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Think piece: Reflection on ‘the first year experience’

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The invitation to contribute a short reflective piece on the policy and practice of the first year experience is a welcome, if challenging, task. The complex set of personal, social and academic factors involved in successful progression through the first year of tertiary education provide ample scope for commentary and debate. Thus, drawing upon my own research focus and interests, and my experience of working with first year students and those who teach them, this commentary is centred in the need for care in recognising and defining the “First Year Experience”.

From a research perspective, factors associated with student persistence, engagement and progression in tertiary level education have been consistently studied in response to concerns regarding the level of attrition rates at this level of study. According to Yorke (2007, p1) ‘the engagement of students in higher education is influenced by a number of factors – for example, how they finance their studies; how they balance studies and part-time employment; and what they see as their aims in undertaking a program of study’. Updating this work in 2008, Yorke & Longden (2008, p2) again found that ‘the major influences on non-continuation [are]: poor choice of programme; lack of personal commitment to study; teaching quality; lack of contact with academic staff; inadequate academic progress; and finance’. Among the institutional variables that have been found to affect the first-year experience are induction methods, teaching/pedagogy, assessment and feedback, and student support.

Research on the First Year experience in an Irish context has similarly focused on identifying the possible causes of non-completion. The first comprehensive studies of non-completion in the Irish Higher Education sector emerge quite late relative to the extant international research and literature. Morgan et al. (2001) examined the completion rates of full-time undergraduates in the university sector who first entered higher education in the 1992–93 academic year, whilst a similar, but separate study focused on the Institute of Technology sector (Morgan et al. 2000). Both studies



found differences in completion between fields of study, entry requirements, and in the case of the IoT sector, gender. The most recent examination of student progression in higher education was conducted by Mooney et al. (2010) in a report for the Higher Education Authority. The 2010 study does provide a more nuanced and finely grained analysis of trends in non-completion. A multivariate analysis took account of gender, social class background and educational attainment of students. The impact of these factors allowed for greater discrimination between programmes and institutions based on the student composition of the institutions. Prior educational attainment, particularly in Mathematics and English, emerges as the strongest predictor of successful progression. As in previous studies, rates of non-completion vary across the fields of study. It is noteworthy that, although percentage levels may vary, the studies conducted at the beginning and end of a 10 year period (2000 – 2010) draw similar conclusions regarding key factors related to non-completion. In the context of my reflections, two key elements are worth highlighting. Firstly, Mooney (2010) among a number of conclusions states that “the strength of the correlation between prior educational attainment and progression should not distract from the equally clear finding of this report that higher education institutions matter, and that the teaching and learning strategies and the student experience created on campus have a significant impact on learning outcomes” (pg 62). The direction of the research focus on the first year experience tends, arguably, to detract from this simple, yet overarching message regarding student success

The theoretical and empirical lens on the first year experience has been one of attrition/departure; arguably a deficit model from either a student or institutional perspective. However, there has been little qualitative research into why students remain: what motivates them to persevere with their studies, and differentiates them from those who depart? How do individual students navigate the school to college transition, and adapt to new environments and roles? Thus, there is a need to discover what, during their initial encounters with an institution, encourages or discourages integration into the community of the discipline, faculty and institution. Even if solely viewing the first year experience from the departure perspective, a multi-theoretical approach is needed because college student departure is best characterized as an ill-structured problem, which defies a single solution (Braxton 2001). All students transitioning to college will experience adaptation to new academic and



social systems (Terenzini, et al., 1994), but the pace of adaptation will vary for individual students.

Taking the above into account there is a need to recognise, define and develop a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and mediates the first year learning experience for heterogeneous cohorts of students. Readers are directed to the work of Nelson and Kift (2005) on transition pedagogy which is framed around the interconnected organising principles of Transition, Diversity, Design, Engagement, Assessment and Evaluation and monitoring. The development of a transition pedagogy marks the point where an institution has evolved to what Lizzio (2009) describes as a coordinated whole of institution partnership which delivers a consistent message about the first year experience across the institution. The recent DIT STEER initiative (Student Transition; Expectations; Engagement; Retention) is a very positive evolution in the scope of definition of the First Year Experience in this institution.

Both national and institutional research has tended to focus, to some extent singularly, on student retrospective self- reports of factors in their decision-making regarding completion of their studies. In-depth qualitative data on the various dimensions of the first year student experience and their resultant impact on persistence/withdrawal are still required. This is reflected in a second key admission from Mooney (2010) in relation to the HEA commissioned study “Unfortunately, the data does not include more subjective information, like motivation for enrolling in higher education, financial wellbeing, participation in part-time employment, academic engagement, views on teaching staff, and attendance and participation in non-academic social and cultural activities, all of which may be expected to play a role in student retention (pg 42). This exposes the idea that as Fleming (2010) states in his response to the HEA report we may “need to listen in quite a different way to what students have to say and how they experience the learning environment of HE. This involves collecting not just their feedback questionnaires but their stories of struggle for success, retention, progression and sometimes non-completion”



The research literature on student college/course choice is similarly extensive, but predominantly quantitative. The nature of the decision-making process for individual students and the abundance of competing desires and constraints present in each case, indicate the need for a qualitative approach. There is a need for detailed research which listens to the experience of the student, and which attempts to understand from that experience, problems and issues that are foremost in the mind during the deliberation and formation of educational decisions. More creative means of inquiry may therefore allow us to explore alternative frameworks through which student voices in decision making could be heard, and within which new understandings could be brought to the educational journey of young adults.

In advocating the use of narrative approaches as pedagogic tools, Witherall and Noddings (1991) as cited by Dhunpath (2001, p.547) suggest that:

Telling our stories can be cathartic and liberating. But it is more than that. Stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning and researching to improve the human condition.

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