



Australian
National
University

Teaching First Year

Good Practice Guide

ANU Centre for
Learning & Teaching

Education Design Team

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Preface

Starting university is a significant milestone in a young person's life. While it is likely to be a time filled with excitement and new adventures, it can also be challenging for many students. This is, at least in part, because it involves a great deal of change. Students may need to learn new skills to manage their time and ensure they can maintain a study-work-life balance. They will need to understand the norms and expectations associated with studying at a tertiary level. Many will need to find ways to cope with anxiety and stress as they navigate their first year at university. And, since many students relocate from interstate or overseas to study at The Australian National University (ANU), these challenges must be faced alongside the need to establish new support networks and, potentially, adapt to a new lifestyle. Each student experiences the transition to their university studies differently, but most will face some form of challenge in their first year.

This document aims to act as a quick reference guide for academic staff at the ANU. It provides an overview of the six aspects of transition pedagogy discussed in [Sally Kift's work](#), and lists short-term techniques for supporting students as they move through their first year at the ANU. It is hoped that the suggestions here will complement the existing techniques and strategies used by ANU academics to support their students through this foundational period.

Transition



Why it matters

First year courses are where many students are learning what it means to be a university student and a member of a particular discipline for the first time. They are learning how to be independent, self-sufficient learners and figuring out how to balance study, work and life without the support structures of secondary school. It can be an emotional and stressful time for many students. We have a collective responsibility to design and deliver courses in a way which acknowledges the enormity of this life transition and supports students as they learn the ropes.

Short-term techniques

1. Introduce yourself and consider sharing something about yourself beyond your academic life. This can make you come across as being approachable. You might mention what attracted you to your discipline, how you came to be at the ANU and what you like to do outside of work.
2. Provide students with details about how and when they can contact you if they need to, and what kind of response times they can reasonably expect from you.

3. Ensure the first class is positive and memorable, making it an engaging introduction to the ANU, the discipline and the course itself.
4. At the start and end of semester, situate your course in the context of a university degree. In Week 1, discuss what students can expect to gain from the course to help them determine whether it's the right course for them. At the end of semester, suggest how they can continue learning in this area.
5. Be explicit about the expectations and norms of a university course within your discipline. Include advice on study hours, required readings, participation and academic integrity. Remember that each student will adapt to university life at their own pace.
6. Provide guidelines on expectations around communication etiquette, both face-to-face and online.
7. Regularly refer to the class summary to role-model how students can find all of the key information, dates and milestones for the course.
8. Make connections between course content and learning outcomes, the real world and students' future careers.
9. At relevant points in the semester, share practical tips and resources with students (e.g. resources on how to reference, tips for time management.). Direct students to the relevant student services at ANU (e.g. Academic Skills, Access and Inclusion, Student Safety and Wellbeing) and normalise the need for accessing these support services.
10. Ensure tutors are informed on key transition challenges for students and how they can provide support.

Long-term strategies

1. Provide learning materials well in advance to reduce student stress and support them in time-management.
2. Ensure all course content, learning activities and assessments are well sequenced and clearly aligned to the learning outcomes of the course.
3. Consider how you support your students' development of key skills at a program level (e.g. academic writing, critical thinking and problem solving, self-management skills).
4. Consider how the social identity and sense of belonging of students can be developed throughout your course, and the program as a whole.

Diversity

Why it matters

Transition into university can be even more challenging for students from diverse backgrounds. As educators, we have a responsibility to ensure that all students, including those with additional learning needs, can access all learning activities and materials. Understanding who our students are and being aware of the diversity among our student cohort is essential in ensuring our learning and teaching activities are accessible and inclusive of all students. It also means we're less likely to exclude certain students or groups of students.

Some types of diversity are very visible, but others are harder to see and we must avoid making assumptions about individual students or groups of students. Each group of students face their own challenges, and being mindful of these can help remove barriers they may encounter. Specific groups of students who may require additional support include those who:

- are the first in their family to study at university
- come from non-English speaking backgrounds
- are experiencing financial hardship
- have disabilities
- are trying to balance work and studies
- are mature age students
- have caring responsibilities.

Short-term techniques

1. Create a safe learning environment that respects and values the perspectives of each student, regardless of background, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, language and ability.
2. Show appreciation for all students' contributions to class and online discussions and activities.
3. Promote and model inclusive behaviours in all interactions with students. This includes:
 - learning students' names, and encouraging students to learn each others' names
 - welcoming students' backgrounds and experiences
 - avoiding stereotypes
 - allowing students to decide how much of themselves and their backgrounds to share.

4. Make expectations clear about the design of learning activities. For instance, some students may be less familiar with group work activities, so provide clear guidance and expectations and monitor and support as needed.
5. Provide a way for students to share as much about themselves as they wish to (e.g. their goals, their first language, their previous university experience, their work experience, other commitments including work, caring responsibilities, family commitments).
6. Include your students' existing knowledge and prior experiences wherever possible.
7. Make students aware of the diversity within their cohort. This can make them more understanding and accommodating of students with different backgrounds and/or learning needs.
8. Be respectful and patient in all dealings with students.

Long-term strategies

1. Design and use a diagnostic activity to understand the range of background knowledge of your students.
2. Consider setting up a mentor or buddy system, where students are paired with each other for support.



Design

Why it matters

The design of teaching activities and resources can significantly impact the student learning experience, either positively or negatively. Studying at university may be very different from students' previous experiences of education. This difference may be even more pronounced for certain groups of students such as international students and those from rural and remote backgrounds.

Short-term techniques

1. Allocate time at the start of each class to recap what was covered in earlier classes.
2. Begin the class by linking content to learning outcomes, previous content and upcoming assessment tasks. Review this at the end of the class.
3. Create a positive learning environment that facilitates learning. You can do this by:
 - making clear connections between learning activities and learning outcomes
 - being explicit about how assessment tasks align with learning activities and learning outcomes
4. Provide a variety of ways for students to contribute or participate in class activities, (e.g. think-pair-share, digital or paper-based brainstorming, anonymous contributions). Create a safe environment by starting with small interactions in pairs and anonymous contributions before moving into group and whole class interactions. Provide structure around interactive activities.
5. Include follow-up quizzes or short activities to determine how well students have mastered previously learned content (e.g. 1-minute log on, responding to prompts such as What I'd most like support with is ..., What I'm most interested in about this class is ...).
6. Where possible, provide exemplars of class activities and assessment tasks.
7. Provide anonymous ways for students to ask questions about course content and assessment activities.
8. Design your Wattle page so that information is clear, easy to find, and organised logically. Check to see if your School/College has a template or typical conventions in how Wattle sites are designed.
9. Orient students to the ANU digital space and tools that will be used in the course, including a tour of the course Wattle site.
10. Provide information in multiple ways to ensure all students can access and understand the material.

Long-term strategies

1. Adopt a flipped learning approach, allowing students to engage with content at their own pace and freeing up class time for active and/or interactive learning tasks.
2. Ensure teaching approaches and resources are designed to foster independent and active learning for the diverse student cohort.



Engagement

Why it matters

Student engagement with their peers, educators, discipline and the wider university are critical to creating a sense of belonging. This helps build resilience and well-being and makes it more likely that students feel a sense of motivation to engage fully in university life. Conversely, students who struggle to connect can face feelings of isolation, loneliness or anxiety. As educators, we play a key role in supporting students by designing active, interactive and collaborative learning experiences.

Short-term techniques

1. Welcome students to the course and create moments to discover and highlight who they are as a learning community. Encourage them to share where they're from and why they're taking your course. Share your passion for the discipline as a whole and any particular areas of interest (e.g. share an exciting new development in your field).
2. Dedicate class time to allowing students to get to know each other. Use a short activity to help structure the first interactions (e.g. ice-breakers).
3. Set and communicate clear expectations about in-class and online interactions, both spoken and written.
4. Incorporate peer learning where appropriate (e.g. pair or small group activities). Create opportunities for students to learn collaboratively in small groups or pairs throughout the course (e.g. during learning activities, through assessments etc.).
5. Use active learning techniques that ask the students to interact with the content (e.g. think-pair-share, polls, small formative quizzes, discussion groups) and encourage them to make connections between existing knowledge/experience and new content.
6. Create and communicate opportunities for students to talk with you (e.g. at the end of a lecture, in a lab, during office hours, at first-year orientation events), and be upfront about your availability and other commitments.
7. Encourage and highlight the value of students learning together outside the classroom, such as in study groups or peer-assisted learning programs. Highlight relevant university social events or student societies where students can build networks in their discipline.
8. Create online spaces for the learning community to interact with each other, and design activities that motivate students to attend and contribute (e.g. discussion forums, MS Teams).

9. Try to identify students who may benefit from accessing support services. Students who seem unwilling to participate or those whose participation is limited may require additional support.
10. Monitor tutorials and class activities for students who are reluctant or hesitant to contribute. Provide examples of suggested phrases for specific situations (e.g. expressing disagreement in a tutorial discussion).

Long-term strategies

1. Ensure your course design incorporates learning activities and/or assessment items that involve student collaboration and group work. Problem-based, inquiry-based and game-based learning approaches lend themselves particularly well to this.
2. Develop online learning communities that integrate synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences. This design may take some iteration to create an online space that students value and are motivated to engage with.



Assessment

Why it matters

Assessment forms a major part of higher education courses, and as such can have a significant impact on the student experience, both positive and negative. First-year students in particular can encounter unfamiliar assessment types, periods of heavy assessment workloads, perceptual mismatches around assessment and learning and, in some cases, feelings of a lack of support and direction, while at the same time trying to adapt to university life in general. It can be overwhelming for some.

It is important then that we, as educators, do our best to ensure we minimise perceptual mismatches around assessment, support our students as much as is feasible, and create an assessment regime that encourages learning and provides our students with positive feelings towards their first experience of higher education.

Short-term techniques

1. Communicate requirements of assessments clearly, including:
 - goals of each assessment task
 - relevance of the assessment task to the course (or program, if relevant) outcomes and/or future work
 - deadlines and extension options
 - weightings
 - policy requirements (e.g. a must-pass final exam).
2. Remind students of requirements as assessment milestones approach.
3. Refer students to relevant services at appropriate times. This avoids overloading them at the start of semester.
4. Support students at appropriate times (e.g. during peak assessment periods) by conducting a Q&A in class/tutorials.
5. Ensure assessment practices are transparent. Consider showing exemplars but if not, be explicit in exactly what needs to be done and what constitutes good performance.
6. Direct students to the assessment criteria. Explain criterion-based assessment. If possible, share a sample assessment submission with the class and “mark it” against the marking criteria.
7. Encourage dialogue around assessment both with peers and with the educator.

8. Allocate class time to feedback.
 - Cohort feedback based on common areas for development, as well as individual feedback
 - Provide feedback on a “sample” together.
9. Manage feedback expectations. Explain what kind of feedback to expect and why. Provide early and ongoing feedback where possible and guide students on how to best use the feedback they receive.
10. Provide actionable feedback. Feedback should ideally help close the gap between current and desired performance so we need to provide concrete steps to help students do this
11. Incorporate reflection into your assessment tasks to build metacognitive skills.

Long-term strategies

1. Ensure assessment has a positive impact on both learning and the learning experience.
2. Include low/no stakes assessments early in the semester (e.g. identify an article that is related to the first assignment and summarise it).
3. Where possible, prevent multiple assessment deadlines coinciding by considering the student experience at a program level.
4. Scaffold assessment tasks. Avoid heavily weighted assessments, where possible. Consider breaking them down into smaller parts.
5. Try to include class activities to mirror assessment stages/offer opportunities to practice.
6. Devise ways to slowly remove the scaffolding over the first year to increase students' independence.
7. Provide students with choices, where appropriate. Students may be offered a level of choice in terms of the assessment topic, format, weighting or timing.
8. Help students learn how to learn by including reflection tasks.



Evaluation and monitoring

Why it matters

It's important to regularly evaluate the design of the first-year curriculum in order to identify areas requiring improvement or renewal. Student engagement should be monitored so that appropriate and timely support can be offered to students who are showing signs of being disengaged. Students need to develop the ability to monitor their own learning and their learning strategies and evaluate their effectiveness.

Students who appear to be less engaged may be at particular risk of failing or dropping out, and may benefit from early interventions and/or targeted support. Poor attendance, lack of participation and/or failure to progress may be signs that a student would benefit from additional support.

Short-term techniques

1. Be aware of the support services available to students, and direct students to these.
2. Keep an eye out for signs of non-engagement or disengagement, such as poor or inconsistent attendance, not contributing to group or class activities and difficulties with group work.
3. Use Wattle to monitor participation. Both the Participants and Reports tabs in the centre top menu provide information on last access to course and access to specific activities in the course site. Follow up with individual students if there are signs of lack of engagement and/or progress.
4. Encourage students to regularly reflect on their own progress and learning strategies. Provide opportunities in class for them to do this. Introduce key phrases and/or paper-based or online tools that your students could use to reflect on their learning. Encourage students to regularly reflect on what they're learning and how effective their learning strategies are.
 - At the end of class, ask students to reflect on what they've learned (e.g. using exit tickets).
 - At the end of class, get feedback by asking students to comment on (anonymously) what they enjoyed most about the class, and what they'd like more support with (or what question they'd like answered).

5. Consider introducing a way for students to provide feedback or ask questions anonymously based on their reflections. Consider using the Wattle Feedback tool at various points in the semester to obtain anonymous student feedback that can be incorporated during the remainder of the semester and/or in subsequent semesters.
6. Encourage students to complete the SELT survey and allocate time to review the SELT results/ comments.
7. Provide regular individual and class feedback, indicating what students are doing well and where they should develop.

Long-term strategies

1. Introduce a student portfolio (physical or digital) that incorporates student reflection on learning and learning strategies.
2. Reflect on your teaching approach and identify what worked well and what could be improved. It's worth spending a few minutes after each class to note down any thoughts about what worked well and what didn't. Share ideas and perspectives with your colleagues, particularly those who are teaching or have taught first-year students.



Checklist

Before semester starts

- Ensure tutors are aware of transition challenges and their role in supporting students
- Design your Wattle page so that information is clear, easy to find, and organised logically

In week 1

- Provide students with details about how and when they can contact you
- Provide guidelines on expectations around communication etiquette
- Orient students to the ANU digital space and tools that will be used in the course
- Dedicate class time to allowing students to get to know each other
- Be explicit about the expectations and norms of a university course within your discipline
- Ensure the first class is positive and memorable
- Create and foster a safe learning environment
- Encourage and highlight the value of students learning together outside the classroom

In every class

- Connect course content to learning outcomes, upcoming assessment tasks and the real world
- Provide clear guidelines and expectations about student engagement in learning activities
- Show appreciation for all contributions to class and online discussions
- Provide ways for students to share as much about themselves as they wish to
- Incorporate your students' existing knowledge and prior experiences
- Provide a variety of ways for students to contribute or participate in class activities
- Provide anonymous ways for students to ask questions
- Incorporate peer learning where appropriate
- Use active learning techniques that require the students to interact with the content
- Monitor tutorials and class activities for students who seem reluctant to contribute
- Identify students who may benefit from accessing support services

At key points in the semester

- Use follow-up quizzes or short activities to determine mastery of previously learned content
- Use Wattle to monitor participation
- Provide regular individual and class feedback, indicating what students are doing well and where they should develop
- Encourage students to regularly reflect on their own progress and learning strategies

- Refer students to relevant services at appropriate times
- Before assessment deadlines
- Remind students of requirements as assessment milestones approach
- Communicate requirements of assessments clearly
- Direct students to the assessment criteria
- Conduct a Q&A about assessment tasks in classes or tutorials

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References and further reading

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