Introduction

Rates of attrition and retention figures and have been a concern of tertiary institutions for over 40 years. Early explanations attributed attrition to a poor psyche on the student’s part but in the 1970s Vincent Tinto (2006-2007) advanced the argument that it was more the environment of the teaching institution in all its aspects which strongly influenced an individual to continue his or her education or leave. *Darlaston-Jones et al. (2003) have also made the point that students considered themselves as being consumers of higher education and demanded value for money. Where this value was denied – or students’ expectations were not realised – disappointment became a reason for withdrawal. For a number of reasons attrition is the highest during the first year of study and so has attracted much attention to this unique period – the First Year Experience (FYE).

However experienced they may be, staff who are new to first year teaching and advising can be overwhelmed by research publications, information and guidelines that relate to the FYE and to first year students. It is a complex area that most will not have the luxury of time to explore thoroughly. This paper offers an overview of the topics most pertinent to the FYE citing works published between 2000 and 2010. Authors who had official affiliation in Australia when their work quoted here was published are identified by an asterisk. Specialised reviews of the literature have been published by a number of authors (*Evans, 2000; Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby, & Zepke, 2005). See also *Webb (2001) for web resources on issues related to the FYE.

Concerns about the FYE have prompted international key researchers in the field to give workshops, seminars and a number of conferences centred on the First Year Experience throughout the year. In Australasia of particular note is the Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education annual conference with 2010 marking its 13th year. Material cited here reflects the interest in such conferences and includes many papers with references giving online access details for ready access.
The material covered in this paper is discussed in three sections: the problem of the attrition of students, factors in the retention of students, and institutional strategies to increase retention. Research findings are not fully comparable across national boundaries with some specific examples of good practice cited later (Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Schih, & Whitt, 2005). It is suggested that these examples are particular to the study focus and do not travel well across the Pacific Ocean. It should also be noted that although there is a concentration on Australian first year students as a group, each institution, faculty, school and student cohort has innate characteristics which result in essential differences.