Editorial

The 17th International First Year in Higher Education Conference, Darwin, Australia 6-9 July, 2014

As always, the second issue of this journal each year is devoted to providing a snapshot of the *International First Year in Higher Education Conference*, in this case, the 17th held in Darwin, Australia from 6-9 July, 2014. This issue includes one of the Keynote addresses along with a series of five articles and five Practice Reports judged by anonymous reviewers and the editors as the "best in show" of the submitted papers and the Nuts and Bolts activities respectively. The Editorial concludes with some comments on the future of the FYHE Conference as it moves from focusing exclusively on first year to embracing student success across the broader student lifecycle.

Keynote Addresses

Professor Steve Larkin

Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Leadership) Charles Darwin University and a Kungarakany man from Darwin in the Northern Territory

In his keynote address *Critical Race Theory and Indigenous higher education: Towards a remaking of the university*, Steve Larkin began with the verifiable assertion that Indigenous participation in Australian higher education (HE) is characterised by the lack of meaningful participation and/or substantive involvement and that the popular explanations for these phenomena coalesce race and culture with notions of human deficit so that only Indigeneity is pathologised. He asserts that such explanations are inadequate, masking other insidious factors that maintain Indigenous disadvantage and proposes Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a suitable vehicle for identifying how race operates to privilege one group and disadvantage another. Further, he indicates how CRT also provides HE practitioners with the necessary tools to challenge the popular explanations and create new ways of transforming HE institutions into inclusive and secure environments for those racially 'othered'.

Professor Karen Nelson

Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) University of the Sunshine Coast

In her keynote address *The first year in higher education – where to from here?*, Karen Nelson acknowledges both the quantity and quality of the practical, empirical and theoretical knowledge underpinning the importance of the first year in higher education (FYHE) that has been developing globally for close to half a century and across Australasia seriously for several decades. The maturity of this activity is reflected in the large body of evidence about what works. In addressing the question of where to from here, Karen suggests that, while recognising that a successful transition to higher education provides the foundation for what follows, the role of institutions in producing student success throughout the student life-cycle, not just in their first year, is attracting considerable attention. She proposes this broader concept of student success as a way forward with the proviso that it demands the same degree of scholarship and attention as has been afforded to FYHE. The full keynote is presented as the *feature* in this issue.

Articles

The Belonging Project is revisited by Natalie Araujo and her colleagues from RMIT University in Australia (see Volume 4, Issue 2 https://fyhejournal.com/article/view/173). Demonstrating the success of a sustained transition initiative, the authors further explore the cohort building activities that embrace belonging as a lifecycle issue crucial to the student experience.

Lynette Faragher from the University of Southern Queensland and Henk Huijser from the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Darwin, Australia investigate the writing samples of first year students in a pilot study and apply Marzano's descriptors to suggest that developing academic writing skills is a process over time, rather than a skill that can be expected to be fully formed at entry level.

Mature-age distance learners are discussed by Ella Kahu from Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand. Interestingly, participants in Kahu's research felt little connection to the university, but connecting with fellow students through face-to-face courses and online forums was deemed significant for some to reduce their sense of isolation. She adds that while emotional engagement is crucial for the first year student, it is rarely clearly considered in course design and delivery. Similarly, from Wollongong University in Australia Lisa Thomas, James Herbert and Mark Teras examine online learning of non-traditional learners and note that both staff and students expressed greater satisfaction with online courses that successfully fostered a sense of belonging among students. Both articles demonstrate that many students and teachers seek to achieve a feeling of community and emotional engagement in the online learning context.

Anna Potter and Lee-Anne Bye from the University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia report on the application of in intervention program in a variety of contexts in a regional university. The program—a series of activities including student reflection, academic advising and action planning—was designed to support at risk first year students. The researchers found that the program was effective, but noted the criticality of enthusiastic teaching staff. Participants reported higher levels of connectedness to their tutor, willingness to seek help and academic confidence.

Practice Reports

From the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba, Australia, Christie White details the outcomes of a qualitative study designed to determine what theoretical model could be developed that would inform the improvement of student support services in Australia and effectively respond to the non-academic needs of low socioeconomic students. Of interest is the thematic trend that students, while aware of the support services provided, were more likely to uptake services or access Student Services if a person in their personal network encouraged them to do so. White's research has implications for Student Services' departments and the need to connect into a student's network of support.

An institutional mentoring network is discussed by Deborah Rodrigo and her colleagues from The University of Sydney, Australia who review three approaches to integrated mentor training. The network, a collaborative group of professional and academic staff responsible for developing and instigating innovative solutions for supporting first year students, has developed a mentor training component that can be adapted to suit the needs of each faculty-specific program.

Utilising technology as a communication tool in a faculty orientation week activity is examined by Shoaib Gill, Tristana Sidoryn and Olexij Straschko from the University of South Australia in Adelaide, Australia. The authors discuss the use of smart phone app known *Tour de Campus* to connect students together to enhance the students' sense of belonging to the campus and other students.

Charmaine Graham and her associates from the University of South Australia in Adelaide, Australia point to recent research on the higher occurrence of psychological distress in Australian university students compared with the general population, noting the vulnerability of first year university students in particular due to the significant changes associated with the transition to university. The authors present a study that explores sedentary behaviours and psychological distress levels of a cohort of first year health science undergraduates and highlight the varied and challenging lifestyles of today's student and the need for further research into student mental well-being.

Strategies to support academic staff teaching first year at the University of Technology in Sydney

(UTS), Australia are profiled by Kathy Egea, Neela Griffiths and Jo McKenzie. Funded through the Widening Participation Strategy, UTS's First Year Experience Project has generated a range of strategies resulting in an evolving learning community in which staff have a sense of belonging and identity.

STARS

Delegates of the conference – first known as the Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference and more recently the International First Year in Higher Education Conference - were pleased and excited to hear of the launch of a *new* Conference from 2015. STARS – Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success – responds to strong indications that continuing to focus only on the first year in higher education was limiting the dissemination of innovative work arising from a broader base of practice, scholarship and research. STARS builds on years of experience that has been shown to enhance the first year experience and will encourage the dissemination of initiatives that enhance the success of all students in tertiary education. The STARS Conference will provide the opportunity to disseminate and discuss current research, good practice, emerging initiatives and leading edge ideas that are aimed at enhancing students' tertiary learning experiences. Importantly the STARS Conference will continue to support and foster the community of academic and professional staff who are dedicated to enhancing the student experience. For more information about the topics that will be discussed in 2015 please see http://unistars.org/about/

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