The First Year Experience: What is it and how might we improve it?

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Forum Overview

• A little bit from me (20 mins or so) –
  – What is it about our students’ FYE?
• I stop!
• You have some more slides that we may or may not go
  – Re what’s happening out there – what issues are being identified – nationally and internationally
• Some themes from “out there”
  – Very multidimensional
Who am I?

• Law academic
• Promoted to AssProf & then Prof primarily on basis of teaching (60%)
• T&L service roles
  – eg Assistant Dean, Teaching & Learning (Law) 5 yrs
• Have some teaching awards
• Have published in discipline but also in: legal education; first year experience; sessional teaching; scholarship of teaching; online teaching; T,L & assessment grad attributes
• Presented externally at no of legal & general education confs and internally at a no of seminars/events like this
• Currently on secondment to DVC(A) as Director, FYE Project
• 2006 Carrick Senior Fellow (commence end 2007)

How did my FY work come about?

• FY teacher
• Curriculum renewal to embed graduate attributes
  – Required reconceptualisation of the FY curriculum
• Necessity to provide staff development for sessional/casual teachers
• Concern over student experience
• Need to be effective and efficient for me and them!
• Desire to harness (academic workload) synergies between teaching, research and service
• Looming RQF
Why are we talking about this?

- Concern around retention, progression & completion; also re student experience, satisfaction & engagement
- Accountability – esp govt intervention & focus on T&L
- [Global] Competition
- ICTs have changed student experience
- Student & staff workloads (eg competing demands & resourcing; changing drivers; looking for synergies)
- Student fees AND opportunity costs/ waste re attrition
- Increasing diversity of FY cohort in terms of –
  - Preparedness for and expectations of tertiary study
  - Membership of at risk or equity groups
  - Widening participation ➔ Varied entry level skills & knowledge; differing cultural capital

What is it about FY?

- Lot of research national and internationally
- Common themes around transition and…(eg)
  - Wrong course choice: including
    • Uncertainty about course choice
    • Viable alternative
  - Academic difficulties & anxiety
  - Poor student experience – poor institutional support/ culture
  - Financial problems
  - Personal problems – balancing conflicting priorities
  - Loneliness, isolation and not making friends
  - Dislike environment/ Not interested/ Wrong institution/ External motivation to attend
  - Membership of equity group and/or non-traditional
  - Massification (mass experience) and diversity

Flinders Teaching FY Students at
So what’s the strategic objective here?

• Some possibilities:
  – That students have a good Flinders “experience”
  – That no student leaves because of an issue with their program or curriculum or a staff member or admin or because of issues with access or support or because they didn’t know how to…xxx.
  – If unavoidable, the fallout from such issues should be pro-actively identified and managed
  – Particularly if we monitor for disengagement
  – Tinto….it’s all to do with successful learning
Vincent Tinto:
(2002;4)

The more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate. This is particularly true for more able and motivated students who seek out learning and are, in turn, more likely to respond to perceived shortcomings in the quality of learning they experience on campus. *Least we forget the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated.* In the final analysis, **student learning drives student retention.** [Emphasis added]

To “Engage” Students; Student “Engagement”

**Broadly re student attitudes and commitment to study**

- **Synonyms** – involve, engross, connect, bind, enmesh, hold, keep, absorb, occupy, fasten
- **Antonyms** – alienate, bore, disconnect, free, detach, extricate, withdraw, separate

*Students’ total experience of university – not just what happens in the traditional classroom – shapes their judgements of quality, promotes retention and engages them in productive learning*

Scott, G (2005) Accessing the Student Voice: Using CEQuery to identify what retains students and promotes engagement in productive learning in Australian higher education at vii
To “engage” and student “engagement”

Engagement occurs where students feel they are part of a group of students and academics committed to learning, where learning outside of the classroom is considered as important as the timetabled and structured experience, and where students actively connect to the subject matter.

McInnis, 2003 at 9

Why do they dis-engage [in FY]?  

➢ Many reasons (eg family difficulties, location, equity, work-life balance) but major factors: Yorke (1999, 2006)
   - Quality & organisation of teaching
   - Program difficulty & lack of preparedness to cope with it;
   - Poor choice of program, including lack of vocational relevance
     - More students know about their institutions & courses before enrolling, less likely they will withdraw (40% cf 25%)  
   - Worry over financing their studies (2006)

➢ “Complex inter-relationship between course dissatisfaction, course preference, limited engagement, and student perceptions of academic staff and of the quality of teaching”
   (Krause et al, 2005, at 64)
All of which means what exactly?

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What can we [actually] do to improve the FYE?

3 dimensions of FYE engagement

A coordinated, student-centred whole-of-institution approach that bridges gaps b/w teaching, admin & support services:

1. **Strategic**
   - Institutional and infrastructure

2. **Tactical**
   - Organisational area (faculty, division or department)

3. **Operational**
   - Classroom practice
Comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated institutional approach

The US Policy Center on the First Year of College in its Foundational Dimensions® suggests institutions should (at http://www.fyfoundations.org/4year.aspx)

…create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year. These structures and policies provide oversight and alignment of all first-year efforts. A coherent first-year experience is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements.

An organisational partnership to ensure that a philosophy for an enhanced FYE is enacted

That –

• Students encounter curriculum that is sensitive to their realities and diversity
  = engage learners in their learning
• WHICH is supported by –
  – Adequate and timely access to support services,
  – Opportunities for students to become part of communities of learners = sense of belonging.
• AND is student facing/centred – really!
What that might look like…

- Welcoming & student facing
  - A seamless, tailored, one-world view of institutional engagement
- Effective orientation and transition **process** (over time)
- Creates a sense of belonging
  - Involves students in a learning community (peers and staff)
  - Engages them with institution & motivates them to stay
  - Treats HE as both social & academic process (peers & staff)
- Assists [and normalises] their decision-making
- Helps students to cope with & become “streetwise” to institution
- Active interventions to assure timely information about, and access to, support services
- Attends to the **controllable** aspects of engagement/involvement in their FY learning

What can we control?

- Not individual student characteristics
- The settings in which they are placed
  - TL&A; curriculum; admin of teaching, just-in-time support & advising; monitoring for disengagement; peer contact
- Our approaches given realities of cohort
  - Assumptions & expectations: *eg* can *explicitly* expect students to take responsibility for their own learning
  - **But** they need assistance to do so
  - **And** they can’t take responsibility for –
    - Poorly designed curriculum
    - Poor teaching practices
    - Impenetrable systems and processes
  - **Esp** in high stakes environment obfuscated by transition

Mediate through an intentional transition pedagogy
Intentional Transition Pedagogy

The research in this regard could not be clearer. Students who find support for their learning, receive frequent feedback about their learning and are actively involved in learning, especially with others, are more likely to learn and in turn more likely to stay. Unfortunately, it remains the case that most first year students experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others. They continue to engage in solo performance and demonstration in what remains a largely show-and-tell environment. Their experience of learning is still very much a “spectator sport” in which [teachers’] talk dominates and where there are few active student participants. It is little wonder then that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

Tinto, 2002 at 2

Why a transition pedagogy?

• **Because of what we know about our students**
  – We know so much – who they are, what their legitimate expectations are, what their issues are likely to be, who is likely at risk etc etc
  – Negligent not to facilitate re what we know

• **Lack of primary student identity**
  – No play & study through uni together like most of us did (McInnis, 2003)
  – No time to make all the necessary accommodations

• **Because this not solely about discipline content** –
  – These are all qualified students
  – Is about the academic, admin & or support systems and processes that wrap around the (easy/ hard) content
**Flinders Orientation and Transition**

- 10 top hints for FYs -

- Get Connected site

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**Conditions for Engaging Learning (1)**

**Quality of teaching and support staff critical**

- **Interest-ed & -ing,** passionate teachers & support
  - Best support & frontline staff in FY
  - Flinders Teaching FY Students at

- **Reward & recognition; workload allocation & support**

- **Make no assumptions about preparedness**
  - Aware of potential for mismatch b/w academic expectations and existing student knowledge & skills

- **Manage increasing sessional staff nos (esp re FYE); large classes; de-personalisation**

- **Consensus about good LT&A**
  - eg: active; authentic; collaborative; challenging; multiple perspectives; student-centred; career-motivated; etc
Conditions for Engaging Learning (2)
Quality of curriculum design critical

- To facilitate FY transition (*from...to...*)
- To provide foundation for later years’ learning
- That is aligned (LT&A Biggs) and scaffolded; Road-mapped
  - Intentional sequencing of knowledge, skills and attitudes 🌟
- Is clear & consistent re goals & requirements
- Accommodates diversity (broadly)
- Embraces an “involving” pedagogy (Tinto from before)
  - Encourage peer-to-peer & student-academic contact:
    formal/informal; in/outside classroom; both frequency & qual
- Appropriate FY assessment
  - Appropriate & early feedback on learning
- Monitors for disengagement and intervenes in timely way
- Is itself evaluated and improved

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Education Principles:
Teaching and Learning at Flinders University

Through its teaching, Flinders aims for its students to:
- be challenged to master a coherent **body of knowledge** and engage with the intellectual foundations of one or more academic disciplines;
- develop intellectual and cultural curiosity;
- acquire a capacity & willingness to **challenge assumptions & embrace new thinking**;
- understand the ethical, social & moral implications of knowledge & responsible citizenship;
- develop transferable learning skills and a commitment to life-long learning;
- experience, particularly at undergraduate level, campus-based teaching and learning, and have the benefit of meeting and interacting on a regular basis with students and staff within a collegial academic environment;
- develop a better overall understanding of social, cultural, technological, scientific and economic issues as they affect the wider community, and a deeper level of understanding of these issues as they relate to a student’s area of study;
- gain opportunities to **interact, work and communicate with others** effectively to achieve both collective and individual goals; and
- embrace a **diverse range of perspectives on learning** and an awareness of global, national, regional and local contexts, and develop a commitment to make contributions at all levels of society.
Common student complaints

- Assessment, feedback & associated communication issues
- Anxiety re requirements for success – onus on us to pay explicit attention to expectations & tertiary literacies: e.g. –
  - **academic literacy** (reading, referencing, academic integrity, independent learning, reflective practice, academic writing, presenting orally);
  - **information literacy**;
  - **computer literacy**;
  - **Also** numeracy; visual literacy; statistical literacy; professional practices; cultural literacy; + + + ???
- Group work
Epilogue
(after Mantz Yorke)

We cannot guarantee student success, because students have to contribute their effort

We can, however, ‘bend the odds’ significantly in favour of success

If

our approach to the student experience is informed by strategic thinking, planning, policy and action (& empathetic understanding)

Thank-you for listening

Questions and Comments
What’s happening out there?

and

Some themes from the national and international literature on the FYE

Much FYE Activity

• Not going away – some recent examples:

• US – active for over 25 years now
  - The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition [http://www.sc.edu/fye/](http://www.sc.edu/fye/)
    - 27th Annual US FYE Conference in Feb 2008
    - 21st International FYE Conference in June 2008

- NSSE [http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm)
  - The National Survey of Student Engagement evaluating empirically confirmed "good practices" in undergraduate education

- Project DEEP [http://webdb.iu.edu/Nsse/?view=deep/briefs](http://webdb.iu.edu/Nsse/?view=deep/briefs)
  - Documenting what high performing institutions do to be effective

  - Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year - a comprehensive, guided self-study and improvement process
**National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) – and AUSSE**

- **Benchmarks of effective Educational Practice**
  - Derived from 42 key questions in NSSE looking at student behaviours & institutional features that contribute to learning & personal development.
    - Level of academic challenge
    - Student interactions with Faculty members
    - Supportive campus environments
    - Active and collaborative learning
    - Enriching educational experiences

- **AUSSE = Australasian Survey of Student Engagement**
  - Being developed by ACER (Kuh, 2007)
  - Aims to deliver generalisable information about our HEIs, that is sensitive to institutional diversity and allows for monitoring and enhancement

**Much FYE Activity**

Australia – at least 10 years
- Decade of research: **CSHE**, Uni of Melbourne (most recent 2005)
- **Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in HE** – grants, awards, citations and fellowships
  - eg a CAAUT Program that Enhances Learning - includes The first-year experience “Encompassing the academic and social transition to higher education, teaching and learning within large student groups, and the quality of the first year student experience”
- **National LTPF**
  - Funding with criteria that includes retention and attrition
- Australian Universities **Quality Agency** (AUQA) [http://www.auqa.edu.au/](http://www.auqa.edu.au/)
**Much FYE Activity**

- Europe and the UK
  - Scotland –
    - Scottish Quality Agency – dedicated Enhancement theme of First Year Experience over 2006/07 – all 21 Scottish HEIs
      - [http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/)
    - NB Hong Kong reference – in 2012 will shift from 3 to 4 yr undergrad
    - Most recently "The first-year experience in higher education in the UK" by Mantz Yorke and Bernard Longden (February 2007)
      - [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/research/web0573_the_first_year_experience](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/research/web0573_the_first_year_experience)
    - Also STAR (Student Transition & Retention) Project at Uni of Ulster
      - [www.ulster.ac.uk/star](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star)
  - 2nd European Conference on the First Year in Higher Education is to be held in Sweden in May 2007

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**Scottish QAA –Enhancement Theme**

First Year Experience

- [http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/activities.asp](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/activities.asp)

**Sector-wide discussion projects**

1. The nature and purposes of the first year
2. Discussion and exploration of student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year

**Practice-focused development projects**

1. Curriculum design for the first year
2. Formative and diagnostic assessment and feedback
3. Peer support in the first year
4. Personal Development Planning (PDP) in the first year
5. Personalisation of the first year
6. Introducing scholarship skills
7. Transition during the first year
Much FYE Activity

- NZ
  - Proposals for similar national institute
    - National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence
  - 4 polytechnics, 2 universities, 1 college of ed
  - New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit Student Engagement: Measuring and Enhancing Engagement with Learning – Symposium 2006
    - How to measure and analyse student engagement in NZ
  - Longstanding participation in international discussions

Zepke, N et al (2005): Findings (1)
Improving tertiary student outcomes in the first year of study.

- Findings mirrored overseas studies.
- Non-institutional factors affect retention
- Some retention challenges same – esp acad advice on entry; good TL&A practices; effective orientation; manageable workload.
- Institutions also face unique retention challenges – need own data, investigations and strategies.
- Adaptation (with integration) approach – institutions adapt culture, processes and practices to support diversity.
- Learner-centred institutional cultures achieve better retention.
- Positive relationships between students and significant people (eg peers, support staff, and teachers) are important.
Zepke, N et al (2005): Findings (2)

Improving tertiary student outcomes in the first year of study.


- Provision of suitable support structures & services key (for all, but esp at risk, students) and staff need to understand them & act as referral points
- Operating an early warning departure system can mitigate attrition even re factors outside institutional control
- Teachers (supportive & learner-centred) do influence retention.
- To work effectively with student diversity teachers need professional development & manageable workloads.
- Administrators play an important role in retaining students (esp re strong client service orientation, effective student support services, pastoral care, and adequate resources & facilities).

Zepke, N et al (2005): Guidelines for Practice

1. Foster an institutional culture where good teaching is valued
2. Cultivate good teaching
3. Create an institutional culture that is learner-centred
4. Foster positive relationships b/w students and staff
5. Ensure sound academic advice is available
6. Provide and maintain facilities, resources and services that support good teaching and learning
7. Restrict class/tutorial group sizes so teachers/tutors can establish rapport with each student
8. Monitor student performance as an early warning system
9. Avoid generalised guidelines; research your own institution
Some themes? (1)

- Much activity, including audits of practice esp to identify successes & areas for improvement
- Focus on coordinated, sustainable, whole-of-institution approaches
  - including institutional policy making; institutional home for FYE; x-institutional working; institutional spaces
- US NSSE has shown student engagement varies more within than between institutions.
- Awareness of institutional difference – need own data
- Managing/ adapting (NZ) for diversity – includes supporting all students not just “at risk”
- Enhanced monitoring of student engagement & progression to enable timely intervention & support

Some themes? (2)

- Commitment to “acculturating” students to both HEIs and to discipline
  - including mediating expectations
- Commonality of focus on induction, transition, integration & coherence of provision (Scottish QAA)
  - Esp longitudinal approach to induction;
  - Pre-entry support, preparation, expectations and program choice
- Emphasis on intentional curriculum design & “good teaching”
  - esp to embed transition support & re importance of formative assess
- Harnessing technology affordances
- Use of peer-to-peer systems /social integration
- Staff development, support, reward & recognition
- Commitment to evaluating [and disseminating] practice