



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

# OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING FIRST-IN-FAMILY STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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## Preamble

These principles and strategies have been created in collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders who are interested, indeed passionate, about supporting first-in-family learners and their significant others. The development of the principles commenced in February 2015 when participants (n= 113) were asked to develop one over-riding principle that could be employed in the support of first-in-family learners. These participants were derived from 19 higher education providers across seven states of Australia; additionally there were representatives from other government and non-government organisations. Out of this activity, nine draft principles were developed focussing on the support of first-in-family learners.

Throughout 2015 and 2016, stakeholders were invited to both contribute and provide feedback on the this initial set of principles, and contribute their own suggestions. Indeed, responses were so descriptive and insightful that it became clear that these could be used to inform both the principles and underpin strategies for their enactment.

This final iteration of the principles and strategies is then based upon feedback and input derived from six workshops conducted nationally between August 2015 and April 2016. These workshops provided a forum for over 330 participants to both contribute ideas and perspectives to this evolving list. At the end of each workshop, this input was entered into a data management system and this culminated in an analysis of the both feedback and suggested principles. After refinement, the following seven overarching principles and strategies have been developed.

This is an evolving process and so I see this list of principles and strategies not as a static inventory but rather a fluid and emerging interactive map of how we might engage with this cohort and their significant others.



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# Disclaimer



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## Principles

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| Principle 1 | Changing Conversations: Engage with Family and Community       |
| Principle 2 | Take the Mystery out of University                             |
| Principle 3 | Make No Assumptions  |
| Principle 4 | Build a Sense of Community                                     |
| Principle 5 | Adopt a Strengths-Based Approach                               |
| Principle 6 | Model Authenticity: Draw on First-in-Family Student Experience |
| Principle 7 | Institutions: Commit to Resources and Policy                   |

## Principle 1

Changing Conversations: Engage with Family and Community

**Celebrate** being first-in-family (not a deficit model).

**Change negative perceptions** of university environment through meaningful engagement that encourages and supports new conversations about university.

**Build sense of belonging through social activities:** connect people and place through in-person contact and on campus social activities that include family and community to build familiarity; family and community days.

**Build relationships** with students and families: staff go to different campuses (regional and city locations), talk face-to-face, be available to engage with and provide support to first-in-family students and family; sustained relationships over time.

**Start engagement (very) young – early conversations:**

- Target programs for first-in-family students in primary school
- Consistent communication, and
- Place-based, human-centred, two-way (space and place), strengths-based approach.

**Be friendly:** celebrate diversity and cultural richness, value **all** people, say hello, smile.

**Actively work towards changing university culture and myths** for example “university is for young people” or “students that lack certain skills / life experiences need to be changed or acted upon”. Remain mindful that you need to avoid implying (in any way) that these students are deficit.

**Have a community focus:** strive to make the university part of the local community rather than separate from it.

**Provide accessible resources and information to family.**

**Provide language translators** at drop-in sessions to overcome language barriers.

## Principle 2

Take the Mystery out of University

**Foreground student contact** that is face to face, that engages with students **and** their families in a meaningful sense and that occurs both on campus **and** in the community.

**Ask students and family members what they need** based on their experience (don't make assumptions about their needs).

**Ensure first-in-family students and family members know how to access available support services.**

**Ensure first-in-family students and family members know the impacts and benefits of being first.**

**Utilise a variety of multi-modal technological strategies to engage with this group.** Strategies need to be multi-channelled; relevant and targeted; two-way; student centered – “Computer says yes!”; just in time; and reflective of the student life cycle.

**Make expectations clear and explicit:** hold information sessions on what students can expect.

**Make all information accessible.** Don't use uni jargon! Include brochures that decipher uni jargon.

**Make people feel welcome and comfortable on campus** by decoding the university landscape through a variety of strategies including family open days, real go to people and peer support.

**Accessibility** to quality information, **awareness, understanding** of higher education experiences for students and family = **stronger relationships**.

**Provide education at the community level** in general about resources for first-in-family students – make this a part of the uni narrative.

## Principle 3

Make No Assumptions

- About who first-in-family students are.
- About what their families know, need or can offer.
- About diverse backgrounds.
- About knowledge of academic expectations and processes.
- Normalise the difference and recognise academic practices and literacies needed for success.
- Provide safe ways to fill in gaps in how to support, e.g. phone app for families to understand how to support students.
- Greater awareness and understanding of the diversity of first-in-family students.

## Principle 4

Build a Sense of Community

**Provide informal opportunities for families to come to campus:** include parents and family at events and hold information days for first-in-family students and their family members.

**Provide space for first-in-family student voices to be heard** via marketing, literature and policy documents.

**Encourage and maintain approachability** amongst all staff members.

**Acknowledge students and their particular journeys to higher education.**

**Build on technology** to create relationships that are meaningful and supportive. These relationships need to be proactive, authentic and diverse but also involve real people and face to face encounters.

## Principle 5

Adopt a Strengths-Based Approach

University outreach that seeks to **empower** students by:

- Recognising what they bring to the university environment and the validity of prior experience.
- Encouraging students to reflect upon the support that exists outside the university.
- Fostering help-seeking behaviour.
- Acknowledging and celebrating the resource of diversity: includes diversity of ages, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic circumstances, life experiences.

## Principle 6

Model Authenticity: Draw on First-in-Family Student Experience

- Develop a mentoring program for students at uni – a 'go to' person.
- Provide students and family with real stories from first-in-family students (and family members) who've been there:
  - Inspirational videos
  - First-in-family student and/or family members as invited speakers at events, and
  - Q & A sessions including first-in-family student/s and/or family member/s.
- Provide networking opportunities for students and their families so that they know there are others in the same situation.

# Principle 7

## Institutions: Commit to Resources and Policy

The institution has a responsibility to:

- allocate funds to effectively support increasing numbers of first-in-family students.
- distribute dedicated staffing, funding and resources that enable success for first-in-family students.
- consider a first-in-family team including a member from other equity groups (e.g. Indigenous, international, disability, etc).
- employ a family engagement / support officer.
- develop a coordinated approach to support students and family members.
- commit funds and resources to research on first-in-family students and their families.
- collect data of first-in-family students at enrolment or through University Admission Centre.
- upskill academic staff and raise awareness.

Institutional policy needs to:

- include recognition of first-in-family students as a diverse group.
- capture first-in-family students at time of enrolment.
- develop institutional guidelines for staff.

