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Five years of FYE: Evolution, outcomes and lessons learned from an institutional program. A Good Practice Report

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Abstract*

The University of Technology Sydney First Year Experience program is an institution-wide, systematic approach to supporting the transition, retention and success of first year students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, within a philosophy that good practice for these students is good practice for all students. The program is based on third-generation first year practice and transition pedagogies. It includes central and faculty coordinators, small grants and learning communities enabling the development, embedding and sharing of transition practice in the curriculum. This good practice report describes the program, its evolution over five years and its impacts on academic and professional staff engagement and improving the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Lessons learned about the importance of central and local coordination, sharing practice underpinned by a scholarly framework and the use of data and strategic alignment are highlighted.

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Introduction

The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) First Year Experience (FYE) program is an institution-wide, systematic approach to supporting the transition, retention and success of first year students from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds, within a philosophy that good practice for these students is good practice for all students. Over the past five years, the program has improved LSES first year students' learning and experiences across undergraduate courses and has evolved in ways that are evidence-based, align with strategic institutional changes in learning and teaching and support the professional development of academic and professional staff. This good practice report describes the program and its evolution over five years, along with the outcomes for participating staff and students, and lessons learned over time.

Program rationale and design

The program was designed in the context of the Bradley recommendations for increasing participation in higher education, particularly for students from LSES backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). Planning and consultation commenced in 2009, with the intention to create an evidence-based institutional program to support the FYE. The program design was informed by third generation first year policy and practice (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010), including the ideas of transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009; 2015). As the university already had successful co-curricular student support activities and an effective PASS scheme, the new program was designed to complement these by embedding transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) in the curriculum for all students.

The program commenced in 2011 as part of the [UTS Widening Participation Strategy](#) with funding provided through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program

(HEPPP). Implementation began in the middle of that year, with the employment of a 0.8 FTE institutional FYE Coordinator. While the first year curriculum focus and key implementation approaches were decided, an overall strategy framework (Figure 1) was developed through 2011-2012 by a group led by the FYE program owner and FYE Coordinator with representatives from all faculties, academic learning centres, student services areas including language and study skills support and counselling, the library, the Indigenous education unit, student administration, equity, and marketing. The aims of the group were to encourage engagement and communication among areas and to build alignment between the new curriculum-focused approach and existing co-curricular student support strategies—both key aspects of third generation transition practice.

With students' identities (both as a student and a professional) and sense of belonging at the centre, the framework identifies key areas for supporting student success. Implementation of the components of the framework is achieved through a set of interlinked activities facilitated by central and faculty leadership. The groups are:

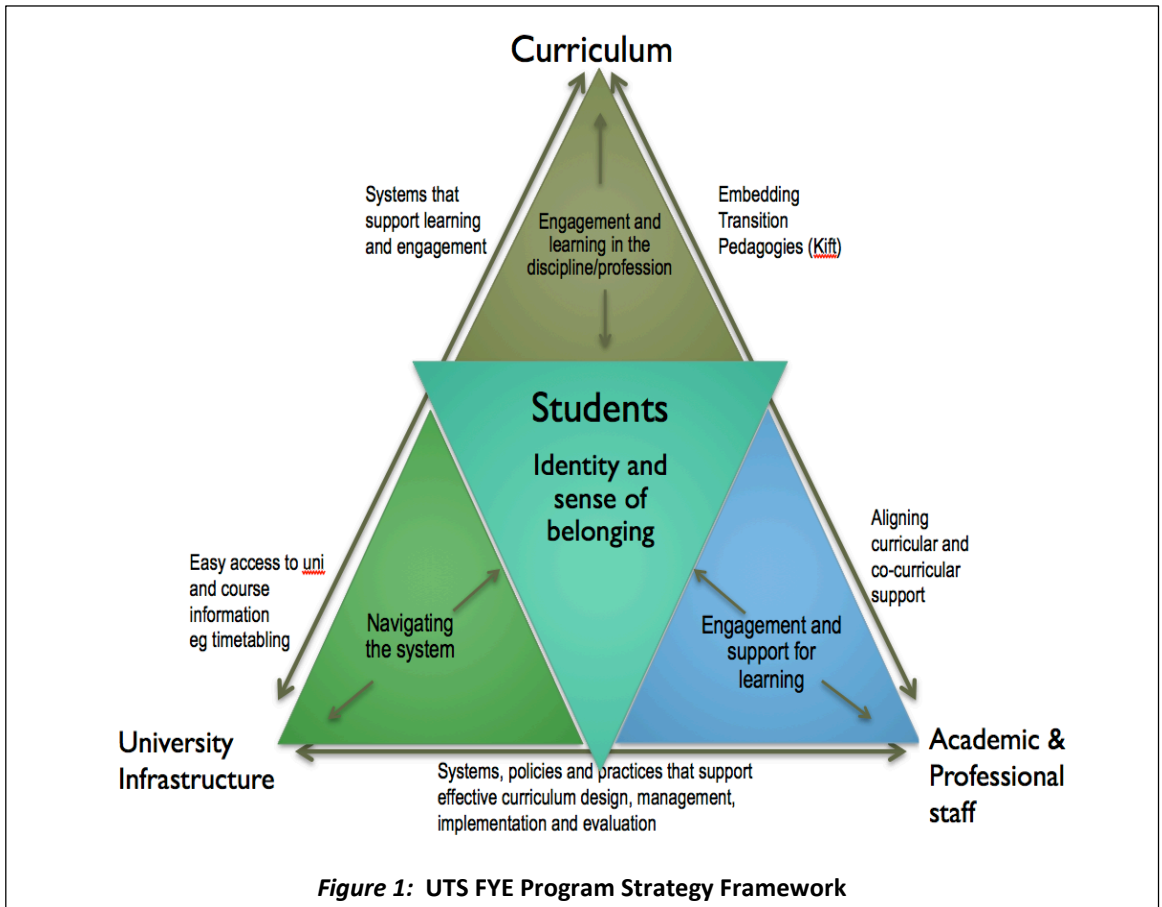
- The coordinator group. A centrally-located FYE Coordinator and program leader and First Year Transition Experience (FYTE) Coordinators in each faculty provide leadership for the strategy and enable collaboration across the university. The coordinator group meets 5-6 times per year with key professional leaders from student services, the library and equity. The group is able to work on aligning curriculum and co-curricular support and identifying infrastructure needs, and to provide stakeholder feedback into university systems projects; and
- The FYE community. This university-wide learning community currently has over

450 members, with approximately 69% academic and 20% professional staff, 1% students and 10% externals. The community has an email list and a Learning Management System (LMS) site for sharing resources and information.

attendance is typically between 80 and 120 with 50-70% academic staff, 20-40% professional staff and a few students (usually PASS leaders or peer mentors) and external participants.

The activities are:

- University-wide community forums. Five face-to-face FYE community forums are held each year to showcase and discuss good first year practice, share ideas and enable cross-university collaboration and networking. These forums support professional learning for participants and identify issues and concerns. Forum
- Faculty-based community activities. FYE communities of practice, workshops and forums are held in most Faculties, to enable local sharing of good practice—usually from FYE grant successes—and planning and collaboration around local first year and transition priorities.
- FYE small grants. These \$1000-\$4000 grants provide support to develop and embed transition practice in the



curriculum. The grants were built in from the beginning to provide direct support for teachers to embed first year transition pedagogies into the curriculum in ways that are likely to benefit students from LSES backgrounds. Priority is given to initiatives that will become embedded in the curriculum for all students, rather than those that involve voluntary participation and may not benefit students who most need support. The grants provide academics with recognition and an incentive to participate (see McKenzie, Alexander, Harper, & Anderson, 2005) as well as practical resourcing, consistent with recommendations on supporting teachers to support LSES students (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012).

- Transition pedagogy resources and activities. These resources and activities are designed to support subject teachers, including tutors and demonstrators, to implement transition pedagogies in practice, along with workshops on transition pedagogy run for casual academics.

Evolution of the program over time

From a small beginning in 2011, the FYE program has evolved over time in response to three primary drivers. One is to improve the transition and learning experience of commencing students. The second is to respond to needs evident in the data on commencing student satisfaction, success and retention. And the third is the desire to remain relevant and engaging for staff and important to the university, by taking a proactive stance on supporting staff to engage with changing university strategic priorities in ways that benefit students.

In 2011, the key priority was developing the strategy. The grants scheme commenced in September 2011, with implementation of the

first few grants that year. The focus for grants was on embedding transition pedagogies, and forums focused on supporting staff to understand the six first year curriculum principles (Kift, 2009) and develop ways of embedding them in practice. The FYE Coordinator was very active in networking, building community and encouraging academic and professional engagement. Support for the program was built through regular reporting to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor responsible for teaching, learning and equity, and regular engagement with the Equity unit that controlled the HEPPP funding.

In 2012, the FYE Coordinator position became full-time. A second round of grants was offered, with applicants encouraged to consider assessment, particularly early, low-stakes assessment and feedback, which had been identified as priorities from student surveys. Projects on criteria benchmarking were funded, along with others on student capability building, transition and engagement. Forums supported an assessment focus, along with focuses on the effective use of technologies for large classes and assessment, which reflected priorities from the university's Teaching and Learning committee. At the end of 2012, grant requirements for 2013 were modified to align with the university's 2012-2014 strategic Graduate Attribute Project. Applicants were encouraged to consider how students could be supported to develop graduate attributes from the beginning of their first year.

In 2013, there was a substantial strengthening of the program with the appointment of the faculty FYTE Coordinators. These positions were funded at lecturer level for 0.2 full-time equivalent (FTE), with HEPPP funding provided for the first two years. The roles of FYTE Coordinators were to lead and coordinate first year transition practices in their faculties, develop contextualised approaches to achieving staff engagement, build faculty communities, support academics to apply for grants and work

with students entering through the new Schools Recommendation Schemes (SRS)¹. The coordinators were familiarised with the student retention and success data for their faculties and encouraged to use it to build a case for their work, knowing that their roles were funded initially for only two years.

The 2013 forum sessions reflected the strategic focus on graduate attributes, with sessions sharing practices from grants on building student team work and collaboration, and integrating academic and professional literacies into the curriculum. The forum format was modified, based on the results of a 2012 participant survey, with more time provided for open discussion resulting in increased participant satisfaction and perceptions of value.

The grants and forums for 2014 not only continued the focus on graduate attributes, but also—aligned with the university's Learning2014 strategy (later part of *learning.futures*)—aimed at encouraging flipped learning designs and blending the best of online learning with face-to-face collaborative learning, authentic assessment and more regular constructive feedback. This alignment was intended to support staff in preparing for teaching in collaborative classrooms in three new buildings that opened in 2014-15. Forum sessions were held in a pilot collaborative room. To support the increased emphasis on flipped learning — with consequent expectations of student preparation in advance—sessions focused on sharing research and practice on supporting student self-regulation and self-management, independent learning skills and the art of facilitation. The community LMS site evolved to share more resources and provide access to videos of forum presentations. To further support academics, including tutors and

demonstrators, to support students, a resource book *Successful Student Transition – A guide to teaching students in their first year at university* (Sparks et al., 2014) was developed by members of the community and launched at the annual conference for casual academics.

The faculty FYTE Coordinators actively promoted staff engagement in the grants, and made use of student success business intelligence data to engage their faculty leadership in supporting FYE and transition activities. The central FYE Coordinator also made more extensive use of project data to provide evidence of success and to identify future needs. By 2014, there was evidence that pass rates were improving in many subjects with FYE grants, and in general for students from LSES backgrounds. However, school leavers were improving more than those from other pathways. The grants criteria for 2015 were broadened to include second year subjects that could support transition for commencing pathways students who entered with credit recognition, thus missing out on the transition practices embedded in first year. A detailed, evidence-based report outlining successes and future recommendations was presented to the Teaching and Learning Committee and Academic Board. The team applied for, and was awarded, a university Learning and Teaching Award.

In 2015, faculties were expected to take over the funding of the FYTE Coordinator positions. A strong indicator that the value of the coordinator's work was a reflection of the valid and robust evidence from the project was that all Deans agreed to do so.

A strategic priority for the university in 2015 was preparation for a three session calendar in 2016. The new calendar brought new expectations that all students would prepare

¹ Schools Recommendation Schemes (SRS) are one way institutions make early offers to current Australian Year 12 students who have applied for undergraduate admission through the Universities Admission Centre <http://www.uac.edu.au/srs/>

online during Orientation and Preparation weeks before their first formal class, so the 2015 forum sessions focused on supporting staff to make the move by: linking orientation and student preparation; supporting transition through creating student welcome materials; and building students’ confidence, skills and professional identities. The move to the new calendar also afforded the opportunity to broaden engagement between the central team, the faculty coordinators and the student administration and IT areas of the university. The aim was to progress the goal of improving the student-friendliness of the university infrastructure and systems from enrolment onwards.

The most recent round of grants (for 2016) continued to focus on supporting students transitioning from non-school leaver pathways, along with *learning futures* and the new academic calendar. Applicants used the opportunity to request funding for related activities including developing pre-work resources and scaffolding student self-management.

Tracing evidence of success

Evidence for evaluating the FYE program is multi-faceted. While the intended impact of the program is to improve success and retention, particularly for students from LSES backgrounds, achieving this is dependent on issues such as activities being in place, staff engaging with them and perceiving them to be of value; and students engaging with and benefitting from the curriculum changes. Also, the program does not operate in isolation from the other components of the Widening Participation Strategy that support LSES background students—for example, additional needs-based financial support, increased counselling and student learning support, and an expansion of the PASS scheme. In this section, evidence is presented of staff and student engagement and influences, student success in subjects where FYE grants were implemented and student success, as indicated by overall pass rates for commencing students.

Table 1: Staff involvement in forums and grants, and subjects and students affected

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Staff attending one or more forums	74	90	204	194	230
FYE Grant awarded	14	15	21	27	30
Staff participating in grants	27	26	31	50	78
Subjects in FYE grants	14	18	14	29	43
Commencing domestic UG students affected by grant outcomes-cumulative	1024	5118	5466	6825	7122
Commencing domestic UG LSES students affected by grant outcomes-cumulative	104	511	546	830	831

Staff engagement and flow-ons to students

All forms of participation by academic and professional staff over the past five years are summarised in Table 1. Some of the significant outcomes for staff and student participants indicated by this data are that, over the past five years,

- all forms of participation have increased;
- the community forums and grants are key activities for engaging academic and professional staff engagement.
- Grant outcomes have had cumulative influences on students.

Increasing numbers of students have been influenced as the outcomes of grants have become embedded in the curriculum of core subjects, to the point where the vast majority of commencing undergraduates encounter at least one learning experience that has been developed through the grants. Academic and professional staff indicate that the FYE forums are highly valued [with overall satisfaction being 4.5/5 (SD 0.7)]. In the 2015 survey, the majority of the 57 respondents indicated that their practice had been influenced by the practices presented at the forums, or from ongoing conversations following from the forums:

I understand the importance of the getting to know the class activities early in the semester. It's not just an icebreaking exercise it's a way to engage students in a way which can be built upon during the semester. Over the last year I have been using a variation of the [forum 1] activity 'how did I get here' narrative sharing as well as an initial questionnaire which is done as a collaborative exercise. (Law academic)

I developed short lab videos and online quizzes for integrating lab practice with theoretical concepts to improve student learning experience and student outcomes.

This was influenced by ideas shared at FYE forums. (Engineering and IT academic)

I am thinking about using Spark as a peer review platform and also adopting strategies for assisting students in understanding marking criteria assessment, similar to what [name removed] in science is doing. (Health academic)

Student success in subjects with grants

Grants have included a broad range of initiatives that have benefitted students in different ways, for example through creating learning resources, diagnostic testing, scaffolding assignments, building students' learning and professional skills, facilitating peer learning, and training tutors. The following examples illustrate a diversity of initiatives which have benefitted all students, with LSES students succeeding at levels equal to or better than the overall domestic cohort, despite increases in student numbers: over the period 2010-2014, domestic students increased by 44% and students with LSES backgrounds increased by 68%. Subject names have been generalised.

Design: 2012 Design experience activities at a week 8 camp on Cockatoo Island (Sydney) were expanded to include daily reflections on Twitter, Instagram and blogs, a performance, and use of visual resources for preparation. Pass rates for LSES students improved from 94% in 2011 to 100% in 2013. The initiative has been sustained and overall pass rates remain above 96%.

Engineering Communication: 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 FYE grants. Engineers without borders (EWB) projects were introduced. Students participated in the EWB national competition and teams won at state level in 2012 and 2013 and national level in 2015. Other activities included mentoring from professional engineers and senior students, benchmarking

for assessment, group work and tutor training on transition, and the introduction of just in time academic literacies. Pass rates trended up from 2010 to 2011 and have been sustained, exceeding 94% for all students and 95% for LSES students.

Biology: 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 grants on scientific writing, benchmarking assessment with Spark PLUS (a self and peer assessment tool), self-review and resubmission opportunities, demonstrator development and peer mentoring with senior students in practical classes. Pass rates improved from 91% in 2011 to 95% in 2012 and 2013 for all commencing students, with TAFE entrant pass rates improving from 64% to 95% and LSES students constant at 95%.

Mathematics subjects: 2013-2015 grants trialed and embedded mastery testing for engineering and science disciplines across a number of subjects. In three years, pass rates have continued to improve, from 60% to 90%. This project has been published in international STEM journal publications.

Chemistry: 2011-2012 grants supported introduction of diagnostic testing in mathematics, weekly testing and feedback, rearrangement of lab time to introduce weekly tutorials, alignment of lecture and lab material and training of demonstrators on transition needs. Pass rates improved from 68% in 2011 to 84% in 2012 and the failure rate for Chemistry 2 reduced in the following semester. In 2013, a focus on communication skills was implemented using early low stakes assessment. In 2015, two more grants moved pre-class lab tests online and developed students' professional practice skills with weekly student self-assessment and tutor assessment of communication and laboratory skills and levels of preparedness prior to the lab. Students were noticeably more engaged in

laboratories. Pass rates in Chemistry 1 and 2 have continued to improve.

University-wide student success

The strategy has enhanced learning and teaching for commencing students directly through the grants, but has also contributed to the broader development of good teaching and learning practices through the FYE community and forums and the leadership of the FYE team. While there are encouraging signs that the FYE strategy has had positive impacts on first year student satisfaction and success, evaluating the impact of the program has been challenging, complicated by a substantial change in the profile of the student population since 2010. Between 2010 and 2014 (2015 numbers are not yet finalized at the time of writing), commencing domestic undergraduate student numbers increased by 44%. While there was no change in the number of students with ATARs² over 85, there was a 101% increase in those with ATARs between 71 and 85, and an increase from 3 to 121 in the numbers entering through access schemes with ATARs of 70 or less. There was also a 46% increase in those from non-ATAR pathways. For the population of students from LSES backgrounds, the changes were greater, with a drop of 10% in those with ATARs above 85, and increases of 118% in those with ATARs of 71-85, 59% in non-ATAR pathways and from 2 to 30 students with ATARs of 70 or less. These entry changes also reflect a shift in disciplinary profile, for example with very much larger increases in students in Science than in Law.

Despite these substantial population changes and increases in student numbers, pass rates for commencing students from LSES backgrounds have improved significantly, from 85% in 2010 to 88% in 2014. Pass rates for all domestic commencing students have remained stable. In

² The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is the primary criterion for entry into most undergraduate-entry university programs in Australia

the group of students with ATARs above 85, those from LSES backgrounds had lower pass rates than all domestic commencers in 2010 but were performing just as well by 2014. LSES students with ATARs in the 71-85 band are now passing at significantly higher rates (91%) than all domestic commencers (89%) in that band. Pass rates for those with ATARs of 70 or below are also trending upwards.

While a number of factors may have contributed to these improvements, there is a contribution from the success of the first year grants, with some examples noted above. Reporting of these grant outcomes in the FYE community forums has also encouraged others to adopt some of the practices, broadening the impact of the original grants.

Lessons learned

As described above, the UTS FYE program and its implementation approaches were developed based on research and scholarship on transition pedagogies (Kift, 2009; 2015) and third-generation first year practice, combined with research on the adoption and dissemination of learning and teaching innovations (McKenzie et al., 2005). The lessons learned are consistent with this research and reinforce the importance of considering general institutional change factors in designing and maintaining sustainable programs.

The importance of central and local leadership

Central leadership for the strategy has been crucial in developing and maintaining the engagement of both grassroots and professional staff and university leaders. The FYE Coordinator has been highly successful in engaging academics and increasing their buy-in through facilitating the learning community, supporting academic engagement in the small grant scheme, organising first year forums and leading the FYTE faculty coordinators team.

Using strong networking skills, the coordinator actively builds synergies between the academic and professional staff and other interested stakeholders. This occurs through the learning community, but also through conversations (and many coffees!) with colleagues from faculties and professional units across the university. Complementing the coordinator's work, the program leader works to align the program activities with the university's strategic goals and bring the program's achievements to the attention of senior leaders.

The work of the faculty FYTE Coordinators complements that done centrally and brings the benefit of contextualising activities to each faculty's priorities and issues. This is critical for local engagement.

The value of sharing practice underpinned by a scholarly framework

The university-wide FYE learning community enables staff to share transition practice that is underpinned by the framework of transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009; 2015). The five years of forums have contributed to an evolution in staff understandings of transition pedagogies, through conversations with others and insights gained from grant presentations. The framework and supporting resources enable academics to identify evidence-based transition practices that they can try, and offer an accessible entry point to engaging in scholarly teaching that evolves into the scholarship of teaching and learning. Professional staff also value the transition pedagogy framework, as it gives them a common language to discuss transition with academics and build collaborations, particularly around addressing transition, diversity, engagement and assessment needs.

Comments from annual participant surveys reflect benefits of developing new teaching

practices and sharing ideas that can be applied more widely. Individual comments include:

Being in the FYE community of practice has provided theoretical and practical applications for law academics to develop their teaching practices and to introduce creative and authentic learning opportunities for first year law students. The depth of collaboration within the first year community of practice is a great example of the effectiveness of the UTS Model of Learning. (Law academic, 2013)

The First Year Forums have helped me tremendously in understanding the unique issues around first-year students and their transition to university and take them into account in designing and teaching my first-year subjects. Many of the ideas and techniques I learned from these forums have also been applied to other subjects in second and third year as they work so well. Above all, the forums have given me and others an opportunity to learn from our own peers from around the university and this has provided a rich bank of ideas to draw on. In some cases it has even enabled teaching collaborations across faculties. I have already invited some people I met through First Year Forums into my classroom. (Arts & Social Sciences academic, 2013)

Through the [FY] project, I've been able to interact with academic staff on an equal footing—something that rarely happened at my former university—sharing my experience and knowledge of the transition process and first year broadly across the whole cohort, and learning from them about the initiatives and directions they are taking in the Faculties. ... Without the project, I wouldn't have been able to work with [academic 1] supporting and further developing her Peer Tutoring program through my knowledge and experience, and this year I have collaborated with [academic 2], developing together an innovative peers in pracs mentoring program in first year science labs. It is a great initiative to bring the whole community working on the First Year Experience across the University

together and I highly recommend it. (Manager, Peer Learning Programs, 2014)

The sharing of effective transition and learning practices is also evident in Faculty communities of practice. Particular achievements have been evident in Science, which has had the highest number of first year grants and has built a substantial scholarly community. Beginning with sharing effective practice within the faculty, group members have developed strong profiles in the scholarship of teaching and learning, with presentations at science education conferences as well as in higher education conferences such as Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention and Success (STARS), Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) and the International Society of the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (ISSOTL), plus a growing number of publications.

The use of data

As indicated in the subject examples and brief summary of the success and retention data (most of which has not been shared in this paper), the use of data has been an important feature of the FYE program. Each year, the grants scheme and forum activities have been modified to encourage staff to address evidence-based gaps in support and emerging needs. Data that provides evidence of program effectiveness is also key to maintaining funding from the faculties.

The FYE Coordinator is regarded as a “power user” of the institutional business intelligence system and supports the FYTE Coordinators and grant holders to access and interpret relevant data on student success and retention. The coordinator and the program leader are currently engaging with the team developing a new student data warehouse and with data analytics specialists to develop a number of specific first year dashboards. As learning analytics becomes more widespread, more

sophisticated uses of data will inform further developments.

Strategic alignment

Academic and professional staff are busy, and universities are typically addressing a number of strategic priorities at the same time. From the FYE program perspective, it therefore makes sense to align ways of addressing the widening participation goals of student retention and success with other priorities such as developing graduate attributes and changing teaching and assessment practices in line with the *learning.futures* priority. Each year, the grants criteria have been modified to encourage academics (and their students) to address more than one strategic priority in the same project. For example, activities that support students' development of professional skills and provide frequent feedback can give a triple benefit: supporting transition and engagement, building graduate attributes and contributing to the feedback and reflective goals of *learning.futures*. Developing and sharing these practices has enabled a number of continuing academics to build evidence for promotion or teaching awards, and some casual academics to build a successful case for a contract or even an ongoing academic position.

Communication about the success of the program has also been important. Presentations have been made each year to equity groups, the Teaching and Learning Committee and Academic Board and achievements have been reported in university publications. Regular reports are made on the First Year Experience as part of the overall Widening Participation Strategy, resulting in continued funding.

The program has also achieved external recognition. Staff from local universities and pathway institutions have attended FYE forums. There has been consensus that more sharing

between the universities in this FYE space would be extremely valuable.

Overall, the FYE program has evolved over five years to engage a large number of academic and professional staff and improve success for students from LSES backgrounds. The strategies adopted so far and the lessons learned will continue to influence the program into the future.

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