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## The First Year at University: Giving Social Capital a Sporting Chance

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## **The First Year at University: Giving Social Capital a Sporting Chance**

*Abstract: The first year of university has been identified as an area of concern for several decades because, for many students, their first year at university is also their last. The researchers developed a program based on a Sports Education model with the aim of influencing the engagement and retention of first year students. The program sought to build social capital by establishing supportive social and collegial networks at university. Students reported that the program made them feel welcome on campus and helped them establish support networks. The data on retention highlighted the need to consider these figures across the university rather than only at course level; course retention figures were lower, however, students were retained within the university to a greater extent than in previous years. The outcomes of this project have provided directions for future approaches to support first year students at course level that can increase social capital for university students generally.*

### **Introduction**

This paper reports on a program that was centred on developing and implementing strategies to improve the engagement and retention of first year Primary Bachelor of Education students at a metropolitan university campus. The overarching aims of the program were to better engage students in order to ease the transition to tertiary education, and improve student satisfaction and retention. Boyd and Lintern (2006) identified that the first year at university can be a lonely and bewildering place and it is important that barriers to social interaction are broken down, enabling students to make friends and create collegial networks. Other research indicated that students' experience in their first year of university can have a lasting influence on their long-term persistence (Horn, 1998; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Webster & Chan, 2009). Experiences early in the first year set patterns of behaviour that endured over a student's years at university (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). As such, the researchers set out to identify the impact of social factors on retention and engagement by trialling a program that promoted social engagement and the development of collegial networks.

### **Managing the transition to university**

The first year of university has been the subject of research for a number of decades (see for example: Black, 2012; McInnis, James & McNaught, 1995; Slatter & Petrie, 2008; Williams & Pepe, 1983) as the decision to leave university can have considerable financial and emotional implications for students (Elliott, 2002), and financial implications for universities. During this time, university educators have examined the needs of students as they make the transition to the first year of higher education. University administrators have employed specialist staff and funded specific programs such as the Student Success Project (Duncan & Nelson, 2009) run by Queensland University of Technology, and Auckland University of Technology's

First Year Experience Intervention Program to address the needs of this cohort. All of this interest has been generated by the fact that for many students their first year at university is also their last year.

Research activity has focussed on supporting first year students academically (Andrews, 2006; Dickson, Krause & Rudman, 2002), socially (Krause & Duchesne, 2000; Stevens, 1995), and through orientation and mentoring programs (Bates, 2008; Dowling, 2007). Kift (2008) takes the view that curriculum is central to improving the first year experience because, as an area that universities can control, it is the key to making a difference to the transition process. However, Scott (2006) contends that it is the “students' total experience of university—not just what happens in the traditional classroom—that shapes their judgments of quality, promotes retention and engages them in productive learning” (p.vii). Of all the factors to predict or determine students' retention, it has been argued that the most important is the students' own motivation and determination to complete the course (Tinto, 2002; Moore, 2006; Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton & Cullity, 2008). Individual differences also need to be considered as several studies have suggested that first-generation university students were less likely to complete their courses than their counterparts (Horn, 1998; Choy, 2001; Elliott, 2002; Ishitani, 2006).

### **Social and Cultural Capital**

Students enter university from disparate backgrounds and internal factors such as educational experience and academic preparedness can be linked to social and cultural capital. The terms social and cultural capital are often used in tandem. Cultural capital, as identified by Bourdieu (1986), pertains to familiarity with the dominant cultural in a society, particularly the education milieu. He contends that cultural capital is created by a family upbringing that transmits the knowledge and mind-sets needed to succeed in an education system and thus maintain a higher status in society. Social capital pertains to the potential or actual advantages of belonging to social networks that can facilitate cooperation and success. Bourdieu's notions of social and cultural capital highlight the impact these factors can have on how successful students are at university. Bourdieu (1983) asserts that individuals are encultured into certain behaviours depending on their social class and that this has implications for their success in different settings. This offers some explanation of why people with similar educational opportunities can perform differently and highlights the complexity of achieving objectives to increase participation in higher education, such as those set out in the Bradley Review of Higher Education (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008). That is, simply providing access to university for people who would not traditionally undertake tertiary education without acknowledging the impact of social and cultural capital is setting them up to fail.

While Bourdieu's discussions of cultural and social capital tend to focus on how this protects the status quo, Coleman (1988) explored social capital as a means to understanding how it operates and could be used to ameliorate cultural influences. Specifically, he explored this concept in relation to the retention of secondary school students and contended that social capital was a significant factor in student retention. He also asserted that social capital is a result of interactions rather than being directly acquired and therefore social capital appropriate to specific settings can be developed. When considered in light of data from the Australian Survey of Student Engagement

(ACER, 2008, p. 51) indicating that 59% of first year students surveyed felt that they were provided with 'quite a bit' or 'very much' academic support, it is concerning that only 24% of students felt that they were given the support they needed to socialise, and 37% reported that they were given no support at all.

### **Defining student retention and engagement**

Identifying approaches that improve the retention and engagement of students is at the centre of the research discussed. Retention has been defined as the percent of entering students graduating or persisting in their studies at an institution (Wyman, 1997). The issue of more clearly defining student retention was addressed by Wild and Ebbers (2002) with the recommendation that the definition must be based on three important factors: i) initial identification of the student's goal; ii) periodic verification or adjustment of the goal; and iii) persistence of the student towards the goal. However, Tinto (2002) reminds us that that "the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated" (p. 4). Therefore retention initiatives also need to incorporate engagement as student engagement has been considered to be a predictor of learning and personal development.

It is commonly held that the more students study or practise a subject and get feedback on their work the more they learn from it (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). The Australian Council for Educational Research defined student engagement as student involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning (ACER, 2008). However, McMahon and Portelli (2004) suggest that these are very limited definitions of engagement taking into account only the outward manifestations of what is traditionally perceived to be engaged behaviour. While not McMahon and Portelli's ideal Critical-Democratic conception of engagement, the Liberal or Student Oriented Conception that they describe is perhaps closer to the type of engagement referred to in this paper as it emphasises the importance of students' sense of belonging to a community.

### **Developing a Program to support engagement and retention**

Concerns about the number of First Year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students who discontinued their studies or whose enrolments became inactive underscored the need to find strategies to increase engagement and retention at the researchers' university. According to university data covering the four years prior to the research, the average retention rate for first year students in the Primary Bachelor of Education program was 73%. The significance of social and curricular factors on engagement and retention was apposite to a broad range of initiatives already in place at the researchers' university. Curriculum issues for the first year Primary Bachelor of Education students were addressed at course implementation level. Orientation and mentoring programs already existed and both were integral to the program.

In order to provide a rich 'total experience', the program was designed to complement existing strategies by developing initiatives to influence engagement and focus on building the social capital that pre-service primary teachers bring to university. Social capital in the context of the program was aligned with Bexley, Marginson and Wheelan's (2007) definition "as an attribute of individuals that draws its leverage from the power of the social connections available to them" (p. 17). The

power of social connection was seen as being a particularly important issue, given that many of the students were the first in their families to participate in tertiary education, several were from non-English speaking backgrounds and others were separated from family and friends in rural or remote areas in order to attend university. Bexley et al (2007) found that these students "have less powerful social capital, and are often without family and friendship groups who can assist with, and to an extent normalise, their educational experience" (p. 77).

The researchers envisaged that by creating a group identity and sense of community at an early stage of their university education, students would be able to develop support networks of peers, mentors and staff to assist with academic and personal challenges. Engaging new undergraduate students in communities of learning, in which they are actively involved with their peers and with faculty, have been shown to an important factor in student engagement, persistence and attainment in higher education (Elson-Green, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Tinto, 2002). Also according to Tinto (1989) and Tang (1993) students who work and socialise together are more likely to succeed and to continue with their tertiary studies.

It was hoped that by developing the social capital of the students, they would become more engaged, more resilient and more persistent, and thus be able to face the challenges of their course. Educators have long been aware of the link between social interaction and learning. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective of learning described a symbiotic relationship between cognitive development, learning, and the characteristics and quality of interactions between people. As Krause and Duchesne (2000, p. 2) succinctly put it "knowledge, ideas, attitudes and values develop through interaction with others". By facilitating social opportunity, the program was also facilitating learning and, as Tinto (2002) noted "the more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate". (p. 3)

### **The Sports Education Model: An approach to promoting engagement, support and retention**

This approach was supported by the research of MacPhail, Kirk, and Kinchin (2004) who suggested that a team-based approach was effective in "develop[ing] feelings of identity, the sense of belonging to a team, and the growth of social skills" (MacPhail et al., 2004 p.106). This model is often referred to as the Team Affiliation approach. Providing opportunities for participation in team activities can create high levels of peer support and lead to improvements in social development, responsibility and decision-making (McPhail, Kirk & Kinchin, 2004). Alexander, Taggart and Thorpe (1996) outlined the benefits of this type of approach for engaging marginalised students and McPhail, Kirk and Kinchin (2004) suggested that constructing a group identity and providing the opportunity for students to work together can make them more resilient in responding to personal and social challenges.

To facilitate a team-based approach, the researchers drew from the Sport Education in Physical Education Program (SEPEP) (Alexander & Taggart, 1994) and the Sport Education Model (Siedentop, 1994). This was a unique approach in the literature on retention programs and it provided the framework for the model used in the program. In this model, students are affiliated with teams for a season with various roles assigned within the team including captain, coach and players. In the context of this program, the term 'sport' encompassed a broad range of activities and,

true to the SEPEP model, concluded with an end of season event. The players in each team were the first year students. Second year students, who had volunteered to participate in the program for twelve months, were assigned the role of captains or mentors. Mentors were responsible for choosing (in collaboration with their mentees), organizing and attending events, as well as maintaining contact with their team. Academic staff teaching first year units assumed the role of coaches and were assigned to a team, thus providing a point of connection for students with teaching staff.

## **The Program**

On Orientation Day, students were randomly allocated to one of eight teams of approximately 25 students, each led by two peer mentors from the second or third year Primary Bachelor of Education course and one staff member. Student mentors were selected through the School of Education Peer Mentor Program and by expressions of interest. First year unit co-ordinators took on the role of staff mentors to the groups. The teams were allocated names and colours to foster team affiliation. Students were also given the opportunity to purchase School of Education polo shirts that could be worn both at university and during professional practice.

Teams of 25 were chosen because they are large enough to ensure opportunities for networking, both socially and academically. The groups were involved in structured team building activities during orientation week and at this time students were asked to make suggestions about the type of activities they would like to be involved in. This informed the structured team building activities in weeks three, six and nine of semester one culminating in a sausage sizzle and drama day. This was held on a Saturday to enable families to come along and watch the short plays that the students had been working on during their drama unit and to enjoy a picnic lunch or a sausage sizzle prior to the performance. The program continued in semester two with less structured events, also determined in consultations between students and their peer mentors, which were simply intended to facilitate social interaction. Events in the second semester included ten-pin bowling, lawn bowls and a family day.

## **Research Method**

Uncovering the complex nature of what happened in the transition to the first year of university and how that process can be supported was a multifaceted task, hence the adoption of a mixed-methods approach (Denzin, 1978; Creswell, 2009). The mix of qualitative and quantitative data sources included self-report surveys and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data was also drawn from university records. A mixed method approach to data analysis was utilised in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the students' first year experience and the factors that influenced their retention and engagement with the course.

In the initial stages of the program data was collected in the form of a survey. This data included demographic information, perceptions about university study and factors that students believed would impact on their success at university. Information about students' perceptions of support, involvement and learning was collected in a follow-up survey. In addition, the subsequent survey sought to determine the factors

that had influenced students' continued enrolment in the course. Further qualitative data was obtained through a meeting with a focus group of students in semester two. The focus group was a randomly selected group of nine female and three male students. The mentors were also able to provide feedback during group interviews in first and second semesters.

The survey questions were developed in conjunction with colleagues at the university who had been involved in conducting exit interviews with first year students who had withdrawn in previous years. Advice was sought from colleagues regarding the face and content validity of the survey instruments to ensure that they appeared to measure what they were intended to measure and that the items were consistent with the area of inquiry (Burns, 1994). Colleagues reviewed the surveys to determine whether the questions were relevant to the issues that they were aware of in their roles with first year students in the course. Recommendations on the wording and content of questions were included in the final versions of the surveys. Items from the survey conducted at the beginning of the year were followed up in the end-of-year survey, for example, at the beginning of the year students were asked to predict which factors they thought would have the greatest impact on their ability to continue their studies at university. The factors they could select from were:

- support from peers at university,
- support from family,
- support from peer mentors,
- support from university staff,
- financial resources,
- balancing work and study commitments,
- self discipline / organisational skills, or
- other (please specify).

In the end-of-year survey students were given the same list and asked to identify the factors that had been the greatest influence on their ability to continue their studies at university. The university accepts a mid-year enrolment of students into the course. In order to ensure that the second survey captured data from the same cohort as the first, students who enrolled mid-year were not included in the second survey.

The focus group meetings with first year students and mentors took the form of semi-structured interviews. Questions were prepared based on students' responses to the initial survey, observations made by staff and mentors during the organised activities, and informal comments made by both students and mentors. Two researchers conducted the focus group interviews in tandem, using the prepared questions to trigger discussion and taking notes as the discussion progressed. The discussions were recorded from two positions in the room to ensure that every speaker could be heard and the recordings were later transcribed. Both notes and transcriptions were used to confirm data obtained from the focus groups.

University records from 2005 to 2012 provided quantitative data on first year retention rates within the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course. A breakdown of the attrition data identified the proportions of students who withdrew from the course but had switched to another course at the university and the proportion who were no longer enrolled at the university.

## Results

The discussion of the results begins by looking at the demographic data and what it revealed about the student cohort. Affective factors that students initially believed would help them to continue with their studies and the factors that, on reflection, they felt had helped them to remain at university are also explored. Comparative data is used to examine students' perceptions about coming to university at the start of their course and at the end of their first year. Survey responses to the program activities are discussed and a summary of the interview data obtained from the focus group and mentors is provided. Finally, retention data is considered in relation to what this contributes to the evaluation of the program.

Ninety-five of the initial surveys were returned which represents 51% of the group. Eighty-one of the second surveys were returned which represents 53% of the first year cohort who were still actively enrolled in the course at the end of the year. Forty-seven percent of students who completed the second survey also completed the first survey.

The initial survey data revealed that 91% of the respondents came from the metropolitan area, the others having moved from regional areas up to 500 kilometres away. School-leavers made up 39% of the group. University-supplied data on age groups represented in this intake was mirrored in the surveys, indicating that the survey respondents formed a representative cross-section of age groups. The largest age group was 19 to 21 year olds but ages ranged from 17 to 50+ across the cohort. Twenty-four percent of respondents indicated that at least one parent had attended university so the remaining 76% can be considered first-generation university students. Of the 11% of students who identified as having a language background other than English, Arabic, Farsi, Chinese, Turkish, Urdu and Vietnamese were listed as the primary languages spoken at home.

Consistent with other studies that have revealed the link between students' intrinsic resolve and their ultimate success at university, this was seen by respondents to the initial survey as the factor most likely to have the greatest impact on their ability to continue their studies (Table 1). The other factors were support from family, balancing work and study commitments, support from peers, financial resources, support from staff and support from mentors.

Predicted factors affecting continuance	Percentage
Self discipline/organisational skills	70
Support from family	61
Balancing work and study commitments	54
Support from peers at university	46
Financial resources	27
Support from university staff	21
Support from peer mentors	6

*Note.* Percentages do not add to 100 because respondents were able to select up to three factors.

Table 1. Students' Initial Beliefs About the Factors that Would Have the Greatest Impact on their Ability to Continue their Studies.

By the time students neared the end of their first year, self-discipline and organisation were still regarded as the most important factors likely to impact on their success. Interestingly the perceived value of peer support increased in the second survey



(Table 2), overtaking balancing work and study commitments in ranking. The impact of support from peer mentors had diminished but the importance of support from staff had increased slightly.

<b>Actual factors affecting continuance</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Self discipline/organisational skills	65
Support from family	62
Support from peers at university	49
Balancing work and study commitments	38
Financial resources	25
Support from university staff	24
Support from peer mentors	1

*Note.* Percentages do not add to 100 because respondents were able to select up to three factors.

Table 2. Students' Beliefs about the Factors that had the Greatest Impact on their Ability to Continue their Studies.

The initial survey investigated student's sense of anticipation and preparedness for embarking on a university course. The second survey asked respondents to consider the same factors at the end of their first year. At the beginning of the year 84% of students agreed that they felt excited about coming to university. By the end of the year 94% agreed that they enjoyed coming to university. Similarly, 50% of students reported that they felt well prepared for starting university but by the end of the year 98% felt confident that they understood what this commitment meant in order to succeed. Seventy-seven percent of students began the year looking forward to making new friends. By the end of the year 90% reported that they had made new friends. Seventy-two percent of respondents began the year feeling confident that they could do the work. By the end of the year that number had risen to 96%. In examining these results consideration needs to be given to the students represented in the surveys. It can be assumed that the students who responded to the second survey were those that had experienced some success at university as they were still enrolled at the end of the year. Of particular interest to the researchers was that 90% of the students made new friends at university and that 94% reported enjoying coming to university.

The most popular events associated with the program were those that were carried out on-campus at times when students would normally be at university. These events included volleyball, indoor soccer and craft activities, and were generally better attended than the activities that were held after hours. This was echoed in the feedback from the focus group who commented that the best activities were those that were held at university and were, "hands-on stuff" and "team-building activities where people's personalities came out like volleyball and team games." Of the activities held outside normal university hours, the family day in semester two was the most popular. The main inhibiting factor to attendance at the events both during university hours and after hours was reported to be work commitments. Sadly, in spite of the efforts to create a welcoming environment, a small percentage (6%) of students did not attend any activities because they felt shy or uncomfortable about socialising. However, the majority of students viewed the activities in a positive light. Eighty percent of students reported that having the activities available made them feel welcome at university, with 51% finding that the activities helped them to settle in. Fifty-two percent reported that having the activities available made it more appealing to spend time at university and 53% stated that it had helped them to make friends.

The interview with the focus group drew out more detail about the aspects of the program that students found beneficial. When asked if the program was worth continuing there was unanimous agreement. Some of the reasons given included that the program:

created an opportunity to meet people,  
placed an emphasis on a social network for all students,  
enabled students to ask mentors questions when they felt silly asking someone else,  
was purely social – a break from study, and  
helped students to get to know each other because they recognised people in their mentor group when attending lectures or tutorials

The importance of the newly created friendship groups was recognised when university commitments began to isolate students from their friendship groups outside of university:

*The network of friends at university becomes very important during busy times as you tend to lose contact with your friends outside university who don't understand how much time you have to spend on assignments and preparation for practicum. Having support from the peer network – being able to contact each other through Facebook etc. when working on assignments, whether it's to discuss something to do with an assignment or just knowing that other people are in the same boat and encouraging each other.*

On the negative side, some students felt that they could not come to the family day because they did not have a family. On being asked to clarify this one student stated that he understood the event to be pitched at students with children and as he did not have children, it was not appropriate for him to attend. One student commented that she felt uncomfortable being the only mature-aged student in her mentor group.

Finally, data was sought from the student mentors to find out what impact the mentoring role had had on them. Each mentor noted that they got to know staff better with one stating:

*I got to know the academic staff involved in the project in a much deeper level, and saw them as peers rather than staff that I could not approach. Since being involved, I have maintained the connections that I have made with teaching staff and continue to value their input.*

Another common theme to emerge from the student mentors was that they wished a similar program had been available when they started:

*When I started three years ago, I was terrified, and there was nobody to “lean” on for support. So to be able to be a mentor for new students was a great opportunity to let them know that it's not as daunting as it seems. I only wish when I was in first year the activities we organised for them were available to us as first years.*

From a personal development perspective the mentors' comments showed that they found it a useful experience:

*Mentoring has helped me to gain confidence in my own teaching abilities and has shown me that I have a lot to offer in the way of helping other people. My motivation and confidence took a steep incline during my time in the mentor program. Being able to provide activities and opportunities for peers to interact and enjoy themselves outside the academic setting was rewarding. I have concluded that I got far more out of it than I ever put in. I was able form stronger relationships with some of my mentoring peers.*

*I feel that I have grown a lot as a person and made a lot of new friends throughout the year.*

*For me personally, I was glad to be able to give the first year students a little assurance that they would survive the year.*

*I can see the benefit it provides to the first year students and I gained so much out of it myself.*

Several of the mentors also commented that they would gladly take on the role again or recommend it to others.

Retention statistics provided by the University enabled the comparison of attrition rates for first year students for the four years prior to the program, and the four years after and including the year of implementation (Table 3).

<b>% Retention Rates 4 Years Prior</b>	<b>% Retention Rates 4 Years After</b>
71.2	71.9
76.0	69.7
72.3	70.2
71.9	68.6
Average 72.9	Average 70.0

Table 3. Retention in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) Course Prior to and Following the Program.

Retention rates in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course were identical for the year prior to the program and the year of implementation (71.9%). A small decline in retention has been evident in subsequent years.

Further analysis of the University data provided some insights to the destination of discontinuing students (Table 4). In the four years prior to the program, an average of 6.8% of students who discontinued the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course in first year transferred to another course at the University. In the four years following, and including the program, there has been a statistically significant increase ( $p < .04$ ) to 10.6% of discontinuing students who have remained at the University in other courses.

<b>% Retention Rates 4 Years Prior</b>	<b>% Retention Rates 4 Years After</b>
8.0	8.0
6.0	12.6
8.7	10.5
4.5	11.1
Average 6.8	Average 10.6

Table 4. Percentage of Students Leaving the Bachelor of Education (Primary) Course and Transferring to another Course at the University Prior to and Following the Program.

## Discussion

Feedback from both the first year students and their mentors allude to increased social capital as a consequence of their involvement in this program. Of the students surveyed 9% came from rural or regional areas and comments from these students reflected their appreciation of the mentor program in helping them acclimatise to the change in setting. As one student reported, “You’re on your own when you move away from friends and family in the country.” Another student from a

rural area commented that two siblings had already got into university but in both cases they had found the transition very difficult and had only lasted about two weeks before dropping out. This student felt that the mentor program had helped her to settle in, make new friends and continue at university.

In keeping with research that has indicated the specific challenges faced by first-generation university students, the first-generation cohort within the focus group revealed some of the difficulties they faced. Students commented on the strain that their enrolment at university had caused in their family lives. In one case a daughter did not like the idea of her mother attending university but this changed when the daughter came along to the drama day at the end of the first semester where, in the words of the mother, “She gained a better understanding of what it was all about.” In other cases support from family members remained elusive:

*It's just studying and they don't know why you have to put a lot of time into it. Anyone who hasn't been to uni doesn't understand and isn't as supportive as someone who has.*

These first-generation university students acknowledged the importance of supportive friendships amongst the group. Another student commented that most of the friends she had made at university came from her mentor group. There was a common bond of understanding, partly brought about by having to live on restricted finances that friends outside of university could not appreciate. Students who had friends in other courses commented that the practicum component of a teaching course brought unique pressures that their friends in other courses did not understand. The comment was made that the, “Aloneness worsens as studies progressed.” Another student remarked that she had underestimated the importance of social networking. This comment was consistent with the survey data that indicated an increased value given to support from peers at university between the beginning of the year and the end.

While many students attested to the benefits of the program, this was not the case for all. Contrary to the findings of Alexander, Taggart and Thorpe (1996) the team-based approach was not entirely effective in engaging marginalised students. Three reasons emerged from the data. First, shyness may have inhibited participation, Second, some students felt excluded by the nature of the activities and third, at least one student felt isolated by being the only mature-aged student in her group. This is an area that will require consideration in the planning of future programs.

An unintended, but highly beneficial, outcome of the program was the impact on the mentors. Mentors reported increased motivation, confidence, and development of relationships with peers and staff as a consequence of their involvement in the program.

The vision of the program was to provide opportunities for students to establish supportive social and collegial networks at university in the belief that this could ameliorate cultural influences and lead to improved retention rates. While it is encouraging to see that students who leave the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course are being retained at the university in greater numbers, we cannot infer that the evolving first year support and networking model is the central factor influencing students' decision to stay on at university. In a large institution like a university it is quite possible that other factors are involved.

## Conclusions

The students entering the Primary Bachelor of Education come from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, ethnicity and educational experience. A focus of the study was to enable students to form friendships and collegial networks across this diverse group and the feedback provided indicates that there has been some success in this area.

The Bradley Review of Higher Education (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008) highlighted the need to increase participation in higher education citing a strong link between the number of people with high-level skills and a country's productivity. In order to increase the number of people participating in higher education, the Review recommended that we "look to members of groups currently under-represented within the system, that is, those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas" (p. xi). With 76% of respondents indicating that they were first-generation university students, the course appears to be attracting students from groups that have not traditionally participated in higher education. Only 9% of respondents came from rural areas, which can partially be attributed to the university having a campus in one of the regional centres of the State. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement in the university's ability to attract and retain students from rural and remote areas, and addressing the social needs of these students has an important role to play.

The program was offered as a means of meeting new people and finding common interests. It modelled strategies that pre-service teachers can re-enact not only in their schools in the future but also in life generally. Mentoring and peer networking encouraged the sharing of ideas, issues and problems with others. Some activities were more popular than others and subsequent programs have taken into account the need to hold the majority of activities during normal university hours. The participation of families, particularly of first-generation university students, was beneficial so at least one activity that promotes and facilitates family involvement is recommended in the first semester.

From the point of view of the mentors, feedback indicates that their involvement in the program contributed to the acquisition of key graduate attributes as well as skills associated with good teaching including communication, collegiality, collaboration, support, reflection and responsibility. The mentors clearly felt that they had benefited from the opportunity and most have continued to participate in leadership opportunities that have arisen since the end of the program. It was also encouraging to note that a substantial number of first year students volunteered to become mentors for the following year's intake. This outcome of the program highlights the need to ensure that there are continued leadership opportunities for those who choose this pathway. These opportunities may take the form of an extended network of mentors, a support system for new mentors or mentoring of specific skills.

The qualitative findings of the research indicate that the program made a difference both to the lives of many of the first year students as they made the transition to university and to the mentors whose leadership skills flourished. The program began as a starting point for developing strategies to engage and support first year students. Feedback from students has been used to continuously evolve the support network model, and while the encouraging signs in the qualitative data have not been reflected in course retention data, it is pleasing to see that more students are

continuing their studies elsewhere in the university rather than dropping out altogether. If we are to meet the recommendations of The Bradley Review of Higher Education by looking to groups currently under-represented within the system then we must continue to explore ways to facilitate their successful transition to university life and this program has offered some useful directions to providing a rich and welcoming environment for all students entering the course.

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