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*Enhancing the transition of commencing students into university :
an institution-wide approach.*

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Enhancing the transition of commencing students into university: An institution-wide approach

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The importance of the first year experience (FYE) to success at university is well documented and supported with the transition into university regarded as crucial. While there is also support for the notion that a successful FYE should have a whole-of-institution focus and models have been proposed, many institutions still face challenges in achieving institution-wide FYE program implementation. This paper discusses the origins, theoretical and empirical bases and structure of an institution-wide approach to the FYE. It uses a case study of the Transitions In Project (TIP) at the Queensland University of Technology to illustrate how institution-wide FYE program implementation can be achieved and sustained. TIP had four inter-related projects focussing on at-risk students, first year curriculum, learning resources and staff development. The key aim of TIP was to identify good practice and institutionalise it in a sustainable way. The degree of success in achieving this is evaluated.

Keywords: Engagement; first year experience; retention; transition

Introduction

There has been an almost exponential growth during the last decade in the perceived importance and centrality of the first year experience (FYE) for tertiary success, resulting in an impressive body of research, practice, and policy designed to enhance students' FYE. Generally the aim has been to improve retention and the related behaviour of engagement. Recent reviews of the FYE and its importance can be found in for example Crosling, Heagney and Thomas (2009), Jones (2008), Nelson, Duncan and Clarke (2009) and Wahr, Gray and Radloff (2009).

Associated with this interest in first year is a corresponding interest on easing the transition of commencing students into that year. Bridges (2003) conceptualises transitions in higher education as an overlapping and coexisting sequence of student identities—pre-enrolment, tertiary student and professional—where the first transition from pre-enrolment to student is crucial to the total FYE. For example in exploring that transition, Lawrence (2005) details the multiple discourses and cultural practices students encounter on commencement and the academic, social and personal nature of this transition, while Wylie (2005) details the information—again of a multi-faceted academic, social and personal nature—that needs to be assimilated by both the institution and commencing students. We have argued elsewhere (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Nelson et al., 2009) that institutional practices designed to foster student engagement should reflect this “whole of person” or holistic approach and, to that end, are drawing on the Transitions In Project (TIP) as a case study of institution-wide FYE implementation. TIP was premised on a holistic view of students and their university experience—specifically their FYE—and attempted to identify and embed good practice that focussed on engaging students across an institution in a way that was sustainable beyond the life of the project. A significant aspect of TIP then was its brief to achieve institution-wide dissemination and sustainability. Therefore, before the case study is discussed in detail, the support for and conceptualisation of institution-wide approaches to transition and retention are explored.

Institution-wide approaches to transition

In 2005, Krause and her colleagues made the now oft-quoted observation that, despite the often high quality, there was essentially

a “piecemeal approach” to discrete first year initiatives which were rarely if ever linked across an institution—the work was most often restricted to one faculty, sometimes two—and effort needed to be directed at moving practice towards more holistic and sustainable institution-wide approaches and enhancements. (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005, ¶8.8.6)

Around the same time, Lawrence (2005), while focussing on the intersection of institutional culture and student transition, echoed these sentiments, but was more specific in identifying that the “inconsistent and fragmented ... requirements, expectations and demands inherent in the discourses and literacies that students need to master and demonstrate differ, for example, across the university and across faculties, disciplines and courses” (p. 22). Based on a number of theoretical models, she also recommended the need at an institutional level for an “explicit and well structured intent that is necessary if the induction is to be successful” (p. 23).

Tinto (2005) builds on Lawrence’s (2005) “discussion of the intersection of institutional culture and student progression” by suggesting a model of institutional action “that draws upon research into student persistence” (Tinto, 2005, p. 89). The model nominates five conditions: Institutional commitment; Institutional expectations; Support; Feedback; and Involvement (pp. 90-94). In summary,

students are more likely to succeed ... in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their success, provide needed academic and social support, give frequent feedback and actively involve them, especially with other students and faculty, in learning. (p. 94)

In similar vein, Wylie (2005) offers a theoretical model of an institution-wide retention plan, delineating the holistic—again, an integration of academic, social and personal—roles of the institution and faculties. These aspects of the student experience have been conceptualised collectively by Kift (2009) as “curriculum.” This broad interpretation of curriculum encompasses “the totality of the undergraduate student experience of and engagement with their new program of tertiary study” (p. 9). Consistent with this, Crosling et al. (2009) articulate the importance of institution-wide support by pointing out the value of student-responsive curriculum development as a means to promote student engagement and offering insight into the inclusivity of teaching, learning and assessment to identify and support transitioning students. Despite different modes of delivery and forms across disciplines, the curriculum forms a platform for the implementation of approaches and strategies that engage students in their university experience (p. 12) as the organisation and delivery of the curriculum is an area over which universities and colleges have significant autonomy (p. 17). Like Crosling et al., Wahr et al. (2009), in supporting the whole of university approach, stress the importance of the role of academics but specifically focus on their professional development in “initiating and designing programmes to support organisational changes needed for improved student transition” (p. 435).

Support for “holistic and sustainable institution-wide approaches” (Krause et al., 2005, ¶8.8.6) facilitating the transition of commencing students is almost an incontestable truism. Commentators, whatever their perspective—institutional discourses and culture, institutional responsibilities, curriculum-mediation or staff development—are unanimous on the need for such approaches. The question then is how that is best done? The purpose of this paper is to discuss the parameters that influence the implementation of such an institution-wide activity.

We do this by presenting a case study of TIP as an example of a whole-of-institution FYE program.

TIP was conducted at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) from mid-2007 to the end of 2009. To understand its structure and focus, it needs to be interpreted and contextualised by considering the activities related to the FYE in the period leading up to the project. Swing (2003) has noted that embedded institutional change may take as long as ten years to emerge, therefore this analysis commences in 2002, a significant year for the FYE initiative at QUT.

The history of FYE at QUT: A longitudinal analysis

In 2002, three issues papers were developed at QUT that came to represent the three strategies which still guide FYE initiatives today. The key strategy is that the first year curriculum must engage new learners in their learning and mediate support for that learning (QUT, 2002a). This is assisted by an awareness of and timely access to QUT support services (QUT, 2002b); and by creating a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experiences (QUT, 2002c). Taken collectively, these strategies present an holistic view of student experience and are the assumptions that underpinned a series of practice- and policy-focussed first year initiatives during the period 2002 to 2007 aimed at improving and enriching the FYE Program at QUT.

A major practice-focussed initiative was a Teaching and Learning Development Project, *Enhancing Transition at QUT* (ET@QUT) (QUT, 2009a). It was carried out between 2005 and mid-2007 and consisted of nine research-based sub-projects focussed on developing and trialling new activities and processes to support commencing students. Some sub-projects have been reported (Duncan & Nelson, 2008; Nelson, Kift, & Clarke, 2008; Nelson, Kift, & Harper, 2005) while summaries of all are available at <http://www.fye.qut.edu.au/>. All sub-projects provided evidence for future developments and three are relevant to this discussion:

- Conflict Resolution: Identifying sources of conflict for first year students and developing a suite of “self-help” resources for students;
- Monitoring Student Engagement: Monitoring and managing first year students deemed to be at risk of leaving QUT; and
- Teamwork Protocol: Designing a staff-focussed Teamwork Protocol to assist teachers with all aspects of teamwork.

In the early stages of ET@QUT, the project directors, seeking to develop a “blueprint for transition success” (Nelson, Kift, Humphreys, & Harper, 2006), introduced the notion of *transition pedagogy* (Kift & Nelson, 2005). They envisaged that this concept would serve to integrate all the elements important for FYE success, thus “bridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs” seen as essential by McInnis (2003, p. 13).

An important decision on academic leadership occurred late in 2006 when QUT appointed an academic as Director of the FYE Program. That position is ongoing and the remit of the incumbent spans first year curriculum, learning support, orientation and transition, peer programs and student retention. Critically the role also includes establishing and maintaining the cross-institution partnerships required for program sustainability and staff development. Partnerships are fostered through a university level committee whose membership is drawn from senior academic and professional managers. The FYE Committee was established in 2002 and continues to oversee FYE Program activities and ensure alignment with the three overarching strategies.

A significant policy-focussed initiative, the *First Year Experience Project*, was identified as a key area “for action over 2006-7” (Kift, 2008, p. 8). It had a strategic focus and aimed to develop policy and strategy in areas pertinent to FYE. This “top-down” focus on policy complemented the practice focus of [ET@QUT](#). Details of the project are in Kift (2008) but the First Year Curriculum Sub-project is of most relevance to this discussion. This sub-project sought to articulate the elements of the transition pedagogy and a significant outcome was the set of six curriculum design principles which now underpin the transition pedagogy. The working descriptions of the principles at this stage (2007) were that an intentional first year curriculum:

- is *designed* for commencing students based on evidence from practice and research;
- explicitly assists the *transition* into learning in higher education for all students;
- acknowledges and reflects the *diversity* and reality of students’ previous experiences and preparedness for university;
- incorporates pedagogies, teaching approaches and materials that *engage* students in their learning;
- introduces a range of appropriate *assessment* and assessment skills explicitly related to learning outcomes; and
- *monitors* students’ performance and engagement in learning to proactively provide life and learning support and *evaluates* its efficacy in doing so.

The curriculum principles as foundational elements of the transition pedagogy were subsequently explored in two ways. First as the focus of a Carrick Senior Fellowship, which investigated their applicability and generalisability for the sector (Kift, 2009). They emerged from that process as the First Year Curriculum Principles; and second as a central element of one aspect of a new FYE practice-focussed project at QUT, the Transitions In Project (TIP), which is discussed below.

This history of evidence-based practice and policy development and implementation from 2002 to 2007 provided a substantial, albeit still fragmented, base on which to build and further enhance the FYE Program at QUT. TIP, an attempt to implement an institution-wide approach to facilitating the transition of commencing students, provided that opportunity.

The Transitions In Project

Introduction

TIP was one of three complementary QUT Teaching and Learning Projects commissioned in 2007. Along with the Work Integrated Learning Project and the Transition Out Project, it made up the Real World Learning (RWL) Project sponsored by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching Quality). All three projects, under the RWL umbrella, were organized to focus on common streams of “students,” “curriculum” and “staff,” and were funded from mid 2007 until the end of 2009. The aim of TIP was to enhance the transition into QUT of commencing students with objectives of:

1. developing a theoretical and operational framework to provide the parameters within which the project can function;
2. identifying and systematically analysing existing and potential projects and activities;
3. selecting and supporting the implementation of sub-projects; and
4. embedding and institutionalising the outcomes of these sub-projects throughout QUT.

From the beginning, TIP was designed to complement the FYE Program and be a capacity building, institution-wide initiative. TIP was premised on the individual and institutional imperative for commencing students to make a successful transition to the QUT learning and teaching environments. The TIP approach was to attempt to change practice at the staff-student and staff-staff interfaces across QUT (bottom-up) and in this way complement the (top-down) policy-focussed work of the Director FYE and the FYE Committee.

Theoretical and empirical background

To provide a theoretical framework (Objective 1), an adaptation of the Bigg’s Presage-Process-Product (3P) model (Biggs, 1999) was used. Student retention and engagement are regarded as crucial indicators of the “transition in” experience and existing models conceptualising retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto, 1993) and engagement (Dart, 1994; Krause, 2006) were synthesised onto the 3P model to identify those individual and institutional characteristics that influenced the student retention and engagement behaviours. These characteristics were augmented by recent developments not envisaged when the contributing models were developed (e.g. the role of ICTs in teaching and learning, increased student diversity, curriculum innovations in assessment etc.); and contextualised by the inclusion of QUT-specific aspects such as Graduate Capabilities (QUT, 2007, Policy C, ¶ 1.4.1, 1.4.2.) and the Teaching Capabilities Framework (QUT, 2004). The resultant IICISRE (Individual and Institutional Characteristics Influencing Student Retention and Engagement) Model is summarised in Figure 1 and discussed in detail in Transitions In Project Report 002 (2007) which is available from the authors.

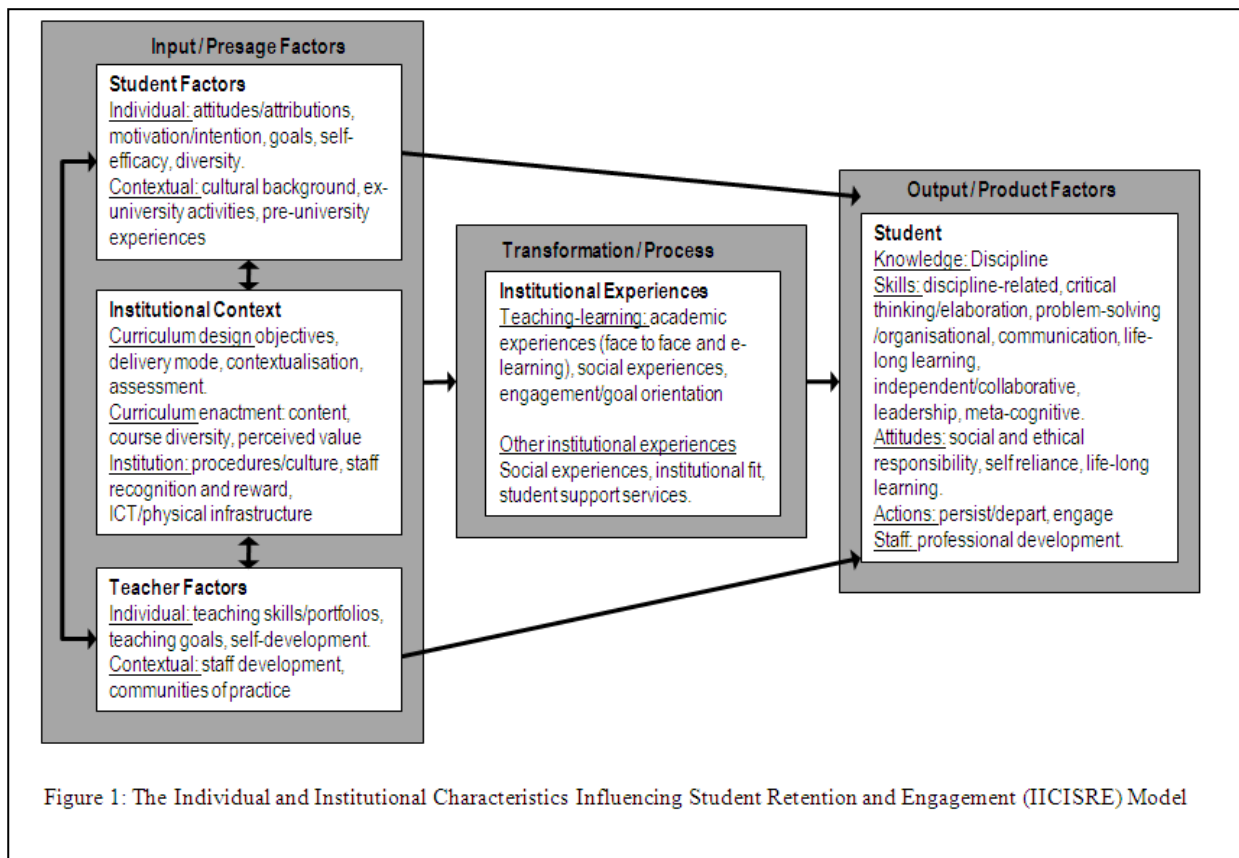


Figure 1: The Individual and Institutional Characteristics Influencing Student Retention and Engagement (IICISRE) Model

The IICISRE model was used to identify existing projects and activities to provide baseline data and hence to detect gaps that could be addressed by TIP (Objective 2). This scoping exercise was also informed by the carryover of activities from selected [ET@QUT](#) sub-projects and led to the emergence of the following foci:

Focus on engaging commencing students

Accepting the crucial significance of the transition from pre-enrolment identity to student identity (Bridges, 2003), there was a recognized need to monitor commencing students and identify and support those who were not engaging with their learning or the institution. Preliminary work had been done in the Monitoring Student Engagement sub-project of the [ET@QUT](#) project (Duncan & Nelson, 2008; QUT, 2009a) provided a solid base on which to build.

Focus on first year curriculum

This focus took up the First Year Curriculum Principles developed in the First Year Curriculum Sub-project. At the conclusion of that sub-project, the principles needed to be implemented and embedded within the curriculum at QUT. Some contributions to the Fellowship (Kift, 2009) by Nelson (2006) and Healy (2007) supplemented the explication of the principles and provided a solid base on which to build.

Focus on engaging students for learning

The ability to work effectively as part of a team is an educational and vocational advantage (Nelson et al., 2006) and Krause et al. (2005) had found that QUT students were more likely to work with other students on group assignments and projects outside university time as compared to other universities. However, the Conflict Resolution sub-project of ET@QUT (QUT, 2009a) identified Teamwork as the major cause of student stress and disagreement and found that students were not always given the opportunity to learn about teamwork or how to participate effectively in teams. Hence, a focus on the development of student resources on Teamwork was a logical activity for TIP. Fortuitously, on-line modules were being developed at QUT in the *Engaging Students Project* (Stewart, Smith, & Dunn, 2008) and TIP worked collaboratively with that project in the development of further modules.

Focus on staff development

For some time, QUT staff had been involved in a number of initiatives aimed at sharing ideas and resources for teaching first year students but often in a limited and isolated manner, for example, the Teamwork Protocol sub-project of ET@QUT. These activities provided an appropriate base on which TIP could build.

These foci led to the development of four specific sub-projects¹ within TIP, summarised in Table 1. The Student Success Project (SSP) developed into a major project utilising at least half of the human and material resources of TIP. The discussions of each project reflect that weighting.

The Student Success Project (SSP)

Overview

Details of this project and its origins have been reported (Duncan & Nelson, 2008; Nelson et al., 2009) and the assumptions underpinning it discussed in detail elsewhere (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2010). In brief, and drawing on commentators such as Crosling

et al. (2009) and Tinto (2005, 2009), there is evidence indicating that engagement is the linchpin of student success and retention and this is accompanied by suggestions that higher education institutions should monitor and measure the extent of student engagement—particularly in the first year—and most importantly intervene with students exhibiting signs of disengaging from their studies. The SSP is therefore a project designed to monitor student engagement in a holistic systematic way to enhance the experience of commencing students

Table 1. The four projects in TIP

RWL stream	Focus	TIP projects
Students	<i>Focus on engaging commencing students</i>	The Student Success Project: Case managing students at risk
Curriculum	<i>Focus on first year curriculum</i>	First year Curriculum Project: The design, development, implementation and evaluation of first year curriculum
Curriculum	<i>Focus on engaging students for learning</i>	Student Learning Resources Project: Developing and evaluating student teamwork resources
Staff	<i>Focus on staff development</i>	First Year Experience Network: Developing and sustaining a community of practice for teachers and coordinators of large first year units

by facilitating persistence and academic performance. Its focus is to create bridges for first year students between their classroom experiences and the discipline and specialist support services available to assist them with their learning and/or management of issues that may be interfering with their ability to focus on their learning and engagement. This is achieved by proactive, timely, individually-tailored personal contact with those students who are classified as at risk of disengaging from their studies. Indicators of “at-riskness” include being a member of a vulnerable cohort (e.g. rural) and/or inappropriate academic performance data (e.g. being absent or not submitting an early assessment). Trained, later-year discipline-experienced students called Student Success Advisors (SSAs) contact at-risk students by phone (email is used as a backup) and provide them with academic, social and/or personal (“holistic”) support.

Outcomes

Over the period of the SSP—beginning of 2008 to the end of 2009—well over 10,000 commencing undergraduate students at QUT were monitored for at-risk behaviour. Around 1,500 were found to be at-risk, and of these, over 800 were successfully contacted by phone and provided appropriate support. These students represent 26 discrete Case Studies (units or cohorts within units) where, in 75% of the cases, contacted students persisted more and in one-third of the cases achieved better, than those at-risk students who were unable to be contacted. A recent study (Nelson et al., 2010) showed that a significantly greater number of students who were successfully contacted in the 2008 intervention were still enrolled at the end of 2009, compared to those students who were not contacted. This suggests that the impact of being involved in the SSP was sustained for at least a year.

A comprehensive and sophisticated Contact Management System (CMS)—that supports operations such as identifying at-risk students, scheduling phone calls and recording call outcomes, and enables evaluation of outcomes—was developed throughout 2008-2009. Role descriptions for SSP Team Leaders and SSAs have been developed along with protocols, management systems and training programs for the SSAs.

Institutionalisation and sustainability

Over its life, the SSP moved from operating in one faculty (Semester 1, 2008 [S1/08]; 5 units) to 5 faculties (S2/08; 8 units) to all faculties (S1-2/09; 8 units). Since the end of S1/09, the SSP has expanded from this in-semester learning engagement focus or “campaign” (Campaign 3) to include three other campaigns—Campaign 1: Offers and enrolments; Campaign 2: Welcome calls to members of potentially at-risk cohorts (e.g. rural students) or to those who do not attend “required” Orientation activities; and Campaign 4: Students potentially at-risk due to unsatisfactory academic performance. Taken collectively, the four campaigns follow the life cycle of students through their first year. As to the institutionalisation of other aspects of the SSP, the CMS has been developed to QUT corporate standards and is integrated into the corporate systems infrastructure. The SSP, renamed the Student Success Program, has been sustained as an integral part of the FYE Program at QUT.

The First Year Curriculum Project: Overview, outcomes, institutionalisation and sustainability

This project focussed on the review, development and evaluation of first year curriculum by implementing the First Year Curriculum Principles underpinning the transition pedagogy concept. These activities were facilitated by a series of checklists based on the principles and developed in the early stages of this project. The development and application of the checklists have been detailed elsewhere (Duncan et al., 2009) but briefly, five Checklists—for First Year Course and Unit Coordinators, Unit Writers, Tutors and Evaluators—based on Kift’s (2008, 2009) First Year Curriculum Principles were developed and used in all faculties. A Template for monitoring the development of an integrated suite of first year units has been developed and used in five faculties. Both the Checklists and Template have already been institutionalised or “mainstreamed” and have been and are currently being used by the Director FYE, curriculum design teams and Learning and Teaching Developers to promote good practice in first year curriculum. By doing this, they have enabled embedding of the transition pedagogy at QUT. This project resulted in the publication of a *Transition Pedagogy Handbook: A Good Practice Guide for Policy and Practice in the First Year Experience* (Creagh, Nelson & Clarke, 2010) which has been made available to the sector. The Handbook amalgamates the checklists, associated resources, exemplars of the implementation of the principles at the institutional, course and unit levels along with brief overviews of QUT’s FYE Program and FYE Policy (see <http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/research/documents/TransitionPedagogyHandbook.pdf>).

The Student Learning Resources Project: Overview, outcomes, institutionalisation and sustainability

The original aim of this project was to develop a variety of learning resources for students. Based on the available evidence (Krause et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2006; QUT, 2009a), the major need was in the area of Teamwork. Resources developed were (a) a Student Teamwork Survival Guide—a succinct compact booklet which addresses different expectations, skills

and motivations and unequal participation in student teams. Designed to be used as a just-in-time strategy for distribution to students when a new teamwork task is introduced, it provides tools to help students work through these sources of conflict; and (b) a series of seven on-line teamwork learning modules designed to prepare students to achieve project goals in teams. These modules require students to reflect upon and critically analyse previous and current team experiences to arrive at understandings of team behaviours. These reflective exercises are underpinned with a theoretical background which informs best practice in the field. The modules—Successful Teams, Team Roles, Team Lifecycles, Team Thinking Styles, Introduction to Understanding Conflict, Resolving Conflict and Working in Cross-cultural Teams—were developed in conjunction with the *Engaging Students Project* (Stewart et al., 2008) and have been embedded in key large first year units across QUT and used by over 3,000 students. The most recent module has recently been reported by Quinn and Smith (2010).

The First Year Experience Network Staff Development Project: Overview, outcomes, institutionalisation and sustainability

The scoping exercise had identified a variety of isolated faculty- or school-based activities related to the development of resources for teaching first year students. To harness the initiatives and maximise their influence across QUT, TIP formed a Community of Practice (CoP) in 2008 that focussed on the design, assessment and management of first year units. Details of the evolution and activities of the CoP are available elsewhere (Quinn, Smith, Duncan, Clarke, & Nelson, 2009) but, in brief, by the end of Semester 2, 2009, more than 40 first year staff had registered as members and 16 meetings involving academic and professional staff from across QUT had been held where an extensive range of relevant “hot issues” were identified and discussed; resources reviewed and shared through a designated wiki site; a “Resourcing and support for coordinators of large first year units” submission (QUT, 2009b) developed; and processes put in place to ensure the sustainability of the network beyond TIP. To ensure the latter, the CoP, renamed the First Year Experience Network (FYEN), has been placed under the control of the FYE Committee that provides a rotating chair and administrative and logistic support. At the end of Semester 1, 2010, over 100 staff had registered.

Key outcomes

Summarising the outcomes of the four projects, TIP, over the period of the project (mid 2007-2009), engaged over 40 first year unit coordinators, over 30 first year units and over 10,000 commencing students in all faculties, embedding and institutionalising good practice, curriculum design and support for commencing students. In particular, it has formed a sustainable network for staff involved with first year units; advised on the development, revision and/or implementation of individual and suites of first year units; designed, trialled and embedded student learning resources; and identified and successfully supported over 800 students deemed to be at risk of disengaging from learning and the institution. It is important to note however that the SSP was only successful in 75% of the interventions, that not all staff were enamoured of curriculum renewal or of collaborating in a community of practice and that a significant number of students did not take the opportunity to avail themselves of the on-line resources.

There were important processes that underpinned the achievement of these outcomes. The formation of sustainable key partnerships both within and between academic and professional staff across the institution was crucial to the success of all projects but in particular the SSP and the FYEN. Links were made and sustained across previously isolated silos of activity.

TIP operated in an environment where FYE policy was not only statutory but also implemented; and this facilitated access and provided justification for the projects. A number of quality assurance processes were also put in place to evaluate the projects and are discussed below.

Evaluation of TIP

The evaluation of TIP consisted of a number of internal evaluations and an independent external evaluation.

Internal evaluations

An extensive evaluation of the SSP was undertaken based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of solicited and unsolicited data collected from staff and students involved in the interventions and the SSAs. The evaluation was based on the “Product” component (Did it succeed?) of Stufflebeam’s CIPP Model (2003). That component includes assessments of *impact* (Were the right beneficiaries reached?); *effectiveness* (Were their targeted needs met?); *sustainability* (Were the gains for beneficiaries sustained?); and *transportability* (Were the processes effective elsewhere?). There was strong evidence on all counts—for example) *impact*: students appreciated the contact and indicated they may have otherwise disengaged; *effectiveness*: students and staff both reported positive changes in student learning behaviours; *sustainability*: student sustained enrolment behaviour reported in Nelson et al. (2010); *transportability*: used in a variety of learning environments and disciplines across QUT. For details of the evaluation, see Nelson et al. (2010).

Evaluation in the remaining projects was less extensive but still substantive. The Teamwork Survival Guide was evaluated by over 200 students in four units. While the quantitative data was equivocal, the qualitative data included many positive student comments about the usefulness of the Guide. Staff involved in the FYEN, responding to an evaluation survey, indicated that the aim of providing a vehicle for staff development was achieved, based on themes that emerged from the evaluation data. The themes were: Self development, involving self with others, supporting the community [of practice] and the collegial nature and energising influence of the community. Details of the themes and the evaluation are available elsewhere (Quinn et al., 2009).

External evaluation

Boyle and Lee (2010) carried out an independent external evaluation. In general, they concluded that:

TIP has been an outstanding success. ... There is systematic engagement in all faculties with the objectives and issues of concern in the TIP. We found good evidence that practices to ensure the quality of QUT students’ first year experience were embedded. ... Further, there is strong commitment to sustainability including the continuation of the important position of Director of the First Year Experience. (pp. 17, 20)

Based on the evaluative evidence presented, it would seem reasonable to assume that TIP achieved its aims and objectives to an acceptable level and the good practices identified in the four projects have been embedded institution-wide in a sustainable form. However, Boyle and Lee (2010) did caution that “reaching this stage of embedded practices and commitment to sustaining them is the critical success factor if QUT is to maintain its reputation for excellence with regards to the FYE” (p. 17).

Discussion

In addressing the challenge posed by Krause et al. (2005) of “moving practice towards more holistic and sustainable institution-wide approaches and enhancements” (§8.8.6), Kift et al. (2010), five years later, noted that “institutions are still struggling with cross-institutional integration, coordination and coherence” (p. 2). TIP was designed to be an institution-wide intervention aimed at facilitating the transition of commencing students at QUT. The evidence presented in this critically reflective case study suggests that it was successful in doing so and hence provides a good practice model for the sector. TIP therefore, enabled the institutionalisation of a sustainable transition pedagogy, the concept introduced (Kift & Nelson, 2005), articulated (Kift, 2009) and implemented (Kift et al., 2010) at QUT. In this implementation of transition pedagogy, the six curriculum principles were used as the organising device to integrate all the institutional elements essential for first year student success (see <http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/>). It is this integrative power that now defines the transition pedagogy as a “third generation” FYE approach which includes first generation (co-curricular) and second generation (curriculum) approaches.² The overall outcome of TIP is that a deeper understanding of transition pedagogy is now possible and drawing on discussions in Kift et al. (2010), is described as

- the integration of first and second generation approaches delivered seamlessly across the institution, its disciplines, programs and services by forming key viable academic-professional partnerships;
- having a university FYE policy with tangible evidence of implementation; and
- having and implementing quality assurance of the student experience.

Using this description it appears from this case study that implementation of successful FYE approaches are likely to have the following features:

- A collaboration between academic and professional staff that is based on a premise of shared responsibility and shared recognition of the important contribution all staff make in supporting successful transition to university;
- A synchronous combination of top down and bottom up activities to create the governance infrastructure and demonstrate impact through localised initiatives;
- Academic leadership which is necessary because of the critical inclusive role of the curriculum and the intractable relationship between student engagement, learning and retention; and
- Institution-wide partnerships formalised in shared understandings of cross-institutional processes, and facilitated through formal and informal forums and actively facilitated by champions at a senior level.

The success of TIP is that, in its capacity-building (bottom up) role, it has provided a number of these resources and practices that have complemented the strategic (top down) policies and integrated with them to operationalise key elements of the FYE Program. The success of this project indicates that the transition pedagogy and the six curriculum design principles that form its organising device, when applied across all the levels of institutional strategy and operations, provide a robust framework for an institution-wide approach to the FYE. However, given this strong base, it is important to continue to address Boyle and Lee’s (2010) cautionary reference to “the critical success factor” (p. 17) of sustaining the embedded practices. The job is not finished.

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Notes

1. Strictly speaking, these four activities are sub-projects within the Transitions In Project. However, as each sub-project grew in significance, continuing to use “sub” seemed inappropriate as each was worthy of status as a stand-alone project. Further, the terminology is cumbersome. As a consequence, within TIP, the sub-projects were referred to as “projects,” a convention that is adopted henceforth in this article.
2. For a brief history of the evolution of generational approaches to FYE, see Wilson (2009) and Kift et al. (2010).
3. The presentations at the Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conferences are available through the “Past Papers” prompt on <http://www.fyhe.qut.edu.au/>

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