

QUT FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE (FYE) PROGRAM

Issues Paper 3: A 'sense of belonging'

The QUT First Year Experience (FYE) Program was endorsed by the Vice Chancellors Advisory Committee (VCAC) in response to recommendations from the final report of the successful Retention Project conducted in 2001. Funding was provided jointly by the Deputy Vice Chancellor and the Registrar for the Program to be established in 2002 with Ray Morley, Director of Student Services, having overall responsibility. The FYE Program brief in 2002 includes:

- Raising first year student awareness of key dates and available services
- Facilitating student access to services
- Making personal contact with at-risk students
- Disseminating position papers based on the key findings of FYE research.

Literature in the last ten years in the area of the first year experience and retention of students at university has identified three major areas of focus:

- Engaging learning experiences,
- Awareness of and timely access to support services, and
- A sense of belonging.

This paper focuses on the last of these issues concerned with 'a sense of belonging'.

Issue Paper 3 addresses 'a sense of belonging' by:

- **Reviewing current literature in this area,**
- **Identifying key elements relating to 'a sense of belonging',**
- **Identifying gaps and issues for consideration**
- **Recommending future action for the FYE program.**

In attempting to tackle the issue of creating and maintaining a positive first year experience for students, developing a 'sense of belonging' is considered a key challenge.

Belonging is about increasing the experiences of integration, involvement, engagement and connectedness with the university and reducing the experiences of fragmentation, estrangement and separation. A university experience, which is both academically and socially satisfying can be achieved through positive teaching and learning experiences, timely access to student support services and through engaging students socially, both during their studies and after graduation.

A sense of belonging can be enabled by encouraging students

- to **engage with the learning experience**
- to **interact with fellow students, staff and support services** as integrated participants in the university experience
- to **engage with the physical environment** of the university

A SNAPSHOT OF CURRENT LITERATURE

The University environment is, for all new students, an unknown entity. It carries with it, its own social norms, bureaucratic processes and academic rules. Developing a 'sense of belonging' in this environment becomes increasingly difficult as the traditional school-leaver is replaced by a more diverse student body with competing interests from family, work and social outlets not attached to the tertiary institution.

McInnis and James (1995) focus on the importance of connectedness to students. They comment that "...going to university is still seen as a special and valued period of transition to adulthood and vocations for most first year students, regardless of age and experience." (112). But they go on to speculate that there is a likelihood that student identity is declining and that sense of identity and affiliation with the university are related to the amount of time students can spend on campus.

A number of studies undertaken by researchers into student attrition rates point to both non-academic and academic variables as contributory to the level of adjustment at university (Tinto cited in Martin, 1999; McInnis et al, 1995, 2001; McLean et al, 1999). The key to persistence and success at university includes inspirational teaching and belonging to a thriving peer group and learning community (James 2001). Some of these less observable dimensions of the university experiences are those that capture imagination and spur a continuing commitment.

The literature in the area of 'a sense of belonging' at university considers three key factors:

- Student identity and diversity.
- Academic 'connectedness'
- Social 'connectedness'

Student identity and diversity.

Diversity' in a student population commonly refers to age, gender, place of living, ethnicity and socio-economic background (McInnis & James (1995); McInnis, Craig & James (1995), and McInnis (2001). Such differences are accompanied by a less visible diversity, which finds its roots in family and educational backgrounds, values, attitudes and expectations. The challenge for tertiary educators is to recognise and attempt to adapt to this diversity (Darlaston-Jones et al, 2001). Failure by universities to provide the level of flexibility required by the modern student body can contribute to disengagement from the university.

Tinto, cited by Martin et al (1999), emphasises the significance of the level of institutional commitment by the student. Student identity is related to the level of institutional commitment and the subsequent level of engagement of the student with the university community. A variety of factors cited by a number of researchers affect this (Elliott (2002); Huon & Sankey (2002); Pargetter et al, 1999).

- Part-time students and those working long hours in paid employment are less likely to see themselves as students and demonstrate a pattern of less attachment and commitment to aspects of university life and study. (McInnis and James, 1995; McInnis and James, 2000; Evans and Peel, 1999).
- diversity means increased numbers of students with family responsibilities and/or extra-curricular activities
- advanced technology enabling remote access learning decreases the amount of time students need to spend on-campus.

Academic 'connectedness'

Engaging students in the learning process is affected by a number of interacting factors. Student transition to university and early tertiary experience is affected by the student's level of motivation towards the course or university which they are entering. This, coupled with the changed nature of teaching and learning, affects the student's sense of connectedness to the course.

Students who lack motivation will not engage at university and may be at risk of withdrawal. The reasons for this may be complex

- students whose *motivation to attend university is "external"*, (because their parents want them to do the course or be at university), are at risk (Sharma and Burgess, 1994; McInnis and James, 1995; Spalding, 1998; Evans and Peel, 1999; McLean et al, 1999; Pargetter et al, 1999; TEPA report, 2000).
- students who are having *doubts about their choice of course* are frequently mentioned as significantly at risk (Abbott-Chapman et al, 1992; UTS, 1996; Dougherty, 1996; Spalding, 1998; McLean et al, 1999; Pargetter et al, 1999; TEPA, 2000; McInnis and James, 2000; James, 2001).
- *course and institution preference* is a significant factor - students who don't intend to complete their course are more prone to attrition. Those students are more likely to be...
 - in courses not of their first preference (McInnis and James, 1995; Day and Dlugosz, 2000; TEPA report, 2000)
 - in an institution not of their first preference (TEPA report, 2000)
 - enrolled in a course to improve their OP rank (TEPA report, 2000)

Increased economic pressure on universities has changed the nature of teaching and learning. A sense of 'connectedness' is affected by...

- Larger class sizes and overcrowded tutorial groups (James, 2001),
- high teacher-student ratio, and engagement of temporary and sessional staff have increased demands placed on academic staff. (Clark, E. and Ramsay, W., 1990; Spalding, 1998)
- Remote access learning such as taping of lectures, supply of on-line teaching materials and communication by email contribute to the lack of personal contact and interaction between the student and the university.
- lack of personal feedback from academic staff as a contributory factor towards risk of withdrawal (Sharma and Burgess, 1994; McInnis and James, 1995; Dougherty, 1996; McLean et al, 1999; Pargetter et al, 1999)

lack of integration between students and lecturers outside the classroom, for example inaccessibility or unfriendliness of lecturers and administrative staff (Pargetter et al, 1999; Darlaston-Jones et al, 2001; James, 2001)

James (2001) uses Herzberg's (1993) two-factor theory to understand satisfaction and motivation with university. *Hygiene* factors such as quality of the surroundings and amenities are associated with personal comfort. The absence of these causes dissatisfaction but their presence does not in itself generate a strong commitment. In contrast, *motivation* factors inspire a high level of involvement and lift achievements beyond expectations. Intellectually stimulating work and inspiring leadership are good examples. The absence of these does not itself lead to dissatisfaction but it means personal involvement will not be raised above mundane levels.

Social 'connectedness'

Newman (1981) describes three fundamental needs which must be met to maximise a sense of belonging. The need;

- for integration or continuity in one's experience
- for individuality (the ability to express one's ideas, interests, personality; striving for personal competence and choice; and differentiating oneself from other people and the institution)
- to affiliate with others (identify with groups, form attachments and develop a sense of belonging)

Students who are at risk of dropping out find the university environment threatening and lack confidence in their ability to cope with their new personal and academic demands (Martin et al, 1999, p.123). McLean et al, 1999, note that a "sense of connectedness to the institution" is a strong factor influencing students from equity groups to leave a course.

Academic self-confidence, socialisation within this new environment and a positive attitude to university are among the key factors to success. Students who are at risk due to lack of social connectedness are those ...

- having difficulty finding a peer group (Pargetter et al, 1999; James, 2001) (Pargetter et al, 1999)
- feeling isolated and insignificant on large and diverse campuses
- from equity groups, such as disabled students, who feel less connected with the university than their counterparts. (McLean et al, 1999)
- rural and isolated students who are having difficulty adjusting (Latham and Green, 1997; Spalding, 1998; Day and Dlugosz, 2000)
- whose expectations are not met, leading to passive lack of involvement in academic and social lives of university (Pargetter et al, 1999; James, 2001)

KEY ELEMENTS OF A 'SENSE OF BELONGING'

Researchers have remarked that attrition rates are lowered where a higher level of institutional attachment occurs and where the student sees the academic outcomes provided by the institution as valid.

The development of this 'attachment' begins when the student is a prospective student or potential customer, and continues beyond graduation.

QUT has developed strategies for enhancing the first year and ongoing student experience. These are focussed on developing the student's connectedness with university and sense of belonging to the university community. They include -

- Engaging prospective students through a variety of University-led and Faculty-level marketing events (tertiary study expos and open days), outreach programs (school and on-campus visits) and community service programs
- Providing a comprehensive and coherent orientation program for commencing students focussed on
 - reducing information overload,
 - encouraging social interaction
 - special initiatives for vulnerable groups
 - provision of support programs addressing needs of commencing students and transition issues
- Providing ease of access to facilities and information about administrative procedures and academic information through the development of on-line technology
- Providing comprehensive range of on-campus student support and guild services to meet the needs of the diverse student population

- Meeting the academic needs of students through progressive teaching and learning which incorporates alternative learning technologies and experiences, practical work experience, generic skills and which fosters feedback from students in the teaching experience.
- Providing academic and peer mentoring programs in many schools and faculties.

Wilder cited in Martin et al (1999, p.123) reported that “negative attitudes and perceptions about the college environment contribute to students dropping out”. He concludes, “that student alienation often resulted from a lack of personal contact”.

ISSUES AND GAPS

Further issues for consideration include

- Clarification of the needs of the diverse student population within QUT.
- Further revision of the orientation program, with focus on engagement of students at school and faculty level
- Greater access to peer mentoring networks within Faculties and Schools;
- The ongoing problem of large classes and tutorials
- Providing students with the appropriate knowledge of administrative functions in order to facilitate enrolment and other administrative processes effectively;
- Increasing opportunities for personal contact with both academic and administrative staff;
- Recognition of the inherent pressures of the transition process to university and external factors which affect social and academic engagement e.g. time management, family commitments/responsibilities, financial constraints, work commitments; and
- Appropriate training and support for academic and administrative staff who interact with first year students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

University efforts may focus at the organisational level (eg smaller classes), the program level (eg relevant course content) or staff level (eg better trained staff) but Newman (1981) claims efforts at just one level will have minimal impact unless accompanied by changes at the other levels. All three need to be addressed simultaneously to increase student involvement, attachment and belonging.

James comments that the opportunity to disentangle oneself from the university seems to be less of a problem in highly intensive, highly structured academic courses, especially those with small cohorts allowing the development of strong interpersonal rapport between staff and students.

- Academic connectedness can be addressed by incorporating ‘a sense of belonging’ into teaching and learning strategies (see Issues Paper 1). These strategies should be both formal and informal means by which the student develops meaningful contact with staff and other students.
- The issue of motivation can be addressed by -
 - Career mentoring which can enhance course career links for students to be available from first year
 - First year lecturers can encourage students to develop goals for their study both short and long term
 - Professional skills programs which link course work to vocational training to be available from first year
- Identification of students in need of support
 - Maintain effective avenues for communication
 - Clear processes that students can follow to make appointments with academic staff
 - Triggers for interventions which may prevent students quietly fading out can include attendance indicators and assignment records
- Transition can be addressed prior to arrival at university by
 - Enhanced liaison between secondary schools and QUT.
 - Programs of parent and child awareness-raising about transition issues
- Enhance opportunities for social ‘connectedness’
 - Strongly encourage attendance at orientation week (include faculty/school focused library tours; incentive prizes for “joiners”)
 - Opportunities for collaborative group work to be available early in first semester
 - Design of student space which provides opportunities for students to mingle
 - Course structure which encourages students link with their department
- Encourage a high profile for student support programs

- Faculty/department focused transition programs
- Support for students contemplating withdrawing or dropping out to make well through out decisions

Provide early feedback on academic success

- Focus on developing an Orientation Program that more adequately meets the needs of commencing students. Orientation is the first contact for commencing students and should leave an indelible mark on students;
 - Take advantage of the enthusiasm of the first year or commencing students in the University experience by maximizing the opportunities by which the student can actively engage in social and academic activities;
 - Increase staff and student awareness of the importance of the first year experience via awareness-raising, publicity, and a highly visible presence on the web;
 - Highlight the range of student support services available to students. Currently, support services are seen as services to be utilized and relevant for marginal groups or students with severe learning difficulties, rather than being a form of improving self-development and learning ability (see Issues Paper 2);
 - Greater emphasis on the academic and general staff awareness and training through staff induction programs;
 - Careful recruitment, selection, induction and training of new academic and general staff involved with first year students
 - Incentives for experienced academics to teach first year subjects; and
- Centralised coordination of first year experience activities and services. FYE Program Coordinator as a central reference point for staff and students.

FOLLOW UP

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