

# INTRODUCTION

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

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### Why a focus on the first year?

The international focus on the first-year experience (FYE) represents a strong and well-established movement in higher education. A focus on what happens in the first year at university, and how this influences student success, has become a fixture on the higher education landscape. In 2009, the annual International Conference on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was held for the 29th time. Through the years, its main sponsoring partner, the National Resource Center at the University of South Carolina, has been instrumental in establishing the movement world-wide.

The concern with first-year success has grown incrementally with the challenges facing higher education as a result of the emerging global trends of massification, widening access, the influence of technology and dwindling resources appearing to manifest most strongly at first-year level. It is little wonder then, that with the increase in student diversity internationally, educationists who seek to enhance student success should pay attention to the moment of greatest transition, the first year of study. There is much consensus in the literature about the challenges that the transition from school to university present and the need for early intervention (Tinto, 1999, 2003; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). One of the reasons for the focus on the first year is the overwhelming influence of schooling, which socialises students into 'particular approaches to learning and responses to educational institutions' (Mann, 2008:90). These approaches are not always conducive to fostering an open-minded, creative and critical approach towards knowledge and learning that is particularly desirable for higher education. A further challenge in the new millennium is the potential increase in distance between the literacy and numeracy conventions that students acquire from the school, the electronic media and other sources, on the one hand, and the manner in which communicative convention, identity and group participation are encouraged in higher education, on the other. For example, Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes (2009) point to the positive as well as negative effects on students of

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belonging to the digital generation, and to the need for educators to understand, manage and enhance, and indeed, even to model, these new literacies.

The need to support the transition to university life seems to be magnified in the South African higher education context. A study of 20 postgraduate students at the University of the Western Cape in 1995 revealed that students experienced points of transition at various times in their careers, but that the first year was the most intense of these, with comments elicited, such as, 'it was a very traumatic and harrowing experience' (Leibowitz, 1995:39). We believe that material and social inequality and divisions based on ethnicity pose far greater challenges than might be the case in North America, Europe or Australia, where much of the literature on the first-year experience is produced. These inequalities occur at national, institutional as well as individual levels, and affect the abilities of students from all race and class backgrounds to succeed at university, as Scott (Chapter 1) so compellingly demonstrates. Inequality amongst rich and poor in South Africa is amongst the highest in the world (United Nations Development Programme, 2008), and aggravating this is the inequality amongst higher education institutions in terms of funding (from various sources) as well as graduation rates (Council on Higher Education, 2006). Thus the ability to support students' entry into the academy remains both unequal and differentiated. Finally, the expenditure on higher education as a whole in South Africa remains lower, at 2.7%, than at 3.3% for the rest of the world (National Advisory Council on Innovation, 2006).

### A focus on success

In response to these challenges there has been significant growth in institutional structures and interventions aimed at facilitating the student's transition from school to university, and providing support during the first year. However, given the title of this book, 'Focus on First-Year Success', it would be useful to begin by attempting to establish a shared understanding of what success in the first year might represent, and thus a shared understanding of what it is that we are aiming for.

The work of Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot (2005) provides a working framework in which they define success according to eight different dimensions, namely the ability to:

- ▣ develop intellectual and academic competence;
- ▣ establish and maintain interpersonal relationships;
- ▣ explore identity development;
- ▣ achieve clarity about career goals;
- ▣ maintain health and wellness;
- ▣ consider faith and the spiritual dimensions of life;
- ▣ develop multicultural awareness; and
- ▣ develop a civic responsibility.

Inherent in this framework is the notion that the successful first-year learner is one who, whilst responsive to others and society, takes responsibility for his or her wellbeing and plays a significant role in his or her own development. Success is characterised

by a combination of disposition, attitude and strength, in order to learn *how* to learn. This is captured in three of the eight capabilities for students generated by Walker (2006a:128):

- ▣ 'educational resilience – able to navigate study, work and life';
- ▣ 'learning disposition – having confidence in one's ability to learn';
- ▣ 'knowledge and imagination – being able to gain knowledge of a chosen subject'.

Barnett (2007) sums up this disposition towards successful learning as having 'the will to learn'. Such a fundamental requirement for student success should be built from the first moment of entry across the university's portals.

### How should we respond?

Increasingly, both higher education and discipline-specific journals inform us of the many different approaches that are being adopted in response to the first-year challenge. In this context, we would agree with McNinnis (2001:110) that an analysis of work in the field shows that it is in many ways relevant to studies in higher education more broadly. What, according to this literature, is an appropriate response to the needs of the first-year student? The most significant call uttered in the past few decades has been for a student-centred approach to learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Dietsche, Chapter 2). We argue that careful attention should be paid to what precisely is meant by 'student-centred learning', and that this does not imply a narrow focus on student support. Even in this volume, many of the chapters describe various interventions, which although innovative and pedagogically sound, represent variations of student support activities. The point is not to deny the value of these interventions, but rather to ask to what extent these should be undergirded by more systemic attempts at transformation. Some years ago, McNinnis (2001:113) cautioned that much of the research in this field was student-focused, particularly with regards to underprepared students and the different forms of support that are made available to these students. We would contend that eight years later, this observation is still pertinent. Within the broader context of academic development in South Africa, Volbrecht and Boughey (2004) note that an exclusive focus on student support is linked to the marginalisation of academic development and thus lack of potential influence on the entire institution. Given the importance of the institution (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wicomb, 2008) in enhancing the chances for academic success of the first-year student, this point cannot be overemphasised.

In relation to support for student learning, the dedicated government funding to support extended degree programmes in South Africa and the influence this has had on research foci in recent years needs to be acknowledged. The significant focus on extended degree programmes and direct student support has inadvertently led many to associate the first-year experience with the 'struggling student' – a notion that we wish to counter. The needs and expectations of the student in the 21st century differ on multiple levels from those of previous generations, and this is true of *all* students (Dietsche, Chapter 2). Schreiner and Hulme (Chapter 5) advocate an affirmative approach which draws on the unique talents of each individual student, and in so

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doing, promote self-efficacy and what Walker (2006b) refers to as 'confident learning dispositions'. Acknowledging these different perspectives of student learning, research that elicits the student voice is appropriate. This assumption is legitimised when one considers that a number of the studies discussed in this book depended on student responses (Gregory, Chapter 7; Steenkamp, Baard & Frick, Chapter 10; Adendorff & Lutz, Chapter 12; Ngcobo, Chapter 15; Burgoyne, Jansen & Smit, Chapter 16). The debate around student agency, persistence and motivation, alluded to earlier, provides a variation on this theme and constitutes another component of student learning that is foregrounded in this collection (Gregory, Chapter 7; Davidowitz, Chapter 14). Adopting an 'affirmative' approach is not without its own questions and difficulties, however. There are a number of tensions in this debate. What is the nature of the preparedness and capabilities of our students? Do we value the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986:243) that our students bring to our universities, even if it is quite different from the prevailing institutional culture or 'invisible tapestry' (Strydom & Mentz, Chapter 4)?

To return to the issue of adopting a student-centred approach to learning, we would argue that this does not require a focus on the student as an isolated individual with innate and given characteristics and independent from his or her surroundings. The first-year experience is influenced by much more than simply what happens in the classroom (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Recent trends in educational research place much emphasis on the social dimension of learning. Notions of alienation and engagement (Mann, 2001), communities of practice (Wenger, 2000; Granville & Dison, Chapter 13) or disciplinary discourse communities (Kreber, 2009; Nel & Nel, Chapter 9; Granville & Dison, Chapter 13; Jacobs, Chapter 17) are foregrounded in current teaching and learning discourse. Participation in the community enables the novice student to acquire an understanding of the ways of doing that characterise the different disciplinary discourses. This understanding paves the way for the students to negotiate their way into the heart of the discipline where they can eventually share in the task of knowledge creation, see things in a different way (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004:409) while at the same time be able to critique and question prevailing ideological perspectives (Kreber, 2009:13).

McInnis (2001:113) suggested that studies focusing on the first-year experience need to look at what he terms the 'broader issues'. But what are the practical implications of this suggestion? His inclusion of the undergraduate curriculum in his understanding of these broader issues is one that we would agree with. Scott (Chapter 1) describes the curriculum as being 'fundamental to the educational process, enacting the faculty's educational philosophy and purposes'. Adopting an evidence-based approach, Dietsche (Chapter 2) draws on a number of different sources to formulate what he describes 'a new paradigm for promoting learning ...'. In both instances these authors are addressing the broader issues. Scott (Chapter 1) in particular provides much direction. He suggests that the choice facing higher education has to do with the extent to which there can be alignment between this philosophy and purpose and the 'preparedness, capabilities and orientations of the students' – this against

the backdrop of the national imperatives surrounding social justice and citizenship. To what extent do our curricula make space for students to engage realistically in the academic community of practice? These questions are implicit in a number of the chapters in this book and the responses provided ought to contribute to the ongoing debate. We would also argue that a focus on the first-year experience should include attention to an extremely important role-player: the lecturer (Leibowitz, Van Schalkwyk, Van der Merwe, Herman & Young, Chapter 18). Northedge and McArthur (2009:107) remind us that the lecturer plays a central role in guiding the student into the discipline, and that a 'learner-teacher relationship of some kind always lies at the heart of effective higher education'.

### The impetus for this book

As indicated previously, attention to the student experience and to student academic success in particular, has long been the subject of research and innovation in South Africa, with much of this attention focused on the first-year student. The history of the academic development movement in South Africa, dating back to the late 1980s, has been documented by Volbrecht and Boughey (2004). Their analysis of the various movements and trends informing academic development demonstrates the array of approaches towards facilitating student success, that are still evident in this book. What has most typified academic development in this country is a profound interest in social justice and equity and in students as human beings that *matter*. Unfortunately, this sphere of activity in South Africa, as well as elsewhere, has tended to be approached in a piecemeal fashion, rather than via a systemic approach.

It was the concern for students and humans that matter, as well as the need for greater efficiency, that led to the first institutional and holistic approach to the first-year experience in South Africa. Substantial dialogue, collaborative discussion and reflection on the international and literature by academics and administrators, led to the inception of the First-Year Academy (FYA) at Stellenbosch University in 2006. This is a virtual structure that has as its main objective the promotion of first-year success by focusing on the coordination of university-wide activities and by supporting faculty-specific interventions that have this same aim. Such a systemic-holistic approach is based on the premise that student success is not exclusively determined by what happens in the lecture rooms, but also by what happens *outside* the lecture rooms, thus taking cognisance of the entire system within which students function. In practical terms, this means that every aspect of the students' experience of university life influences their chances of achieving success. This is why every aspect of the University has been made part of the scope of the FYA, including the use of supportive measures such as early assessment and web portals as key infrastructure and tools for first-year students (Van der Merwe & Pina, Chapter 8). This all-encompassing understanding of the first-year experience provides an important premise for our book which showcases work that was presented during the *1st Southern African Conference on the First-Year Experience: Opening conversations on first-year success* and which was a project of the FYA. Although the decision to compile this publication was made at the start

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of the conference planning period, the overwhelming response to the conference itself and the need to capture some of the rich and diverse presentations, provided further motivation. Thus the book was born out of a desire to contribute to the call for change and to respond to the ideals expressed earlier. In so doing we hope to provide a platform for higher education practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds to participate in these conversations on a diverse array of themes and to enrich their own practice.

### An overview of the book

Many different lenses are used to explore the central theme of the book, each in its own way contributing to the conversation. Thus, while some chapters highlight national and international trends in higher education, others foreground student voices. Some of the chapters are abstract, or generic, while others are more pragmatic or specific to particular groups of students. The diversity that is evident from reading the table of contents emphasises the complexity and situatedness that underscores research of this nature. Each chapter, however, has the focus on the first-year experience as a common theme. The authors come from a wide range of backgrounds representing thirteen different higher education institutions in South and southern Africa as well as the UK and North America. Many are academics – some of long-standing – most having spent time in a first-year classroom. Others are academic development practitioners whose focused endeavours in supporting first-year students and the lecturers who serve them, are documented.

In the opening chapter of this book Scott describes the traditional image of the first university year as ‘one of exciting intellectual and personal discoveries, independence in thought and behaviours, widening horizons, and growth in confidence’. He goes on to suggest, however, that this is not the ‘first-year experience’ for the majority of students entering higher education in South Africa. Instead he argues that it is incumbent on the sector to reposition itself – to bring about meaningful change – if it is to respond to realities that its students are experiencing. The need for change emerges equally strongly in the Dietsche chapter where he calls for ‘significant change in the way higher education institutions interact with students, create learning environments and engineer opportunities for specific experiences’. Yet, reminds Dietsche, these ideas are not new. He cites Durkheim, who in the 19th century ‘argued for the importance of social networks, interpersonal interactions and community as the key to integrating and retaining individuals in social contexts’.

These two opening chapters provide a context for the book as a whole. The work comprises four sections and takes the reader on a journey through many different aspects of the first-year experience – from research through to reports and even personal accounts. While some are more theoretically grounded (Dietsche, Chapter 2; Schreiner & Hulme, Chapter 5; Nel & Nel, Chapter 9; Jacobs, Chapter 17), others adopt a more narrative or descriptive style to recount the implementation of an innovation or intervention (Person, Escoe & Lewis, Chapter 6; Van der Merwe & Pina, Chapter 8; Govinjee, Chapter 11; Adendorff & Lutz, Chapter 12). In the first

section the focus is broad, looking at either national systems or universal perspectives. Apart from Scott's challenging and factual perspective on the South African higher education sector, the Dietsche chapter foregrounds an important theme of the book that we have discussed earlier in this Introduction – that of establishing a student-centred approach that seeks to personalise the relationship that exists between the students and the institution. Green, Cashmore, Scott & Narayanan (Chapter 3), who write from a UK perspective, adopt an ethnographic approach that explores particular insights into aspects of student transitions. Their work, which presents the student voice, reminds the reader that university life is multi-layered and complex and that this impacts directly on the student experience. Issues of diversity provide the main theme for Chapters 4 (Strydom & Mentz) and 5 (Schreiner & Hulme) which address the challenges that diversity presents and the possibilities inherent in seeking to capitalise on the strengths that all students bring to the higher education playing field.

The second section looks at institutional initiatives and interventions that adopt a holistic and integrated approach to students, managing diversity, using information and communication technologies (ICTs) and aspects of academic discourse and reading. In Chapter 6, Person, Escoe and Lewis pick up on the theme of learning communities, emphasising the importance of adopting an integrated approach to student success. As is the case with the FYA at Stellenbosch University, they draw on both the academic and the social world of the first-year student in their study. Gregory (Chapter 7) then provides a southern African (Botswanan) perspective on this same topic while Van der Merwe and Pina (Chapter 8) demonstrate the value of using portal technology to support the overall goals of the FYA at SU. The final chapter in this section (Nel & Nel), speaks to an academic development approach that focuses on academic reading.

The final section of the book presents a series of case studies. While some of these studies address themes that have already been introduced, such as academic literacy and extended degree programmes (Granville & Dison, Chapter 13; Davidowitz, Chapter 14; Ngcobo, Chapter 15), others contribute to providing a rich description of the first-year experience by opening conversations on assessment, tutorial programmes and issues relating to the language of teaching and learning. These case studies also represent a variety of disciplines including Accounting (Steenkamp, Baard & Frick, Chapter 10), Law (Govindjee, Chapter 11), Chemistry (Adendorff & Lutz, Chapter 12) and Economics (Burgoyne, Jansen & Smit, Chapter 16). Perhaps more importantly, however, these studies bear testimony to the commitment of the many academics who have sought to adopt a scholarly approach to their teaching. It is this work that Scott in the first chapter suggests needs to be overtly rewarded and recognised.

Having explored the context, expounded different approaches and given voice to the students, the book's spotlight moves to the university teacher. Jacobs (Chapter 17) revisits the notion of disciplinary discourse community that had been introduced earlier by Granville and Dison (Chapter 13), describing how it becomes crucial for lecturers to be able to make overt that which is often hidden for the newcomer student.



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Leibowitz, Van Schalkwyk, Van der Merwe, Herman and Young (Chapter 18) explore the notion of ‘becoming’ good at what you do – in contributing to first-year success. This final chapter provides what we hope will be a signpost that shows *where to from here* as it highlights the need for reflective, responsive and scholarly teachers and academic development practitioners.

### Final thoughts

South Africa’s unique history and educational realities add several layers of complexity to the debate about how to respond to the first-year experience – one that has more to do with our divided past. In our country, higher education faces very specific challenges; challenges that impact across the sector. Nationally, there is a clear mandate that institutions contribute to meaningful nation-building and social transformation, promoting ideals of citizenship and social justice. Throughout history, universities have been places where vigorous debate and rigorous scholarship have influenced society’s thinking on these issues, where identities are shaped and future leaders are born. Yet, how will this happen if one out of every three young people entering higher education in South Africa leave by the end of their first year (Scott, Chapter 1) and if success at undergraduate level seems to be ‘racially differentiated’ (Schreiner and Hulme, Chapter 5)? Questions as to why students leave university without a qualification provide stark reminders as to the debilitating socio-economic standing of many entering students, the impact of an inequitable schooling system, and tensions that can result from the cultural, language, socio-economic and other dimensions of diversity that characterise most of our universities (Kreber, 2009). These questions demand responses. In this book we present some of these responses, mindful of the fact that they provide merely a glimpse of the status quo and that the reality is both complex and multi-faceted.

Much endeavour in higher education is currently focused on the success of its first-year cohorts. As such, it places a burden on dwindling resources. It is, therefore, incumbent on practitioners to adopt a reflective approach to their day-to-day practice. It is, however, equally important for the sector to be accountable and to evaluate and document this work rigorously, and to strike a balance between basic and applied research. This will open up a space for more proactive, broad-based research rather than reactively focusing on, for example, student attrition (Gregory, Chapter 7; McInnis, 2001; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Importantly we need to consider how what we are doing will contribute to our students eventually being successful in a super-complex world (Barnett, 2007). In this context it is necessary to consider the implications of what this book contains and to discern the extent to which responses to the important questions posed at the start of this introductory section have been formulated. While some of the chapters close with summative comments that recommend a particular approach, strategy or design, and describe the lessons learned, others acknowledge that, in exploring a particular aspect of the first-year experience, they have in reality exposed more avenues requiring investigation. Such is the nature of educational research.



Hodkinson (2004:24) has suggested that a key outcome of research ought to be *learning – learning* that will enable us to ‘tell better stories ... that provide better understanding of aspects of education ...’. Our intention with this work is to provide texts that will contribute to such learning among those higher education practitioners who have a responsibility at first-year level. It is our hope that in telling our ‘better stories’ we will indeed open conversations on first-year success.

### Notes to the reader

While some of the chapters are written from an international perspective (Dietsche; Green, Cashmore, Scott & Narayanan; Person, Escoe & Lewis; Schreiner & Hulme) most of the work focuses on South and southern Africa. For the international reader it will be important to obtain an understanding of the South African higher education context which Scott’s opening chapter provides. Terms or phrases which may require some elucidation include the following:

- ▣ The references to the ethnicity of different groups of students reflect the legacy of South Africa’s past and the inequities that were, and in many cases still are, prevalent in education (primary, secondary and tertiary). Generally reference to *black* students will imply black (African, coloured, Indian) unless otherwise stated.
- ▣ *Extended degree programmes* refer to programmes that generally extend the generic, three-year Bachelors degree by one year, providing additional foundational content during year one.
- ▣ In the previous political dispensation in South Africa, Model C schools were predominantly for white children and were better resourced. The name has been maintained in common South African discourse as it denotes a greater level of resourcing than that which is found at many other schools.
- ▣ A faculty refers to the structure within which a specific broad field of study would be housed. For example, Faculty of Education. Academic staff members are referred to as lecturers in the context of their teaching role.

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