



**“I think you are doing a good job, but...”  
Initial Thoughts on First Year -  
Responses from Students and  
Implications for the University**

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**Abstract**

The first year experience (FYE) is both exciting and daunting for university students. Ensuring that this experience is positive and enjoyable is increasingly important for universities, with research indicating that students' initial experiences will determine whether they complete their degree (McInnes, James and Hartley 2000).

This paper analyses student responses to one open-ended question in a survey that considered students' initial experiences of university at the Carseldine and Caboolture Campuses of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2005. The question was *How could QUT and the campus improve your experience as a first-year student? Please describe both positive and negative aspects of your experience.* The responses were classified into five categories: Enrolment/Orientation Issues, Socio-cultural Issues, Academic Support, Access to Information and General Comments.

Some students did not comment (n=109) but those that did respond (n=155) identified some key challenges and possible solutions. These included: the provision of social activities for first year students, the need for improved clarity in enrolment processes, and more information and pre-commencement sessions on course structures/requirements/choices and career pathways.

Two major implications for the initial phases of first year can be discerned from the challenges identified by the students. Firstly, improvements are required in orientation/induction programs and, secondly, the information provided to students, as well as the means for accessing that information, need to be clear and consistent.

Key words: first-year experience; transition; university students

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## **Introduction**

The first year at university is an exciting but often a daunting time for students. Just how difficult the first year experience can be for some students is reflected in both disengagement and underperformance (Cook and Lowe 2004) as well as in high levels of attrition, with up to 30% of students considering or actually withdrawing from their courses in first year (McInnes, James and Hartley 2000). As a consequence, universities are increasingly implementing programs designed to enhance the first year experience (FYE) and improve retention rates (eg McInnes et al 2000; Ellis 2002). In these contexts, the initial induction activities and the first weeks of the course are cited as crucial in determining successful transition to tertiary studies (Peat, Dalziel and Grant 2000; Walker 2001; Ellis 2002).

An extensive literature exists on the first year experience (see Humphreys 2002) and a number of factors have been identified as predictors of successful transition. Tinto (2000, 6), for example, has argued that four conditions need to be met: students need “clear and consistent information”, appropriate “academic, social and personal support”, they need to be involved with and valued by the university, and they need learning environments that engage them in learning. Others have identified the “campus ecology” including staff/student interactions (Banning 1989), institutional/student ‘fit’ (Ozga and Sukhmandan (1998) and the capacity of students to integrate academically and socially (Cook and Lowe 2004) as crucial to success. Importantly, while the focus is on the students and their transition, the issue is one of engagement by the both the institution and the student.

Assessing the nature of the first year experience has largely occurred using quantitative data analysis (eg Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis 2005) and the investigation from which this paper has been drawn (Williamson, Miller, Heffernan and David 2005) includes a significant quantitative component. However, qualitative approaches are more conducive to obtaining information on what the students themselves identify as important to their transition processes and to the provision of detailed and specific data which may not otherwise be uncovered. While researchers have acknowledged the need to ensure that their survey mechanisms address students’ concerns and that “in-depth qualitative data on various dimensions of the first year students experience” are required (Krause et al 2005, 90), few surveys have explored the rather more messy business of asking students about how they think their first year experience could be improved<sup>1</sup>.

This paper reports on student responses to one open-ended question in a larger survey on the initial experiences of first year students at the Carseldine and Caboolture Campuses of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 2005 (Williamson et al 2005)<sup>2</sup>. The question asked students to indicate how QUT and the campus (staff) might improve their experiences as first year students. They were invited to describe both positive and negative aspects of their experiences. The responses provided both valuable insights into the key challenges confronting first year students and a number of solutions. Some students did not comment (n=109) and some of the general

comments provided positive feedback. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that students are looking for social activities and integration into university life. Additionally, they want improved clarity in enrolment processes, and more information and pre-commencement sessions on course structures/requirements/choices and career pathways. These findings suggest that orientation and induction programs need to be improved and the initial information provided to students, as well as the means for accessing that information, need to be clear and consistent. Various elements of the university have roles to play in making these improvements.

## **Background to the Survey**

QUT is a multi-campus university based in Brisbane. This paper focuses on one question in a survey undertaken by first year students at the two northern campuses of the university (Carseldine and Caboolture) in April-May 2005.

Carseldine Campus hosts a range of undergraduate courses. From 2005, these include a number of programs in which students undertake first year at Carseldine and then move to another campus to complete their degree. The Carseldine based degree programs include: Humanities (Arts), Social Science, Psychology and these components of double degrees. The first year programs at Carseldine include: Business, Information Technology and Science. Similarly from 2005, the Caboolture Campus is offering first year programs in Humanities (Arts), Social Science, Business, Information Technology and Creative Industries with students transferring to other campuses to complete their degrees.

The importance of enhancing the first year experience is widely endorsed at QUT. A university-wide FYE program has been in operation since 2002 and it is embedded in the Learning and Teaching Plans of the university and faculties. However, there is little effective coordination of FYE activities and limited resources to support it at the institutional level, although various administrative and support services, eg the libraries, contribute to orientation/induction activities.

Assisting transition by improving the first-year experience has been a priority for a number of faculties at Carseldine Campus. For example, the Faculty, QUT Carseldine, in its dual role of housing Humanities and Human Services and seeking to develop a campus ethos has undertaken a number of activities. These have included: peer mentoring for first-year students, academic support programs, the production of a *Carseldine Students' Guide* and a regular system of email messages to students with advice and assistance. The School of Psychology and Counselling (Faculty of Health) has also developed a peer mentoring program in collaboration with Humanities and Human Services, while the Faculty of Business has had a 'Buddy program'.

The development of a number of first year programs at Carseldine and Caboolture provided opportunities to adopt a more coordinated approach to supporting the first year transition to university at these campuses. In November 2004, it was agreed to survey the 2005 first year cohort of the two campuses with a view to ascertaining its expectations, its experiences and to identify possible improvements. The initial survey took place in the early weeks of first semester 2005 with a follow up survey to occur in October 2005. Additional surveys are proposed for the next two-three years in order to track these students across their undergraduate careers.

## **Method**

This paper focuses on one open-ended question in the initial survey in 2005. The survey involved all first year undergraduate students at QUT's Northern Campuses and was conducted on-line, through the students' QUT Virtual Personal Profile portals,

between Monday 11 April and Sunday 8 May 2005. Students who undertook the survey were eligible to win one of five prizes.

The decision to adopt an on-line methodology reflected the inherent efficiencies of such an approach and its consistency with QUT's use of the on-line environment in communication with students. There are limitations associated with on-line surveys, most noticeably the risk of low response rates (McCabe 2003). However, the response rate of 24% for this survey compared favourably with the 28% response rate achieved by the better resourced 2004 National First Year Experience Survey (Krause et al 2005, 5), which utilised a hard copy, mailed approach.

### **Measures**

The survey was designed to identify student expectations of their first year at university and their experiences of the first few weeks of semester. The survey included three main sections: Expectations and Experiences, Facilities and Services, and Staff and Classes. It incorporated both quantitative and qualitative components. This paper focuses on responses to one of the open-ended questions: *How could QUT and the campus improve your experience as a first-year student? Please describe both positive and negative aspects of your experience.*

### **Data Analysis**

For the quantitative items, statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS for Windows. For the open-ended qualitative questions, a thematic approach was used to classify the responses (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and identify any consistency in the substance of the comments. The data indicated five key categories: Enrolment/Orientation Issues, Socio-cultural Issues, Academic Support, Access to Information and General Comments. The first four categories reflected particular issues and included a number of solutions, whilst the final category provided general feedback and comments on the initial features of the first year experience. Each comment was coded once according to its main theme although some comments did range over a number of issues.

### **Survey Participants**

Of the 1117 first-year students enrolled in Semester One 2005 at QUT's Carseldine and Caboolture Campuses, a total of 264 students completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 24% (Carseldine response rate, 22%; Caboolture response rate, 25%),

Table 1 details the demographic characteristics of the total first-year student population and the sample population at Caboolture and Carseldine Campuses as at 30 June 2005. Age and gender demographics of the sample population are comparable with the total first-year student population, with the average age of all first-years being 22.6 years, and the majority being female (66%). The sample includes a greater proportion of school leavers (59%) than the general first-year population. School leavers have been defined as those aged 17 to 18.99 years (n=155) and non-school leavers have been defined as those aged 19 years and over (n=109).

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the First-Year Student Population Compared with Survey Sample**

	<b>Total First-Years* (n=1117)</b>	<b>Sample First-Years (n=264)</b>
Average Age	22.6 yrs	22.2 yrs
Entry Type: School Leaver Non-School Leaver	39.3% 60.7%	59.3% 40.7%
Gender: Male Female	33.6% 66.4%	29.0% 71.0%

\*Data provided by QUT Student Business Services

Some of the characteristics of the participants are provided in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Student Characteristics Profile (Numbers of Students)**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
I relocated from a rural or regional area of Australia	43	221
I am the first in my immediate family to attend university	123	141
For study purposes I have a computer at home	257	7
For study purposes I have access to the internet at home	241	23
I am of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin	5	259
I have a permanent or significant disability	17	247
I have children/family responsibilities	67	197
English is my first language	239	25
I am an international student	7	257

## Results

264 first year students responded to the survey but not all of them chose to address the open-ended question: *How could QUT and the campus improve your experience as a first-year student? Please describe both positive and negative aspects of your experience.* Amongst the Carseldine based participants (numbering 236), 98 students (67 females and 31 males) did not respond, whilst amongst the Caboolture based participants (numbering 28), 11 students (9 females and 2 males) did not respond. The reasons for the large numbers of students who did not respond are not clear. It is likely that some students felt that the other qualitative and quantitative responses they provided adequately addressed their concerns. Unfortunately, there were not the resources to address this matter using alternative approaches such as focus groups.

School leavers proved more willing to respond to the survey than non-school leavers. National data indicate that non-school leavers tend to be clear about their goals, focused on their studies and satisfied with their courses (Krause et al 2005, 72). These factors suggest that fewer non-school leavers might feel compelled to respond to the survey. Certainly, this survey indicated that while non-school leaver respondents were concerned about balancing their various commitments, they were also more likely to report satisfaction with university facilities and enjoyment of their classes,

The responses were classified according to the categories: Enrolment/Orientation Issues, Socio-cultural Issues, Academic Support, Access to Information and General Comments. The data also suggested that attention should be given to the campus of the respondent and any significant difference in position that might attach to the gender

of the respondent. Table 3 below indicates the number of comments in each of the categories by campus and by gender.

**Table 3: Number of Comments in Each Category**

<b>Carseldine</b>	<b>Enrolment/ Orientation</b>	<b>Socio-cultural Issues</b>	<b>Academic Support</b>	<b>Access to Information</b>	<b>General Comments</b>
Female	15	12	9	20	44
Male	9	5	4	2	18
<b>Total</b>	24	17	13	22	62
<b>Caboolture</b>	<b>Enrolment/ Orientation</b>	<b>Socio-cultural Issues</b>	<b>Academic Support</b>	<b>Access to Information</b>	<b>General Comments</b>
Female	-	1	2	3	7
Male	-	-	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>	-	1	4	4	8

As the figures above indicate, some issues appear to be campus specific whilst others have significance to students on both campuses. For example, orientation and enrolment issues were not identified at Caboolture but figured quite prominently in the Carseldine responses. This may reflect the smaller size of the first year student cohort at Caboolture and the capacity of staff at that campus to deal satisfactorily with these matters. Similarly, social-cultural issues were not noted at Caboolture but were raised by the Carseldine students. On the other hand, issues related to academic support and access to information were identified by students from both campuses and across both genders, although males at Carseldine had far fewer comments to make about access to information than female students. The general comments were numerous but, aside from the endorsements of activities to date, they tended to be less useful than other responses.

### ***Enrolment/Orientation***

As the survey was held in the early part of first semester, it was expected that students would remember their orientation and enrolment experiences and provide useful feedback. Quantitative data on the orientation programs collected in this survey indicated that 60% of Carseldine students were satisfied and 26% were neutral; 57% of Caboolture students were satisfied and 43% were neutral.

24 students from Carseldine commented on their enrolment/orientation experiences. They indicated that orientation needed to be better pitched, more helpful and include social activities. Enrolment processes were seen as overly complex and students require more assistance to make appropriate subject choices.

For me the change was very smooth. I read so much about everything that I found O-Week to be very repetitive of the information I already knew. Maybe more social events to meet people would be helpful (Female 17)

Orientation week needs to be more fun (Female 18)

Improvements – probably the orientation week was not as helpful in getting to know the campus as it could be...I still don't know where some places are and I thought that more interaction that week with older students could be helpful in fitting in although I am aware of the mentoring program... (Female 18)

Orientation day was like being the sheep, the cattle dogs rounding up the dumb beasts and passing us through before we could absorb what the hell they were talking about (negative). The continuing smiles of peer support personnel even when it was all over has left a lasting impression (positive) (Female 42)

I think there needs to be more readily available help with the online enrolment. I had a lot of trouble trying to figure out what to do and because I am a double degree student I had difficulty with timetabling and knowing what subjects I should be doing... (Female 17)

I felt the virtual tours, enrolment and the overall explanations were hard to follow and most of the languages and discourses were too hard to follow efficiently (Male 18)

I could have used more support with choosing subjects and planning subjects for the rest of my course. I only realise now, with hindsight, that support was available, though, I didn't realise I needed help before... (Female 22)

I think you guys (QUT) should hold pre-uni commencement classes on how to pick and choose your units...At the very least a simpler version of what's already on the QUT website, kind of like 'A dummies guide to starting uni' in detail, with pictures and a 24 hour toll free help line that CAN actually help (Male 18).

### **Socio-cultural Issues**

The issues raised in this category reflected the desire of students to establish social networks, make friends, and be involved in student/university culture. A quantitative component of the survey asked students about whether they were making friends. 93% of the Caboolture students indicated that they were, while 69% of the Carseldine students responded positively and 11% disagreed. However, respondents to the open-ended question (17 at Carseldine and 1 at Caboolture) indicated that their experiences could be improved by the deliberate facilitation of social activities with some noting the difficulties younger students had in being involved in scheduled Student Guild events. Males were more likely to comment on sporting activities than females.

I think there has to be something organised to meet new people, it gets hard when you don't know many people and coming straight from school you are used to having a lot of friends around and now you don't have many if any (Carseldine Female 17)

Something social could be organised at Caboolture (Caboolture Female 18)

Doing more things, orientation parties (Carseldine Male 18)

Have start of year activities where all first years must be involved and only first years. (It is daunting to see everyone with friends on the first day at uni when you are new.) (Carseldine Male 18)

Encourage students to become more involved in 'uni life'. More support for students who have relocated from a small town and don't know many people... (Carseldine Female 18)

More exposure of things happening on campus, social aspects of uni life (Carseldine Female 22)

I feel there are no improvements needed except maybe an AFL ground + team for inter university comps (Carseldine Male 21)

I think that there should be more fun party-type stuff available for students, especially those that aren't 18, because they can't go to the Guild Bar or to concerts in the Guild Bar, etc. (Carseldine Female 17)

As I have just finished school, I am not yet 18 (well I am in 9 days!) but I have noticed that they have social activities for students but you have to be over 18 to attend some. eg they had a concert thing not long ago. This is leaving out a very



small number of students and seems unfair. After leaving school I couldn't wait to get to uni and have a new social life with awesome things involved with uni, only to get to uni and find out I had to wait until I turn 18 anyway (Carseldine Female 18)

### ***Academic Support***

A major section of the quantitative component of the survey focused on perceptions of staff and classes. Participants responded very favourably to their teaching staff with 82% of Carseldine students and 93% of Caboolture students agreeing that their lecturers were friendly, approachable and helpful. At the same time, some students at both campuses were surprised at the amount of work they needed to do (58% at Carseldine and 61% at Caboolture).

Respondents to the open-ended question (13 at Carseldine and 4 at Caboolture) indicated that they would appreciate further staff/student interaction, improvements in the explanations of academic requirements – particularly with respect to assessment – and assistance with adjustment to a new learning environment.

It has been very positive for me, apart from the fact I wish the lecturers had more time to get through everything and perhaps interact with the students more. I don't feel comfortable asking questions because I know they don't have time (Carseldine Female 53)

I know that staff have to spend time at other campuses but it seems they try to spend the least amount of time here. This also disadvantages us as if we have questions to ask we can't access them until our next lecture/tutorial. Even though the idea of having email accounts are great, you don't get the face to face interaction (Caboolture Female 18)

Make the specifics for assignments a little more clear as it can be overwhelming for a first year student. The specifics of them need to be explained better (Caboolture Male 18).

I think you are doing a good job but perhaps, as a first year it would be helpful if lecturers/tutors explained what exactly they expected of us in terms of assignments, how to hand assignments in...etc. I think this is a bit of an issue with first years (Carseldine Female 17)

I am finding it very difficult to completely self teach myself...I'm not sure if that is the word. What I mean is that at high school teachers would be constantly reminding you about assignments and making sure you were on track. I find coming to uni is going to the opposite extreme and I'm kinda struggling to make sure I'm on track all the time (Carseldine Female 18)

Uni just seems to be thrust upon you. Even though QUT well prepares you for what's to come no-one realises the insane work load that is expected of you and the fact that different lecturers want different things from you (Caboolture Male 17)

### ***Access to Information***

One quantitative component of the survey enabled students to indicate their level of satisfaction with a range of services offered by QUT. Numbers of these facilities provide information to students about the mechanisms of enrolment (Student Services) and academic requirements (University Preparation Courses). Students at Carseldine reported high levels of satisfaction with services and facilities, while Caboolture students were less satisfied particularly with the facilities on campus.

The open-ended question provided students with the opportunity to comment on the provision of relevant information and number of them did (22 students at Carseldine and 4 at Caboolture). Some respondents indicated that there was too much information

for them to process, others suggested that they were able to get all the assistance they needed. Numbers of responses, however, indicated that better, further or more accessible information would have been helpful. There were few male responses in this category although some had expressed concerns about enrolment information/processes – see Orientation/Enrolment above.

Not to bombard students with so much information all at the one time. Staff are very friendly and willing to assist (Carseldine Female 17)

I thought my experience wasn't negative at all. It was very positive, I've never had any trouble. If I needed help and asked for it people did help (Carseldine Female 17)

The staff at Caboolture are great – both of my lecturers, all of my tutors and the library staff are fantastic. They are willing to give advice and answer any questions that I had (Caboolture Female 26)

Coming straight from high school not knowing what to expect of university was a real issue for me. While the OLT site (On-line Teaching Site) contains most of the information I need regarding courses etc I still had a bit of trouble finding information regarding assignments and assessments. I found the transition from being spoon fed at school to being almost totally independent at uni a bit of a shock (Carseldine Female 18)

I think a few more career days or information about career pathways would be good. A lot of first years are still really unsure about what they are doing and where they are heading... (Carseldine Female 17)

I have no idea how to write essays, sit for exams or even to do a written assignment or talk to the tut class. A bit more recognition of the fact that there are mature age students who haven't been in school for 10 years or more, in saying this I mean support sessions... aimed at mature age students only. It would also be a good place to meet people like ourselves –so we don't feel so alone (Carseldine Female 30)

### **General Comments**

The general comments were numerous (62 from Carseldine students and 8 from Caboolture). These comments ranged from the self-reflective to simple statements of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Occasionally the comments hinted at things that needed to be addressed to make improvements but were not sufficiently clear to be allocated elsewhere.

Improve the facilities. Everything else has been good (Caboolture Female 20)

The staff have been outstanding. I feel very much part of a unique place and time (Caboolture Female 43)

Nothing really you are doing a great job! Thanks! (Carseldine Female 18)

It is quite OK now (Carseldine Male 45)

Improvements are hard to identify as this is a new experience for me (Carseldine Male 43)

Possibly to let you know the help that is available (Carseldine Female 22)

...The only major thing I have worry about is motivation...so, my issue really (Carseldine Male 18)

## Discussion

The qualitative data engendered by the open-ended question *How could QUT and the campus improve your experience as a first-year student? Please describe both positive and negative aspects of your experience* added to the richness of the survey results by providing specific details of what worked and what needed improvement in the first year experience of students at the Carseldine and Caboolture Campuses of QUT. Clearly, there are risks in placing too much emphasis on comments that were provided by 155 of the 264 respondents to the survey. However, to the extent that there were identifiable consistencies in the comments made, the students can be seen to have articulated some key challenges and some possible solutions.

One of the key challenges relates to the social integration of first year students. Numbers of students indicated that their experience could have been enhanced with the development of social activities on campus. While some students, both male and female, were looking for fun, orientation parties, the responses also pointed to the need for students to be involved in 'uni life' and for the provision of activities for younger students and those from rural and regional areas. Significantly, this issue of social integration was also noted in the context of the request for specific academic support for mature age students.

A second challenge relates to the provision and clarity of information with respect to enrolment processes, course structures /requirements and career pathways. Students were largely appreciative of the academic support they received but numbers of them were initially confused and disenchanted with both the information they were given and the way it was disseminated. The solutions identified involved requests for guidelines to simplify enrolment and various pre-university commencement classes addressing course requirements, subject selection and career choices.

Notwithstanding the existing mechanisms designed to enhance the first year experience that have been developed at the university, campus and faculty levels, two major implications for the initial phases of first year can be discerned from the challenges identified by the students. Firstly, improvements are required in our orientation/induction programs and, secondly, we need to ensure that the information provided to students, as well as the means for accessing that information, are clear and consistent.

A number of researchers have pointed to the significance of orientation programs. Krause et al (2005) argue that "initial orientation programs...play a key role in welcoming students into the learning community" (p.35) and that "institutional-level programs" need to be "accompanied by department or faculty-based initiatives... to support students within their disciplinary subgroups" (p.35). Perigo and Upcraft (1989) have argued that orientation programs should enable students to understand academic requirements, assist students to adjust to university life and ensure that their families are cognisant of the changes the students will face. Importantly, orientation (transition) programs needs to extend into the first few weeks of classes and relate to pedagogical approaches as well as course requirements (Cook and Lowe 2004, Table IV).

While the induction/orientation programs offered at Carseldine and Caboolture have satisfied some students, they have not provided the systematic social and academic integration that the research suggests is required. However, successful models exist from which future strategies can be developed. For example, Peat et al (2000) have reported on the effectiveness of a one day Transition to University Workshop at the University of Sydney for science students that enabled the development of "social and study-related networks" and "enhanced study, self-motivation and the general enjoyment of university life" (p. 293). The workshops cater for up to 800 students and include social activities, academic information sharing and a question and answer

session for parents (p. 295). Ellis (2002, 20-22) has identified a number of similar pre-orientation programs including Head Start, a week long program at Massey University and the Start Smart Program at Finders University.

QUT currently offers a number of pre-orientation induction activities including the Getting Started with Learning one day program, which some students acknowledged as useful in their responses to the open-ended question. However, these programs do not appear to offer extensive social interaction or the course specific information that students require. Attention needs to be given to Faculty based programs, such as that provided at the University of Sydney. Such programs need to meet the challenges the students identified, engage with their new learning environments, occur at appropriate times and link with on-going support mechanisms such as peer mentoring. Importantly, faculties need to be resourced adequately to undertake these activities.

Clearly, induction into university is not simply a matter of providing information but, as Tinto (2000) has warned,

students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide clear and consistent information...as well as the advice they need to arrive at reasonable decisions about their programs of study and future career goals (p. 2).

Appropriate orientation programs will go some way to addressing the concerns of students about course requirements, including assessment regimes, career pathways, etc. However, it is clear that more needs to be done to improve the quality and clarity of information provided by faculties in hard copy and virtual formats both prior to enrolment and in the first weeks of semester.

At the same time, this is an issue that also needs to be addressed by the university in light of the multifarious sources of information within the institution and the lack of familiarity incoming students have of tertiary academic discourse. Currently care is taken to ensure that consistent messages are deployed in the university's marketing activities and attempts are underway to identify uniform nomenclature for academic program components, such as majors. However, the development of clear and consistent information also needs to be seen as central to improving the first year experience. Achieving this outcome will require the university to adopt a more thorough-going approach to FYE, to resource it effectively and to ensure that it continues to be firmly located in the institution's strategic planning processes.

## **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Offering first year students the opportunity to comment on their initial experiences of and at the university and how these might be improved has yielded useful data. Students sought more effective social integration and they wanted their concerns about a range of issues including enrolment processes, course structures /requirements and career pathways addressed. This paper has argued that these findings imply that improvements are required in the provision of orientation/induction programs and that more attention is needed at all levels of the university to ensure that the information provided to students, as well as the means for accessing that information, are clear and consistent.

This paper has reported on one open-ended question in a survey of students in the early weeks of their first year at Carseldine and Caboolture Campuses. Another survey of this student cohort is due in October 2005 at which time further reflection on the first year experience will be sought including the identification of items for improvement. The data generated by these surveys will inform future research on the first year experience and, more particularly, the processes of successful transition within the crucial first 12 months of university study. Assessing the impact on retention of

improvements to the first year experience will be difficult to gauge in the immediate future. However, as Krause et al (2005) have noted in their analysis of first year experience data over the decade 1994-2004, students appear to have responded well to the academic orientation programs designed to support them and this augurs well for the first year experience at QUT's Northern Campuses.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Exceptions here include McInnis et al 2000; Peat et al 2000

<sup>2</sup> The summary of quantitative data and a copy of the survey are located in Williamson et al (2005) and will shortly be available on the QUT Carseldine website.

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