

People Prepared to Make a Difference - tanga tu, tangata ora.

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Abstract

This Nuts and Bolts presentation describes a first year intervention, the Student Engagement and Transition Programme (STEP), in the College of Engineering at the University of Canterbury. STEP was implemented in April 2010 in response to contextual changes in both the tertiary funding regime and institutional leadership and consequent refocus on student retention and success. Core to STEP are the Engagement Report to identify students whose academic progress is at risk and responsive Intrusive Advising strategies. The potential of the STEP is enhanced through the mutual respect and student-centeredness underpinning the collaboration of the academic and professional staff involved as well as the holistic approach of this initiative.

Introduction – The Context

The Education Tertiary Reforms Bill (Bill) came into effect on 1 January 2008 to improve the planning, funding and monitoring of the New Zealand tertiary education. The Bill was a move “away from an annually funded, demand-led, input-based tertiary education system to a three-yearly, controlled and outcome-based system” intended to ensure that the sector contributes outcomes aligned with the economic, social and environmental interests of NZ (Government Bill, 2007:1-2).

Under the new funding regime, tertiary education providers receive a fixed financial contribution over a three-year period. Although, institutions currently determine the split of efts¹ across qualifications, the new funding system implies capped enrolments at an institutional level. Furthermore, the Tertiary Education Commission has signalled an intention to place a portion of the Student Achievement Component of government funding at risk to be earned on the basis of course and qualification completions, retention within multi-year qualifications, and progression from one year to the next.

The shift in funding criteria from efts-based recruitment to student achievement indicators has significant implications for the management and operation of tertiary education particularly because many commencing students are insufficiently prepared for the demands of university life. This is substantiated in a Ministry of Education report that 33% of the efts allocation from 1998 to 2003 “was taken up by students who dropped out in their first year of study” (Zepke et al., 2005:1).

The importance of a supportive environment to learner retention and success, particularly holistic integration of academic and non-academic support initiatives has gained prominence in the literature (Rivers, 2005). “Support is more effective when it is provided in the context of student learning needs” (Tinto, 2006:27) and as a comprehensive range of academic and

¹ “Efts” is the abbreviated version of “equivalent full time students” and a metric used for funding and course sizing purposes.

social support options (Rivers, 2005). Therefore, it is highly recommended that institutions systematically monitor first year students' adjustment to tertiary study and operate systems for the early detection and appropriate response to students at risk of failing (Prebble et al., 2004).

In 2002 the NZ Ministry of Education commissioned a report synthesising the research into the impact of student support services and academic development programmes on undergraduate tertiary student outcomes (Zepke et al., 2005). The synthesis revealed two distinct categories of retention initiatives. The most commonly applied, an integration approach, is characterised by institutionally adopted policies and practices designed to socially and academically assimilate students into the institutional culture. By comparison, the distinguishing feature of the second category, or adaptation approach, is the change of institutional administrative and academic cultures to align with the diverse interests of students. The dominant theme of this latter type of initiative and the emerging discourse is the cultural capital that students bring to their learning and that where this is actively valued they are more likely to succeed.

There is a strong philosophical difference between these two approaches. The former requires the student to adjust in order to integrate into the institutional culture. By contrast, the latter acknowledges a changed student body and therefore, amended student need, for the institution to adapt to. It is possible that an inclusive rather than dichotomous approach of complementary rather than exclusive categories is most effective. In fact, a call for 'dual socialisation', which is premised on an assumption that two different institutional cultures can co-exist, is emerging in the literature (Prebble et al., 2004; Rivers, 2005).

The Intervention - Student Transition & Engagement Programme (STEP)

UC's College of Engineering enrolls approximately 845 students annually into the first year of study, Engineering Intermediate Year, towards a Bachelor of Engineering with Honours – an internationally recognised and accredited four year professional degree. A strategic institutional intention is to increase Intermediate enrolments to approximately 950-1000 students over the next 4-5 years, and Professional Year numbers from the current 1333 to around 1400. These increases would mostly be achieved through international recruitment.

Drawing on exposure to the rich body of first year in higher education (FYHE) practice such as the Student Success Project at QUT, Student Transitions and Engagement Programme (STEP) was conceptualised to refocus Intermediate Year stakeholder attitudes and practices within the College of Engineering to enhance the retention and success of an increasingly diverse student body (Duncan & Nelson, 2009).

STEP is a collaborative undertaking between the Dean of Engineering and Forestry and the Manager of Student Advisory Services typifying what Wilson (2009) termed heroic individualism through the engagement of relevant partners from among those directly involved in the first year experience. This partnership explicitly bridges the traditional binary divide between academic departments and service units to the benefit of students.

Tinto (2002) reports that students engaged with their learning, especially collaboratively with their peers, and receiving frequent feedback, are more likely to persist to completion. Moreover, engagement is a key factor for achieving student success. However, first-year students reputedly fail to seek academic or personal assistance to decode and navigate university life and expectations - this is no less so at UC. STEP strategies to counter this trend

among Engineering Intermediate Year students in 2010 include the introduction of Engagement Reports that document each student’s tutorial and laboratory participation, as well as their assessment status in six core courses; namely EMTH118, ENGR101, PHYS101, CHEM111, COSC121 and MATH103.

It is proposed that this data is gathered four times a year – at the end of terms one and three, and semesters one and two. The criterion for selection of students at-risk for follow-up is those currently at or below a 50% grade in two or more courses. The identified students receive an email signed by the Dean of Engineering and Forestry urging them to make contact with a designated advisor thereby signalling the need for their active involvement in their academic success. The first such email was transmitted to 59 students on 14 May 2010.

This Intrusive Advising (IA) strategy, as pioneered by Robert Glennan, engages students in their academic progress through institution initiated contact (Upcraft and Kramer, Eds., 1995). Furthermore, in the discussions advisors demonstrate an active concern for students’ academic progress and willingness to assist by discussing difficulties, identifying options and making referrals to relevant support services if required. The process is aligned with the holistic intention of STEP by acknowledging the impact of non-academic issues on academic outcomes.

As a preventative mode, the advisor can help the student anticipate issues and model problem-solving skills and processes. It is anticipated that this demonstrates to the student that they are valued, thereby consolidating the student’s relationship with the institution and contributing a loyal alumni.

The overarching intention of STEP is to develop, implement and trial a holistic and sustainable student transition and engagement framework that identifies students at risk of failing, and initiates student and institutional responses that enhance their campus experience and contribute to their success. The project is in its infancy and has been implemented at a time of protracted change, radical restructure and diminishing resources. Consequently the intervention is practice-based and operating within these operational limitations. Nonetheless, the author is simultaneously engaging with the FYHE literature and experts, such as Karen Nelson, to make meaning of the anticipated and unanticipated outcomes and to chart a way towards a teaching and learning environment that facilitates student engagement as the responsibility of the whole institution and all stakeholders (Kift, 2008; Nelson, Kift & Creagh, 2007).

Session Plan		
5 minutes	Whole Group	Icebreaker.
5 minutes	Presenter	Description of the development and early lessons learned through implementation of the Student Transition and Engagement Programme (STEP) as intended to enhance the academic success of first year engineering students at UC.
10 minutes	Pairs/ Quads	From their own experience participants will consider one or more questions formulated around actual and/or anticipated issues, strategies and learning points that can, or have, positively influence the engagement and success of first year

		<p>students. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Top down institutional (eg. policy and leadership values and actions) ▪ Bottom up institutional (eg. academic and staff attitudes and actions) ▪ At a student level (attitudes and behaviours)
10 minutes	Whole Group & Presenter	Presenter gathers ideas from participants, summarises and highlights the points of learning.

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