

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 24th International Conference on the First-Year Experience® Manchester, England, 21 to 24 June 2011

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The first year experience is internationally regarded as a socio-educational movement with a long-standing mission to support and advance efforts to improve student learning and to support students with the transition to and through higher education (National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition, 2011). According to Wend (2006), the student learning experience can be defined as consisting of the variety of experiences within the sphere of the University's responsibility with which the students come into contact and which influences learning. The student learning experience is therefore all-embracing and includes matters such as academic readiness, curricula, methods of teaching, learning and assessment, learning environment and resources, student progress and achievement, and academic and emotional support. Both nationally and internationally, the learning experience influences students' intentions to persist as well as their academic achievement (Lemmens, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Scott, 2009; Tinto, 1993).

The first International Conference on the First-Year Experience® was held in 1986 in the United Kingdom and returned to Manchester, United Kingdom, for the 24th International Conference on the First-Year Experience® from the 21st to the 24th June, 2011. The National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition together with a number of higher education institutions host this annual international conference and provide online resources for lecturers, researchers and concerned staff. The National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition evidently have a long history of providing a platform to think about, discuss and debate the complexities of the first academic year. The last number of years has witnessed a movement to also monitor and

evaluate programme processes and outcomes as key indicators of the success of first-year initiatives.

This year marked a record number of participants from 24 different countries across five continents of the world. The diversity in the higher education context was evident, but more so the similarities, which provided an opportunity to learn from each other and to discuss current trends and issues. Five delegates from various universities represented South Africa with well formulated and comprehensive programmes to address first-year issues. The delegates from South Africa furnished evidence as to the theoretical foundation of their programmes and stakeholder involvement (it takes a whole campus to teach a student), as well as measuring the impact, to varying degrees, of their programmes.

The conference organiser provided the opportunity to register for preconference workshops within the conference theme. I attended a workshop presented by John N. Gardner and Betsy O. Barefoot, esteemed writers, researchers and executive staff of the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence and the National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience® and Students in Transition. The workshop focused on the strategies and principles of educational practices in the first year. The keynote address by Alastair Summerlee, President of the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, argued for the revolutionising of undergraduate education with thought provoking suggestions for change, taking into account the challenges currently facing higher education.

Over the three conference days, a total of 87 concurrent sessions took place, including themes such as peer mentorship programmes, Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) programmes, orientation programmes, student engagement, academic readiness, and transition. My bias towards quantitative research, especially survey research on non-cognitive variables and academic achievement, directed my choice of presentations to attend. Non-cognitive variables usually refer to motivation, adjustment, behaviours and attitudes. From the perspective of higher education institutions, non-cognitive variables are usually down played as factors associated with academic achievement. Thus, cognitive variables such as high school marks or the results from ability tests are preferred as indicators of the readiness of students for university education.

Readiness for university education can be defined as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enrol and succeed, without remediation in a credit-bearing programme at a higher education institution (Conley, 2007, p. 1). The most central of the elements, according to Conley (2007), is “key cognitive strategies” and is defined as the development of cognitive abilities through planned and practised behaviours. The key cognitive strategies that are referred to in the model are, amongst others, conceptual and evaluative thinking, synthesising, and problem solving (see Conley, Lombardi, Seburn, & McGaughy, 2009, p. 4). These tasks usually form part of a high school curriculum and are demonstrated primarily through learning activities

and tasks. A number of researchers, however, contest the use of “key cognitive strategies” alone as a selection tool, as research suggests that non-cognitive variables add incremental validity to the academic achievement prediction model (Conley, 2007; Sedlacek, 2005; Sternberg, 2007).

“Lunch with College Clusters” allowed participants from similar types of an institution who share similar roles and interests the opportunity to share their experiences and educational circumstances informally. A second, but separate session on a different day, the “International Higher Education Session”, allowed participants to discuss the similarities and differences in higher education in a structured manner. Questions were posed to pre-allocated groups and feedback was provided to the session facilitator subsequent to the discussions thereof.

The student was the central focal point at the 24th International Conference on the First-Year Experience, as viewed through the lenses of myriad institutional initiatives. The said conference was an excellent opportunity to become part of an international movement while remaining locally relevant. In the South African educational context, a great cause for concern is, for instance, the limited “pool” of students with endorsement, the readiness of such students, the need for social transformation in terms of equity of access, the low graduation rates, and the high attrition rates of students who are already in the system (CHE, 2009). To remain locally relevant, the delegates from South Africa aim to set up a Southern African First-Year Experience chapter in the form of a Special Interest Group (SIG) under the auspices of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa’s (HELTASA) annual conference held in Port Elizabeth from 30 November 2011.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



Juan-Claude Lemmens is a senior research analyst at the Department for Education Innovation, University of Pretoria. He is the co-author of the Student Academic Readiness Survey and the First Year Experience Survey. His research interests include the assessment, profiling, and tracking of undergraduate students, especially first-year students. His research foci fall in the areas of academic readiness, learning experience, retention and success.

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