FIRST: Finding the “I”. Revealing Students’ Tensions and experiences during their first year at The University of Queensland

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Abstract

First year students experience a range of tensions as they negotiate their new roles as university students, particularly in their first six (6) months of study. Not only are they learning new things about themselves, but they are negotiating new rules, identities, environments, academic expectations and content, in addition to having to form new friendship groups. The First Year Experience (FYE) project at The University of Queensland has been ongoing since 2003. It is a strategic teaching and learning project funded through the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) [DVC(A)]. The overarching aim of the project is to implement specific, student-centred initiatives to create a learning environment which will improve first year students’ experiences at the University. Vignettes of students’ experiences along with current interventions within the University setting will be used to illustrate how first year students’ issues are actively being addressed to improve the overall student experience.

The face of first year experience has changed dramatically over the past decade and there is no reason to expect that this will not be the case in the decade to come. The one constant, however, is that the first year of university study remains arguably the most critical time for engaging students with their learning community and equipping them with the requisite skills to not only persist but to be successful and independent in their learning throughout the undergraduate years and beyond. Krause, 2005, 9.

The First Year Experience (FYE) project at The University of Queensland has been ongoing since 2003. It is a strategic teaching and learning project funded through the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) [DVC(A)]. The overarching aim of the project is to implement specific, student-centred initiatives to create a learning environment which will improve first year students’ experiences at the University. This is in response to calls from researchers like Krause (2005) who argue that “research universities have a particular responsibility to scrutinise their practice and policy in relation to the student experience” (2). In particular, The University of Queensland aims to develop in students attributes such as independence and creativity, a sense of belonging within the organisation, an understanding of the range of possible employment options open to them as a result of degree completion, as well as opportunities for students to forge academic networks in a meaningful and ongoing manner.

Successful transition to the tertiary context within the first year increases students’ overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience as well as increasing the likelihood of degree completion (Krause, 2005; Tinto, 2002; Vest, 2005; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yorke, & Thomas, 2003). Large classes or programs that do not have a core curriculum to create shared purpose and identity, in combination with the financial and personal demands on students which have the potential to fragment their experiences of campus life, may contribute to making this transition difficult (Beder, 1997; Hayden & Long, 2006; Krause, 2005; McInnis & Hartley, 2001).
My brief as the University’s FYE project coordinator involves working across the three main University campuses and seven (7) Faculties with an overall student cohort in 2006 of 69,000, of which 9,000 are first year undergraduate students. One of my major aims is to facilitate and increase communication within, and between, the University Faculties in a way which does not lose sight of the first year student positioning, perspective and experience. Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) argue that successful first year university programs “involve university-wide action focused on new students’ academic and social well-being” (187). Thus, in order to highlight current first year student experience and appreciate their journey in negotiating their new identities as students in a tertiary context, I will include discussion throughout the paper as it relates to my activities as the University’s FYE project coordinator. I will also use the interventions currently being developed within the University setting to illustrate the experiences of this particular cohort of students. The paper will begin with a short detailed overview of what current FYE project initiatives look like. This will be followed by four sub-sections where vignettes of students’ experiences will be used to illustrate the following four (4) common elements which are unique to current initiatives within each of the University’s seven (7) Faculties:

1. Building a sense of community and connection within the university context;
2. Making connections with a range of possible employment opportunities;
3. Addressing academic skill needs and improving communication between staff and students; and
4. Hosting social activities to enable students to meet one another and form friendship/support networks.

Each of these four sub-sections will open with a vignette of related student experience within the context of Faculty-based initiatives. The names and identifying features will be modified in order to protect the student and Faculty’s privacy. In some instances it has been appropriate to combine a number of student experiences into one pseudo student to maintain privacy and illustrate a number of related experiences. A final sub-section focusing on the potential implications for the whole undergraduate student cohort will conclude the paper.

First year student experience at The University of Queensland

The overall FYE project is embedded within a reflective research framework (Adler, & Haas, 1992; Barnett, Walsh, Orletsky, & Sattes, 1995; Dewey, 1916; Fullan, 1990; Swain, 1998) or action research model (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998; Lynd-Balta, Erklenz-Watts, Freeman, & Westbay, 2006; Simpson, & Schockley-Zalabak, 2005; Tomal, 2005). This is a process whereby an action or activity is planned, articulated, implemented and then reflected upon in a cyclical style. Each reflection influences and modifies action or activity in the subsequent cycle.

A large proportion of the current project initiatives in 2006 are Faculty driven in the form of Induction programs which expand information and welcome sessions conducted in Orientation week, as recommended in research conducted by Goodsell, Maher and Tinto (1992), Krause (2005), Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis (2005), Kuh and Vesper, (1997), Lowe and Cook (2003), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Pitkethly and Prosser (2001), Smith and Hughes (2004), Vest (2005), and Yorke and Thomas (2003). My role as the University’s FYE project coordinator includes providing assistance to each of the Faculties to enhance their Induction programs and first year initiatives; improve communication between and within Faculties and Schools at the University; and ensure seamless communication between...
the DVC(A) office and Faculties about project related initiatives, expectations and directions. In addition to this I am responsible for the design of a project related web site and implementation of three project related workshops throughout the academic year. The three workshops, whilst self-contained presentations, are designed to advance discussion and activity about the first year experience from preceding sessions using a variety of innovative formats. For example, short video presentations of first year student perspectives and experience, small group discussion, and snapshots of activities at a Faculty level. The workshops and project website also enhance the development of a project related annual report.

In addition to these roles I have also instigated a First Year Experience Queensland University wide Network with FYE project coordinators, Learning Advisors or academic Teaching and Learning Chairs from The University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, Griffith University, University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Southern Queensland, Central Queensland University, and James Cook University. This network communicates via email on a regular basis and has face to face meetings on a four monthly rotation at each of the Brisbane-based universities.

In 2005 FYE project activities were two-fold:

1. the implementation and evaluation of Faculty-based pilot projects
2. the development of Faculty-based Induction programs for 2006.

Seed funding was provided to assist in the development, implementation, and evaluation of a number of pilot projects run at a local level. These projects were aimed at developing academic writing & research intervention skills; developing different learning skills & approaches, administering early diagnostic assessment exercises, conducting early one-on-one interviews to identify students at risk; developing an elective research-based course for credit; establishing physical & virtual drop-in centres, with lead tutors; and introducing additional Week 1 tutorials for socialisation & explication of course objectives. Feedback and written reports on these pilot projects are currently underway.

In many cases these pilot projects have informed Faculty planning for the 2006 programs aimed at inducting first year students into their university learning experience. A sustained, academic Induction program which builds on activities conducted in the Orientation Week program presents opportunities to engage, motivate and challenge students, to assist them to develop clear aspirational goals, to immerse them in scholarly discourse and to help them come to terms with academic life (Goodsell, Maher, & Tinto, 1992; Krause, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Kuh, & Vesper, 1997; Lowe, & Cook, 2003; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Pitkethly, & Prosser, 2001; Vest, 2005; Yorke, & Thomas, 2003). These Faculty-based Induction programs are currently being implemented in semester one and will be evaluated and reformulated as the year progresses.

**Building a sense of community and connection within the university context**

Veronica[^1] is an undergraduate student in her first year at university. She is the first in her family to pursue tertiary education and is from a small rural area within Queensland. She is excited, yet apprehensive, about attending university and living away home for the first time. Veronica is not really sure what to expect when she gets to university in terms of her course,

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[^1]: This student is the amalgamation of several students’ experiences into one example.

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work load, or career options. She was accepted into a program held at one of the two smaller University campuses.

During O Week activities Veronica was alerted to a new university web site developed specifically for first year students during her Faculty welcome session. On this web site Veronica was able to access information about students who were first in their family to attend university, differences to expect between high school and university studies, workload and study tips, information about university clubs and societies, and a section with information specifically designed for parents and partners of students. The web site answered a lot of Veronica’s questions and provided her with contact details for relevant services. She no longer felt like the odd one out.

First year students often struggle to understand the university context and their connection to the university community when they first begin (Davies & Elias, 2003; Krause, 2005; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Work on identity construction by Goffman (1959) and Frey (2004) argue that there are only a limited number of identities available within any given context, or community, however there are infinite numbers of selves available. In short, a person has to edit their selves in order to fit an identity to gain acceptance and insider status within a community. If they are unable to edit their selves in order to gain insider status then they will be met with rejection and move between communities until they find an identity which fits and enables them to gain acceptance.

The university community is a new context with new rules which first year students are often unprepared for (Davies & Elias, 2003; Lowe & Cook, 2003; McGivney, 1996; McInnis, 2001; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 2002; Wilcox, Winn, Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). The identities they bring with them from secondary education, work, TAFE and home often do not fit neatly into a university context. There is a settling-in period where students new to the university have to recognise, or become aware of, the limited number of identities available to them in this new context, learn the rules, and decide if they are able to edit their selves in order to make connections and gain a sense of connectedness and acceptance. By becoming aware of the web site designed specifically for first year students, Veronica was able to access information which unpacked the rules, expectations and differences for her as a rural, first in the family, straight from high school university student. She was able to gain a sense of what she would have to do to edit her self in order to gain acceptance and a sense of connectedness within the university community. The section which was designed specifically for parents and partners also provided a way of communicating this new environment to Veronica’s parents, family, and friends who did not attend university. It allowed them to understand the different work load requirements and expectations placed on Veronica as a university student.

By breaking down feelings of isolation and having clear statements about workload expectations and differences between university and school, the designers of the web site were able to move towards successful integration of first year students and improving retention rates on this particular campus.

Making connections with a range of possible employment opportunities

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Sally arrived at her compulsory Faculty welcome day in Orientation week feeling shy and not knowing what to expect in this predominately male dominated field of study. Upon entry into the building where the event was to be held she was met with a sea of faces all streaming into the large auditorium. She was given a table number to sit at and a bag as she entered. The auditorium was buzzing with nervous noise as the 600+ students tried to locate their tables and seats. The introductory session was brief but allowed her to meet key members of the Faculty, like the first year coordinator and provided her with a clear understanding of the remainder of the day’s events. She felt nervous about having to work on a group project but then realised that everyone at her table felt exactly the same way. There were a couple of other young women at her table so she didn’t feel the gender imbalance as much as she had first expected. They all got the opportunity to introduce themselves within the confines of their table groupings and started to get to know one another. Just prior to the lunch break a panel of speakers from a range of employers within the field spoke about their experiences both as undergraduate university students and as employees of large, well-known companies. Sally was excited about seeing the number of women speakers on the stage and hearing about the diversity within their individual employment history. She felt excited about her choice to study within this particular Faculty and determined to succeed in her studies. The Faculty had arranged stands outside the auditorium for a range of companies to showcase employment opportunities within the field. Sally was able to speak directly to company representatives at each of the stands during the lunch break.

The information about employment opportunities after graduation and the chance to work in a group situation and make connections with other first year students was significant for Sally for a number of reasons. Firstly, she was enrolled in a degree and field which was predominately male dominated. Secondly, when Sally was able to connect with other female students and listen to a number of female speakers on the panel who were able to share their reflections both as undergraduate students and now as employees working with a range of large cutting edge companies in the field, she did not feel so anxious about being the only female in a sea of male faces. The panel of speakers also allowed her to become increasingly aware of the range of assistance schemes which were open to her whilst studying and employment opportunities available upon completion of her undergraduate degree. Ongoing, regular employer visits and information sessions were part of the Faculty-based Induction program for the remainder of the year. Sally felt confident she would be able to make connections with a range of employers who would appreciate and allow her to pursue her interests in environmental related areas within the field.

In addition to the panel of speakers, Sally was able to begin putting faces to the names of academic and administration personnel who would be significant during her first year of study. She felt increasingly confident about being to approach the correct people with her questions about study related issues, particularly the first year coordinator, who was able to address the majority of Sally’s most pressing questions in her introductory opening to the group. Lastly, the opportunity to meet other first year students in a group project setting allowed her to get to know at least ten (10) other students well. The task provided an insight into group related work, the expectations of the academic staff, and the opportunity to see how other students worked in a group setting. By the end of the day, Sally had made friends and was able to form a group of like minded students in preparation for the first piece of assessment. Research by Vest (2005), states that universities, particularly those which are research focused, are fundamental in helping students to see the connection between their

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2 This student is the combination of several students’ experiences into one example.

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degree, disciplinary communities and employment opportunities. This connection making with industry early on in a degree provides students with goals and pathways which sustain them during their undergraduate studies. Research by Goodsell, Maher, and Tinto (1992), Krause (2005), McInnis (2001), Tinto (2002), Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005), and Yorke and Thomas (2003) all contend that students who are able to develop friendships with other students in their degree are able to access emotional and buffer support which is equivalent to that found in positive family relationships. This type of support is pivotal in the transition to university study in the first year.

**Addressing academic skill needs and improving communication between staff and students**

| Jared³ hated to admit how overwhelmed he felt during the information sessions and welcome during O week. He had always been at the top of his class in high school and his parents had high expectations of his success at university. He was feeling confused about the requirements of the assessment tasks presented in his unit outlines. He did not understand what actually constituted plagiarism let alone what the difference was between APA and Harvard referencing systems. He had no idea who he should ask or what his questions were other than to say he did not understand. This made him feel inadequate so he decided to keep his confusion to himself. During his first week of lectures, a number of the academic staff made reference to the mentoring program which was being organised to provide first year students with additional academic support during first semester free of charge. The program had been developed by the academic staff but was being run by students in their second, third, or fourth year of study. Jared decided to attend the first session of the mentoring program to see what it was all about. |

There are a number of different variations of mentoring type programs currently being run within a number of the university’s seven (7) Faculties. Essentially, each program trains and employees high achieving second, third, and fourth year undergraduate students with excellent inter-personal skills as tutors to run sessions for first year students on a range of topics as they relate to a particular degree. Often the tutors will refer student on to relevant Library or Student Support Services for more detailed information and/or support as required. The tutors are often able to reassure the first year students that their confusion is not usual by relaying their own experiences of first year. These programs support research by McInnis (2001), Tinto (2002), and Yorke and Thomas (2003) which suggest that because of the age and status of the tutors as students, information and skills about academic related material is both better received and sought out by first year students. The tutors are able to relay their own experiences, make suggestions about how to approach a particular issue or staff member, and refer on to suitable University services as required. Many Faculties also ensure a number their best academic staff teach in a range of first year subjects in conjunction with mentoring style programs to improve the level of communication and expectation between staff and first year students.

**Hosting social activities to enable students to meet one another and form friendship/support networks**

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³ This student is the amalgamation of several students’ experiences into one example.

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Libby\(^4\) was a mature age entry student who had worked for several years and had just finished a course at a local TAFE college. She was keen to complete a university degree but many of her friends from TAFE did not apply to university. She felt very lonely, isolated and lost when she first arrived on campus. Within the first two weeks she had attended a welcome BBQ organised by the Faculty where her course was situated, joined a student association organised and run by the Faculty and made enquiries about several social and sporting clubs organised by the student union.

Within the first four weeks of semester Libby was starting to make connections with other students in her cohort, form study groups, and make friends.

Arriving at university for the first time as an undergraduate student can be an overwhelming experience, particularly when you do not know anyone on campus or in your course. Research conducted by Krause (2005), Rickinson and Rutherford (1996) and Thomas (2002) suggests that first year students are less likely to withdraw from their studies if they are able to make friends and feel connected to the university environment. Many Faculties at the University of Queensland recognise the importance of running multiple social activities throughout the first semester. They are aware that these activities allow students to get to know who is in their cohort and begin to form friendships and study groups. Many of these social activities centre around BBQs, course related one day or overnight field trips, and course related student associations. Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) also recommend the use of “interactive and collaborative learning methods to facilitate the development of peer group and staff-student relationships” such as mentoring programs and the development of Faculty specific student associations (708).

**Potential impact on whole student cohort**

Sam\(^5\) was an undergraduate student in his second year of study. He applied and was successfully accepted as a Student Mentor for a PASS\(^6\) program being run within the School in which he was studying. Sam flourished in this role and connected well with the first year students in his sessions.

An Academic staff member who had had Sam in classes during his first and second years at university noted an impressive change. The staff member recounted a difference in Sam’s preparation, contribution during class time and overall willingness to be an active member of a class. The Academic staff member made polite inquires about how Sam was going with his studies to see if he could uncover what had brought about the changes to Sam’s study skills and contributions in class. Sam proudly told the Academic staff member that he too was now a member of staff because of his involvement with the PASS program. Sam said that he now understood why he had to turn up to class on time with pre-requisite readings completed. Sam felt proud to be a staff member and student at the university.

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\(^4\) This student is the collection of several students’ experiences into one example.  
\(^5\) This is the experience of one student who has been given a pseudonym to protect their privacy.  
\(^6\) The PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions) Program is a Faculty based series of mentoring sessions run within a number of the seven Faculties at The University of Queensland. As each Faculty has different requirements and student cohorts the PASS program is modified to suit these needs and consequently does not look the same within each of the Faculties. However, despite the differences between the programs across Faculties, each program engages the services of high achieving second, third, and fourth year undergraduate students to run the sessions for first year students. Training and support are given to the mentoring undergraduate students who run the sessions.
The possibility of influencing university wide cultural change at both an academic and student level through the introduction of programs and transformations at a first year undergraduate level is exciting. As evidenced by the vignette provided above, it can be seen that Sam felt like he belonged within the university community. He felt like a valued member of staff and was able to understand the importance of preparation and class contribution as a student (Clulow, 2003). Sam displayed a new found understanding and pride which in turn influenced his own actions as an undergraduate student. He was able to make connections and find an “I”, that is, an identity within the university context with which he could relate to.

This is but one example of the impact initiatives aimed at first year students is having on the whole student experience. Research by Tinto (1975), Beder (1997) and Krause (2005) suggests that by getting it right in the first year of study greatly improves student retention for the whole undergraduate experience and increases feelings of connectedness with the university. Particularly when “one third of first year students actually consider withdrawing during the first semester” (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001, 186). There is an expectation within the University that while initiatives for improving student experience have initially focused on first year students, these schemes will be refined and developed for other year levels as a means of embarking upon university wide cultural change and appreciation of teaching and learning (Smith & Hughes, 2004).

Conclusion

First year students experience a range of tensions as they negotiate their new roles as university students, particularly in their first six (6) months of study. Not only are they learning new things about themselves, but they are negotiating new rules, identities, environments, academic expectations and content, in addition to having to form new friendship groups.

In an effort to address a wide range of issues and tension experienced by first year students, the seven (7) Faculties at The University of Queensland have embarked upon the development and implementation of Faculty-based Induction programs. These Induction programs have been developed for the specific needs of the student cohort, hence, each of the programs looks different for each of the seven (7) Faculties. 2006 will see the first cycle of implementation and evaluation of the Induction programs. Vignettes have been provided throughout this paper to highlight first year students’ experiences, tensions and content. Snap shots of how the University, via Faculty-based Induction programs and the FYE project, have also been provided to illustrate how first year students’ issues are actively being addressed to improve the overall student experience.

References


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