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## Changing students' perception of Economics by facilitating their transition to university

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John Marangos

Department of Economics,  
Colorado State University,  
1771 Campus Delivery,  
Fort Collins, CO 80523-1771, USA  
Fax: +1-970-491-2925  
E-mail: John.Marangos@colostate.edu

**Abstract:** Universities in Australia are encouraging initiatives and developing strategies to assist students in the transition stage of their studies. In addition, Economics as an area of university study in Australia and in major industrial countries confronts the problem of the decline in student enrollments and degrees awarded. This paper assesses the effectiveness of the introduction of an Economics Orientation Tutorial incorporated in the Transition Program as a means of dealing with general transition issues and in altering the negative perception of Economics, which influences enrollments beyond the compulsory first year Economics courses. Using questionnaire responses by students in evaluating the transition program it is demonstrated that the Orientation Tutorial, not only assisted in general transition issues but also has made some inroads in reducing the negative perception of Economics. This study's relevance to other disciplines is also investigated.

**Keywords:** transition to university; Economics; orientation tutorial.

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**Biographical notes:** Dr. John Marangos is an Associate Professor in the Department of Economics at Colorado State University. His main research interests are transition economics, political economy and teaching economics. He has recently been appointed editor of the Forum of Social Economics, a journal sponsored by the Association for Social Economics. His latest book titled *Alternative Economic Models of Transition* is published by Ashgate publishing.

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### 1 Introduction

In Australia, Economics as an area of university study, confronts the problem of declining student enrollments and consequently a decline in Economics degrees awarded. This is not a phenomenon confined only to Australia, as the trends are remarkably similar in other countries, with respect to the degrees in Economics that are awarded. Thus, it

appears that positive strategies are required to be put in place to attest the situation. One such measure, while not being the only answer, is to engage students in the discipline early in their academic career. This implies that this engagement should take place in the transition stage.

As new students enter the university they experience a radical change in behaviour and expectations compared with their experience during the previous 12 years of their educational life. Those new students that have been adequately prepared are able to adjust to the new conditions of university life and find the experience rewarding and exciting. However, within the current diverse student population there are many students who do not adjust readily. Consequently, they find their studies and university life, in general, daunting and unfulfilling. Such maladjustment has significant repercussions for the individual student, the university and society in general. In addition, students who do not adjust well are limited in their academic achievement and usually withdraw from academic life. This has significant costs for the student, their family, as well as the university and the larger society. One way to address this troubling and undesirable situation of student discontinuation and dissatisfaction and to maximise the value of the educational experience for all students is to provide an academic transition program for first year students at the commencement of their studies.

A hypothesis is established that the declining enrollments in Economics can be attested by using an Economics orientation tutorial as a tool incorporated in the transition mechanism. The purpose of this paper is to assess the effectiveness of the introduction of an Economics Orientation Tutorial in the Transition Program as a means of dealing with general transition issues and in altering students' negative perception of Economics. While, the Monash University Faculty of Business and Economics Transition Program is made available for all first year students in the Faculty, this paper focuses only on the evaluation of the transition program on Economics students. The author is unaware of any explicit strategies adopted to increase the number of enrollments in Economics through the use of a transition program. Administrators in Economics departments would benefit from this novel approach as it provides an alternative mechanism in dealing with the decline in enrollments in their discipline. This paper relates the tensions and dynamics of higher education in a changing environment with the process of learning.

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 analyses the issues of the declining enrollments in Economics and the transition to university; Sections 3 and 4 provides the methodology by establishing the link between the transition program as a mechanism and the orientation tutorial as a tool in influencing enrollments; Section 4 supplies the results, analysis and recommendations and Section 5 concludes the paper.

## **2 Declining enrollments in Economics and university transition issues**

Lewis and Norris (1997) demonstrated that in Australia between 1991 and 1996, first year Economics enrollments fell by 12% nationally; total enrollments in Economics degrees fell by 13.2%; and enrollments in honours level degrees in Economics fell by 18% from the peak year. At Monash University over the period 1992–1998 total

enrollments in the undergraduate Economics degree fell by 83% and honours degree enrollments fell by 56% (Underwood, 1998, p.2). More recent data continues to reveal the unwelcoming situation for the Economics profession, as aggregate enrollments have continued to fall: in 2000, 8713 undergraduate students were enrolled in Economics, while in 2001, 7828 students were enrolled in the discipline a reduction of 10.15% and in 2002, the number was further reduced to 7377 a reduction of 5.76% (Millmow, 2004). All this when an Economics degree has a significantly higher rate of return than other degrees and a higher private return than a business degree (Lewis et al., 2004).

Table 1 presents the international trends for undergraduate degrees in Economics for a sample of universities from Australia, Canada, Germany and USA: From 1989 to 1999, undergraduate degrees in Economics declined in Australia by 8.21%, in Canada by 25.8%, in the USA by 19.4% and in Germany there was an increase by 10.3%. In addition, in the USA in July 2003 there were 14,391 degrees awarded, thus only 1% had been recovered of the 30% decrease in degrees awarded annually from 14,177 in 1991–1992 to 10,054 in 1995–1996 (Siegfried, 2004, p.304). Canadian Economics degrees declined by 12% after 1996 and German Economics degrees reported a reduction of 14% between 1993 and 1997 (Siegfried and Round, 2001). In the UK Economics applications by domestic students in 1998 had fallen from 4905 to 3870, a reduction of 21.1% as the Universities and College Admissions Service data revealed, while a survey of Heads of Department of Economics uncovered an average decline of 28% and those departments which did not experience a decline registered a substantial reduction in applications (Abbott and Williams, 2000). Importantly, by 1999 only Germany has recovered in absolute numbers in undergraduate Economics degrees.

The general reason for the decline in economic enrollments and degrees awarded is that the discipline is poorly perceived by potential students (Lewis and Norris, 1997; Underwood, 1998). Economics is often viewed as: abstract and theoretical, difficult to study, rigorous and dull thus reducing interests, unexciting, boring and lacking intrinsic interest, not relevant to 'real world' or 'real life' issues, lacking an ethical dimension, lacking interdisciplinary synergies, not being associated with a high profile profession or group of professions and thus reducing career prospects. Thus, it appears that positive strategies are needed to attest the situation. One such measure, while not being the only answer to the problems associated with the decline in Economics enrolment and degrees, is to engage students in the discipline as early as possible in their education. This implies that such engagement should take place in the transition stage from high school to university. This paper evaluates such an attempt.

Abbott et al. (1992, p.17) point out that there are economic inefficiencies as a result of a large number of students not completing their degrees. In addition, there are personal costs, such as the distress and ordeal of dropping out which have important consequences for the personality development of young students. Even for students who do not fall at either extreme of the adjustment process to university life, the students' experiences in the first year and the first semester, in particular, are significant. The literature suggests that during this period, students form the basis of their attitudes to and values within higher education and ultimately to lifelong learning. Students form a view of themselves within the university and within society in general. Hence universities are encouraging initiatives to assist students in the transition stage

of their studies. The transition program is underpinned by the well-recognised view that it is important for students to make a successful transition from high school to the university learning environment. It is imperative however that the Transition Program is well designed so that it is relevant to a successful adjustment to university study.

The Monash University Faculty of Business and Economics Transition Program is made available for all first year students in the Faculty, this paper focuses on the evaluation of the transition program to Economics students. In particular, the paper assesses the effectiveness of the introduction of an Economics Orientation Tutorial in the transition program as a means of dealing with general transition issues and in altering the negative perception of Economics.

### **3 Methodology: the economics orientation tutorial**

The economic inefficiencies and personal trauma which result from new students not adjusting successfully to the university learning environment has encouraged Australian Universities to initiate transition programs. The aim of such transition programs is to assist students in their transition to university. The Monash University's Faculty of Business and Economics Transition Program is one such innovative response. It began in 1997 on the Clayton campus of the Faculty, in 1998 it was extended to the other Faculty campuses, and by 1999 it was fully operational across campuses within the Faculty. The transition program consists of two primary components: orientation tutorials and approaches to study seminars.

*Orientation tutorials:* offered in the first week of the semester as part of the mainstream teaching conducted by Assistant Lecturers in the tutorial class in all first year subjects in the Faculty departments: Accounting and Finance, Business Law and Taxation, Econometrics and Business Statistics, Economics, Management and Marketing. It is this Orientation Tutorial, which is the focus of this paper with particular emphasis on the Economics Orientation Tutorial.

*Approaches to study (or study skills) seminars:* provided by the Language and Learning staff in the first weeks of the semester and attended voluntarily by students in addition to their mainstream lectures and tutorials. These seminars began in second semester of 1996 and since then have been offered at the beginning of each semester. The objective of such seminars is to assist students to appreciate the expectations of and the assumptions underpinning university study and study of disciplines. An additional goal is to introduce students to effective strategies to study. A major benefit of these sessions, which operate in addition to the mainstream teaching program, is that they are held within the Faculty, thereby encouraging students to perceive them as just another facet of the Faculty curriculum, and not solely for 'remedial' students and purposes. This approach seems to encourage students to attend the program. Furthermore, although the seminars address approaches to study, the content is directly related to the Business /Commerce content, further ensuring their relevance. However, this aspect of the transition program will not be evaluated in this paper.

**Table 1** Undergraduate degrees in economics

Country	1988-1989	1989-1990	1990-1991	1991-1992	1992-1993	1993-1994	1994-1995	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999
Australia (n = 14)	1157	1186 (+2.5)	1186 (+12.1)	1428 (7.4)	1340 (-6.2)	1266 (-5.5)	1079 (+14.8)	938 (-13.1)	1049 (+11.8)	1062 (+1.2)	[-8.21]
Canada (n = 10)	-	-	1740	1537 (-11.7)	1559 (+1.4)	1517 (-2.7)	1364 (-10.1)	1154 (-15.4)	1138 (-1.4)	1170 (+2.8)	1291 (+10.3) [-25.80]
Germany (n = population)	19,841	21,252 (+7.1)	21,211 (-0.2)	23,765 (+12.0)	25,379 (6.8)	25,258 (-0.5)	23,831 (-5.6)	22,080 (-7.3)	21,832 (+1.1)	22,178 (+1.6)	21,889 (-1.3) [+10.3]
USA (n = 170)	-	-	11,298	11,250 (-0.4)	10,187 (-9.4)	9116 (-10.5)	8152 (-10.6)	8007 (-1.8)	8176 (+2.1)	8596 (+5.1)	9095 (+5.8) [-19.4]

Source: Siegfried and Round (2001, p.206). The number in the parenthesis is the percentage change. The number in brackets is the overall percentage change.

The concept of an Orientation Tutorial was suggested in 1996 by the then Director of the Monash University Orientation. Its purpose was to strengthen academic orientation as part of the transition from high 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. The then Director of the Monash University Orientation argued that the introduction of a tutorial during the first week of the semester would facilitate 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. Furthermore, Evans and Peel (1999) maintain that students' successful social transition is particularly important in the first few weeks of university life than their academic transition. The concept of the Orientation Tutorial was facilitated by the introduction of a computer-based method of allocating tutorials. Tutorial allocation was largely completed by the Friday immediately prior to the beginning of the academic year, thus allowing the commencement of tutorials during the first week of the semester. The orientation tutorial will benefit the student by easing the learning process and initiating a change in behaviour necessary for an increase in the quality of learning, as demonstrated by the theories of knowledge gaps, absorptive capacity and learning cycles.

The Faculty of Business and Economics Teaching Innovations Grant Scheme provided funding to evaluate the 1999 Transition Program and the results were published by Ward et al. (2000). This paper specifically presents the results of the evaluation with respect to the Economics Orientation Tutorial. The investigation is underpinned by published research on factors affecting transition to university and students' surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of the Economics Orientation Tutorial. The literature review revealed that the major factors in successful transition include: *socialisation/sense of identity with other students*; familiarity with university teaching procedures; motivation for study/sense of purpose of the chosen course; and appreciation of academic standards of the discipline. An analysis of the transition issues identified as associated with the Orientation Tutorial follows.

*Socialisation/sense of identity with other students*: recognising the importance of the social aspect for new students. The most important element identified in the literature on transition issues is students' socialisation, such as developing friendship groups with other students in their institution (Christie and Dinham, 1991; Kantanis, 1997; Tinto, 1975). The orientation of students to university learning cannot be separated from their need to develop a sense of self-identity within their peer groups (McInnes and James, 1999, p.119). This is amplified by the fact that many students have left their school friendship networks and are studying in universities where they may not initially know any of their fellow students.

Socialisation is closely related to academic orientation. The degree to which new students establish networks of friends and begin to identify themselves with their particular institution is positively linked with their desire to do well in their studies and to graduate (McInnes and James, 1999; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1975). Furthermore, Evans and Peel (1999) maintain that students' successful social transition is more important in the first few weeks of university life than their academic transition. Socialisation provides opportunities for students to develop conceptions of themselves as competent members of an academic and social community (Beder, 1997). Thus, social and academic orientations are intertwined. The link has been demonstrated by the

McInnes and James (1995) study of first year students. McInnes and James (1995) confirmed 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. The sense of identity that arises from being part of a social network and the informal social relations with fellow students provide the opportunity for informal learning networks or 'learning communities' in which students can discuss study material with each other in an informal setting. Kantanis (1997) also notes that lack of a friendship group diminishes self-confidence and self-esteem, inhibits development of social skills, precludes discussion of study content in learning communities, restricts the rate of familiarisation with university resources and culture, and reinforces feelings of negativity towards the institution, self and others. Given the significance of the social aspect of the transition phase, it is rational to include opportunities for social interaction within the Orientation Tutorial so that through these activities students can get to know each other and form learning communities.

*The second major factor contributing to successful transition is familiarity with university teaching procedures:* reflecting students concerns of how the method of teaching might differ from previous educational experiences. A transition issue identified in the literature is that students feel alienated by university teaching procedures. Abbot et al. (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 that they perceived the environment in general as 'less than friendly'. Kantanis (1997, p.2) study of Arts Faculty students of Monash University noted that many students found staff to be less accessible than expected. Peel (1999, p.1) also reports that most students, at some stage of their academic studies, experience the university system as 'unfriendly, daunting and alienating'. It could be deduced from these views that individual independence inherent in the current university teaching processes and structure plays a major role in the sense of isolation felt by students. In order to minimise such isolation it is important to have a greater match of expectations between students and teaching staff (Abbott et al., 1992, p.1). Kantanis (1997) also notes that students would have appreciated more information on how lectures and tutorials function. Students need to have some understanding of the university learning environment in terms of the role of lectures, tutorials, Lecturers and Assistant Lecturers and the implications for students' responsibilities and behaviour. The Orientation Tutorial can be an avenue for establishing an initial understanding of teaching practices at the university level and what is expected from university students.

*The third major factor associated with a successful transition is motivation for study/sense of purpose of the chosen course:* acknowledging students concerns in developing a sense of purpose and motivation for their study. To continue with their studies and perform satisfactorily, students need to establish a sense of purpose and motivation to succeed. In their longitudinal Tasmanian study Abbot et al. (1992, p.17) found that differences in motivation to university study are related to student progress and 'liking study' is correlated with good performance and achieving graduation. Conversely with respect to those students who discontinue, one of the most important reasons given for their withdrawal was their lack of commitment and motivation to their course of studies. It is imperative that students are motivated in their studies. An appreciation for what they are studying and of how their various courses interrelate and contribute to the purpose of their degree can assist motivating students. Evans and Peel (1999, p.6) argue that motivation is related to the degree of the teacher's interest, enthusiasm and 'actively

welcoming first year students'. Thus, a key component of an academic transition program must focus on the importance of motivating students. The Orientation Tutorial provides an opportunity to instill interest and enthusiasm in studying the subject.

*The final major factor contributing to a successful transition is appreciation of the academic standards of the discipline:* awareness of the expected standards of study in academia and the discipline. Undoubtedly, university academic standards differ in many ways from those of students' previous educational settings. For example, in the McInnes and James (1995, p.31) study, 64% of students stated that they found studying at university more demanding than studying at school and 45% indicated that the expectations were much higher. Kantanis (1997) suggests that students found the workload to be much heavier and some subjects to be much more complex than expected. Abbot et al. (1992, p.17) provide support for this transition issue suggesting that the closer the expectations and realisations of the students and the teaching staff, the more highly motivated are the students and the better their performance. Consequently, there is a need to clarify for students the standards, expectations and learning outcomes of the subject for which it is assumed that they have the appropriate knowledge (Clark and Ramsay, 1990; McInnes and James, 1995). In addition, complementary teaching support services and well-designed learning assistance programs are indispensable. Such programs should be 'proactive rather than reactive' (Blanc et al., 1983; Clark and Ramsay, 1990) so that students can obtain assistance before they experience serious academic problems. Providing students with information about academic standards through support studies programmes positively affects persistence with their studies. In his study of the retention among at-risk first year students Cone (1991, p.314) found a rise in retention from 7% to 53% could be attributed to a study skills and college adjustment course. Hence, it is beneficial to incorporate into the Orientation Tutorial some form of early elucidation of the standards and expectations of the disciplines in which the students will study and encourage them to participate in study support programs and seminars. The Orientation Tutorial can be the starting point in revealing the academic standards of the divergent disciplines. In addition, it can be used to inform students of the study skills workshops and encourage their participation in such workshops.

Specifically, during the Economics Orientation Tutorial approximately 25 minutes was spent on helping students to get to know one another and their Assistant Lecturer, while the remaining time was allocated on the following three goals:

- 1 *Familiarity with university teaching structure:* explaining what happens in Economics lectures and tutorials and what is expected from students and Assistant Lecturers
- 2 *Motivation for study:* explaining the value of studying Economics
- 3 *Appreciation of academic standards of the economics discipline:* explaining the ways to study the subject, the nature of assessment and how to write assignments.

The introduction of an Economics tutorial can be used as a tool in dealing with transition issues as explained above, while it also has the positive externality of altering the students' negative perception about Economics which accounts for the substantial decline in Economics enrollments and degrees awarded. As it will be demonstrated, there is a link between transition issues, which the Orientation Tutorial tries to deal with, and



students' perception regarding Economics, which influences enrollments beyond the compulsory first year Economics courses. In particular, the Economics orientation tutorial deals with the following issues: *socialisation/sense of identity*; familiarity with university teaching structure; sense of purpose/motivation for studies and appreciation of academic standards of the discipline.

Beginning with *socialisation/sense of identity*, to learn Economics, students need to think diversely, to abstract, to apply and to express complex ideas. Thus, students often perceive Economics as a difficult subject. The establishment of learning communities, which is part of the socialisation transition issue in the Orientation Tutorial can facilitate the study of Economics and thus change the perception of Economics as being a difficult and boring subject. Collaborative study within the learning communities encourages deep learning and the development of improved communication and teamwork skills (Kagan, 1992; Tinto, 1975). Research supports the argument that there is a positive relationship between cooperative learning within the learning communities and improved student achievement (Palinscar and Brown, 1984; Slavin, 1990). Collaborative study within the learning communities established in the Orientation Tutorial requires students to communicate their understanding to their peers, which exposes inadequate reasoning in a non-threatening manner. Collaborative learning allows students to discuss, explain and understand new ideas, while learning at a deeper level by exploring how concepts fit together and link the material with previously analysed concepts. As such, the help that a student provides to others enhances individual understanding. Therefore, the establishment of learning communities through the socialisation activities can facilitate the study of Economics. In this way, it is hoped that the negative perception of Economics will be reversed.

Secondly, is the issue of familiarity with university teaching structure. The Economics Orientation Tutorial can be used as a vehicle for explaining the teaching practices of the subject. Topics that can be covered in the Orientation Tutorial are the difference between study at school and university and studying of Economics; the role of the lecture and the tutorial; the role of an academic; the role of the Lecturer and Assistant Lecturer; the responsibilities of students and the nature of consultation. Establishing an initial understanding of the teaching practices in Economics in the Orientation Tutorial will have a positive impact of how students perceive Economics. Avoiding any misunderstanding about how the subject is taught and studied may have also a positive impact on enrollments.

Thirdly, Economics orientation tutorials deal with the sense of purpose/motivation for studies. The perception that Economics is boring, abstract and theoretical has a negative impact on student motivation. The reduction in enrollments reflects the perception that Economics is irrelevant to 'real world' or 'real life' issues, unexciting and lacking an ethical dimension. However, "the perceived, boring or abstract nature of Economics is, of course, something that teachers of Economics can do something about" (Lewis and Norris, 1997, p.10). Introducing problem-based exercises in the Orientation Tutorial encourages interest and deeper learning. By solving problems, students become active participants in their learning. As a result, they are more likely to retain the material presented to them and they are more likely to develop analytical skills. Problem-based exercises increase the perceived relevance of the subject and makes learning more meaningful and interesting. For example, a lecturer made use in the Orientation Tutorial of a weather map as a link to the study of Economics. In the lecturer's words: "We had a weather map which we used to draw parallels with Economics models, what information

they convey is a representation of reality and the validity of predictions. This worked well after students realized that we were looking at a weather map in Economics” (Ward et al., 2000, p.27). Introducing problem-solving activities in the Orientation Tutorial and expanding these activities as a normal part of the discipline appear to be conducive to improving student enjoyment and motivation, as well as enhancing learning outcomes. As a student-centred form of teaching Economics and an alternative to traditional didactic instruction, it places emphasis on what the students are doing, rather than on what the tutors are doing. In addition, different expectations are associated with the Assistant Lecturer in this form of tutorial. Assistant Lecturers are no longer the centre of attention, thus providing ample opportunities for them to interact with students in a more informal atmosphere, resulting in less stress and more personal satisfaction in facilitating learning.

Finally, the Economics orientation tutorial facilitates an appreciation of academic standards of the disciplines. It is recognised that, during their first year at the university, students adopt enduring attitudes and approaches to learning. Students attempt to identify which learning strategies are rewarded from a careful scrutiny of the signals they detect in the behaviour of Lecturers and Assistant Lecturers. However, this is not so straightforward. Economics educators assume knowledge of the appropriate discipline standards by students with the aim of retaining a sense of challenge in the discipline. Instead most students are likely to sense frustration, which acts as a de-motivating factor. This could affect students’ decisions whether or not to persist in their Economics studies. Consequently, there is a need to clarify for 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 standards required in the discipline in an attempt to avoid confusion and misunderstanding during their course of study. In this context it can be recommended to students that they participate in the support studies seminars that are offered as part of the transition programs. The objective of these seminars is to help students appreciate the expectations and assumptions underpinning university study and of Economics, in particular, as well as to introduce them to some strategies for effective study. Although the seminars address approaches to study, the content and vehicle is directly linked, in this case with Economics, which further ensures the disciplines relevance. Using the Orientation Tutorial as a means of revealing the academic standards used in Economics and of informing and encouraging students to participate in study skills workshops will facilitate transition and contribute to demystifying the appropriate standards required and, once again to reverse students’ negative perceptions of Economics.

#### **4 Results, analysis and recommendations**

During the literature review process a questionnaire was prepared and sent to subject leaders who were teaching first year first semester subjects 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 in the future; any positive or negative experiences; and their view of the Orientation Tutorial as a vehicle in assisting in academic transition. Information from both of these sources was used as a basis for the survey questionnaire to be completed by all first year students in the

academic year 1999 at the university. 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 the students' 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 a scale with four categories to choose from ranging from 'a lot' to 'negligibly if at all'. The questionnaire and the response forms were distributed to Subject Leaders who then distributed them to the Assistant Lecturers. The questionnaire took place in the third and fourth weeks of the semester, which enabled the students to associate the Orientation Tutorial with the context of their academic studies. The number of surveys returned by Economics students was across campuses 950. The results are demonstrated in Table 2.

**Table 2** Percentage in top two categories Academic Year 1999

Question	%
Question 1: Helped students get to know fellow students	46.7
Question 2: Helped understanding of what happens in lectures	53.6
Question 3: Helped understanding of what happens in tutorials	69.3
Question 4: Helped understanding of what tutors can be expected to do	68.8
Question 5: Helped understanding of what students are expected to do in tutorials	62.9
Question 6: Helped understanding of the value of studying this subject	48.1
Question 7: Helped understanding of ways of studying this subject	42.6
Question 8: Helped understanding of the nature of assessment in this subject	60.3
Question 9: Helped understanding of how to write assignments in this subject	22.3
All questions	51.6
First 8 questions	55.3

Source: Ward et al. (2000, Appendix 4, p.4).

The results appear to be quite positive, as the average positive response for all nine questions in the top two categories was 51.6%. The only task from which students did not appear to derive any assistance was question nine, which asked what effect the Orientation Tutorial had on the students' 'understanding of how to write assignments in the subject'. This question received a very low positive response of 22.3%, which suggests the inappropriateness of the task during the Orientation Tutorial. This task requires adequate time and discussion, which cannot be provided in the limited time allocated specifically for this task in the Orientation Tutorial. This issue can be dealt effectively in the study skills seminars. If we remove question nine, which proved to be inappropriate, the average positive response increases to 55.3%.

Taken individually, the highest positive results were for three questions, number three (69.3%), four (68.8%) and five (62.9%), which focused on students' improved understanding of the role of the tutorial and of the role of the Assistant Lecturer. This is to be expected, as the Assistant Lecturer is the most competent to explain the aim and the conduct of the tutorial. There is an element of self-interest on the part of the Assistant Lecturers as it is in their interest to make an extra effort in clearly explaining their role in order to avoid any misunderstanding regarding their responsibilities. A very high response to question eight (60.3%) which focused on the nature of assessment can also

be attributed to the above arguments, as it is the Assistant Lecturer who is responsible for grading the papers, tests, final exams and allocating participation marks. Understanding the role of the Lecturer, question two (56.6%) received a somewhat lower response since at the time of the survey students were removed from the activity of the lecture. Questions six (48.1%) and seven (42.6%) were the most challenging tasks on the part of the Assistant Lecturers and students. The questions had to do with the value of Economics and the ways to studying the subject, which were not address satisfactorily, nevertheless the response rate is encouraging for both questions. Familiarisation with fellow students, which is question one, received a 46.7% positive response. This is also an encouraging but not satisfactory result.

Overall the feedback received by students regarding the Economics Orientation Tutorial was quite positive taking into account the embryonic stage of the transition program. It has been shown that the Orientation Tutorial has made some inroads in reducing the students' negative perceptions of Economics. Hopefully, this can be translated into increased enrollments and degrees in the long run. Nevertheless, at the same time Economics had the lowest performance in comparison with the other disciplines in the Faculty.

A number of recommendations can be derived from the students' responses with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of the Economics Orientation Tutorial. Specialised training for Assistant Lecturers is required to deal with the transition issues relevant to Economics. Assistant Lecturers, motivated by the basic economic principle of self-interest, are able to convene effectively what happens in tutorials, their role, students' responsibilities in tutorials and the nature of assessment. While this is very positive, it appears that they trade off the remaining transitional issues. Consequently, the transition issues of familiarisation with fellow students, the role of lecturers, the value of Economics and the ways of effectively studying Economics received less emphasis. This explains the poor performance of Economics in relation to the other disciplines in the Faculty. Specialised training for Assistant Lecturers is required to assist them with the more difficult transitional issues in Economics; for example, the value of Economics and its relationship with other disciplines. It may not be only self-interest but also a lack of appreciation of these issues. Meanwhile, it is essential that these issues deserve somewhat more attention if Economics is to successfully reverse the negative perception of the discipline. This task becomes disproportionately the responsibility of the Assistant Lecturer due to the mere fact that they are the ones conducting the Orientation Tutorial. Nevertheless, it is the role of Subject Leaders and Lecturers together with the study skill coordinators to develop strategies, which will equip Assistant Lecturers to confront the transition issues in Economics and make full-use of the Orientation Tutorial. With regard to familiarising students with one another this is best achieved by dividing the students into small groups. These groups should be formed with the goal of achieving, where possible, a balance by gender and between Australian and overseas students. Assistant Lecturers should be encouraged to make use of an 'ice-breaker' which allows the students to get to know one another. A list of successful 'ice-breaking' activities should be made available to all Assistant Lecturers.

It is expected that these changes would have a positive externality of reducing students' negative perception of Economics and thus positively influencing enrollments and degrees awarded. This is consistent with the New Zealand experience. Economics courses have been able to resist the decline in economic enrollments due to the fact that New Zealand universities are small and cooperation between Faculties and Colleges is

significant (Alvey and Smith, 1999, p.94). It may be implied that due to the above characteristics, New Zealand universities can deal more effectively with transition issues, especially the ones that give Economics the negative perception, since they are small and departments are cooperative resulting in higher exposure of students to Economics.

The above recommendations were implemented in the Orientation Tutorial in the academic year 2000. The Orientation Tutorial was restructured to deal more effectively with transition issues within the context of Economics. In an attempt to focus on the poor perception by students about Economics, the Department of Economics at the Caulfield campus of Monash University introduced in 2000 a specific transition program, which focused on the role that Economics can play in a business/commerce degree. This is of particular significance at Caulfield Campus as it has traditionally emphasised business training. Thus, the goal was to ensure by facilitating transition that new students understand how Economics fits into a business/commerce degree, and how the different subjects they are studying complement each other. The motivation behind the change in the structure of the Economics Orientation tutorial is the steady decline in student enrollments in Economics, while there has been an exponential growth in business studies. As Table 3 demonstrates, student enrollments between 1995 and 2000 in Marketing and Distribution increased by 128.6%, while Economics enrollments decreased by 8.5%. Abbott and Williams (2000, p.65) demonstrated that in the case of the UK competition from business courses was the most important factor explaining the reduction in Economics enrollments.

**Table 3** Undergraduate enrollments by field of study, 1995–2000

	<i>Student enrollments</i>		<i>Growth</i>
	<i>1995</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>%</i>
Marketing and distribution	5794	13247	128.6
Administration and management	6425	12335	91.2
Business administration	15996	20463	27.9
Hospitality management	3963	4687	18.3
Personnel management	1971	2235	13.4
Economics	6137	5613	-8.5

*Source:* Lewis et al. (2004, p.236).

In the 2000 Orientation Tutorial the issues of socialisation and familiarity with university teaching remained as before. From the appreciation of academic standards the issue of how to write assignments was removed, since it was ineffective. Motivation for study expanded to fill the gap by developing the topic of what is a business degree and how Economics fits into such a degree. Assistant Lecturers were instructed to focus on the following four issues:

- 1 What is a business degree?
- 2 What subjects belong to this degree and why?
- 3 How does the study of a business degree help your career?
- 4 How does the discipline of Economics fit into the degree?

Following the Orientation Tutorial, we conducted a survey of 116 students in first year Economics. Students were asked four questions to which they could answer one of the following: the tutorial clarified their understanding of

- 1 a lot
- 2 a moderate amount
- 3 a little bit or
- 4 negligibly if at all.

The questionnaire results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4** Percentage in top two categories Academic Year 2000

<i>Question</i>	<i>%</i>
Question 1: Clarified understanding of what is a business degree	58.3
Question 2: Clarified understanding of why individual subjects are part of a business degree	62.3
Question 3: Clarified understanding of how studying a business degree can help obtain a job	54.4
Question 4: Clarified understanding of how the study of Economics can assist in study for a business degree	63.2

*Source:* Ward et al. (2001, p.86–87).

Students' responses were very encouraging. The lowest response was only 58.3% for question one (Clarified understanding of what is a business degree) and the highest 63.2% for question four (Clarified understanding of how the study of Economics can assist in study for a business degree). Unfortunately, the author/researcher on the Orientation Tutorial relocated outside Australia and was unable to follow and report any further developments and outcomes.

## 5 Conclusion

Adjustment to university life can be problematic for many students. Not only can poor adjustment have severe repercussions for individual students, it is also costly for the university system, and for the overall society. It is therefore prudent for universities to put in place strategies that will help students make a successful transition to university. There are clear positive benefits to such strategies. Students who feel at home in their institutions have friends and a social network, and can appreciate the value of studying their disciplines. They also perform better in their studies than those who do not. Additionally, students benefit from an understanding of the academic and discipline standards as well as strategies for meeting these standards.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits associated with facilitating the transition to university life, transition strategies can be used to familiarise students to their respective requirements regarding an academic discipline. In other words, a transition program should have two goals: firstly, to provide information, assistance and guidance to general issues of transition and secondly discipline related requirements and study strategies. Hence, the transition strategy based on the Orientation Tutorial outlined in this paper has general applicability as it can be easily applied to disciplines other than Economics. The discipline related component of transition can be formulated to achieve a variety of goals.

In the case of Economics investigated in this paper the goal of discipline related transition had the aim to reverse students' negative perception of Economics. The Monash University Faculty of Business and Economics Transition Program, available to all first year students in the Faculty, were evaluated in this paper in relation to Economics. In particular, the paper assessed the effectiveness of the introduction of an Economics Orientation Tutorial in the Transition Program as a means of dealing with general transition issues and in altering the negative perception of Economics. The introduction of an Economics Orientation Tutorial can be used as a tool of not only dealing with transition issues and discipline related requirements but also the tutorial has the positive externality of altering the negative perception about Economics which contributes the substantial decline in Economics enrollments. There is a correlation between the transition issues, which the Orientation Tutorial attempts to address and students' perception of Economics, which influences enrollments beyond the compulsory first year Economics courses. It has been shown that the Orientation Tutorial has made some inroads in reducing students' negative perception of Economics.

The question arises regarding the future of Economics in Australia: Would Economics play a service role for business students by emphasising the complementary nature of Economics to business disciplines? If so, this would require teaching staff to modify their material to reflect the complementary nature of Economics for business subjects, thus making an important contribution to overall business training. Would this compromise the analytical and critical thinking strengths of Economics? Further research is needed to adequately address this question.

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