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Gateway to Success An integrated academic and student life orientation programme for new firstyear students Gateway to Success Uhlelo lokufunda nokufundisa olumayelananempilo yabafundi abenza unyaka wokuqala

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Gateway to Success: An integrated academic and student life orientation programme for new first-year students

Gateway to Success: Uhlelo lokufunda nokufundisa olumayelana nempilo yabafundi abenza unyaka wokuqala

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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to university is widely recognised as challenging for many students under normal circumstances. It was especially challenging for students who experienced almost two years of disrupted schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) ran a one-week first-year orientation programme. In mid-2021, as the severity of the pandemic was easing, it was clear that new students would need more than one week to adjust not just to university life but also to in-person interactions. As academic affairs and student affairs leaders we therefore undertook to design and implement an extended, integrated academic and student life orientation programme that would be compulsory for all 6 500 new first-year students in 2022 called Gateway to Success (GTS). Rapidly changing circumstances meant we had only four months to do this. In this reflective practice article we discuss the design of GTS and explain how we could plan it so quickly by utilising a networking approach combined with a modified agile project management approach we had been developing since 2019. We then provide student evaluation results from 2022, and discuss how GTS was modified in 2023 when pandemic-related restrictions were lifted. We conclude with a discussion of how GTS has been embedded in university structures and processes and contributes to our institutional commitment to student success.

KEYWORDS

First year transition, student success, network of people, agile change management

ISIFINYEZO

Ushintsho losuka esikoleni samabanga aphezulu kuya enyuvesi luhlonzwe kabanzi njengalelo oluyinselelo kubafundi abaningi, kanti lube yinselelo kakhulu kubafundi abahlangabezane

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nokuphazamiseka kweminyaka emibili yokufunda ngesikhathi sobhubhane lwe-COVID-19. Ngaphambi kobhubhane, iNyuvesi yaseWitwatersrand (Wits) kade yenza uhlelo lokuzijwayeza/lokwamukela abafundi abasha abenza unyaka wokuqala oluye lube isonto elilodwa. Kanti kuthe maphakathi no-2021, njengoba ubucayi bobhubhane budamba, kwacaca ukuthi abafundi abasha bazodinga isikhathi esingaphezu kwesonto elilodwa ukuze bazijwayeze impilo yasenyuvesi yize kwakungekhona lokho kuphela kodwa nokuxhumana nabantu uqobo. Njengabaholi bezindaba zezemfundo kanye nabaholi bezindaba zabafundi siye sazibophezela ukuhlela nokusebenzisa uhlelo olwandisiwe, oludidiyelwe lwezemfundo kanjalo nokufundisa ngempilo yabafundi oluzoba yimpoqo kubo bonke abafundi abasha abenza unyaka wokuqala abangu-6 500 ngonyaka ka-2022 olubizwa ngokuthi i-Gateway to Success (GTS). Izimo ezishintsha ngokushesha zaphoqa ukuthi sinezinyanga eziwu-4 kuphela ukwenza lokhu. Kulombiko wephepha sidingida ukwakheka kwe-GTS, siphinde sichaze ukuthi singayihlela kanjani ngokushesha kangaka ngokusebenzisa indlela yokuxhumana ehlanganiswe nendlela yokuphathwa kwephrojekthi ebesilokhu siyithuthukisa kusukela ngo-2019. Sibe sesihlinzeka ngemiphumela yezimvo zokuhlolwa kwabafundi kusukela ngo-2022, sidingide nokuthi i-GTS yashintshwa kanjani ngo-2023 lapho imibandela ehambisana nobhubhane isuswa. Siphetha ngokudingida ukuthi i-GTS ifakwe kanjani ezinhlakeni nasezinqubweni zasenyuvesi kanye negalelo lokuzibophezela empumelelweni yabafundi esikhungweni sethu.

AMAGAMA ANGUKHIYE

Uguquko ekufundeni konyaka wokuqala, impumelelo yomfundi, ukuxhumana kwabantu, ukuphathwa kwezinguquko ngendlela esheshayo nenobuhlakani

Introduction

It has been well-established that the transition from high school to university is challenging for many students (Barefoot, 2000). For South African students, this transition presents particular challenges, in part because of the nature of schooling. In contrast to students in high-income countries, many South African high school students experience a didactic teaching style and a learning environment that discourages independent thinking and personal agency, and are increasingly being drilled to pass school-leaving examinations in response to the government's focus on pass rates. The discontinuity between the requirements for learning at university, in particular self-regulation, independence and resourcefulness, and learning at high school have contributed to concerning completion rates at South Africa universities in minimum (regulation) time, which, while increasing slowly, remain low (Council on Higher Education, 2022). There are also socio-economic factors that make students' transition to university challenging, including high levels of poverty in many students' homes and communities and being the first in their families to attend university.

In order to ease the transition into university, universities across the world have created some form of structured First Year Experience (FYE). The University of South Carolina organises an annual FYE conference, held in 2024 for the forty-third time,[4]

4 For more on which, see: https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/events/conferences/first-year_experience/index.php

which is an indication of the importance attributed to such programmes by many institutions. Extensive research has shown that First Year Experience (FYE) programmes are one of several "high impact practices" (Kuh et al., 2013, p. 49) that positively affect student success.

In South Africa, although the low and racially biased university completion rates had been a concern since the dawn of democracy in 1994, an explicit national focus on 'student success' is more recent. In 2014 the Kresge Foundation launched the Siyaphumelela[5] ('We succeed') student success project. Also in 2014, the Council on Higher Education launched the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), a national project to systemically improve student success, defined as, "enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable" (Council on Higher Education, 2014, p. 13). In 2017 the Department of Higher Education and Training produced a ministerial statement on the establishment of the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017), to be supported by the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG). One of the stated purposes is, "High levels of success for undergraduate and postgraduate students", using the QEP's definition of student success (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017, p. 7). The document states that, "The UCDP seeks to support a structured, integrated approach to improving student success" (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017, p. 10), and makes explicit reference to FYE programmes as one such approach. UCDG funding was therefore made available to support the South African National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC).[6]

A key component of many FYE initiatives is an orientation programme. Vincent Tinto (Tinto, 2014) argues that the integration of students into both the social and academic fabric of the university is key to a student's retention and eventual success. An orientation programme is the first point of engagement between a university and its students. It supports the student's experience in three dimensions: (1) transition process, (2) academic integration, and (3) personal and social integration. It sets the tone for the student and their family's expectations of the university they have chosen, and it is through orientation that new students begin their journey of integration into the university culture.

In this reflective practice article, we describe the reconceptualization of the first-year orientation programme at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) over five years in order to better support students with changing characteristics and needs while responding to disruptive external events.

First-year orientation at Wits

Prior to 2019, the Wits orientation programme, dubbed O-week, comprised largely informational and social activities. This changed with the appointment in early 2018 of Jerome September as the new Dean of Student Affairs and Diane Grayson as Senior Director: Academic Affairs, who undertook to collaborate to promote a holistic,

5 https://siyaphumelela.org.za/about.php
6 https://www.sanrc.co.za/

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institutional approach to student success. This included moving to a more values-based approach and involvement of a greater range of stakeholders, academic and support staff and students, in the planning and implementation of O-week, as recommended by Robinson et al. (1996, p. 61):

> *The best orientation experience occurs when there is a total campus commitment to the process, resulting from collaborative efforts of students, senior administrators, faculty, and the broad spectrum of student affairs and educational support programs. A spirit of campus cooperation and commitment to student learning and professional development projects a strong sense of the campus as a learning community to incoming students.*

The orientation programme lays the foundation for the students' total experience of the campus, and the ongoing year-long FYE programme builds on this. At the July 2018 meeting of the FYE committee, September proposed that he form an Orientation Coordinating Working Group comprising staff and students, which would agree on a set of principles and work together to design an orientation programme that would better project Wits as a learning institution, with student success at the core. This he did over the next few months, engaging stakeholders, and student leaders in particular, in robust discussions, about what the new O-week would comprise, moving from a predominantly social event to a more holistic preparation for university life. The result was a very different O-week in February 2019, comprising a mixture of faculty-led, student affairs-led and student-led activities.

In parallel with the reconceptualizing of O-week, Grayson produced a concept document in late 2018 arguing for an institutional approach to student success to provide a framework for the many student support initiatives at Wits. In 2019 she convened a multi-stakeholder task team, including September and Brenner. This marked the beginning of a networked way of working across institutional siloes at Wits, which aligns with research showing that campus networks are a core element in creating a context that enables collaboration (Kezar, 2005). The task team developed a student-centred model for holistic student support and produced the *Wits Institutional Framework for Student Success*, guided by systems thinking (Grayson, 2020) and approved by Senate and Council in late 2019. The reconceptualized O-week was now part of a more coherent institutional approach to student success.

In February 2020, the new O-week ran again, with incremental improvements based on feedback from 2019. Six weeks later, South Africa went into hard lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and students were sent home. Emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) in an online mode was implemented to enable students to complete the academic year. In February 2021 South Africa was still under lockdown and orientation was carried out online.

As 2021 progressed lockdown regulations eased, and it appeared that students could come back to campus in 2022. By mid-year the Senior DVC: Academic expressed concern about how new first-year students would adjust to university life. How had the pandemic impacted teaching and learning at high school? How prepared would high school learners be for the first year of student life at university after almost two years of disrupted schooling?

A need was identified for an extended orientation programme that would support students to transition not only from high school to university but also from the largely remote learning they experienced during the pandemic to the blend of on-campus and online learning and teaching that Wits would offer in 2022. It was also hoped that some of the academic challenges students would face arising from two years of reduced teaching and learning time would be addressed. This led to the conceptualization of Gateway to Success (GTS).

Design and planning of GTS

In normal times, initiating, designing and planning a new programme for 6 500 first-time first-year students would take a long time. But nothing was normal about the COVID-19 pandemic period. The rapidly changing external environment required rapid responses.

In July 2021, as a first step in determining how best to help the 2022 cohort of new first-year students make the transition, Grayson phoned several Deans and Assistant Deans: Teaching and Learning to brainstorm ideas. She and September then discussed the idea of running an extended, compulsory orientation programme in 2022 that would integrate both academic and student life components, which they would co-lead. They also had discussions with the registrar to see whether it would be possible to run a 4-week orientation programme in February between the release of the 2021 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination results and the beginning of the academic year. This opportunity arose because the late release of the 2020 NSC results had a cascading effect on the start and end of the 2021 academic year and the planned start of the 2022 year. The registrar thought it could be done. Grayson and September presented the concept to the Senior Executive Team (SET) in August, who, while supportive of the idea, did not think it could be implemented in time. Nonetheless, SET agreed to let them present the idea to the executive committees of the five faculties. In August and September virtual 'roadshows' were held, during which they presented the idea and listened to suggestions and concerns. Ultimately, support from the faculties for the extended orientation programme was obtained on condition that it could be done in time. The proposal, revised after input from the faculties, was taken back to the SET and approved.

Funding as a special project was approved during the annual budgeting process in October, with support from the Senior DVC: Academic, based on a 'bare bones' budget. Since most staff would be on duty during the planning and implementation of GTS anyway, running GTS did not require a large budget. This was important because the University did not want students to be charged extra fees for GTS, especially as those students who were most likely to need the programme would be least likely to afford an additional financial cost.

The following purposes of GTS were identified:

- To help new first-year students experience a seamless transition from high school to the first year of university.
- To promote social and academic integration into the university and cultivate a sense of belonging and community among students.

- To help students make a strong start to the academic year by providing structured academic support, both content and skills development.
- To help students begin to develop life skills that will help them succeed at university and beyond.
- To familiarise students with the campus, the various supports and the wide range of extracurricular offerings available.

To plan the programme a modified agile project management[7] approach was used, combined with Wits' now well-established networked way of working (Grayson, 2023). A similar approach had been used in early 2021 when the whole university transitioned from one Learning Management System (LMS) to a new one in two months (Grayson, 2021). The approach involved setting up a multi-stakeholder project committee comprising representatives from key stakeholder groups, academic and support staff and students, and task teams to focus on specific cross-cutting aspects of the programme. The project committee comprised the Assistant Dean and one faculty student advisor from each faculty, and representatives from ICT, Student Affairs, Campus Housing, Student Academic Development, Institutional Research, the Student Enrolment Centre, Communications, Marketing, Facilities, and student leadership. It was co-chaired by Grayson and September. Unspent funds from Grayson's budget were used to pay Brenner, a retired Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning, to be logistics project manager and part of the committee.

The following task teams were established, each convened by a member of the project committee:

- Marketing and Communication: to coordinate all information on GTS, including on the University website, social media, and through emails and letters to students and staff.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: to devise and implement short- and medium-term monitoring and evaluation plans.
- Logistics: to coordinate the administrative and physical logistics, including ensuring that venues that had not been used for two years would be clean and COVID-safe.
- Mentoring: to select, train and coordinate senior students who would serve as mentors for groups of about 10 FY students during GTS and for the rest of the year.

The project committee met (online) eight times between 15 October 2021 and 26 January 2022. At each meeting, stakeholder representatives responsible for components of the programme reported on progress and task team convenors provided information and updates. The representation of key stakeholders on the project committee ensured that programme components were well-coordinated, there was an effective flow of correct information, and queries, challenges and concerns were addressed. Task teams met (mostly online) as often as needed, and members also communicated frequently by email and WhatsApp.

Responsibility for the components of the GTS were divided among academic affairs (led by Grayson), student affairs (led by September) and faculties. Since South Africa still

7 https://www.apm.org.uk/resources/find-a-resource/agile-project-management/

had lockdown regulations in place that limited venue occupancy, Wits, and therefore GTS, had to utilise a blend of on-campus and online activities, with limited numbers of students on campus at a time.

The academic components, comprising both content and skills focused activities, were conducted fully online using Wits' Learning Management System (LMS), ulwazi (Canvas), which served to familiarise students with the system. The courses and the number of notional hours were:

- *Climate Change and Me*, a writing-intensive (Nichols et al., 2023) interdisciplinary course that integrated content and academic skills (25).
- *Digital Abilities*, an introduction to computer literacy, digital skills and digital literacy (20).
- *Academic Integrity*, dealing with ethical issues and avoiding academic misconduct (5).
- Faculty specific courses to address key content (20).

Climate Change and Me, in addition to addressing a vitally important topic, includes two high-impact practices identified by research – providing a common intellectual experience and strengthening academic writing.[8] *Digital Abilities* goes beyond computer literacy and introduces several components of the JISC Digital Capabilities Framework (JISC data analytics, 2024). *Academic Integrity* provides early exposure to this concept and how to avoid academic misconduct (Quality Assurance Agency, 2022).

Student life activities were conducted on campus, with resources made available online. They included an address from the Dean of Student Affairs, life skills, such as time and finance management, goal setting, self-awareness, interpersonal communication and critical diversity awareness, as well as social, recreational and student-led activities and information on available support, clubs and societies. There was also a mentoring programme, in which senior students were selected and trained to be mentors for groups of FY students. Time slots were allocated in the programme for mentors and mentees to meet.

Implementation of GTS in 2022

Although GTS had been planned as a four-week programme, shortly before implementation the starting date had to be delayed by one week. Reasons for this included later than expected dates for opening student residences and for scheduled in-person registration for students needing assistance. (Students had to be registered before GTS to access the LMS.) However, the agile implementation approach meant that changes could be made quickly. In the end GTS ran from 7 to 25 February, and classes started on 28 February.

Implementation required engagement with stakeholders across the whole university. Buy-in and assistance from people in nearly every area of the university was needed: academic affairs, student affairs, all faculties and even schools and departments, central support services such as ICT, the Learning and Teaching Centre, Services, Facilities, Marketing, Communications, Alumni Relations, Security Services, the Social Justice Cluster

8 https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact

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of units, the International Students' Office, and the Student Representative Council and their sub-structures, including School and Faculty Councils, the All Residences Council and House Committees, and the Sports Sub-council.

As project manager, Brenner convened the logistics task team, comprised of a wide variety of support staff from across the University. She also coordinated all venue bookings and the compilation and production of the final programme, which involved constant communication with faculties, student affairs, marketing, facilities and security. The logistics were complicated by the fact that most of the venues had not been used for nearly two years and so required thorough cleaning and, in some cases, fixing or replacing equipment, such as data projectors or sound systems. In addition, since COVID-19 restrictions were still in place, venue capacities were limited, which meant that students from each faculty had to be divided into two groups for on-campus sessions, one from 8:30 to 12:30 and one from 12:30 to 16:30. It also meant that some larger campus venues had to be used that had not previously been used during O-week. One of these was the Great Hall, normally used for formal events such as graduation. Another was three science laboratories, each accommodating over 300 students, so that mentors could meet their mentees around an allocated laboratory bench.

Multiple media were used to communicate with students before and during GTS: letters, emails, bulk text messages, social media, the Wits website and the LMS. The detailed programme for each faculty, which included faculty-led and student life activities and information on the online courses, was uploaded onto the Wits website. An LMS site was created for the FYE, with GTS as the landing page, and each faculty created its own LMS student support site. Several computer laboratories were booked on campus, which were staffed by senior student tutors to assist students struggling to use computers and the LMS.

The day before the GTS programme began, students and their parents or guardians were invited to Welcome Day, at which they were formally welcomed by the Chancellor and Vice- Chancellor. In weeks 1 and 2 of GTS students attended a half day of faculty-based and a half day of student-life activities on campus per week. In week 3 there were on-campus student-life activities, campus tours and evening, student-organised entertainment, culminating on the last day in the traditional 'Wits Spirit' soccer game, at which students received Wits T-shirts and were welcomed as 'Witsies for Life'. In addition, students were expected to spend time on the online courses – 25 hours in week 1, 30 in week 2 and 20 in week 3.

Reflection and outcomes of GTS 2022

Organising a new programme for 6 500 new students in four months was quite a feat. It could not have been done without drawing on Wits' networked way of working and modified agile project methodology, involving dozens of role players working on aspects of the programme in parallel, combined with coordinating structures and effective communication channels.

GTS was advertised as compulsory, and although this could not be enforced, attendance was high. An online survey was administered to all new first-year students

during the first two weeks of classes, with a 57% response rate to the whole survey and another 9% to parts of it. In response to a question of how many friends they had made during GTS, only 6% of respondents indicated they made no friends, while when asked whether they were comfortable to call themselves 'Witsies', 95% of students said yes. These results suggest that GTS helped students feel a sense of belonging to the University, illustrated by the following quotes:

> *It was a warm welcome as a first year Witsie and it also gave me a sense of belonging.*
>
> *Wits really welcomed us with big arms and made me feel like part of the family. I am a proud Witsie, Witsie for life!*
>
> *I was made to feel that I belong at the university and that with hard work, perseverance and a positive attitude, success and growth were in sight. I am thankful for the experience.*

Self-reported attendance at almost all the in-person scheduled sessions was around 90%. The completion rate of the online courses was about 72%. Reasons given for not completing the online courses included problems with devices, data and connectivity and inadequate time management.

In terms of their overall experience of GTS, students indicated that it helped with the transition to university, they made friends, found it fun, enjoyable, informative and welcoming and felt a sense of belonging. A few students said it was overwhelming at the beginning, but they adjusted during the programme. Several students' comments are shown below:

> *It was an exciting experience, it helped me learn about university and how to adjust from high school. It also brought a sense of comfort to know that we are assigned mentors, the feeling of knowing you're not alone is the best thing any first year could ask for.*
>
> *The GTS program was a wonderful experience that really helped me adjust and get comfortable in university. I learnt important skills in the Climate Change course that I am grateful I learnt them before school started. I had the opportunity to make friends and familiarize myself with the campus. University is certainly a different environment compared to high school but the GTS program helped a lot in invalidating myths and just put us at ease.*
>
> *My experience [of] the GTS programme was overwhelming at first because I knew no one and had no friends but as time went on I adapted. It got even better when I met my mentor and the mentees group for the first time. Meeting them made me want to be engaged in all activities even the mentor made us feel at ease. The programme itself was quite informative. I learnt a lot from it and I realised that Wits is not just a university but it is a community that upholds equity. I really appreciated the session of mental health it showed me that Wits cares about our state of wellbeing. After the GTS programme I was proud to be a Witsie.*

GTS 2023

Several changes were made to GTS in 2023. The biggest change was a reduction in length from three weeks (15 weekdays) to 11 weekdays. This was done because the NSC results would be released earlier and staff wanted to return to the pre-COVID schedule of earlier start and end dates for the academic year, rather than ending in December. Since COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in mid-2022, in 2023 there were no restrictions on how many students could be on campus or in venues at the same time. That meant that all students from a faculty could be on campus simultaneously, as could students from more than one faculty. Thus, there was no need to limit the time students spent in on-campus faculty and student-life activities. On the contrary, the time for faculty-led activities could be increased to one full day (instead of half a day) per week for two weeks to help foster student identity in a discipline and allow students to better familiarise themselves with campus venues. There was also one scheduled day of student-life activities per week per faculty, plus a number of informal on-campus social and recreational activities that students could participate in during the second week.

Another change was to remove the faculty-based online courses, reducing the total notional hours for the online courses from 75 to 50, requiring students to spend 25 hours per week on them. Since students had spent much of 2022 physically attending high school, it was hoped they had experienced less disruption to their classes, at least in Grade 12, compared to the previous year's students and therefore would not need the content-focused courses.

Based on feedback from students and staff, several other changes were made to the programme. One was to avoid having too many presentations or sessions in which students were mostly sitting and listening to a speaker (or a video), and to rather make sessions interactive. Another change was to introduce GTS Ambassadors (in addition to mentors) who would help with logistics, such as setting up venues and equipment, and help students find venues spread across the large campus.

The online GTS survey was administered in the second week of classes, with a response rate of 59%, slightly higher than in 2022. Responses about making friends and attending in-person sessions were similar to the 2022 responses. However, there was a significant change in the percentage of students who completed the online courses. For *Climate Change and Me* the percentage dropped from 72% in 2022 to 29% in 2023, for *Digital Abilities* it dropped from 71% to 49% and for *Academic Integrity* from 72% to 50%. Reasons given by students for not completing online activities included time constraints due to poor time management or feeling tired from the on-campus GTS activities. Some students struggled with internet connections, although computer laboratories were available on campus every day. It was also evident that this cohort of students was no longer used to learning in an online mode, unlike the 2022 cohort. In addition, anecdotal evidence from students and staff suggests that some students did not understand that the online courses were an integral and required component of GTS, without which they would struggle when they had to use the LMS in their formal courses.

The drop in participation in the online courses came as a surprise, but it did bring the realisation that students and their lived experience are changing every year, which

means that every year GTS should be modified. It also means that, even though students are included on the committees and task teams, ways should be found to draw more heavily on their insights and experiences in the planning.

Conclusion

Gateway to Success began as a bold initiative to address needs created and exacerbated by a global pandemic. It grew out of a commitment by academic and student affairs staff, made three years earlier, to collaborate on promoting student success, starting with orientation. The need to be innovative in accessing and leveraging limited human and financial resources quickly provided additional impetus to this pre-existing commitment (Commodore, 2018). GTS could be rapidly planned and implemented by using Wits' network of people methodology. The networked approach was first employed in 2019 in developing the *Wits Institutional Framework for Student Success*, which involved bringing people from highly siloed units together to work towards a common purpose, namely, promoting student success. These networks of people were expanded when emergency remote teaching and learning was implemented in 2020 and again when Wits switched to a new LMS in 2021, when a modified agile project management was added to the approach. Thus, by mid-2021 when GTS was conceptualized, the team had experience with a networked way of working and the number of people across the University who knew each other and were involved in promoting student success had grown considerably. By drawing on this experience, GTS could be quickly and effectively organised and new role players who had become committed to student success could be drawn in.

While the scale and severity of the pandemic have subsided, we are confident that there is still great value in mounting an extended orientation programme for new first-year students that integrates both academic and student life components, while helping students develop a sense of belonging to the University. We have seen a growing network of people across the University who want to contribute to ensuring our students succeed, and the relationships and sense of shared purpose among them facilitates our ability to run such a large scale and complicated programme.

GTS is now a part of the University calendar and funding cycle. We plan to keep running it for the foreseeable future, adjusting each year as needed to better cater for our students and the circumstances in which they and the University find themselves. In addition, in recognition of the importance of supporting students to navigate a number of transitions during their student journey, in 2024 the Division of Student Affairs has created a new Student Persistence and Transitions Unit. This unit will oversee, among other things, GTS, the year-long FYE programme and the first-year mentoring programme. All of these initiatives are part of our institutional commitment to student success, guided by our institutional student success framework.

Ethics statement

The authors confirm that University ethics requirements were met in the writing of this reflective practice article.

Potential conflict of interests
The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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