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A holistic approach to the support and engagement of first year students: a retention strategy.

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ABSTRACT

There is consensus that the first of the series of transitions to higher education conceptualised by Bridges (2003) is critical and furthermore that a positive **first year experience (FYE)** is the foundation of student success at university. We recently focused on the international and seminal work (Tinto 1987; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991) in this area noting that multiple issues underpin students' decisions to leave university before the completion of their course (Nelson, Duncan and Clarke, 2009)

Institutions should enact holistic approaches that address students' personal, social and academic engagement in the early weeks of first year to facilitate retention (Nelson, Kift & Clarke, 2008). This holistic approach is central to the FYE program at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), which was established to maximise learning engagement and hence positively influence the retention of commencing students. The program aims to

- engage students in their learning through an intentionally designed and enacted curriculum (Kift, 2008)
- facilitate timely access to life and learning support

- promote a sense of belonging to the discipline, cohort and profession.

The FYE program's aims are achieved by strategic alliances between academic and professional staff across the institution.

The Student Success Project is a key strategic alliance that focuses on the processes involved in a curriculum-mediated systematic management of student engagement. The SSP enhances the experience of commencing students 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. Operationally, this is achieved by proactive and timely personal contact with those students who are classified as "at risk" of disengaging based on indicators that have been shown to be related to students opting out such as non-attendance or non-submission/failure of an assignment.

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