivates them across a broad range of contexts. This session led seamlessly into the Career Counseling and Guidance workshop, which facilitated the identification of professional interests and career trajectories that complimented student motivation and interests. This workshop was designed to promote student engagement in university life through strengthened alignment with course outcomes and career pathways.

## **5. Findings**

The efficacy of this initiative to drive substantial change in first year Dance students' satisfaction, connectedness, and overall performance within the BFA Dance course and promote their successful transition into their first year of university was measured using qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data was gathered from questionnaires and focus groups to determine the impact of the project upon student learning and performance.

The Student Engagement Questionnaire (Kember, Leung & McNaught 2005) was utilised to assess first year BFA Dance students' perception of the 2015 iteration of TTP. This instrument was chosen because of its ability to provide information on students' perceptions of their development of a set of generic capabilities and their perception of the teaching and learning environment and its impact on the

development of these capabilities (Kember, Leung & McNaught 2009). The questionnaire consists of 37 questions. The first 35 questions employ a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The last two questions are open-ended.

The eight generic capabilities measured in this questionnaire include: critical thinking, creative thinking, self-managed learning, adaptability, problem solving, communication skills, interpersonal skills and group work, and computer literacy. Students' perception of the quality of the teaching and learning environment and its effects on the development of the generic capabilities include: active learning, teaching for understanding, feedback to assist learning, assessment, relationship between teacher and students, workload, relationship with other students, cooperative learning, and coherence of curriculum.

When analysing and comparing the data from the two questionnaires, the general trend was a shift from more definitive responses i.e. 'strongly disagree' (1) or 'strongly agree' (5), to more measured responses i.e. 'agree' (4) or 'only to be used if a definite answer is not possible' (3). The data gathered from the second questionnaire reveals a 74.5% increase in positive responses i.e. 'agree' (4) or 'strongly agree' (5) across both sections of the questionnaire (26 questions). This data also revealed that 17% of student responses remained the same (6 questions) and 8.5% of the responses (3 questions) shifted into the negative i.e. 'disagree' (2) or 'strongly disagree' (1).

The largest shift in student responses concerned their perception of the quality of the teaching and learning environment and its effects on the development of the generic capabilities. Five questions from four of the scales within this component of the questionnaire, namely active learning, coherence of curriculum, workload and assessment, experienced the largest shift toward the positive ('agree' (4) or 'strongly agree' (5)). This data reflects an improvement in student satisfaction of issues that affect their motivation, competence, relatedness and autonomy and suggest that extending TTP to encompass the entire first semester, has resulted in substantial change in first year Dance students' satisfaction of and connectedness to the BFA Dance course.

Of the six questions that experienced no real change in student response, four questions relate to the computer literacy, interpersonal skills and group work and critical thinking scales, reflecting the students' perceptions of their development of some of the generic capabilities. The data gathered for these four questions reflects a predominantly positive perception of the associated scale ('agree' (4) or 'strongly agree' (5)). The remaining two questions in this category reflect student perception of the assessment and cooperative learning scales, two areas of widespread concern for the student population. Interestingly, there was no change in students' overall perception of their computer literacy. The data

gathered from the two questions incorporated within this scale represented the most negative responses ('disagree' (2) or 'strongly disagree' (1)) of the entire questionnaire. The student responses to this scale are not overly surprising given that they are respondents are Dance students: kinesthetic learners engaged in an area of study that primarily involves doing rather than sitting at a computer.

Remarkably, only three of the 35 questions reflected negative perceptions of both students' perceptions of their development of a set of generic capabilities and their perception of the teaching and learning environment and its impact on the development of these capabilities (Kember, Leung & McNaught 2009). These three questions relate to the adaptability scale, teaching for understanding scale and workload scale. The data reflects negative student perceptions of the amount of course work they were required to engage with, their ability to understand content and accept new ideas; three areas of widespread concern for the student population in the lead up to examination periods, which was when the final questionnaire was completed.

The data gathered from the focus group was more descriptive and often quite personal. Students felt that the activities within the expanded TTP had helped deepen their learning, improved their engagement in course material and illuminated connections across units. They described feeling overwhelmed and inundated during the initial four-week intensive TTP and as such, they felt that expanding TTP across weeks five to ten of the semester facilitated their learning as it provided more opportunities and time for them to absorb and make sense of new information. Students enjoyed the variety of information they received but also articulated the benefits of covering the same or similar information from different approaches. For example, in the last performance psychology session the students identified and analysed their personal strengths, interests and motivation. During the career counseling workshop, the students revisited these traits, working to align them and their individual skill set with particular areas of employment.

The pedagogical approaches implemented during the activities within the expanded TTP privileged individualised feedback. The nature of these sessions helped the students to stay focused on the task at hand and provided some good insights into individual problems. The students also enjoyed the facilitated group sessions as they felt these helped to develop a group ethos and create a community of practice. The students reported that the activities illuminated connections across units, deepened the learning and engaged students in discussions that stimulated critical thinking, analytical skills and self-reflective practices. This depth of integration and partnership will ensure sustainability. The following are examples of general comments –

- 'The career counseling session helped clarify my options.'



- ‘The tech labs were really helpful because I got the opportunity for some one-on-one moments in amongst the group work. This really helped me understand feedback I had been given and gave me the space to put things together without the added pressure of being in a dance class.’
- ‘I didn’t realise that I was interested in so many things or that other jobs (relating to dance) were a possibility until the session with the career counselor.’
- The first four weeks of TTP really highlighted what I needed to work on or improve. It was overwhelming. The ongoing workshops gave me the space, after I had calmed down, to make sense of the information from the earlier intensive weeks.’
- ‘The design of the tech labs in week five to ten allowed us to take theory and corrections from previous units and classes and apply them to our dancing. I wouldn’t have done that or at least it would have taken me so much longer to get the same point without these classes.’
- ‘The library sessions were SO helpful. Really valuable.’
- ‘These experiences have helped me work out who I am and what I want from this course.’
- ‘It was really interesting hearing everyone’s ideas for their oral assessment. I enjoyed hearing about what others were struggling with and getting to know a little bit more about what everyone was working on.’
- ‘These workshops have made me feel welcomed, comfortable and confident. I know where to go to get help and who to ask for help.’
- ‘If we hadn’t had the library sessions in these TTP activities, I probably wouldn’t have ever gone to the library. I’ve been back with an assignment for help and the feedback was so detailed and personalized.’

## **6. Conclusion**

This initiative provided sound theoretical data concerning first year Dance students’ transition needs, detailing the variety and examples of student perceptions and experiences during this formative period. The topics, activities and approaches trialed in this expansion of TTP from a four-week intensive to a semester long program have supported the first year BFA Dance students’ transition into tertiary study, and facilitated the integration of key TTP themes into semester one Dance curricula. Expanding the program in this way has illustrated the need to take a semester long, if not year-long approach, to the first year student transition as evidenced by the Dance students’ focus group responses and their engagement in the piloted activities.

Data gathered from the Student Engagement Questionnaire (Kember, Leung & McNaught 2005) highlighted workload, teamwork, assessment and comprehension as areas of concern for the first year BFA Dance students.

Although these issues are common amongst the broader student population, interventions can be enacted within the discipline to lessen the affect of such perceptions. Clear and timely communication between Dance staff regarding unit examination timetables will ensure that assessment items are appropriately spread across the semester. Greater consideration and incorporation of formative assessment within units will provide students with important and relevant opportunities to practice the skills of preparing, presenting, receiving and implementing feedback and reflective practice. Furthermore, more work is required to ensure that all Dance teaching staff thoroughly understand the needs of the first year Dance cohort at this very particular stage of their learning journey, and understand to ensure the integration of the TTP philosophy into all teaching and learning experiences.

Data from the focus group provided more detailed and individualised responses. Access to career counseling and guidance was articulated as a positive outcome of this expanded TTP. Students described this session as having helped them clarify career trajectories and supported their self-identification within the broader dance field. This connectedness to career outcomes can motivate and inspire students, developing a strong sense of belonging, and driving skill acquisition, self-efficacy, meaning making and creative agency while also enhancing student employability (Rooney et al 2012).

The Performance Psychology workshops and Academic Skills Development workshop were well received by the majority of the first year Dance cohort. The students' valued the opportunity to not only unpack their individual concerns and ideas in the Performance Psychology workshops, but also identified the value in sharing relevant issues with their peers. Students reported significant benefits from the Academic Skills Development workshops, experiencing tangible benefits both personally, through increased confidence, and academically, through higher quality work. This supports Brinkworth et al's (2008: 170) claim that students' '...preparedness for study at tertiary level, and, crucially, the institution provides academic support if and when required...', is directly associated with improved social and academic connectedness.

The response to transition as explored in the 2015 iteration of TTP, highlights the potential of explicitly designed curricula and pedagogy to positively influence first year students' experiences and ultimately, their success within the tertiary environment. A program of this type arms the tertiary Dance student with the skills to navigate change, facilitating a holistic approach to learning that will resonate throughout their university experience. If transition is 'the capacity to navigate change' (Gale & Parker 2011:25) then programs aimed at supporting tertiary students' wellbeing through this period, will also promote the development of life-long learning skills.

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