Applying a 4th Generation Approach to Supporting First Year Students
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INTRODUCTION
Entry into higher education is only the beginning of a longer journey that will potentially lead to improved personal and social outcomes. While the journey towards graduation is often viewed as an individual endeavour, in reality, it is shared with family, friends, teachers, advisors and fellow students. Much like the African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child”, we believe that it takes a whole community to support a tertiary student and the support provided in the critical First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) may determine whether the student will complete their undergraduate journey and achieve their dreams.

4th GENERATION APPROACH
Our 4th Generation Approach to the FYHE (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014) uses a Community of Practice (CoP) methodology (Wenger, 1998). This approach is underpinned by concepts of responsiveness (linking with the student’s social and civic communities – family, friends, school, local community), respectfulness (of the knowledge, social and cultural capital that students bring with them) and transparency, “opening up our institutions to new audiences” (Spanier, 2004, p. 8). The 4th Generation Approach responds to student’s needs during their transition to university by involving key community and university people in a CoP to devise and develop strategies that can be implemented to support students in their transition to university.

METHOD
In 2015, we surveyed, conducted focus groups and interviewed Gympie first year students. These students identified community members who were significant in supporting them to attend higher education. We approached these community members and invited them to participate in a CoP (called CommUniTI (Community University Team Initiative)). CommUniTI members came from the University community and the Gympie community and made commitments to the group at varying levels, as shown in the diagram. Some members were family and others were specialists in their field. They brought with them various skills and invaluable knowledge of the local area which we drew on to develop the resulting Gympie specific first year initiative for commencing 2016 students.

RESULTING INITIATIVE: Gympie Drop Zone
Gympie first year students told us they needed greater emotional and professional support and tailored, “just in time” and accessible information. With this knowledge the Gympie Drop Zone was conceptualized, developed and implemented in Semester 1 2016. The Gympie Drop Zone is found on Blackboard and links to social media sites where students can connect with each other and professional mentors. The Gympie Drop Zone:

• Gives a sense of belonging by developing a cohort identity for the Gympie first year student
• Provides important and timely university and campus specific information for first year students
• Enables first year students to communicate and support each other through linking to social media groups
• Enables first year students to connect with professional mentors in the Gympie region who understand the demands of university study or the student’s future profession

References

This project was funded by the University of Sunshine Coast Commissioned Learning and Teaching Grant
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