TUTORING – WHAT DO OUR FIRST-YEAR REAL ESTATE UNDERGRADUATES EXPECT?

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Abstract

An effective tutoring strategy is important in enhancing the student learning experience. This is a preliminary study using qualitative approaches to investigate how a group of first-year real estate students perceived the usefulness of tutoring strategies adopted in the first six weeks of study, specifically how they assisted in engaging students in their learning and how useful they were for their transition to university learning. In-class survey was performed in week 6 and constant comparison method was used in data analysis to examine the differences of perceptions between different groups of students. Student-centred teaching, feedback and assessments were the three main themes highlighted in the findings and the student-centred teaching style was identified as most significant in assisting students with their transition.

Keywords: university, tutoring, first-year student, transition, student engagement

INTRODUCTION

One of the current pressing issues confronting universities in Australia is the high attrition rate of students. An average attrition rate of more than 18% nationally presents a clear challenge in retaining first-year students to engage in a new learning environment (The Australian, 2009, p3). Literature suggests that student transition into university culture is often complex and difficult (Kember 2001, Krause 2001 and Lawrence 2005), and thus first-year experience has been identified as a critical factor contributing to students' subsequent learning success (McInnis 2001).

A group of students who have completed their first twelve months of study revealed that quality teaching is an important factor in improving first-year retention (Zimitat 2006). This infers support from the beginning is critical for student success. James and Baldwin (1997) argue that tutors influence students' academic performance; as such they are instrumental in the success of the first-year transition (Rhoden and Dowling 2006). Given that tutors are the front-line for student contact, they are central to student engagement and transition (Rhoden and Dowling 2006). As the first few weeks are critical to students' learning experience, it is vital for tutors to adopt effective tutoring strategies to engage them. This is not only beneficial for students' studies, but also helps them adapt to the university learning environment.

Most studies revolve around problems and strategies for managing transition; however, very little research has been carried out specifically addressing the role of tutoring in first-year transition. Thus, this paper intends to address two research questions:

(i)   what aspects of student-centred teaching approaches were identified by students as most useful?; and

(ii) how do students perceive these strategies in assisting them in transitioning to university learning?

A qualitative approach was used to examine feedback from a group of first-year students on their learning experience in an Australian university.

Although there have been many research papers on real estate education published globally in recent years (including Burton and Rutherford 2007, Ford and Elkes 2008, Manning and Epley

2006, Newell, Susilawati and Yam 2010, Rose and Delaney 2007 and Tu, Weinstein, Worzala and Lukens 2009), there are only a handful of papers on teaching approach (see Burton and Rutherford 2007, Born 2003 and Anderson, Loviscek and Webb 2000). Hence, this paper was designed to fill this gap by addressing issues on teaching strategies, particularly on tutoring first-year students.

This paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, a review of past literature on university transition, student engagement, student-centred learning, and tutoring is undertaken. Then, it will be followed by the research design and methodology, discussions on the results, and finally a conclusion based on the findings, implications and limitations of study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition to University Learning Environment
Student attrition has become the focus of education research in Australia over the past decade as a result of an increasingly competitive higher education sector. There has been a significant body of research on factors contributing to student attrition and strategies to increase retention rates (Krause 2005, Thomas and Yorke 2003, Tinto 1997 and Zimitat 2006). Undoubtedly, the first year of university study is of utmost importance as nearly 30% of first-year students in Australia indicate intentions of leaving study in their first year (Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis 2005). Therefore, Laing, Robinson and Johnston (2005) suggest that educators must first understand students' needs and expectations, only then can they adopt useful strategies to induct students into the expectations of university learning in assisting students during the transition period.

The first year of university studies is a period of transition, either from a high school, a working environment, or other social background. Nelson, Kift, Humphrey and Harper (2006) suggest that many first-year students are either not familiar with, or have been ill-informed about what to expect from, a university education. Sometimes, student expectations can be unrealistic and may cause students to have difficulties in adjusting to the university environment (Krallman and Holcomb 1997). Students are most at risk in the first year, in terms of social and academic failure (McInnis 2001); hence, universities have to be responsive to their needs and try to assist them to adapt to the different set of learning expectations. As suggested by Skene, Hogan and Brown (2006), first-year transition is a series of adjustments; not only on the part of the students, but academics also have to be more responsive to accommodating their needs.

Students' expectations of teaching and learning are partly influenced by their previous education and life experience (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998). As well, their level of pre-university preparation is said to be crucial in affecting their adaption to university learning styles (Lowe and Cook 2003). Nevertheless, students should not be blamed for their poor understanding of university expectations; instead, universities ought to be student-centred and supportive, and encourage social and academic integration (Tinto 2008) from the beginning for their later academic success.

Poor academic performance (Sharma and Burgess 1994) and students' dissatisfaction with their academic experience (Price, Harte and Cole 1991) were among reasons for student withdrawals. Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1992) suggest that student motivation is significant for academic success; thus, quality teaching is one of the approaches used to motivate students and increase first-year retention (Zimitat 2006). Therefore, it is critical to manage students' learning experiences well from day one for their later success in university (McInnis 2001). To achieve academic success, it is appropriate to provide the necessary scaffolding to first-year students to adjust to a more independent style of university learning (Nelson et al 2006). Hence, this research will further investigate the effectiveness of engaging first-year students by using a student-centred learning approach.

Student Engagement and Student-Centred Learning

In Australia, from 1994-2000, 30% of students responded negatively on teaching quality in the national first-year experience survey; this is equivalent to the number of students who were considering withdrawing from universities (McInnis and James 1995). These students perceived academics as unapproachable, inaccessible, and not interested in their work. They also believed academics provided poor feedback. However, a study conducted in 2004 shows that students were more positive about teaching quality in the last decade with improved staff commitment and accessibility (Krause et al 2005). These findings highlight the importance of quality teaching in higher education. Thus, it is crucial for academics to understand students' conception of learning in order to develop effective teaching strategies to engage them (Biggs and Tang 2007 and Ramsden 2003). In other words, academics ought to be sensitive to students' perceptions on good teaching, on their needs and what academics should do in constructing an environment conducive for their learning.

Student engagement is a central issue in higher education to improve learning quality and market competitiveness (Krause 2005). Kift (2004) argues that students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to succeed in their learning. However, the challenge remains how to engage first-year students in the university learning environment. The literature argues that the institutions and their staff are those which need to provide the right environment to promote engagement (Davis and Murrel 1993, Krause and Coates 2008 and Ramsden 2003) particularly during the transition to university learning.

It has been suggested that student-centred learning is 'a broad teaching approach that includes substituting active learning for lectures, holding students responsible for their learning, and using self-paced and/or team based learning' (Felder and Brent 1996, p43). As opposed to teacher-directed learning, Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) argue that a student-centred learning approach has been given preference in teaching to engage students for better learning outcomes. There are past research papers that propose the student-centred approach is important in developing graduate qualities (Biggs and Tang 2007, Felder and Brent 1996 and Lea, Stephenson and Troy 2003), and a longitudinal study conducted by Lonka and Ahola (1995) within the Department of Psychology at University of Helsinki found that students who were exposed to student-centred learning performed better than those with teacher-directed learning.

In contrast to the traditional teacher-directed approach where the teachers are in control of the academic content and learning process, the student-centred learning approach emphasizes student responsibility and activity, rather than what the teachers are doing. In summary, characteristics of student-centred learning include emphasis on students' goals for learning; formulation of activities to encourage deep learning; promotion of discussions between students; assessment based on real-world examples; more choices about where, when and how students study; and teachers as guides, mentors and facilitators of learning (McKeachie cited in Landrum 1999). Biggs (1999, p61) suggests that student-centred learning focuses on students' learning to bringing about conceptual change in their understanding of the world; it is what students do that is important. Thus, one of the strategies is to include group work to promote group learning activities to increase students' interactions and engagement (Skene, Hogan and Brown 2006). Ultimately, it is what the students do that is important in constructing their knowledge (Biggs and Tang 2007). The literature suggests that experiential learning and problem-based learning have been found to be vital in enhancing student learning in real estate education (Anderson, Loviscek and Webb 2000, Born 2003, Burton and Rutherford 2007 and Callanan and McCarthy 2003).

Tinto (1997) puts forwards that curriculum design and interactive classroom activities are instrumental for students' academic and social engagement. It is said that students' active

engagement in classroom activities is a key factor in generating motivation and persistence in study (Braxton, Milem and Sullivan 2000). These types of interactive activities are also essential in improving students' ability to work in teams, communication and interpersonal skills (Ford and Elkes 2008 and Galuppo and Worzala 2004).

Also, it is important to note that from the student's point of view, the assessment is the curriculum (Ramsden 2003); it is thus a powerful tool to engage students in their learning (Taylor 2006). Rust (2002, p150) says that one of the most important influences on students' learning approaches is the assessment strategies used: students are more likely to use deep learning if they can see the relevance and importance of what they are required to do. Therefore, assessment should be early and formative (Thomas and Yorke 2003) in order to engage first-year students in their study.

In addition to assessment strategies, tutorials have become an important teaching method (Steinert 2004) in providing the right environment to enhance student engagement. As tutorials encourage active interactions between tutors and students, it is proposed that tutorials are an ideal platform to implement student-centred teaching to engage first-year students academically.

Tutoring
Zimitat (2006) argues that quality teaching is important to improve first-year retention and so support from the beginning is critical to their success. Research shows there are improvements in students' academic skills, thinking skills and problem-solving ability related to tutoring activities (Gordon, Morgan, Ponticell and O'Malley 2004). Hence, it has been suggested that tutorials play an important role to improve the quality of university teaching (Lorenzo and Juste 2008).

With the advancement of computer technology there have been examples of the development of intelligent tutoring systems including e-learning and context-aware ubiquitous learning (see Hwang 2003 and Liu and Hwang 2010). However, as the tutor was not involved in the online component of the course, this paper only covers in-class tutoring activities, face-to-face meetings between the students and the tutor, as well as email correspondences.

Tutorial classes are less formal than lectures and provide opportunities for students and tutors to discuss key topics, concepts and ideas in an interactive way. In other words, tutorials provide more opportunities for students to have face-to-face interaction with the tutors. Researchers suggest that tutors not only influence students' academic performance (James and Baldwin 1997), they are also instrumental in first-year transition (Rhoden and Dowling 2006) thus helping to reduce attrition (Potolsky, Cohen and Saylor 2003).

Kantanis (2000) proposes that students will be able to engage themselves better if they can benefit from small group learning. In this case, as tutors are the front-line for student contact, they are the ones who are most likely to engage in a face-to-face discussion, either in groups or individually. For many new students, tutors are the university; therefore, tutors are central in engaging students with the university classroom experience (James and Baldwin 1997), particularly during the transition period.

Research by Rhoden and Dowling (2006) on first-year students found that students rate the role of tutors very highly, and regard them as one of the most important relationships in their academic experience. This is confirmed by another study in which Crossman (2007) suggests that teacher-student relationships have far-reaching consequences that may influence a student's future learning experience. The author also argues that effective communication and positive teacher-student relationships may affect student's confidence and motivation. Simply put, the role of the tutor is not only fundamental to students' academic engagement (Kift 2002), it is also integral to students' transition to university learning culture as a whole (Rhoden and Dowling 2006).

Students expect a more comprehensive role for the tutor that is able to engage them in their study, as well as help in their transition to university learning. Tutor helpfulness has been identified as one of the features of a successful tutorial (Thonus 2002). For instance, the role of a tutor can be considered to be a guide, supporter, teacher specialist, teacher coach, helping teacher, support teacher, and encourager (Lauland 1998). Not surprisingly, tutor attributes have been identified as important characteristics of effective tutoring; this includes his/her personality, the ability to promote group interaction as well as to problem-solve (Steinert 2004, p286). In other words, not only is a teacher's personality significant in reaching all students, his/her subject matter expertise is also essential in improving teaching quality (Schmidt and Moust 1995) and students expect tutors to be directive to some extent (Blau, Hall, and Strauss 1998 and Thonus 2001). In line with earlier findings, Thompson (2009, p417) suggests that:

> "cognitive scaffolding leads and supports the students in making correct
> and useful responses, while emotional scaffolding provides feedback and
> helps maintain focus on the task and motivation."

In short, it is evident from the literature that tutoring is instrumental in supporting and enhancing a students' academic experience; therefore it is important to ensure quality tutoring in improving retention rates. As suggested by Zimitat (2006), the more positively students perceive teaching quality, the more likely they are to continue with their study. Thus, this paper aims to explore the perception of first-year students in a real estate course about the usefulness of tutoring strategies in engaging them in their study during their transition to university learning.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To encourage effective learning, Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000) argue that collecting students' feedback is an effective means of giving students a voice in course delivery. This was a preliminary qualitative study to understand how a group of first-year students responded to the tutoring strategies adopted in their first six weeks of study in a first-year first-semester real estate course in 2009. It was an in-class survey for which an open-ended questionnaire was used to ask students to comment on tutoring strategies in week 7. The survey was anonymous to minimise any possible bias in the responses. The questionnaire was handed out by the tutor and a student was nominated to collect the questionnaires upon completion. The questionnaire was designed to answer the two research questions:

    (i)   what aspects of student-centred teaching approaches were identified by students as most useful? and

    (ii)   how do students perceive these strategies in assisting them in transitioning to university learning?

Students were requested to nominate the three best aspects of the tutorials, explain how these aspects assisted them in motivating their studies and how they aided in their transition to university learning.

The participants in this research consisted of a group of 38 undergraduate students enrolled in two tutorial classes conducted by a single tutor, in a first-year introductory real estate course in an Australian university. *Introduction to Property and Valuation* is a first year, first semester course in the Bachelor of Business (Property) program. The course was designed to achieve a range of objectives to prepare students for their future studies in the program. Although this course was offered internally and externally, this research was limited to the internal students only. Face-to-face lectures and workshops were held weekly for internal students. Also, materials such as a study guide, power-point slides, workshop instructions and assignment details were available online for all students. The key element of the course was the weekly workshops in which students learnt to

apply the principles and concepts covered in the lectures to a series of simple problems that they had to solve in-class. Together, all these smaller tasks helped them to complete their individual assignment which was due at the end of the semester. Various tutoring approaches were adopted to engage students in their learning. For instance, icebreakers were used in the first lesson to make them talk and get to know each other. This aimed to help students feel more relaxed and comfortable with their peers and the tutor.

There has been evidence suggesting that tutors and students often have differences in their conception of goals, assessment criteria and course expectations (Hounsell 1997 and Norton 1990). Therefore, students were informed clearly on the assessment requirements on the first day of tutorials in order to minimize the gap between the tutor's expectations and students' understanding of the assessment criteria. Also, the benefits of tutorials were explained to students, for example, how tutorials can provide opportunities for discussions, problem-solving and in becoming skilled at learning how to apply knowledge to solve real-world problems.

Students were required to work in groups to accomplish weekly exercises to help develop effective peer relationships and provide opportunities to discuss their assignments together. In addition, more help and support was extended to students who were 'weak and shy' in discussion. Also, students were encouraged to see the tutor in person or by email should they have any problems.

To improve student learning, in addition to weekly tests, the tutor provided weekly problem-based exercises for students to work through in groups to apply theory in solving real-world problems. For example, students were taught how to measure building areas and then conduct actual field-work in groups with the tutor present. Group work was emphasized as it helped to promote interactions and friendship among students. As feedback is crucial for student learning, formative verbal and written feedback (both regular and immediate) was given so that students understood their mistakes and knew how to improve. Furthermore, group discussions were synthesized and summarized in every tutorial to reinforce student understanding.

The questionnaire was administered in-class to maximize response rates in Week 6. As this was the first time these first-year students were involved in a university survey, they were reminded the responses should be centred on teaching aspects only. The introductory information and questionnaire design were planned to frame the students' mind on the right focus and the terminologies used in the questionnaire had also been used in the tutorials to ensure that students understood the questions. All participation was voluntary and all respondents were assured their responses would remain confidential and anonymous.

As the university records did not identify students in their first year of study, questionnaires were applied to all. Of 38 students in the class, 28 students responded; 15 self-identified as first year in university; and the other 13 self-identified as in later years. Since this research was designed for first-year transition students, only the 15 responses from first-year students were analysed. Therefore, the response rate stood at 40%, which was considered sufficient for this exploratory study. Of the 15 respondents, there were 10 males and five females, including two international students. There were 10 students aged younger than 20, three students aged 20-25 and two other students older than 39. All international students were aged 20-25. The 15 respondents' profile is depicted in Table 1.

	Number of respondents	%
Male	10	67%
Female	5	33%
International	2	13%
Non-International	13	87%
< 20 year-old	10	67%
20 – 25 year-old	3	20%
>39 year-old	2	13%

Respondents' Profile
Source: Author
Table 1

The qualitative data were analysed using the constant comparison method (Boeije 2002, Boyatzis 1998 and Braun and Clarke 2006). Tesch (1990) argues that the method of comparing and contrasting is the main tool adopted in all analyses in grounded theory which it is used to form categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories and summarizing the content of each category, among other things. This method enabled the researcher to analyse the differences in perceptions between different groups of students, for example, between males and females. As this study was only limited to a small group of real estate students, the result should be taken with prudence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
There were three main themes observed from the responses to the first research question about the usefulness of student-centred teaching approaches: student-centred teaching style, feedback, and assessments. As indicated by the literature, student-centred teaching style is about emphasizing student learning, creating activities and the environment to encourage students to adopt deep learning approaches to achieve the desired learning objective.

Words frequently used by students indicating student-centred teaching style include: approachable, motivating, encouraging, helpful, interested in my study, interested in the subject, made the subject interesting, good explanation, and organized tutorials. 'Asking questions during and after tutorials are made simple. Tutor answers questions in the best way possible. Therefore confusions are made clear on the spot.' Thus it is suggested that a teacher's personal attributes are crucial in engaging students. These attributes had enabled students to ask questions whenever they had doubts and this had made them feel comfortable and interested in the course. This is in line with the literature (Schmidt and Moust 1995 and Steinert 2004) which stated teaching skills and approachability are important qualities of a good teacher; also it is important to have an accommodating academic in satisfying the needs of these first-year students (Surjan, Chiarelli, Dempsey, Lyall and O'Toole 2010).

An academic's ability to motivate students is a crucial factor in engaging students in their study: 'She always makes sure that we understand everything and this makes us more confident about doing the practical aspect' and 'These had helped me get motivated as I get confidence in knowing that if I encounter a problem help is accessible and feedback will be sufficient.' Also, students feel obliged to study well so as not to disappoint the tutor. One student said, 'You could feel as if you are letting her down after all the help she has given you.'

It is evident from the above comments that support and scaffolding from the tutor are not only imperative to students' academic engagement (Harman, 2010), they are also critical in helping to

improve the quality of teaching as well. This is in line with Tinto, Goodsell-Love and Russo's (1993) findings that interactions between teachers and students are important in retaining enrolled students; uncaring and indifferent attitudes will only encourage student withdrawals. Also, it is important to ensure that the teaching activities are engaging, such as through the use of group activities and field-work to stimulate students' interest: 'This subject has had a different approach than others and it seems to be much more interesting and fun. I look forward to this class all week.' As rightly suggested by Farrell and Farrell (2009), the majority of the students reported that supportive team experiences had helped them in developing their discussion skills.

The second theme identified was feedback. There is considerable research to show that feedback is significant in engaging students academically and effective feedback leads to learning gains (Black and Wiliam 1998 and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Students in this project viewed helpful and constructive feedback as important for their study. However, there is evidence suggesting that feedback messages are always complex thus students require opportunities to understand them (Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000 and Higgins, Hartley and Skelton 2001). In this course, besides telling students about the strengths and weaknesses in their academic work (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006), students were also advised on what could have been done to improve their results. Both written and verbal feedback were provided by the tutor to enhance student's understanding and a further discussion was arranged if needed.

One student commented that regular feedback was helpful so he/she knew what went wrong and how to improve on it; this is imperative as good feedback gives students an opportunity to rectify their mistakes before any damage is done (Goldfinch and Hughes 2007). This highlights the importance of tutor's explanations and use of expertise and experience in the provision of feedback.

Another student said: '…if I encounter a problem help is accessible and feedback will be sufficient'; this reinforces the notion that an immediate response to student's questions will assist them to reduce their first-year anxieties (Surjan et al 2010). As well, besides pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of student's work, timely feedback should offer corrective advice (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). It is worth noting that most students who worked part-time found feedback to be important in assisting them to cope with their learning. Perhaps this was because useful feedback helps by guiding students in how to rectify their mistakes efficiently and effectively, particularly during face-to-face discussions with the tutor.

The third theme identified was assessment, as this is important in engaging students in their learning. Results showed that younger students (< 20 year-old) viewed the weekly test positively as they found it useful in forcing them to study regularly. This is in line with Ramsden's (2003) proposition that from the student's point of view, the assessment is the curriculum; they focus on what will be assessed, not on what is in the curriculum or even what has been covered in the class (Biggs, 2003, p3). It may be argued from the findings that, because older students tend to be more self-regulated, they could manage their study better than younger students.

In addition, the group exercises and assessments were also well received by younger students (< 20 year-old) as they were able to make more friends and discuss their studies together. As high school leavers, this group needs more peer support in negotiating their new life compared with the older students. This has the additional benefit of increasing retention, as the more students interact with their peers in an educationally purposeful way, the more likely they are to be engaged academically (Gellin 2003 and Terenzini, Pascarella and Blimling 1996). Most of these students did not work in any paid employment enabling them to have more time to engage in their learning. Also, these students found that group exercises made the subject more interesting.

It was interesting to note that all female students found the best aspect of teaching to be the tutor who was motivating, approachable, and helpful. It could be surmised that this is because female students tend to need more emotional support than male students, particularly during the challenging transition period. Although only two international students responded, both of them valued a tutor who was approachable, helpful, and motivating. As these students were away from their overseas families, they may have required extra motivation and assistance in adjusting to their life in a different country and culture. A summary of the three main themes of the usefulness of student-centred teaching approaches is provided in Table 2.

For the second research question, 'how do the students perceive these tutoring strategies in assisting them in transitioning to university learning?', many students found the tutors' student-centred tutoring style had given them confidence: 'The tutor is approachable and helpful that makes us feel confident'. In addition, this tutoring style helped to make their transition easier and not so stressful: 'Approachable tutor makes the transition easier.'

Main themes	Characteristics	Remarks
Student-centred teaching style	Tutor's personal attributes: approachable; motivating; encouraging; helpful; interested in student's study; interested in the subject; make the subject interesting; good explanation; and organized tutorials.	This is particularly relevant for female students and also those from overseas, they appreciate tutors who are helpful, motivating and approachable.
Feedback	Timely, helpful and constructive feedback; good explanation; and use of expertise and experience in provision of feedback.	It is worth noting that part-time students in particular found feedback to be important in assisting them to cope with their learning.
Assessment	Regular and group assessment.	This is particularly relevant for students <20 year-old as regular assessment forces them to study and peer support is important for them.

**A Summary of the Three Main Themes of the Usefulness of Student-Centred Teaching
Source: Author
Table 2**

As the students became confident with their university studies, these strategies assisted students to cope with challenges in transition. 'Encouragement to go through tough tasks makes it helpful to continue this university journey.' This was predominantly relevant for those students under 20 years-old. As pointed out by Cook and Leckey (1999), these students would have developed a certain learning style in high school and these skills are likely to be at odds with the independent learning style encouraged by university study. Hence, this sudden change of learning culture requires them to make significant adjustments to adapt to the university learning environment in which they need more support to cushion the impact. As expected, both international students responded that the approachable tutor had helped to make the transition easier. Being away from their families, it was expected that this group would be more in need of emotional support compared to domestic students.

In short, to help students to cope with difficulties during the transition, tutors need to be student-centred and responsive to students' needs to help them become engaged in their learning. It is essential to support these first-year students from the beginning by using effective tutoring strategies to improve first-year retention. This is important, as in addition to influencing students'

academic performance (James and Baldwin 1997), tutoring is also instrumental in helping students to cope with challenges in the first-year transition (Rhoden and Dowling 2006).

When students were asked about what they would like the tutor to do to aid their transition, many students said they wanted to have a tutor who is approachable, friendly and interested in their learning. In line with earlier discussion, most students younger than 20-years-old wanted to have an approachable tutor who gave them confidence and support in adapting to the new, challenging learning environment. Conversely, older students, who may be more mature in handling their emotions, required less support of this kind from the tutor. In spite of this, it may be inferred that a teacher's personal attributes and teaching style are crucial in influencing a students' transition experience. Therefore, using a student-centred approach is not only important for students' learning, but it is also helpful for their transition.

Compared with younger students, many older students (> 20 year-old) found practical exercises and helpful feedback to be useful in engaging them in their transition. This could be because there were many problem-based learning activities in the tutorials with which students engaged in applying theories to real-world problems (Biggs 1999 and Biggs and Tang 2007). In addition, to make learning effective, formative feedback (both immediate and regular feedback) was given to enhance student understanding. Table 3 summarises useful strategies for the student's transition period.

40% of the respondents were 'very satisfied' with their tutoring experience, while another 60% were 'satisfied'; these results suggesting that the tutoring strategies were useful for the students.

Main themes	Characteristics	Remarks
Student-centred teaching style	Tutor's personal attributes and teaching style: responsive to students' needs; approachable; friendly; interested in students' studies; motivating; and supportive.	This is particularly relevant for students who are < 20 year-old.
Feedback	Helpful and constructive.	More relevant for older students. Maybe they can see the relationship between theories and practice and they can relate their study to real-world problems better than younger students.
Assessment	Practical assessment to apply theories to real-world problems.	

A Summary of Useful Strategies for the Student's Transition to University Learning.
Source: Author
Table 3

CONCLUSION
The research findings demonstrate that there were three main themes highlighted by students: student-centred teaching style, feedback and assessments. These three themes emerged in answering both research questions. In other words, these are the three most important aspects of student-centred teaching approaches and they were also vital for student's transition to university learning.

Firstly, student-centred teaching style has been identified as most important in engaging students' learning and, hence, assisting them in their transition. This student-centred teaching style focused on the tutor's personal attributes as well as inclusive tutoring skills that reach all students. Consistent with the literature, this was found to be particularly evident with the empathetic attitude and behaviour of the tutor with attributes including being approachable, helpful and taking an

interest in students' study and well-being. As these students were negotiating numerous challenges during their transition, this teaching style was helpful in providing them with confidence and support in their learning.

The second theme, feedback, was found to be effective in reinforcing student understanding of the subject. This is in line with the literature that helpful and constructive feedback is essential to enhance learning.

Thirdly, assessment was found to be important in engaging student learning. Interestingly, group activities and assessments were viewed positively by younger students (< 20 year-old) as they found it an effective way to make friends and study together. These younger students also viewed weekly assessments positively as these forced them to study regularly. In addition, problem-based learning assessment was also found to be effective in engaging students as it enabled them to apply theories in solving practical problems. This is particularly relevant for a professional course like real estate valuation as students learn better through experiential learning (Anderson, Loviscek and Webb 2000, Born, 2003 and Burton and Rutherford 2007).

Inevitably, tutors assume critical roles in helping first-year students to engage with their study as students have longer contact hours and one-to-one relationships with tutors. It is thus important for the tutors to adopt effective tutoring strategies not only to engage students in their study, but also to help them adapt to the new, challenging university environment. As reported in past studies, not only do tutors need to know the subject matter well, they should know how to facilitate the learning process in which they need to be student-centred, caring and responsive to students' needs.

There are two main implications from the research findings. The first concerns university guidelines on tutor selection. It is important to employ a tutor who is caring, approachable and of empathetic attitude; this personal quality is essential in creating a non-threatening learning environment and thus facilitating student learning. Of course, to teach a professional course like real estate valuation, a potential tutor's subject matter knowledge is also a deciding criterion in the selection process so that he/she is able to teach problem-based learning courses effectively besides providing meaningful feedback. Evidently, someone with real estate industry experience (Tu et al 2009) who can relate theory to practical problems would be much desired. Second, there are implications for university training programs for tutors in which the university should focus on the techniques that a tutor can use in creating a friendly environment to facilitate group work. For instance, the tutor can use an ice-breaking technique to make the tutoring environment less formal; and a scaffolding technique is also found to be useful in assisting students to adapt to the university learning environment.

There are several limitations to this study. Although students were assured of anonymity in their responses, the most significant weakness was the in-class student survey which may be biased as students might be reluctant to say anything negative fearing that they may offend the tutor as a result. Another limitation was that the findings of this preliminary research may not be generalizable due to the small student number surveyed; nevertheless the findings can be useful for further research on larger samples.

This type of student evaluation is useful to explore first-year students' perceptions of their learning experience and so should be part of an ongoing exercise to explore strategies to enhance student engagement. To arrest the current alarming rate of student attrition, similar types of student survey should be extended to larger groups of first-year students to find out how best we can help to engage these students in their transition to university learning. As Kantanis (2000) says, whatever strategies are proposed, it is important university teachers be caring and attentive to the students' needs as these personal attributes are vital in providing assurance and encouragement to students in

their transition to university.

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