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## ENCOURAGING POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF ECONOMICS: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ORIENTATION TUTORIAL

by

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### Introduction

Economics, as an area of university study, is facing the problem of decline in student enrolments. Lewis and Norris (1997) have demonstrated that between 1991 and 1996: first year Economics degree enrolments fell by 12% nationally; total enrolments in Economics degrees fell by 13.2%; and enrolments in honours level degrees in Economics fell by 18% from the peak year. At Monash University, over the period 1992/1998, total enrolments in the undergraduate Economics degree fell by 83% and honours degree enrolments fell by 56% (Underwood, 1998, p. 2).

Generally, the decline in Economics enrolments may be attributed to the fact that Economics is poorly perceived by potential students (Hodgkinson and Perera, 1996; Haslehurst, Hopkins and Thorpe, 1998; Lewis and Norris, 1997; Millmow, 1997; Underwood, 1998). It is viewed as: abstract and theoretical, difficult to study, rigorous and dull thus reducing interest, unexciting, boring and lacking intrinsic interest, not relevant to "real world" or "real life" issues, lacking an ethical dimension, not being associated with a high profile profession or group of professions and reducing career prospects.

If the current trend continues it is conceivable that Economics will become only a service subject because student numbers will not satisfy the requirements for a major in the discipline. Thus, in attempts to arrest the situation, it appears that positive strategies need be put in place. One such measure, while not being the panacea to all the problems associated with the decline in enrolment numbers, is to engage students in the discipline as early as possible in their studies, beginning in the transition stage.

This paper evaluates one such attempt. The Monash University Faculty of Business and Economics Transition Program caters for all first year

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students in the Faculty, across all the disciplines of the Faculty. An evaluation of the program, focusing on the Economics subject, is the purpose of this paper. An assessment is made of the effectiveness of the Orientation Tutorial in first year Economics as a means of enhancing positive perceptions of Economics. The evaluation revealed some interesting results. Of pressing interest was that the perception of Economics by first year students in the Faculty compared poorly to the more clearly job-focused subjects of Accounting, Finance, Law and Taxation, Management and Marketing.

### **Transition to University: Introducing Orientation Tutorials**

The transition stage must not be underrated, as it is pivotal in shaping the attitudes and values of new students to their university study and to themselves as students. While many students adjust readily to the changed learning environment, for many others, especially in the current diverse student population, adjustment is problematic. Negative outcomes, such as trauma and limited academic achievement, can result for the individual student, with implications for the university system, which must absorb such economic inefficiencies (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld, 1992, p. 17). However, this vital period of transition presents a unique opportunity to begin maximising the value of the educational experience for all students, and this can be achieved in a formalised way through an academic transition program for first year students. Such programs, however, need to be structured in ways that address factors that are seen as significant in assisting students to make positive adjustments to university study. A synthesis and review of the literature indicates that four major factors contribute to successful transition.

The first, and perhaps most important, factor for overall adjustment is that of socialisation, or students developing a sense of themselves in their new environments. This relates to students developing friendship networks with their fellow students. It coincides with the maturation stage of the young adults who make up most of the new student category (Tinto, 1975; Christie and Dinham, 1991; Kantanis, 1997; McInnes and James, 1995, p. 119). However, socialisation has further repercussions than students feeling comfortable with themselves and with their friends. Research has shown that socialisation is closely related to academic orientation, and is positively linked with students' desires to do well in their studies and to graduate (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella and Terenzine, 1983; McInnes and James, 1995; Evans and Peel, 1999). Socialisation provides opportunities for students to develop conceptions of themselves as competent members of an academic and social community (Beder, 1997). Furthermore, it forms the basis of informal learning networks, or "learning communities" where students can discuss study material with each other in an informal setting. McInnes and James (1995), in their study of first year students, demonstrated that there are significant differences in the academic

performance of students who interacted with other students and those who did not participate in social groups.

In an Orientation Tutorial for Economics, student-student socialisation can be encouraged, and in this way students can be assisted to develop positive perceptions towards their study of Economics. In Economics, students need to think diversely, to conceptualise, to apply and to express complex ideas, and as mentioned, they often perceive it as a difficult subject. By providing the opportunity, and encouraging students to discuss their studies, including difficult abstract concepts, there is increased chance that students will develop a stronger grasp of the subject and therefore find it less daunting and more rewarding. Kagan (1992) supports this view, where it was found that collaborative study within learning communities encourages deep learning, improved communication and teamwork skills. There is also a positive relationship between cooperative learning and improved student achievement (Palinscar and Brown, 1984; Slavin, 1990). Groups can be established in the Orientation Tutorial to discuss certain issues, and these groups can be utilised for problem-solving activities in subsequent tutorials. If students get to know others in this environment, there is also a good chance that these groups will continue to meet outside the classroom for informal learning purposes.

The second factor concerns the need for new students to have some understanding of the university teaching environment; this avoids students developing a sense of alienation in the context of university teaching procedures. Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1992, p. 56), in their study of discontinuing students, found that 30% of these students stated that they found staff to be "uncaring and uninterested" and perceived the environment in general as "less than friendly". It could be said that the individual independence inherent in current university teaching processes and structure contributes to students' isolation. One way to overcome this, as explained by Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1992, p. 1), is for staff and students' expectations to be closer, and this can be achieved by explicit instruction on the role and function of lecturers, tutorials, lecturers and assistant lecturers, and implications for students' responsibilities, as pointed out by Kantanis (1997). The Orientation Tutorial can be an avenue for the establishment of an initial understanding of teaching practices at the university level.

In the same way, the Orientation Tutorial in Economics can be a forum for explanation of the subject's teaching practices, considering issues such as the difference between study at school and university and in Economics; the roles of staff members and how students may consult with them. Groups can be utilised to enable the students to discuss such issues. Avoiding any misunderstanding about how the subject is taught and studied may also have a positive impact of enrolments.

The third factor perceived as influential in successful adjustment to university study is students developing a sense of purpose for, or being motivated towards, their studies. This seems to be critical in relation to

Economics and the task of encouraging students to continue with their studies in this discipline. The value of motivation and interest is demonstrated by the longitudinal Tasmanian study of Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1992, p. 17), where they point out that differences in motivation to university study are related to student progress, and "liking study" is correlated with good performance and achieving graduation. Conversely, for students who discontinue, one of the most important reasons given was their lack of commitment and motivation to their course of studies, resulting in them "not seeing the value of university any more". Evans and Peel (1999, p. 6) argue that motivation is related to the degree of the teacher's interest and enthusiasm and "actively welcoming first year students". We also add that it can be developed by students appreciating how Economics relates to other subjects studied in the Faculty, and to the business world and everyday life. That is, the subject needs to be presented as living and dynamic and of real world relevance.

The final factor concerns students having some awareness of academic standards, especially in relation to their subjects. The difference between school standards and expectations has been noted by McInnes and James' (1995, p. 31) study. They found that 64% of students stated that studying at university was more demanding than studying at school and 45% regarded that the standard or work expected was much higher. Kantanis (1997) records that students found the workload to be much heavier and some subjects to be much more complex than expected. Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1992, p. 17) provide support for this transition issue. They found that the closer the expectations and realisations of the students and the teaching staff, the more highly motivated will the students be, and the better their performance. Consequently, there is a need to make clear to students the standards, expectations and learning outcomes of the subject (Clark and Ramsay, 1990; McInnes and James, 1995).

As we have pointed out previously, the first year is crucial in students adopting enduring attitudes and approaches to learning. Without explicit instruction, students attempt to identify which learning strategies are rewarded by carefully scrutinising signals in the behaviour of Lecturers and Assistant Lecturers. However, the situation is more complicated with Economics since educators assume that students have knowledge of the standards of the discipline, and this is often justified by retaining a sense of challenge in the discipline. With this approach, however, most students are likely to become frustrated. Such a motivating force could influence students' decisions as to whether or not to continue with their studies in Economics. Thus, there is a need to make clear to students the standards, expectations and learning outcomes that are required when studying Economics. The Orientation Tutorial can be used as a means of informing students of the standard required in an attempt to avoid confusion and misunderstanding during the course of study. Students can also be encouraged to attend support study skills seminars offered by student learning lecturers, where the expectations and assumptions of Economics

study can be more directly elucidated. Another option is a mentoring scheme where senior students or tutors give advice on their experience of studying Economics.

### **Introducing an Orientation Tutorial in Economics**

The Orientation Tutorial in Economics is part of Monash University's Faculty of Business and Economics Transition Program. The program began in 1997 on the Clayton campus of the Faculty, in 1998 it was extended to other Faculty campuses and it was fully operational across campuses within the Faculty in 1999. The Transition Program consists of two components as follows, but it is the first component that is of interest in this paper.

1. Orientation Tutorials in the first week of the semester as part of the mainstream teaching conducted by Assistant Lecturers in the tutorial class in all Faculty first year subjects: Accounting and Finance, Business Law and Taxation, Econometrics and Business Statistics, Economics, Management and Marketing.
2. Approaches to Study seminars taken by the Language and Learning staff in the first weeks of the semester.

The concept of an Orientation Tutorial was suggested in 1996 by the then Director of the Monash University Orientation, Associate Professor Ian Ward, to strengthen academic orientation as part of the transition from school to university. Long-established orientation activities were partly directed at academic orientation, with addresses by the Vice Chancellor, Deans, Heads of Departments and Subject Leaders. Associate Professor Ward argued that the introduction of a tutorial during the first week of the semester would contribute to academic transition. Traditionally, tutorials began in the second week of the semester, thus giving the opportunity to introduce the Orientation Tutorial in the first week. The Orientation Tutorial represented an extremely useful vehicle for treatment of academic transition issues in a more systematic and detailed manner. Associate Professor Ward and Ms Glenda Crosling, the Faculty's Transition and Generic Skills Adviser, were invited to co-ordinate the Faculty Transition Program.

The Orientation Tutorial in first year Economics at the Clayton campus took the following form:

1. Up to 25 minutes was spent on helping students to get to know one another and their Assistant Lecturer.
2. The remaining time was spent on:
  - Familiarity with University Teaching Structure: explaining what happens in lectures and tutorials and what is expected from students and Assistant Lecturers.
  - Motivation for Study: explaining the value of studying Economics.
  - Appreciation of Academic Standards of the Economics Discipline: explaining the ways to study the subject, the nature of assessment and, to a small degree, how to write assignments.

Considering the current Economics enrolment situation, it can be seen that all of these aspects are important in assisting students to be successful in their Economics' study and therefore encouraging them to continue in the discipline. However, it seems that the most important may be motivating students to study the subject, and appreciating its value and resonance.

### Methodology-Questionnaire Results

During the literature review process for the evaluation that is the focus of this paper, a questionnaire was prepared and sent to subject leaders who were teaching first year, first semester in the Faculty. The purpose of the questionnaire was to seek information relating to the 1998 experience with the Orientation Tutorial. In particular, they were asked to comment on the approach they adopted in 1998, any changes they were planning to introduce, any positive or negative experiences and their view of the Orientation Tutorial as a vehicle to assist in academic transition. Information from both the literature review and the views of subject leaders was used as a basis for the survey questionnaire to be completed by all first year students in the Faculty.

There were 12 questions to be answered. The first three questions related to the subject and the campus the students were studying, and whether they attended the Orientation Tutorial. The remaining nine questions were designed to test student response to the tutorial in the themes derived from the literature review and implemented in the Orientation Tutorial. The questions and responses are presented in Table 2. Students were given four categories to choose from ranging from "a lot" to "negligibly if at all". The questionnaire and the response forms, supplied by the Monash Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED), were distributed to Subject Leaders who then distributed them to the Assistant Lecturers. The questionnaire was distributed in the third and fourth weeks of the semester to enable students to associate the Orientation Tutorial in the context of their academic studies. The number of surveys returned by Economics students per campus is shown in Table 1

TABLE 1  
SURVEYS RETURNED IN ECONOMICS, BY CAMPUS (TOTAL NUMBER OF SURVEYS: 950)

| Campus  |           |         |           |           |
|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| Berwick | Caulfield | Clayton | Gippsland | Peninsula |
| 57      | 217       | 548     | 47        | 81        |

CHED's Teaching Evaluation Unit processed the computer-coded surveys. Statistical work was undertaken through SPSS 9.0 for Windows. The results are demonstrated in Table 2.

Overall, the results were quite positive, with the exception of question 9, which focused on whether students had learned how to write assignments in the subject. For all nine questions in the top two categories, the average

TABLE 2  
PERCENTAGE IN TOP TWO CATEGORIES IN ECONOMICS

| Question   | All  | Clayton | Caulfield | Berwick | Peninsula | Gippsland |
|--|------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Helped students get to know fellow students                           | 46.7 | 43.5    | 53.5      | 50.0    | 34.4      | 65.9      |
| 2. Helped understanding of what happens in lectures                      | 53.6 | 58.8    | 60.5      | 33.4    | 37.3      | 54.5      |
| 3. Helped understanding of what happens in tutorials                     | 69.3 | 76.1    | 63.0      | 56.1    | 52.3      | 64.4      |
| 4. Helped understanding of what tutors can be expected to do             | 68.8 | 76.8    | 60.1      | 55.1    | 50.0      | 62.2      |
| 5. Helped understanding of what students are expected to do in tutorials | 62.9 | 73.9    | 59.5      | 61.9    | 56.4      | 66.7      |
| 6. Helped understanding of the value of studying this subject            | 48.1 | 49.3    | 48.6      | 50.0    | 32.2      | 66.7      |
| 7. Helped understanding of ways of studying this subject                 | 42.6 | 42.6    | 43.1      | 36.1    | 37.5      | 47.7      |
| 8. Helped understanding of the nature of assessment in this subject      | 60.3 | 67.7    | 45.2      | 39.2    | 40.4      | 62.2      |
| 9. Helped understanding of how to write assignments in this subject      | 22.3 | 22.7    | 24.7      | 26.2    | 14.8      | 15.9      |
| All questions  | 51.6 | 56.8    | 50.9      | 46.4    | 40.37     | 56.24     |
| First 8 questions  | 55.3 | 61.1    | 54.2      | 48.97   | 43.6      | 61.3      |

positive response was 51.6%. If we remove question 9, which proved to be inappropriate, the positive response increases to 55.3%.

For the individual questions, the highest positive results were for the three questions that focused on students' improved understanding of the role of the tutorial and the Assistant Lecturer, that is, questions 3 (69.3%), 4 (68.8%) and 5 (62.9%). This is to be expected, as the Assistant Lecturer is the most competent to explain the aim and the conduct of the tutorial and students would be very receptive to learning about the activity that they were experiencing at the time. We would add that there is an element of self-interest in the context, that it is in the interest of the Assistant Lecturer to make that extra effort to explain clearly his/her role to avoid any misunderstanding. A very high response to question 8 (60.3%), which

focused on the nature of assessment, can also be attributed to the above arguments. Understanding the role of the lecturer, question 2 (56.6%) received a somewhat lower response since at the time students were experiencing the tutorial and removed from the activity of the lecture. Questions 6 (48.1%) and 7 (42.6%), which had to do with the value of Economics and the ways to study the subject, were the most challenging for the Assistant Lecturers. While these issues were not addressed satisfactorily, the response rate is encouraging since the positive response is above 40% for both questions.

Familiarisation, or socialisation with fellow students, question 1, received a 46.7% positive response. Again, this is an encouraging but not satisfactory result. As we stated before, question 9 was the only area from which students did not appear to derive much assistance at all for their transition, with only 22.3% answering positively. It can be concluded that this activity requires adequate time and discussion, which cannot be provided in the Orientation Tutorial. Instead, informing and encouraging the participation in study skill workshops, in which this issue could be dealt with effectively, is a more appropriate substitute.

While the students in the Faculty benefited through the easing of the transitional difficulties associated with commencing university study, it was particularly revealing when we disaggregated the results according to the particular subject taken. These results are set out in Tables 3 and 4.

TABLE 3  
DEPARTMENT BREAKDOWN PARTICIPATING IN THE ORIENTATION TUTORIAL PROGRAM

| Department                           | Percentage responses in top two categories |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
|                                      | With Question 9                            | Without Question 9 |
| Accounting                           | 59.90                                      | 63.40              |
| Business Law and Taxation            | 59.90                                      | 64.32              |
| Econometrics and Business Statistics | 52.20                                      | 54.60              |
| Economics                            | 52.30                                      | 56.00              |
| Management                           | 62.80                                      | 66.00              |
| Marketing                            | 63.15                                      | 63.26              |

If we rank each department in order of positive responses for each of the nine questions and allocate points as follows: number one in ranking, 6 points; number two in ranking, 5 points; number three in ranking, 4 points, and so forth, we obtain the results illustrated in Table 4.

While the four departments of Accounting and Finance, Business Law and Taxation, Management and Marketing performed positively at above 63%, both Economics and Econometrics and Business Statistics registered positive responses of 56% and 54.6% respectively; both below 60%. In the departmental ranking, both Economics and Econometrics and Business Statistics performed poorly, with Economics ranking last in the scale. Management tops the scale with the highest percentage of positive



TABLE 4  
DEPARTMENT RANKING POINTS

| Department                           | Points |
|--------------------------------------|--------|
| Management                           | 45     |
| Accounting                           | 40     |
| Marketing                            | 34     |
| Business Law and Taxation            | 34     |
| Econometrics and Business Statistics | 19     |
| Economics                            | 14     |

responses 66%, while Accounting with third highest positive percentage of 63.40 is ranked second. Marketing and Business Law and Taxation are ranked equally third with 63.26% and 64.32% positive responses respectively. The four top ranked departments appear to be better attuned with transition issues than Economics and Econometrics and Business Statistics, as reflected in the big discrepancies of the department ranking points of 14 and 19 versus 34 for Marketing and Business Law and Taxation and a high of 45 for Management.

How can these results be explained? One possible explanation is that the subject leaders and Assistant Lecturers in Economics and Econometrics were less informed and/or enthusiastic about the issue of transition. However, following our assessment of the questionnaires filled in by subject leaders, it is difficult to conclude that this was a major explanatory factor. If this was the case, all that would be required is some training of Economics staff in matters of importance of academic transition.

A more likely factor centres on the perception of new students coming into the Faculty. Students appear to identify more readily, within a Business/Commerce degree, with what they perceive as more job-related disciplines: Accounting, Finance, Management and Marketing. By contrast, we found that students question the relevance of Economics, as well as Econometrics and Business Statistics, in a Business/Commerce degree. Consequently, the decision at Monash University's Caulfield Campus to make only one Business Statistics subject compulsory resulted in a dramatic decline in enrolment in the now optional subject. A similar trend would have occurred in Economics if it were not for the requirement that Micro-and Macro-Economics be taken as part of the professional Accounting accreditation. Thus, our results appear to give support to the earlier research of Lewis and Norris (1997), Millmow (1998) and Underwood (1998) that point to a serious perception problem in the case of Economics.

What can be done to address this worrying situation? Our research on the Orientation Tutorial and the general transition process indicates that, while some of the general transitional difficulties have been successfully addressed whatever subjects students take, it has little implication for the relatively poor perception by students of first year Economics.

In 2000, we not only sought to strengthen the overall Transition Program,

but, in addition, we conducted an experiment in first/second year Micro Economics, with an enrolment of 850, at the Caulfield campus of Monash University.

Of the six specialisation modules developed by the Faculty, the Subject Leader in Economics chose the one which focused on issues such as: what is a business degree?; how do the different subjects fit into the overall degree?; how are these subjects related to each other?; and why is Economics useful as a complement to a major in Accounting, Finance, Management and Marketing, both in their studies and in obtaining and keeping a job?

The feedback from the Assistant Lecturers has been very positive, both in terms of familiarisation and in the specialisation. This provides qualitative evidence that this use of the Orientation Tutorial is helpful in trying to combat the poor perception of Economics by first year students.

Attempting to counter the negative perception of Economics through an Orientation Tutorial is only a first step. Lecturers need to follow this start by building into the curriculum an approach which links Economics to the other disciplines and to a Business/Commerce degree. For example, the conventional economic theory of the firm can easily be related to the treatment of the firm in Management, where the entrepreneurial function is dispersed among managerial and supervisory staff; the economist's approach to the role of consumer preferences and utility leads quite easily to the approach adopted in marketing subjects on buyer behaviour; when discussing property rights, markets and competition policy, the essential link with the study of the law of property, contract and regulation should be made. In addition, it should always be stressed that all Business/Commerce students need an appreciation of the global, regional and local economies as well as the industry environment within which the business firm operates.

### **Conclusion**

While our research has demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between the Orientation Tutorial and the easing of the transitional difficulties when moving from school to university, the Orientation Tutorial might also address more specific issues, such as the poor perception of Economics by students entering a Business/Commerce degree. We have explained how Economics can be made more meaningful by a holistic approach wherein students perceive Economics in relation to their other subjects and the business world. However, this is only a first step and will only be effective if subject leaders, in their weekly teaching program, are prepared to adapt their subject material to an environment in which most students tend to view Economics, at best, as a service subject designed to strengthen their understanding of a more job-focused specialisation. While we need to encourage students to major in Economics, the future vitality of Economics as an undergraduate discipline is likely to depend on the extent to which students consider that a minor in Economics is complementary

to a major in Accounting, Finance, Business Law, Management and Marketing.

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