

A photograph of a building corner with a large 'UT' sign on a dark panel. The image is semi-transparent and serves as a background for the text.

Protocols: First Year Experience

Protocols to accompany the policy for First Year Experience

(Manual of Policy and Procedures C/6.2)

August 2011

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Version 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• August 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Replaced references to OTQ with LTU



1. QUT's aim for the First Year Experience

In line with QUT's vision and goals (see Manual of Policies and Procedures (MOPP) [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
- 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.

2. Intentional first year curriculum design

Principle

QUT commits to delivering intentionally designed first year curriculum that mediates a relevant, involving and social transition to tertiary academic study and is not overwhelming to the new learner in the discipline.

Why

In the context of new tertiary study, a successful transition to learning in a new discipline has been proven to increase the student's overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience as well as increasing the likelihood of their retention and degree completion. 'First year students', as multiple cohorts, are extremely diverse and the diverse nature of student progression also means that non-first year students may enrol in first year units of study. QUT protocols for the first year experience are concerned with undergraduate first year curriculum and co-curriculum design, rather than with the experience of commencing students.

The first year of university study is arguably the most crucial time for engaging students in their learning community and equipping them with the requisite skills, not only to persist, but to be successful and independent in their new learning throughout their undergraduate years and for a lifetime of professional practice in which they will be continually required to learn and to engage with new ideas that go beyond the content of their university course.

*The more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate. This is particularly true for more able and motivated students who seek out learning and are, in turn, more likely to respond to perceived shortcomings in the quality of learning they experience on campus. Lest we forget the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated. In the final analysis, **student learning drives student retention.***

(Tinto, 2002, p. 4)

How

- First year curriculum should focus closely on the enablers of student learning, the development of personal learning capability and the processes of learning in the discipline context, rather than solely or more heavily on the content of that learning.
- First year curriculum designers should consider carefully the aims and learning outcomes of the first year curriculum in the overall curriculum context. This involves explicitly determining what knowledge, skills and attitudes should be developed by the end of the first year. It is also relevant to consider how students are assisted to take control of their own learning (encouraging student self-efficacy) through unit content, structural design, curriculum organisation and delivery.

- Resources (e.g. teaching, support and administrative staff, rooms, timetabling, laboratories, equipment etc.) should be allocated preferentially to first year students and their studies.
- First year curriculum and learning environments should be of the highest quality and taught and supported by QUT's best teachers and professional staff.

3. Broad organising principles for first year curriculum design

QUT acknowledges that certain curriculum design principles stand out as supportive of first year learning engagement, success and retention. All members of the University, students and both professional and academic staff, have a responsibility to ensure that the first year curriculum is engaging, supportive, intentional, relevant and social. Every QUT first year curriculum should abide by the following interconnected organising principles of good first year curriculum design to facilitate all students fully achieving desired learning outcomes.

3.1 Transition

Principle

The curriculum should be designed to be consistent and explicit in assisting students' transition from their previous educational experience to the nature of learning in higher education, learning in their discipline and to lifelong learning.

Why

Research indicates that a sustained, academic and social induction program, which builds on activities conducted pre-entry and in the formal Orientation Week program, presents opportunities for students to be engaged, motivated and challenged, for them to develop clear aspirational goals, for them to be immersed in scholarly discourse and helps them come to terms with academic life.

The US Policy Center on the First Year of College in its *Foundational dimensions*[®] (four-year college version) claims that leading FY institutions:

... facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission. Beginning with recruitment and admissions and continuing through the first year, institutions communicate clear curricular and co-curricular expectations and provide appropriate support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students' responsibilities to themselves and the institution. They create and maintain curricular alignments with secondary schools and linkages with secondary school personnel, families, and other sources of support, as appropriate. (Transitions)

How

The first year curriculum should be designed to mediate and support transition as a process that occurs over time. In this way, the first year curriculum will enable successful student transition into first year, through first year, into later years and ultimately out into the world of work, professional practice and career attainment.

- First year curriculum design should provide the foundation for students' transition to later years' learning success and career attainment; for example, by assisting in students' transition to:
 - new learning and assessment methods
 - independent learning and academic agency
 - self-belief and academic confidence
 - guided reflection on the way in which they learn
 - understanding the cognitive and affective hierarchy.
- The first year curriculum should provide processes and opportunities to support students before the formal semester commences (e.g. transition workshops, summer schools, bridging programs, cohort specific pre-entry initiatives, opportunities that assist with the development of independent learning skills etc.).
- The first year curriculum should be also be harnessed to manage orientation as a process that occurs over time. This means that strategies should be embedded in first year curriculum to continue the orientation and transition process after the official Orientation Week is concluded.
- Student transition to higher education and to their new discipline of study should be assisted by:
 - creating a sense of academic and social cohort belonging
 - providing clear pathways and timely access to support services
 - ensuring consistency of communication, language and expectations.
- First year curriculum should make explicit to students the discipline's expectations of commencing students and provide tools and resources to support the acquisition of any knowledge and skills not presently existing.
- First year curriculum design should assist commencing students in their mediation of realistic and realisable expectations of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education generally and their discipline specifically.
- The first year curriculum should be explicit about making expectations in the discipline and standards clear and upholding them.
- Co-curricula first year design should ensure the systematic provision and structuring of academic and career advising opportunities relevant to the first year student context.

3.2 Diversity

Principle

The first year curriculum should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students.

First year curriculum design should recognise that students have special learning needs by reason of their social, cultural and academic transition. Diversity is often a factor that further exacerbates transition difficulties. The first year curriculum should take into account students' backgrounds, needs, experiences and patterns of study and few if any assumptions should be made about existing skills and knowledge.

'Diversity' in this context includes:

- membership of at-risk or equity groups
- widening participation (e.g. non-traditional cohorts)
- students' existing skills and knowledge
- patterns and timing of engagement with the first year curriculum (e.g. mid-year entry).

Why

The first year curriculum bears a heavy burden — it must support an increasingly diverse student body that the institution has, at a threshold level, determined as competent to complete its degree programs. Research suggests that the best kind of student support is that provided through the curriculum. In this sense, student support is as much an academic as a professional responsibility. First year curriculum should accommodate known and knowable student diversity by ensuring that no unnecessary barriers to engagement and learning success are placed in the path of entering students and, further, that students are served according to their varied needs.

Widening access has fundamentally changed the assumptions that can be made about students' [entry] skills and knowledge. This has not always led to the necessary changes in learning, teaching and assessment approaches.

(Johnston, 2002)

Institutional responsibility in this regard is nicely summed up by Liverpool John Moores University (UK) in its *Strategic plan, 2003–2008* (p. 10):

The core business of the University is provision of a curriculum that is inclusive, accessible and appropriate to the learning and employability needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Similarly, the US Policy Center on the First Year of College in its *Foundational dimensions*® (four-year college version) asserts that leading FY institutions:

... serve all first-year students according to their varied needs. The process of anticipating, diagnosing, and addressing needs is ongoing and is subject to [evaluation] and adjustment throughout the first year. Institutions provide services with respect for the students' abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Institutions also ensure a campus environment that is inclusive and safe for all students. (All Students)

The first year curriculum is one of the controllable aspects of an institution's engagement with its students and, in an era of increasing diversity and massification, must provide the means by which students are supported to acquire the necessary platform of knowledge, skills and attitudes that diverse cohorts need to be successful learners on into later years of study and out into the world of work. If diversity is not explicitly attended to, then it is possible that the curriculum will embed assumptions and decisions that may exclude or disadvantage certain individuals or cohorts of students. In this way, curriculum is conceptualised as more than just content, and first year curriculum in particular is conceptualised as the preparation for a student's whole program of study on which the rest of the curriculum can be built in an integrated and incremental way. A primary objective of the first year curriculum is to ensure that, at the end of their first year, students have been scaffolded to acquire the necessary foundational knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, whatever their entry level position.

Adjusting the methods of learning, teaching and assessment to meet the needs of a wide range of students is likely to benefit all students and possibly will improve retention.

(Liverpool John Moores University, 2003, p. 11)

How

- Academics responsible for first year curriculum design and teaching should be informed about, and explicitly manage for, the diversity of their commencing cohort. A primary step in effective first year curriculum design is to identify and understand the characteristics of prospective learners in the discipline.
- Academics and professional staff should be systematic about monitoring retention and attrition rates of first year students both during the currency of the first two semesters of study and at the conclusion of them. Staff should be alert to signs of student disengagement and use university data to determine profiles of cohorts who are being well supported and likely to be retained, so that good practice examples may be shared across the institution. University data should also be used by staff to identify cohorts who are more likely to withdraw or not fully achieve desired learning outcomes, so that appropriate and effective intervention and support mechanisms may be developed and deployed.

- Diversity and massification requires that the certain identifiable cohorts should be academically supported both in and beyond the curriculum. Strategies in this regard might include:
 - induction and diagnostic activities that are embedded in first year curriculum design
 - the provision of on-going support (both within curriculum and through referral out to co-curriculum support) when, where and how it is most needed
 - enhanced learning support through mentoring, PASS schemes etc.
 - providing opportunities through the curriculum to assist new students in forming friendship groups and to create a sense of belonging to both their program and to QUT
 - developing a learner support policy.
- First year curriculum design and delivery should take into account differences in the patterns and timing of student engagement with the first year curriculum (e.g. the mid-year entry point).
- The first year curriculum should expose new learners to a variety of ways of learning, teaching and assessment (which are aligned to unit learning outcomes) to assist students with different approaches.
- A degree program that is flexible in design is more likely to be accessible to diverse student cohorts. Flexibility may be provided through:
 - choices over what and how to learn and when and where to learn (modes of study and attendance patterns)
 - assessment options
 - access to resources (including forms of pre-study preparation)
 - the provision of blended learning environments
 - mechanisms for communicating with staff and other students
 - choices for individual or collaborative learning.

3.3 *Design*

Principle

First year curriculum design and delivery should be student-focussed, explicit and relevant in providing the foundation and scaffolding necessary for first year learning success.

Why

Curriculum generally should be conceptualised as more than just content, and first year curriculum in particular must be conceptualised as the preparation for a student's whole program of study on which the rest of the program can be built in an integrated and incremental way. A primary objective of the first year curriculum is to ensure that, at the end of their first year, students have been scaffolded to acquire the necessary foundational knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, whatever their entry level position.

Students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to have a successful university experience. The informal curriculum of social and community interactions and external commitments such as work and family need to be acknowledged, incorporated and supported, but it is within the formal or academic curriculum that students must find their places, be inspired and excited, and work towards mastery of their chosen discipline (Nelson & Kift, 2005).

Students in their first year have special learning needs directly arising from the social and academic transitions they are experiencing, the expectations with which they arrive, and their varied levels of preparedness. From multiple starting points, all students are on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners and the first year curriculum must help get them there.

A holistic and intentional approach to first year curriculum design is vital to whole-of-program coherence and student learning and development. Just as the careful placement of content in course design is considered important, so too is the intentional sequencing and scaffolding of graduate attributes and various generic tertiary literacies (such as academic literacies (including information literacy), numeracy, computer literacy, cultural literacy, visual literacy, statistical literacy etc.) for holistic capability attainment.

QUT is committed to delivering authentic learning environments for its students. In the first year in particular, authentic learning, teaching and assessment practices, together with the introduction of career management skills, can raise aspirations and increase intrinsic student motivation through explicit demonstration of career alignment and relevance of curriculum activities. Research shows that while student learning from lectures alone can be as low as 5%, the opportunity to immediately apply principles in a real-world scenario increases this by up to 85% (Magennis & Farrell, 2005). Through experiential learning, the scholarly values of research, critical thinking, analysis, problem solving, reporting and presentation become embodied as professional attributes.

How

The curriculum must be designed to assist student development and to support their engagement with learning environments through the intentional integration and sequencing of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

- Curriculum in first year should form a coherent whole. Both individual modules within a unit and individual units of study within the entire first year program should be purposefully and explicitly connected and sequenced. The first year curriculum should make an explicit statement concerning its end of year objectives.
- First year curriculum design should deploy a careful and intentional balancing and placement of content, skills and attitudes to scaffold the development of desirable and explicitly stated first year learning outcomes across the first two semesters of study.
- The first year curriculum should be presented to students as structured, holistic and coherent and integrated with the curriculum in subsequent years (e.g. as a curriculum roadmap through their degree that demonstrates an incremental progression from foundational basic study and generic skills, through to critical analysis and complex problem solving).

- Curriculum time should be devoted in the first year to supporting students to develop desirable study skills, habits and personal attitudes/traits/qualities and other requisite tertiary skills (for independent and lifelong learning).
- First year curriculum design should be relevant to and inform students' vocational aspirations (University of Ulster, 2002). Specifically, it should expose students to authentic learning environments and assessment tasks.
- First year curriculum should embed career modules to enhance familiarity with realistic career destinations, to enhance student certainty about their course choice, and to demonstrate how the curriculum develops capabilities and skills that will enhance employability. Timely and effective career management skills integrated into first year curriculum, in particular, can raise aspirations and increase motivation as career alignment and relevance of curriculum activities is made explicit to students.
- Opportunities for ePortfolio population and reflection should be embedded in first year curriculum design to support student-focussed learning, to assist in the development and recording of graduate capability and employability skill acquisition, and to make the curriculum more accessible in the first year by reason of its clear career relevance.
- The first year curriculum should articulate and promote the teaching/research nexus as appropriate to the discipline.
- The first year curriculum should harness appropriately blended (face-to-face with online) learning environments for both student learning and the administration of their learning.
- Whenever possible co-curricular activities should be designed into the curriculum to support aspects of the formal curriculum (e.g. Business Advantage, leadership programs, ePortfolio training; careers advising and presentations; community service; student ambassadors; peer mentors; PASS etc.).

3.4 *Engagement*

Principle

Learning, teaching and assessment approaches in the first year curriculum should enact an engaging and involving curriculum pedagogy and enable active and collaborative learning.

Why

Research shows that, ultimately, engagement is the most important influence on student learning (Cleary & Skaines, 2005), and has a stronger impact on the university experience than do other factors such as student demographics, or choice of institution (Kuh, 2002).

Referring primarily to student learning conditions, Tinto (2002, p. 2) emphasises the criticality of a student-focussed teaching approach in first year curriculum design and goes on to observe:

The research in this regard could not be clearer. Students who find support for their learning, receive frequent feedback about their learning and are actively involved in learning, especially with others, are more likely to learn and in turn more likely to stay. Unfortunately, it remains the case that most first year students experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others. They continue to engage in solo performance and demonstration in what remains a largely show-and-tell environment. Their experience of learning is still very much a 'spectator sport' in which [teachers'] talk dominates and where there are few active student participants. It is little wonder then that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

In a similar vein, the US Policy Center on the First Year of College in its *Foundational dimensions® (four-year college version)* 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.

How

Learning communities should be promoted through the embedding in first year curriculum of active and interactive learning opportunities and other opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and teacher–student interaction:

- The first year curriculum should be reconceptualised for a holistic approach that fosters student engagement by bringing together the academic, administrative and other support programs available under the organising device of the curriculum.
- The first year curriculum should exploit the potential for social engagement (e.g. through opportunities for collaborative work; keeping students connected to their course and discipline through co-curricula activities; provision of mentoring opportunities; PASS and PALS schemes; staff–student interaction etc.).
- The first year curriculum should take into account the generational characteristics of entering cohorts, and deploy engaging and appropriately blended learning environments that harness the technological affordances available; in short, make ICTs work for both teachers and learners.
- Pre-entry and early engagement with students should be promoted at a discipline level wherever, however and whenever possible.
- The first year curriculum should pay particular attention to engaging double degree students in their dual learning communities.
- The creation and provision of physical spaces for first year students to congregate, including 'welcoming' and 'learner-friendly' facilities and campus environments (e.g. FIT has a dedicated first year common room).

3.5 Assessment

Principle

The first year curriculum should assist students to make a successful transition to assessment in higher education, while assessment should increase in complexity from the first to later years of curriculum design.

Why

We expect first year students to become independent and self-managing learners but they first need to be supported to make a successful transition to assessment in higher education. Critical to this transition is the necessity to alleviate early anxieties around assessment information, instructions, guidance and performance. This includes, for example, discussing and explaining the relevance of marking criteria and performance standards and providing annotated examples of varying levels of performance for early student guidance. In addition, students need early and informative feedback on how they are going or they will quickly become demotivated. Directed and early formative feedback is essential to provide students with a sense of early progress and learning success. *QUT FYE program issues paper 1* (2002) identifies that an early assessment task provides an opportunity for staff not to only to provide detailed feedback, but also to clarify assessment expectations and to identify students having difficulties. Directed and timely feedback will also enhance student learning outcomes by facilitating ongoing learning improvement through reflection.

How

- Critically, students should receive regular, formative evaluations of their work early in their program of study to aid their learning and to provide feedback to both students and staff on student progress and achievement.
- Students should be provided with clear, consistent and explicit information about (whole-of-course) course and (individual) units' assessment types, standards and expectations, and be provided with timetabled opportunities to discuss, seek clarification and provide feedback on this information (e.g. provide opportunities to check for understanding, to discuss assessment criteria (and standards), to examine previous student answers) in advance of the assessment task: see Liverpool John Moores University (2001) [Guide to writing a feedback strategy](#).
- Criterion-referenced Assessment (CRA) sheets should be provided with assignment tasks and the form and relevance of marking criteria and performance standards should be explained in class discussions for shared staff–student understanding.
- Annotated examples of varying levels of performance of specific criteria should be provided as a form of early student guidance.
- Assessment in the first year should be manageable for both students and staff.
- Early, 'low stakes', formative assessment should be designed into first year curriculum, with its return scheduled prior to Week 5.

- Opportunities for formative assessment should be designed into curriculum (e.g. using self and peer feedback, harnessing group work for feedback on assignments or work in progress) especially in the first semester of first year.
- Consideration might be given to developing a 'feedback strategy' (as a collection of tactics that work in particular situations) for communicating to staff, students and to quality bodies (see [Guide to writing a feedback strategy](#)).
- Provision for the use of diagnostic feedback to identify students' learning needs early in the first weeks of the first semester or even pre-semester.
- Consider how assessment practices might be improved to ensure that students will act on the feedback that is provided to improve their learning. For example, as suggested by Liverpool John Moores University in *Guide to writing a feedback strategy*:

Consider whether it is possible to give back work with comments but without marks. If marks are required keep them yourself and return work without them but invite the students to estimate their own marks from your comments. This should encourage students to read the comments and will also identify students whose perception is very different from yours.

3.6 Evaluation and monitoring

Principle

Good first year curriculum design is evidence-based and enhanced by regular evaluation that leads to curriculum development and renewal designed to improve student learning.

The first year curriculum should have strategies embedded to monitor all students' engagement in their learning and to identify and intervene in a timely way with students at risk of not succeeding or fully achieving desired learning outcomes.

Why

The consequences of disengagement and attrition, if not managed appropriately, can be financially, personally and institutionally problematic and wasteful. Most Australian institutions are now introducing monitoring initiatives to identify those students who are having difficulties in first year when student attrition is highest (DEST, 2004). Tinto says (1995, p. 5):

Only [by assessing the particular characteristics of student departure from its campus] 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.

First year student engagement cannot be left to chance and monitoring and intervention is demonstrative of institutional commitment to a positive first year experience. Research has highlighted the importance of early identification of students at risk of disengagement and/or of not succeeding or fully achieving desired learning outcomes. There is a consequential responsibility on the institution to demonstrate its commitment to collaboration between administrative, academic and support staff and to deliver an explicit, student-focused, approach to the first year experience.

This in turn leads to the requirement that first year curriculum design should itself be based on evidence, feedback, evaluation and review:

Thus evaluation is a vital part of curriculum development and needs to be designed into the curriculum ... Evaluation should therefore be a continuous, active and responsive process.

(Liverpool John Moores University, 2003, p. 16)

How

- Assessment items introduced early in the course provide an opportunity for both students and teachers to gain a sense of student progress and engagement in the early weeks of the first year.
- Systemising monitoring processes to collect signs of non/disengagement such as:
 - informal contacts with academic staff
 - nonattendance or nonparticipation in tutorials across course or program of study
 - nonsubmission of or poor performance on early assessment
 - no or minimal access to online learning environment
 - interaction with support services.
- Referring to counselling or study-skills-based interventions.
- Design into the curriculum opportunities for feedback and evaluation (e.g. peer review, PASS, instant feedback from students who are asked to identify the key points of a session/module individually or in groups, staff reflections (including sessional staff), formal teaching evaluations (LEX, FYES, MYES, EYES), focus groups etc.).

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