The next, great first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution–wide approaches to enact the FYE as "everybody's business"

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Abstract

Supporting and enhancing the diversity of our students' first year experience (FYE) requires that all of our institutional aspects – our philosophies, strategies and structures, our polices, processes and practices, and particularly our first year learning and teaching approaches and related support delivery – are integrated, coordinated and intentional in aid of early student learning, engagement and success. While this might seem trite, as observed in 2005 when reviewing a decade of Australian research into our students' FYE, "first year support efforts have tended to be piecemeal in the main, developed and sustained by individuals or small groups who champion the cause of first year transition. We have now reached the stage where universities must recognise the need for institution-wide approaches to enhancing the first year experience" (Krause et al, 2005, at 8.8.6).

This keynote seeks to address this substantial challenge. How might all the institutional players integrate and coordinate their various excellent, but quite disparate, first year initiatives and work together towards more holistic and sustainable, institution-wide, approaches that transcend the silos of academic, administrative and support areas? How do we enact a whole, systematically-managed, vision for the FYE that is truly student-focussed and is indeed greater than the sum of its many parts? This paper will discuss how my institution, leveraging a strong base of existing work by the appointment of a senior academic as FYE Director, has sought to enact an institutional priority around undergraduate first year and to promote an organisation-wide ethos of the FYE as "everybody's business". The five project areas identified and progressed will be presented, and the strengths and weaknesses of such an initiative will be discussed. Though it is understood and accepted that embedded institutional change of this nature may take as long as ten years to effect (Swing, 2003), the organisation partnerships nurtured and policy gains realised, even over one year, suggest that much can be achieved when an institution commits itself to coherency and seamlessness in delivering on the promise of a positive FYE for all of its commencing students.

Introduction

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> by individuals or small groups who champion the cause of first year transition. We have
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In 2008, efforts to understand and enhance the first year experience (FYE) of
commencing undergraduate students may point to an impressive lineage of initiatives and
an extensive body of national and international research, of which this FYHE Conference
is but one example. In Australia, the status of the FYE, as an area deserving of concerted
institutional attention, has undoubtedly grown exponentially over the last decade, assisted
in no small part by the coherent and longitudinal tracking of student attitudes and
experiences emanating from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE), the
most recent of which analyses the findings of a decade of such research (Krause, Hartley,
James & McInnis, 2005). We have looked to and learnt much from the extensive US
literature, while even more significantly the latest UK research by Mantz Yorke and
Bernard Longden (2007, 2008) has thrown up remarkable similarities between the
Australian and the UK experience of commencing students. Most recently, we have now
been presented with the results of the *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement –
AUSSE* (ACER, 2008), which have leveraged a decade of US experience using the
National Survey of Student Engagement (Kuh, 2007). For the first time in Australia,
AUSSE has interrogated what it is that students do that engages them; "student
engagement" in *AUSSE* being defined as students' involvement with "activities and
conditions likely to generate high quality learning" (ACER, 2008, vi).

Yet despite all these efforts, the extensive data collected and analyses conducted, it is fair
to say, as Krause and her colleagues observed in the opening quote, that our efforts
around FYE enhancement have been "piecemeal in the main". Tinto (2006-7, 2) has
similarly commented recently that "substantial gains in student retention have been hard
to come by" and "there is much that we have not yet done to translate our research and
theory into effective practice". This paper seeks to address this substantial challenge of
translating research and theory into effective institutional action, that is not only
implemented, but implemented fully, well and sustainably (Tinto, 2006-7). It asks – how
might all the institutional players integrate and coordinate their various excellent, but
often quite disparate, first year initiatives and work together towards more sustainable,
institution-wide, approaches that transcend the silos of academic, administrative and
support areas? How do we enact a holistic, systematically-managed, vision for the FYE
that is truly student-focussed and is indeed greater than the sum of its many parts?

In answer to this next, great FYE challenge, the tried and true "top-down, bottom-up"
approach for intentional action will be advocated. It is contended that each institution
needs first to identify and then coordinate individual, dispersed FYE efforts to ensure
sustainability and coherence of initiatives across its organisational areas. One of the
imperatives here is to respond to the concerns expressed in the international literature that
the quality of the student experience may vary more *within* than *between* institutions
(Kuh, 2007). From an early point, this first step requires us to act respectfully and in

concert to leverage the strong base of existing practice that is already to be found in most institutions. Building on this ground-up approach, a model for institutional action may then be promoted, which can focus commitment to an enduring FYE culture as an institutional priority that is, both in rhetoric and reality, "everybody's business". With the support of "effective, multi-level leadership and management" in a "climate of readiness for change" (Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers & Abraham, 2005), a state of readiness we have undoubtedly reached, institutional structures, policies and practices may be created that

> … provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year. These structures and policies provide oversight and alignment of all first-year efforts. A coherent first-year experience is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements.
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> (*US Policy Center on the First Year of College,* n.d.)

This is the ethos that is at the heart of my institution's most recent efforts to move its FYE agenda purposefully forward. Through the appointment of an academic Director, FYE Program, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has progressed a model of institutional action that has sought to enact an agreed FYE framework – a transitions "blueprint" (Nelson, Kift, Humphreys & Harper, 2006) – under the auspices of five project areas in which early policy and program gains were thought achievable if supported by the concomitant development of a coherent organisational context. The primary purpose of the Director role was to build stakeholder consensus around, and establish the QUT infrastructure for, the necessity to institutionalise our FYE approaches. Specifically, there was a dedicated focus on: identifying existing effective action and trialling desirable new practices; joining-up existing, though dispersed, efforts; making such initiatives visible to students and staff alike and up-scaling them across the institution; all in a multi-layered model that aimed to be enduring and sustainable and not dependent on individual champions (Nelson et al, 2006). A further, fundamental component of this work has been the associated development and operationalisation of consensus-based FYE policy enhancements to support and enable these initiatives. These policy gains have in turn been underpinned and validated by the development of QUT specific data collections (for example, a *Program Exit Survey*, a refreshed *Orientation Survey 2007*, and newly created *QUT First Year Experience Survey (FYES) 2007*). Thus, as Tinto exhorts (2006-7, 7), we have genuinely sought to connect "specific programs and practices for students to institutional actions that provide support for the faculty and staff directing those programs and practices".

The five project areas identified for action will be discussed below. Though it is understood and accepted that embedded institutional change of this nature may take as long as ten years to effect (Swing, 2003), the organisational partnerships nurtured and policy gains realised, even over one year (admittedly in our (QUT) context working off quite a strong base, most recently the 2005-2007 *Enhancing Transitions Project*, *ET@QUT*: Kift & Nelson, 2005; Nelson et al, 2006), suggest that much can be achieved when an institution commits itself to coherency and seamlessness in delivering on the promise of a positive FYE for all of its commencing cohorts. Rounding out this fresh FYE push, we have recognised the continuing need to work consistently with dedicated

frontline teaching and student support staff to assist them in delivering these desirable systematic enhancements. Therefore, another crucial plank in the action platform has been the augmentation of the Director role by a newly funded "*Transitions In Project*" ("*TIP*"), which is facilitating and coordinating the implementation of this research-led, practice-based change broadly across the discipline, support and service area coalface.

Before turning to the specific project areas pursued, I will first discuss, in general terms, the philosophical framework within which this work has progressed. In so doing, it is important to recognise the major challenges to managing this type of whole-of-institution change (so that they might be mitigated) and to make some further observations around how significant organisational change may nevertheless be enacted.

A comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated institutional approach to FYE: the challenges.

QUT has been working on its conceptualisation of the FYE for many years (Kift, 2004; Kift & Nelson, 2005). As one might expect, our approaches and strategies have matured considerably over that time, but the essence of our blueprint has remained steadfast: in all of their diversity, and in spite of their changing patterns of engagement, students come to us in higher education to learn. Therefore, for transition to be truly successful, for students to be educated and thus retained (Tinto, 2002a), first year curriculum that engages and supports new learners in their learning must be the FYE centerpiece and first principle. Given that first year students have special learning needs by virtue of the social and academic transitions they are making, they need assistance to be successful in their learning engagement. This leads to our two supporting principles (Kift, 2004; Kift & Nelson, 2005): that all institutional practices need to be carefully embedded, integrated and coordinated to support new learners
[1] through timely access to support and service provision, and
[2] by the inculcation of a sense of cohort belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experience, their teachers and their peers.
The overall strategic objective in this regard is to ensure that the day-to-day transactions between learners and the various aspects of their learning are seamless (particularly in those crucial first few days, weeks and months of the first year), so that they can focus their energy on learning.

This is long term and complex work that is essentially about doing the right thing by the students we have accepted into our programs of study and it requires us to provide them proactively with the equity of opportunity they need to be successful. As Harvey, Drew & Smith (2006, vii) point out, there is no one "homogeneous [FYE] experience but a multiplicity of experiences contingent on type of institution and student characteristics… Furthermore, the first year experience evolves and changes both temporally and culturally". In seeking to mediate this dynamic multiplicity of first year "experiences", institutions face significant challenges in their attempts to coordinate programs of action across their organisational areas. These challenges need to be acknowledged and reconciled, and for that reason will now be mentioned briefly. In doing so, I identify what

I consider to be three main "change challenges", followed by a number of sub-issues that impact appreciably on efforts to mitigate the primary three.

Change challenges

First, the institutional approaches themselves need to be driven by both high level and distributed sponsorship and leadership, while the articulation of clear and efficient governance structures to "[bridge] the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs [remains] a substantial challenge" (McInnis, 2003, 13). This first challenge is exacerbated by the second, which tends to undermine institutional will to assume the necessary leadership authority: that, in the face the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's (ALTC) increasing impact on learning and teaching quality, and in spite of the blunt focus on retention and attrition forced by the national Teaching and Learning Performance Fund,[2] it remains the case that, rhetoric aside, student success, retention and education is not accorded a high priority by either institutions or their staff, the latter generally but amongst teaching staff especially. Building a strategic commitment to educating and thus retaining students (Tinto, 2002a) requires that we adapt and respond to changing student needs and accommodate known and knowable student diversity, which is writ large in the contemporary massified sector: "We need to teach the students we recruit, not the ones we would have liked to recruit"(NAO, 2007, 30). Unfortunately, as Tinto points out (2006-7, 9), teachers

> …typically do not see retaining students as their job. Given what many [teachers] believe to be the root causes of attrition, namely the lack of skills and motivation, they might observe that they would not have a retention "problem" if the admission office only admitted more qualified students.

This last raises a third and central challenge, that of attending to the efficacy of first year curriculum design – what I have called the articulation of a "transition pedagogy" – a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts (Kift, 2004). To date, we have done a lot of work *around* the curriculum, and *in aid of* it, but we need now to come in from the periphery and focus on articulating, implementing and sustaining first year curriculum design that is engaging, supportive, intentional, relevant and social (STAR, 2005).

A number of sub-issues impact on whether these three primary challenges can be met in the FYE context, chief amongst which are the following –
- whether there is an institutional commitment to front-ending and emphasising resource allocation to the FYE;
- agreeing a conceptualisation of student orientation, transition and induction as a process that must be mediated over time and that is operationalised with an eye to coherency of provision and just-in-time support and information delivery;
- harnessing institutional information and communication technologies (ICTs) – which deliver students both eAdministration and eLearning – for a holistic view of students' institutional engagement (Nelson, Kift, Harper, 2005);

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[2] See http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/learning_teaching/ltpf/

- ensuring that academic staff are provided with the "pedagogical and assessment skills they need to establish conditions in their classrooms that promote student involvement, learning, and retention" (Tinto, 2002a, 8), which includes reaching a consensus about what good first year teaching looks like;
- ensuring that professional staff (both central and faculty based) are also provided with the staff development opportunities they need around the FYE and the nature of their particular role and contribution to student success and retention;
- ensuring that institutional reward and recognition structures for both academic and professional staff are aligned with desirable FYE practice and that the requisite incentives for both staff *and their managers* are provided for them to engage in this important, but presently unappreciated, work with our commencing students;
- enabling staff to analyse and respond to both national (eg *AUSSE*, *Course Experience Questionnaire* (*CEQ*), CSHE, etc) and institutionally-specific data collected for the purposes of evidence-based quality enhancement (see for example, the RMIT-based ALTC Leadership Project, *Developing multi-level leadership in the use of student feedback to enhance student learning and teaching practice*[3]). In this regard, the recent national picture painted by the *AUSSE* analysis (ACER, 2008) raises some interesting and important issues around the engagement aspect of a transition pedagogy (most critical amongst which are facilitating non-academic support provision, peer-to-peer interactions, and staff-student interactions); and
- developing systematic, institutional approaches to monitoring for student (dis)engagement and progression during the currency of an existing enrolment period, (to be compared with the traditional response at the end of the semester after failure), to enable for timely intervention and support (Nelson et al, 2006; Duncan & Nelson, 2008).

Many of the features referred to in this part are now becoming constant refrains in the more recent national and international literature examining the FYE (e.g., *Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) Project* (see Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates (2005)); Yorke & Longden, 2007, 2008; STAR, 2005; the Scottish Quality Agency's Enhancement Theme on the FYE[4]; Zepke et al, 2005; Harvey et al, 2006).

Enacting sustainable institution-wide change to enhance the FYE

The fraught contemporary reality for us all – staff and students alike, trying to do more with greater effectiveness and efficacy, but with fewer resources and less time – is a final, potentially debilitating, factor that works against the best of institutional (and even combined individual) intentions to enhance the FYE. However, in the face of all these possibly confounding challenges, FYE research and the change literature coalesce to present remarkably consistent advice about the way forward. Specifically in the latter regard, Robert Diamond, President of the US National Academy for Academic Leadership, acknowledges the significant pressures to which higher education is currently subject but nevertheless remains optimistic that successful change can be enabled in the

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[3] At http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/carricklgp/
[4] At http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/

"areas of course and curricular design and pedagogy, [which]…must be accomplished with few resources and with many factors complicating the change process" (2005, 24).

Adapting Diamond's identified elements for successful change (Diamond, 2005, 29-30) to the specific instance of FYE enhancement, his list of "prerequisite conditions, steps in the change process, and the characteristics of the campus climate that must be established if change initiatives are to be successful" would relevantly include –

- What is the institution's agreed and clearly articulated "**mission and vision statement**" (Diamond, 2005, 29) for the FYE and the broader student experience?
- Is **student learning**, development and engagement **at the centre** of the institution's mission and vision (albeit with research, but nevertheless balanced)?
- Do all **organisational areas' plans and activities support** the institutional mission and vision?
- Is mission and vision implementation, and all institutional decision making, **research-led**, **evidence-based** and concordant with the **institution's culture**?
- What is the **governance and leadership structure**? Is research-led learning and teaching "leadership for change…effectively integrated throughout the institution" (Diamond, 2005, 29) with clarity about roles? This includes both visionary high-level leadership and distributed professional and academic leadership.
- Is **reward and recognition** aligned with the institutional priorities expressed in the mission and vision?
- Is implementation and decision-making continuously monitored, **evaluated and refined**?
- Is professional and academic **staff development** aligned to support implementation?
- Are institutional leaders **working collaboratively across silos** to explore new structures, processes and practices?
- Does a "**willingness** to test all previous assumptions" exist?
- Is there a commitment to change at all levels of the institution as "**everybody's business**"?

Diamond, Tinto, McInnis and others recognise that it is indeed a "tall order" (Diamond, 2005, 30) to enact such an integrated, multi-layered model of institutional reform. But it is challenge that must be met and it is what we have recently attempted, and are still now pursuing, at QUT.

The five project areas identified for concerted institutional action will each be discussed in turn in the following part. That discussion will also incorporate some broad reflections on the efficacy, strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches progressed. The five project areas are as follows –
1. QUT FYE Vision Project
2. First Year Teaching and Support Enabling Project
3. Pre-Orientation, Orientation and Transition Project
4. First Year Curriculum Project
5. First Year Students Project.

In conclusion to this part, further retrospective validation of the five project areas as our choices for institutional action is now to be found in Yorke and Longden's recent synthesis (2008, 4-5) of the "six broad areas of institutional activity through which the chances of student success can be enhanced", there identified as:

- an institutional commitment to student learning, and hence to student engagement;
- proactive management of student transition
- treating the curriculum as an academic milieu, and also one in which social engagement is fostered
- choosing curricular structures that increase the chances of student success
- placing an emphasis on the first year experience (including the provision of resources)
- systematically monitoring and evaluating student achievement, and acting on the evidence thereby collected and
- academic leadership.

An outline of QUT's FYE Program 2007–ongoing

The Program reported here was pursued by way of an initial twelve month secondment of the author from her home Faculty to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)'s (DVC(A)) Office as the Director, First Year Experience Program ("Director"), starting late in 2006 and extending over 2007. The University has since committed further resourcing to this important work by seconding another senior academic to the role for 2008 (Associate Professor Karen Nelson), who is also the Project Manager for the *Transitions In Project* (*TIP*) referred to above, a welcome and synergistic coupling of resourcing.

On appointment in late 2006, the Director was charged with developing a Project Management Framework, identifying a series of projects for action over 2006-7, building partnerships across the university, reporting on results, and making recommendations for future action. In terms of scope given the original timeframe, the Program was confined to the *undergraduate* FYE, though it is recognised that both postgraduate and research students also have significant transition issues deserving of dedicated attention. Multiple working groups (10 in all) were established under the auspices of the Program in order to bring academic and professional colleagues from across the university together to share knowledge and experience and to build cross-institutional structures and practices. Regular progress reports were submitted to University Teaching and Learning Committee (UTLC) over the Program's life, outlining its detailed aims, objectives and intended outcomes, while an Interim Report was presented to UTLC in June 2007. In particular, the latter provided an overview of progress, a briefing on proposed future action for institutional endorsement, and an assessment of the risks that could militate against successful Program outcomes. All Program documentation and the resources collected under its auspices have been made widely available on a dedicated Program wiki. A Final Report was submitted in December 2007 for the QUT community's consideration, future action and implementation.

The Program's broad aims and each of its projects seek to address Tinto's challenge of making connections between individual programs and practices and delineating the organizational context that will support and sustain both them and their proponents. The Program's broad aims were articulated as follows (QUT FYE Program, 2007, 2):

- To address the institutional priority of ensuring that QUT's organisational contexts – its structure, policies and practices, particularly its first year learning and teaching approaches and all related service delivery – are integrated, coordinated, intentional and proactive so that first year student engagement, learning and success are supported and enhanced.
- To promote an organisation-wide ethos to the FYE, with a student-centred perspective, that is embedded at all levels: strategically across the institution, tactically in the faculties and divisions, and operationally in the classroom.

The five projects were designated primarily to move us from "theory to action" (Tinto, 2006-7), but also to ensure that the typical, ground-up approaches of disparate pockets of dispersed FYE activity were identified, up-scaled, validated and moved into mainstream institutional practice. While it might sound trite, the audit of current institutional practice was a key Program feature, one of the imperatives being the desire to build in quality assurance, resourcing and cohesiveness around existing practice and to enable future cross-institutional decision-making, sharing and planning to occur. To take a concrete example: working with faculty and divisional colleagues across the university, we were able to identify all the many and varied peer-to-peer opportunities that students have available to them across QUT and to bring the staff directing those programs and practices together with a view both to validating this previously unrecognised work and to enabling a consistent look and feel to all these various initiatives in a way that makes sense to students and is student-facing (e.g., by way of standardised mentor reward and recognition, common T-Shirts and branding, sharing and up-scaling of practice across organisational areas, etc). This process is now being very effectively managed and sustainably coordinated by the Head of QUT's Counselling Services. The next step in assuring institutional cohesiveness in this area of practice is to make available to students a whole-of-institution view of these various peer opportunities across discipline and divisional silos (e.g., by website portal) and to develop institutional policy and performance indicators around their offering and uptake.

Project 1: QUT FYE Vision

The broad aim of this first project was to deliver an evidence-based FYE "vision" that articulated a QUT-specific strategic commitment to a positive and successful FYE for all our commencing undergraduate students. It was acknowledged that QUT had already done much to enhance the experience of its first year students but, to move the institutional agenda forward, it was considered imperative to leverage existing processes and practices and to articulate, at a high-level of policy enunciation, a commitment to and a vision for, a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated FYE approach. The proposed statement of institutional intent therefore aimed (QUT FYE Program, 2007, 3) –
- to provide the strategic framework necessary to support and inform all existing and future institutional FYE policies, processes and practices;
- to ensure that QUT's approach to the FYE is intentional and that cohesive, systematic strategies are developed and deployed consistently for sustainable, whole-of-institution action in accordance with the agreed philosophy; and
- to provide the impetus for alignment between resource allocation and the conditions that promote successful student transitions.

While in its final articulation, the statement developed and ultimately endorsed through the institutional committee process and now embedded in the institutional policy

framework (the *Manual of Policy and Procedures* (QUT *MoPP*)) was not called a "vision", we can proudly boast that, "[i]n line with QUT's vision and goals, a key aim is to support all commencing students to adjust successfully to study at QUT by providing a strong transition experience – academically, socially and administratively – according to their varied needs" (QUT *MoPP*, n.d., C/1.5 *The First Year Experience*). The Policy statement adopted is set out at Appendix A.

Project 2: First Year Teaching and Support Enabling Project

Broadly this project aimed to set in place the strategic organisational policies, structures and processes that would (QUT FYE Program, 2007, 6) –

- raise the status and profile of first year teaching and support among full-time academics and professional staff by aligning QUT's institutional commitment to the FYE with the incentives, workload allocation, recognition, reward and other support mechanisms necessary to ensure that organisational areas are intentional and strategic about their allocation of QUT's best teachers and professional staff to first year learning environments;
- ensure that these first year teachers and professional staff are appropriately supported by all other faculty academic and professional staff members and also cross-institutionally as required; and
- enhance staff development offerings for greater alignment to QUT's strategic priority of the FYE.

An extensive body of research makes clear the conditions necessary to best promote student learning and retention in the first year. While it is accepted that individual student characteristics are largely beyond institutional control –

> This is clearly not the case for the settings in which students are placed. Those settlings, classrooms, laboratories, residential halls, and the like, are directly under our control and are, if we so wish, subject to change by our actions.
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> (Tinto, 2002b, 2).

In a similar vein, the *US Policy Center on the First Year of College* (n.d.) suggests leading first year institutions are –

> …characterized by a culture of faculty responsibility for the first year that is realized through high-quality instruction in first-year classes and substantial interaction between faculty and first-year students both inside and outside the classroom. This culture of responsibility is nurtured by chief academic officers, deans, and department chairs and supported by the institutions' reward systems.

As obvious as these matters might seem, it is probably not surprising to hear that this project achieved the least substantial outcomes of the five pursued over the Program's timeframe. This type of institutional action involves a substantial paradigm and culture shift in institutional thinking and practice; one that requires concerted thinking and attention over time to realise. But if we take this necessary culture shift one step at a time, a decisive first step, which would send an unambiguous message about the value of attending to the student experience (and accordingly raise the status of first year learning and teaching), would be to have clarity around the indicia of good teaching for all important institutional purposes. This presupposes that the institution can reach a consensus on what constitutes teaching quality (for example, by adopting a statement such as the University of Melbourne's *Nine Principles Guiding Teaching and Learning*

(2007) or ALTC's criteria for the national teaching excellence awards[5] or enacting the outcomes of ALTC's *National Teaching Quality Indicators Project*[6]) and then uses such a statement to underpin all relevant HR academic and professional processes (including appointment, Performance Planning and Review, probation, and promotion).

Finally, the imperative to raise the status and profile of first year teaching and support requires the simultaneous development of strategies and action at two levels:
- *the provision of incentives to teachers and professional staff* to engage in this difficult, and presently unglamorous, work with first year students (e.g., through strategic allocation of workload consistent with the importance of first year teaching; adequate support and resourcing of staff; reward and recognition; promotion and career progression; research mentoring; block release (not simply rewarding good teaching with more teaching: Shulman, 2000); easy recognition of "teaching research leadership" where it is occurring; *etc*); and
- *drivers for managers* to ensure best teacher placement and student-centred administrative and academic support and advising (for example, through policy initiatives; through Performance Planning and Review systems; via revised top level Learning and Teaching Plan targets and performance indicators (e.g., tighter retention and progression targets); by requiring correlation between formal teaching evaluations and teacher allocation to the first year; through reward and recognition strategies for schools/faculties that demonstrate increases in student satisfaction and retention; resourcing tied to income generated by teaching load; *etc*).

While much of the above is still work-in-progress, some important gains were, however, made under this project. A "FYE perspective" has been written into all the various academic leadership roles in teaching and learning in the QUT *MoPP* (see *MoPP* B/3.5 Academic leadership roles in teaching and learning): for example, individual unit (subject) coordinators' responsibilities now include matters such as the "[organisation of] curriculum, teaching and assessment materials for the unit, paying particular attention to student needs (e.g., in first year unit design, attending to the special learning needs of first year students)" and "[fostering] students' progress in the unit and, particularly in first year units, monitor for signs of student disengagement / weak performance" (see *MoPP* 3.5.6 Unit coordinator). All other levels of the teaching and learning leadership roles also have a responsibility to "provide leadership at [the relevant level] for implementation of QUT teaching and learning priorities, such as first year experience, real world learning and transition to professional practice". In a similar vein, academic staff development programs for both sessional and ongoing staff now seek to ensure that a "FYE perspective" is infused, while the *Transitions In Project*, currently underway across the university, has adopted a specific staff development focus as one of its priority areas.

Project 3: Pre-Orientation, Orientation and Transition Project

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[5] See the five criteria identified in the *Teaching Excellence Award Guidelines* at
http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/webdav/site/carricksite/users/siteadmin/public/awards_guidelines_dec07.pdf
[6] At http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/tqi

> Induction of first-year students is often criticised for being confusing, sometimes overly bureaucratic and, whilst providing information, not providing it in a user-friendly way and in a context that can be readily assimilated. Various studies report induction programmes and longer-term active processes designed to ameliorate the confusion and information overload of the induction period. They suggest more gradual provision of information and better integration and socialisation of students. There are separate issues for integration of distance students.
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> (Harvey et al, 2006, 70)

There are many drivers that have pushed universities to be more strategic about supporting student transition into the institution from an early stage in the student-institution experience, including: the heterogeneity of entering students' backgrounds; the well documented and changing patterns of student engagement; the expectations of new learners, many of whom belong to Generation Y or the dot.com generation; and the sector's own transition from an elite to a mass education system. The literature also directs attention to:

- the desirability of alleviating information overload;
- pro-activity to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic procedures; and
- the necessity to address the lack of preparedness of many students to cope with their new tertiary environment.

Krause et al (2005, 35) argue that "initial orientation programs …play a key role in welcoming students into the learning community" and that "institutional-level programs [need to be] accompanied by department or faculty-based initiatives…to support students within their disciplinary subgroups".

The conceptualisation of orientation as a *process* that occurs over time, with a particular focus on critical time periods, one of which is clearly the Orientation Week ("O Week"), is not an easy matter in and of itself. The implementation and coordination of such a conceptualisation, given the reality of thousands of commencing students, often across multiple campuses, in a myriad of double degree possibilities, with enormous diversity in entering needs, is an enormously complex undertaking.

By late 2006, the dedicated work of a professional staff member (the FYE Program Coordinator) across QUT's (then) nine Faculties had already achieved much in terms of quality assuring effective O Week approaches at the Faculty level that

- were more student-friendly and intentionally social in the discipline context (with informal semi-structured interactions between commencing students and more experienced students ("orientation facilitators")); and
- purposefully minimised the amount of "talking head" information provided formally in large group lectures by faculty and divisional staff.

In response to these initiatives, feedback from both commencing students and Faculty staff was that students were better prepared than previous cohorts and were experiencing less confusion around administrative issues (e.g., about where and how to hand in assignments, where to go for help, correct enrolment, activating user name and password access, etc). Through mailouts and other encouragement, O Week attendance rates were pleasingly high, and by 2007 all QUT Faculties had adopted this good practice, discipline-based approach.

However, 2007 O Week feedback from students and staff was that holistic O Week expectations were still not being appropriately mediated ("where was O WEEK – I got here Monday morning and nothing was happening") and that there was a lack of excitement – "buzz" – and activity around QUT's four campuses. In response for 2008, under this project's auspices and within the usual resource constraints, we organised specific campus-based "O Weeks" and sought to ensure a critical mass on student attendance on each of the four campuses for designated days (only), through the coalescing of faculty and divisional programs. Students were now being invited to attend specific Orientation days and activities, with a mid-day focal point of a shared central event on each campus. The response to this refreshed approach to O Week, as collected in the *Student Orientation Survey 2008*, was further increases in attendance rates and positive data that showed:

- 88.8% of respondents reported that Orientation events helped them to settle into QUT;
- 86.0% of commencing students found the course orientation sessions either useful, very useful or extremely useful;
- 81.3% of respondents who attended seminars in 2008 found them useful, very useful or extremely useful;
- 87.5% of 2008 respondents who attended tour seminars found them useful;
- 63.0% of respondents attended the Big-Top event at either the Kelvin Grove or the Gardens Point campus;
- 89.5% of those attending the Big-Top Event rated it as at least "OK", with 53% rating the Big-Top event as good or very good.

Critically also, focusing O Week by campus cohorts assisted in significantly reducing the perennial problem of double degree O Week clashes; such that, in 2008, 3% more double degree students attended both of their degree orientation events than in 2007 (up from 58.1% to 61.1%). Of the remaining double degree students, approximately one in three attended one course orientation session.

Having attended to both an improved, but quite realistic, management of students' expectations around orientation excitement and to the immediate social, knowledge and skill requirements of commencing students in O Week itself (respectively, via the delivery of a uniquely "QUT style of excitement" in the central event and by way of the small group faculty sessions), the other area that this project worked on was the conceptualisation of O Week as one part of a larger transition process. This is being done by raising staff awareness and careful, coordinated planning. Specifically, this was another area in which policy enhancement has delivered a substantial improvement to existing practice and processes. Working with a cross-university FYE Reference Group and enacting the institutional philosophy now articulated in the new *MoPP* FYE Policy (QUT *MoPP*, n.d., C/1.5 *The First Year Experience*), an enlarged conceptualisation of orientation and transition as a process over time has been formalised in QUT policy, and all Faculty and Divisional areas are being required to develop their own, specific Orientation and Transition Plans to attend to this process. Specifically, as a university community, we have now agreed that

QUT conceptualises student Orientation as a process that occurs over time; in some aspects, independently of the curriculum (from the letter of offer through to Week 4 of first semester) and, in other aspects, embedded in the curriculum. This will be achieved through:
- a process of academic and social integration to facilitate learning engagement; and
- just-in-time information provision and timely access to support services.

Specifically, QUT's Orientation seeks to promote a positive transition experience for commencing students by supporting their transition from their previous educational experience to their new QUT learning environments and their particular discipline of study. QUT supports commencing students in a number of ways and with a particular focus on critical time periods. One of these critical time periods is Orientation Week ("O Week").

QUT's new *Orientation and Transition Policy*, accompanied by a set of guidelines for faculty and divisional implementation, has now been approved by ULTC for inclusion in the institutional policy framework, further underscoring the emergent institutional FYE culture. In particular, that *Policy* sets out, amongst other things, an agreed statement of QUT's "Orientation Good Practice Principles" as follows –

1. Orientation is a process, not an event. Specifically, the first year curriculum shall be intentionally designed to mediate orientation and transition as a process that occurs over time.
2. QUT's approach to and communication about Orientation will be coherent, comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated.
3. The academic, social, administrative and geographic integration of commencing students into QUT is a shared priority for all staff during the Orientation process.
4. Orientation activities shall provide timely and easy access to course advising, services and programs that aid academic, administrative and social transition, integration, and support.
5. Information provision shall be limited to that which is immediately relevant to each stage of the Orientation process.
6. Orientation activities shall maximise opportunities for cohort development by facilitating social interaction between commencing students and their peers and informal interaction between commencing students and academic and administrative staff.
7. Orientation activities shall be evidence-based and enhanced by regular evaluation.

In terms of the requirement to deliver a realistic, but comprehensive and coordinated QUT-specific approach to student orientation that is supportive of both students-in-transition and the staff directing those programs, we consider that the accretions described above to QUT's transition policy, processes and practices have been a considerable partnership achievement.

Project 4: First Year Curriculum Project

This project aimed to identify and promote an intentional first year (or transition) pedagogy for adoption in aid of good first year curriculum design and hence general FYE enhancement. In so doing, we were explicitly acknowledging, in a way that we hoped would move *from* theory *to* practice and sustainable implementation, the centrality of the learning experience to our students' FYE. In its early articulation, we considered that intentional first year curriculum, amongst other things, (QUT FYE Program, 2007, 15; STAR, 2005):
- is relevant to and informs students' vocational aspirations early on in the course;

- assists students' transition from their previous educational experience to studying at tertiary level, as well as addressing the different learning needs and skills required relevant to their new discipline of study;
- provides students with formative assessments of their work early in their program; and
- facilitates quality, authentic learning experiences, promotes student involvement in their learning and provides students with "good reasons to stay beyond the first year" (Krause, 2006, 3).

On inquiry, it was quickly discovered that all of QUT's (then) nine Faculties had already commenced, or were about to embark on, first year curriculum renewal. The pursuit of this project therefore brought together academic and divisional representatives from across the university in a very productive community of practice. At a very general level, colleagues have been able to discuss issues and challenges around first year curriculum design, have shared practice, and have generally found the collaborations facilitated to be rewarding, supportive and validating. Further, first year curriculum champions have now been identified across the institution.

A key question we asked ourselves as we began our work across the diversity of discipline areas was whether it was possible to identify certain (generic) curriculum design principles that might stand out as supportive of first year learning engagement, success and retention? The prompt for this enquiry was also an ALTC Senior Fellowship Program that had already been awarded to the Director.[7] A major outcome of this work has now been the identification of six *First Year Curriculum Design Principles* – a set of interconnected organising principles to facilitate all students achieving desired learning outcomes to the best of their ability – that
- are research-based (but move *from* theory *to* action);
- can help guide and inform practice;
- are supported by practical tips, checklists, examples & strategies for implementation (to move *from* principle *to* practice).

While it was recognised that first year *students* are very diverse and can enter the curriculum at multiple entry points (and that we need to attend carefully to supporting those multiple entry points), the focus here is firmly on the first year *curriculum* (rather than the experience of commencing students), noting that the diverse nature of student progression also means that non-first year students may enrol in first year units of study.

The principles developed, and the guidelines developed and checklists proposed to assist busy teachers enact them, have been approved by UTLC for incorporation in QUT's institutional policy framework, the *MoPP* – another significant policy gain in aid of the FYE. In 2008, the current FYE Director and the *Transitions In Project* (*TIP*) are now supporting the implementation of the first year curriculum policy and principles within four of (now) eight QUT faculties (Education, Science, Built Environment and Engineering, and Creative Industries) and assisting with first year curriculum redesign in a further three faculties (IT, Law and Business). The community of practice assistance and support is ongoing. Under the auspices of the author's ALTC Senior Fellowship,

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[7] Information about this ALTC Fellowship, which is ongoing, is available on the ALTC Exchange at http://www.carrickexchange.edu.au/first-year-experience-and-curriculum-design

colleagues from a diverse range of disciples (law, science, creative arts, education, IT, arts and social sciences, and applied science) across a variety of institution types have also developed a series of case studies analysing their practice against the six principles.

The six, interconnected, first year curriculum design principles, which must be enacted concurrently with good teaching and first year support, set out in brief form accompanied by some practice examples,[8] are as follows –

1. **Transition** – good first year curriculum design aids transition *from* a student's previous educational experience *to* the nature of learning in higher education and their new discipline as part of their life long learning journey.
   For example: students might be asked to self-assess their entering knowledge, skills and attitudes against discipline expectations; curriculum time might be devoted to discussing expectations and responsibilities (e.g., draw up a student/staff contract; agreeing a statement on what "independent learning" means); endemic program-choice uncertainty might be attended to by embedding career modules/career planning opportunities and/or investigating what it is to be a XYZ professional.

2. **Diversity** – good first year curriculum design acknowledges student diversity because diversity may exacerbate transition issues and, in the current massified sector, few assumptions can be made about students' entering knowledge, skills and attitudes. Diversity in this context is very broad and includes, for example, membership of at-risk or equity groups, non-traditional cohorts, and students' various patterns and timing of engagement with the first year curriculum (e.g., mid-year entry).
   For example: students might be made aware of the diversity of their learning preference/ personality type/ preferred team role through self-reflective exercises; mentors and Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)[9] schemes might be built into curriculum design; online quizzes could be made available to students to complete at their own pace; a diversity of learning, teaching and assessment approaches might be employed; attention could be paid to the scaffolding of academic skills and learning processes (e.g., by scaffolding reading through subject workbooks; discipline writing workshops in class time); self refection of the individual student's own cultural "grab-bag" might be incorporated.

3. **Design** – good first year curriculum design is student-focussed, explicit and relevant and provides the foundation and scaffolding for learning success. The first year curriculum objectives should be articulated and, desirably, the first year curriculum should form a coherent, integrated whole.
   For example: student ePortfolio population and reflection might be built-in to emphasise the program's career/ employability relevance; a series of co-curricula presentations by the discipline's great researchers, industry representative and alumni could be offered and students be required to attend X number to reflect on later in

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[8] I acknowledge the work of my collaborators under the ALTC Fellowship, from whose case study exemplars some of these examples are adapted, and particularly Dr Annah Healy (Education, QUT) and Associate Professor Karen Nelson (IT, QUT).
[9] For example, as at the University of Wollongong: see http://www.uow.edu.au/student/services/pass/

class; linkages might be intentionally promoted across individual first year subjects for a more integrative and holistic view of the curriculum.

4. ***Engagement*** – good first year curriculum design enacts an engaging and involving pedagogy. *AUSSE* (ACER, 2008) now provides us with very clear guidance around the "activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning" (ACER, 2008, vi) and evidences that "all aspects of engagement have a strong positive relationship with a range of general, specific, social, personal, ethical and interpersonal capabilities" (ACER, 2008, ix). Pascarella & Terenzini (2005, 646) record that –

> With striking consistency, studies show that innovative, active, collaborative, and constructivist instructional approaches shape learning more powerfully, in some forms by substantial margins, than do conventional lecture-discussion and text-based approaches.

For example: enact a team-based learning approach in a first year subject (Michaelsen, Knight & Fink (2002); www.teambasedlearning.org); model a "professional conversation" in large first year group (Field & Kift, 2006); ensure that one first year unit has a teamwork project; structure the engagement in first year through the use of workbooks and cumulative assessment pieces (latter, e.g., a reflective reading log, leading to a preliminary essay plan, to a draft assignment, to the final assignment); appoint academic mentors for commencing students; provide a dedicated physical and/or virtual space for first year students.

5. ***Assessment*** – good first year curriculum design aids students' transition to higher education assessment and provides early feedback on student progress to students and staff. Assessment increases in complexity from first to later years.
For example: consider developing and communicating a Feedback Strategy (e.g., as at http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/lid/ltweb/84079.htm); provide annotated examples of good, fair and poor performance of assessment criterion to students – the QUT Faculty of Education has an "assessment repository" full of examples for students; "correct" a piece of writing in large group using the track changes function for immediate feedback; have the class, including the teacher, produce a small piece of written work, swap it and mark it against criteria; Taylor (2008) suggests in a first year maths subject that by Week 2 students could be required to have reflected on their previous maths experiences, confirm vital course information, and develop a study plan.

6. ***Evaluation and Monitoring*** – good first year curriculum design is itself evidence-based and evaluated, and desirably includes mechanisms to monitor for student engagement, the latter allowing then for timely intervention in aid of students are at risk of not being successful.
For example: monitoring for (dis)engagement in a systematic way might entail: taking attendance rolls; knowing students by name; involving peer mentors; monitoring online interactions (LMS, email activation); noting non-submission of assessment; Auckland University of Technology has a systematic approach entitled "First Year Experience Intervention and Support Programme".[10]

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[10] See http://auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail.php?gp_id=2907

The first year curriculum design principles articulated, and associated policy enacted, have been an important leverage in moving whole-of-institution practice forward in an intentional and principled way in aid of quality curriculum improvement. Particularly, in addition to the obvious benefits of bringing together a broad, cross-university, community of practice, this project has facilitated curriculum enhancement through

- the promotion of shared language and understanding,
- the provision of the policy hook and then staff development support for its widespread deployment, and
- the enabling of cross-fertilisation of practice between divisional and faculty colleagues, in this last aspect harnessing a range of institutional expertise that has not always found it easy to influence academic design activity (e.g., Academic Skills Advisors, Language and Learning Advisors, Liaison Librarians, and similar professional staff).

Project 5: First Year Students Project

The capability to examine our students' FYE through accessible and context-specific analyses of attrition, retention and engagement data has been a focus of recent and dedicated attention at QUT. The consequences of disengagement and attrition, if not managed appropriately, can be financially, personally, collectively, and institutionally wasteful. In response, most Australian institutions have introduced monitoring initiatives to identify those students who are having difficulties in first year where student attrition is highest (DEST, 2004). All national and international research on the FYE emphasises that, while some FYE challenges are shared (for example: academic advice on entry; good learning, teaching and assessment practices; effective orientation processes; manageable workloads for staff and students), many institutions face unique retention challenges and need to generate their own data, investigations and strategies in order to identify and then respond specifically to such matters. Tinto (1995, 5) similarly notes that:

> Only [by assessing the particular characteristics of student departure from their campuses] can institutions identify and accurately target specific forms of actions to the task of student retention. Institutional [evaluation] is, in this fashion, a necessary beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention program.

This final project area therefore directed attention to this imperative to enhance faculties' and schools' understanding of the constitution of their commencing cohorts and to ensure that those organisational areas were provided with the data and other resources they needed to monitor their students' progression and retention, thus being enabled to intervene as appropriate in aid of students at risk. The project also aimed to access and respond to the student voice about the quality of the *QUT* FYE, and to make recommendations about how first year students might be better connected to each other and to the academic and professional support services available to them.

Major outcomes of this project's work include the coordination and coherence that has now been achieved around all of QUT's various peer-to-peer opportunities under the auspices of the *Peer Mentoring Steering Committee,* chaired by the Manager, Counselling Services (referred to above at the commencement of this part). The status

and profile of this work was also raised in 2007 when UTLC received its first comprehensive Report on the extent of this significant student support initiative, together with a number of recommendations around its further enhancement (e.g., policy development, governance, training, website development, mentor conduct and accountability, embedding peer interactions in QUT culture, mentor recognition, and reporting and evaluation of programs).

The project also delivered substantial outcomes to the QUT community in terms of enhancing QUT-specific data sources and analyses, through the development of a new online *Program Exit Survey*, a refreshed *Orientation Survey 2007*, and the newly created *First Year Experience Survey (FYES) 2007*.[11] To take the *FYES* as an example, the overall response rate for the *FYES 2007* was 28.3%; representing 2650 individual student responses. Significantly, we got access to another important, but previously missing, piece in the QUT FYE jigsaw – the first-in-family data – which for us in 2007 ran at 39.5%. The feedback from the *FYES* has enabled us to identify good practice and to target areas for specific action in pursuit of evidence-based quality enhancement. Specifically, it has also allowed us to address quality improvements uniformly across the institution. With the invaluable assistance of the University's Survey Manager, further analyses of these data are being pursued and the triangulation of the various data sources available, national and local (including the standard course evaluation data), is providing a rich picture of our institutional engagement with our first year cohorts and the basis for internal quality imporvement.

Finally, the necessity to systematise our approaches to monitoring for student (dis)engagement during the *currency* of their semester's enrolment (in order to make proactive support interventions before final results) has been long recognised. Over 2008, this work is sponsored by the new Director, FYE and has been taken up by the *Transitions In Project (TIP)*. In Semester 2 2008, it will be rolled out as a QUT-wide *Student Success Project* initiative (with four active Faculties from mid-year and the final four scheduled for inclusion in 2009). This support strategy is being reported on at this Conference (Duncan & Nelson, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper has presented a model for institutional FYE action that has been enacted in a large, multi-campus, metropolitan Australian university with a commencing undergraduate enrolment of approximately 10,000 students each year. The model adopted was research-led and evidence-based and has been pursued purposefully in a multi-layered, partnership, approach that has encouraged buy-in and provided support at a variety of levels of organisational engagement. The evidence here presented, of a broad range of significant policy, practice and process outcomes, demonstrates that it is possible to move *from* theory *to* action and sustainable implementation, even in a large, diverse institution in the face of many change challenges. The most important outcome, I think,

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[11] See http://www.yourfeedback.qut.edu.au/qut_surveys/fyes/index.jsp and closing the loop on FYES feedback at http://www.yourfeedback.qut.edu.au/Vice-Chancellor_invites/response/fyes.jsp

has been the capability to work across and within existing organisational structures and processes, both academic and professional, to create a shared vision of the FYE at QUT as "everybody's business". Indeed, the theme for QUT's 2007 Senior Staff Conference held in May 2007 – *Enhancing the Student Experience: It's Everybody's Business* – is indicative of the strong culture shift that has been achieved in this regard.

Lest this report be thought to be overly optimistic, it is also true to say that, those crucial partnerships that have led to QUT being better placed to deliver on a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated FYE remain fragile at this time and require continued high level support, focus and nurturing. Thus, the ongoing appointment of a well-resourced FYE Director (or like) over 2008 (and beyond), in tandem with coherent governance structures, is critical. Otherwise the gains that have been made to date will easily dissipate and fragment. While being brutally honest about these matters, a disappointing, if unsurprising, finding in this work is that it would seen that the leadership on these issues must be academic, as proven by the efficacy of the academic appointment to this key role following several years of quite outstanding professional staff endeavour. One might speculate as to the several reasons why this might be the case, but perhaps the real answer lies in the centrality of learning and learning engagement to the FYE, necessary within the academic province.

At this Conference in 2003, Randy Swing warned us that this type of embedded institutional change may take as long as ten years to effect (Swing, 2003). It would be my harsh estimation that, institutionally, QUT is still only in the fifth or sixth year of its long-term development. There remains much work still to be done in response to this next great first year challenge, but I am confident that, if our attention remains focused, the future looks bright for our commencing students' FYE.

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C/1.5 The First Year Experience

http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/C/C_01_05.jsp

In line with QUT's vision and goals (see A/2.1), a key aim is to support all commencing students to adjust successfully to study at QUT by providing a strong transition experience -academically, socially and administratively - according to their varied needs.

QUT is aware of the significant transitional challenges facing first year students and acknowledges the diversity and changing social and educational needs and aspirations of its entering cohorts. QUT believes that a positive and involving First Year Experience (FYE), which connects new learners with their teachers and peers in a community committed to learning, provides the critical foundation for transition to later years' learning success and career attainment and enhances student satisfaction, course experience and retention.

At QUT, the FYE and successful transition of our students is everybody's responsibility. QUT focuses on providing the best possible experience for new students in an environment where they are supported to take responsibility for their own learning, and to embrace an active role in succeeding to their full potential (academically and personally) as new learners in our University.

Therefore QUT will deliver a comprehensive, integrated and coordinated approach to the FYE that:

- is mediated through intentionally designed curricula and co-curricula;
- is facilitated by a quality learning environment and good teaching and support;
- is promoted and supported by all academic and professional staff interactions with students, where staff are developed, valued and rewarded for their FYE-focused perspective and partnerships;
- fosters easy access to services and programs that aid academic and social orientation, integration, and support;
- is appropriate to QUT's culture and creates a sense of belonging;
- is scholarly, evidence-based and enhanced by regular evaluation; and
- is given a high priority by the University to ensure that the conditions that promote successful student transitions are appropriately resourced and are sustainable over time.