

European First Year Experience Conference: Learning through a third space development community

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ABSTRACT

The European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference has existed for nearly 20 years. It has no formal infrastructure or funding to maintain its existence, just a common interest (Kenny, 2016) around a desire to support all students to successfully transition into and through university regardless of their pre-entry status, and to promote and develop the strategies, policies and practices for those students and staff who can enable this transition regardless of their role. This is enacted through the will, enthusiasm and perseverance of a community of scholars and practitioners drawn from across Europe (Bonne & Nutt, 2016). This voluntary organisation, we argue, has become an effective third space development community. Colleagues will come and go as the conference moves to different countries each year in a deliberate attempt to broaden engagement across the nations of Europe, but the message is being shared. At the heart of the community is a group of people who have all hosted the conference. They provide the engine to drive the identification of new conference hosts and the creation of opportunities for the sharing of good practice. This diverse group of leaders embrace the “common experiences, needs, expectations, and access to opportunity” identified by Parkinson et al. (2020, p. 195), as important for community-based development, as they have as a foundation the desire to share practice that enhances student and staff experiences. They operate across and within universities, working within a third space that challenges the silos that exist, and offer a focused approach to collaborative, community led, educational development of the first-year experience.

Keywords: first year experience, students, educational development, third-space, collaboration, community

Introduction

The European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference services a community that focuses on enhancing students’ transitions into and through their first year of study. It provides development opportunities for all those who work with first year students and students transitioning into and out of the first year. It creates an environment for developing practice, research and discussions related to the learning experiences of first year students. The conference community comprises people from a range of roles and higher education (HE) institutions across Europe. Participants include academic developers, academics, researchers, professional staff, managers and students. This is a development community where people work within and across those roles to enhance teaching and develop practice within HE institutions (and in associated

settings, e.g. some pre-entry activities and organisations). This is both an informed learning and development space and a rich space for participants to impact their individual practice and influence their institution's practice, whilst empowering a community that reaches well beyond the boundaries of any individual institution, or an individual conference event.

As a community (its members, its activities, its ways of being), it has created a third space for learning. What was at the outset simply a conference organisation for a group of individuals who had an interest in supporting First Year Experience (FYE) has become a supportive learning environment, where staff in a range of roles along with student participants can share and challenge practice, and learn about each other's perspective on FYE and transitions. This article provides some explanations about what the EFYE Conference is, its history, and how it works to develop staff; we also explore how this learning community works as a third space (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022b; Whitchurch, 2008) development environment and consider how the event and community are beginning to have a wider impact and potentially become a movement for change in a range of European contexts.

Context

On 27th June 2023, the 17th EFYE conference began with a keynote challenge for the 333 delegates to focus upon their contextual need to create institutional change across the 24 delegate countries, that would most benefit their first year students' experiences. The challenge was portrayed as moving from the isolated programme or departmental approaches within a single institution to an approach that might see wider institutional or national collaborations (McIntosh & Millard, 2023). The conference was to witness 148 engaging sessions offering a variety of perspectives from across the world.

The opening keynote concluded with the announcement that two Scottish universities, Abertay and University of West of Scotland, would be working together to initiate a Scottish FYE Network (Hogan et al, 2024). This was well timed as the Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland (QAAS) had just completed its three-year enhancement theme topic, which asked universities to consider how they could foster resilient learning communities (QAA Scotland, 2023). All Scottish universities had initiated activities that sought to develop learning communities, many of which were focused on new students. Therefore, the momentum from such work could be harnessed and redirected to a longer-term piece of work that could offer some form of legacy.

The hope and intention are that the focus of a Scottish first year community could offer a new space for the development of staff in the region. In a sense this aligns with Baume's (2016) notion of academic development as focusing on three things: academic developers, academic staff who engage in academic development, and the development of academic practice ('the people', the field', the work', p. 96). Baume (2016) challenged his readers to visit, study and talk "with everyone else in the University and the wider world who share our concern to improve student learning" (p. 97). But a focus on a wider first year community also engages with Parkinson et al.'s (2020) perspective on developing educational practice and those involved in supporting educational practice outside institutional contexts and constraints:

Unbinding academic development from institutional settings opens up the possibility of fostering developmental communities of interest comprised of otherwise isolated individuals and providing tailored support that responds directly to their experiences, interests, and choices (p. 199)

The Scottish network initiative was not the first of its kind. Over the past ten years, networks had been created across South Africa, Norway, Finland, and Turkey, acting as catalysts for change in those nations (Nutt, 2016). In the USA, the National Resource Center for FYE and Students in Transition at South Carolina University, operating since 1986, co-ordinates national and international events, offers research grants and publishes its own journal and books. Within Europe, there is no such coordination through a single formal organisation, merely an enthusiasm from a core group of activists who have hosted EFYE conferences and who “share common experiences, needs, expectations, and access to opportunity” for students and staff to be involved in enhancing the FYE across Europe (Parkinson et al., 2020, p. 195).

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in hosting and attending the conference. This may be partly influenced by governments, funders, and regulators wanting to see a greater return on student investment. As Gardner (2023) identifies, the first-year experience is important because it is the students first encounter with their university and “it is a period when we help students develop what can and should become lifelong habits for living, working and citizenship” (p. 20). The 17 EFYE conferences have engaged over 4000 staff and students from across Europe in enhancing this vision.

As an (informal) organisation, the EFYE annual conference organising committee is a loosely formed collective of previous conference organisers. There is not an office, but there is a periodically maintained website. The organisation operates on goodwill and commitment that is focused around the annual conference. Over the 17 years of EFYE some of the event hosts have now retired or changed role and therefore, at present, there is a central core of eight to ten individuals from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, Finland, Norway and Scotland. Each year this group is refreshed as a new conference is hosted and a new person joins the EFYE committee. Details of some of the previous hosts approaches can be found in Bonne and Nutt (2016) and have included universities in Teesside, Goteborg, Wolverhampton, Groningen, Antwerp, Manchester, Helsinki, Nottingham, Bergen, Ghent, Birmingham, Utrecht, Cork, Aarhus, Graz, and Dundee.

Each year the organising committee receives bids to host a forthcoming event and these are scrutinised. This review process focuses upon: the attractiveness of the proposal to an international audience; the relevance of the themes to current issues in developing practice; the evidence supporting the practice or research; and the practicality of successfully delivering what is proposed. However, the title and focus for the conference belongs to that institution and its perception of need in the sector, which often has elements localised to that nation. This might see a focus on an issue such as learning communities or student analytics, but it may also target specific groups such as academic developers, study counsellors, or student organisations. The 17th conference, at Abertay University, saw a deliberate attempt to better engage with student organisations (Blackwell-Young & Millard, 2023) as the conference theme extolled the virtue of discovering the individual needs of students and personalising that first-year student experience to enable student success. This followed institutional advances at Abertay (Millard et al., 2023) that had embedded personalised student diagnostics within the curriculum to seek to support the development of student academic and social foundations. The institutional desire to host the EFYE conference was founded around a desire to make all staff at the university aware of the practice and pedagogy around the first-year student experience. The desire to engage student organisations in the EFYE development community builds on successful activity and programmes that integrate the individual and collective voices of students as contributors, collaborators, and partners in wider educational and academic development practices (Healey et al., 2014; Mathrani & Cook-Sather, 2020; Ody & Carey, 2016) and in personalising first-year student experiences (Millard & Janjua, 2020, Morari et al., 2024; Ody & Carey, 2013).

The aim is to create spaces for collaborations and partnerships coalescing around common themes allowing attendees to operate in marginal (Flint, 2020) spaces, in ways that support mutual benefits to individuals, institutions and wider communities. As the theme of each conference varies, this inevitably results in a churn within the conference attendees and sees new conversations being generated throughout the community across the years. Table 1 shows a simple breakdown of the roles of participants for the most recent event (in Abertay) and offers a previous example (in Bergen, where the theme related to student support and institutional change) to show that the range of types of people participating does vary slightly at different events, but it is within a broader common picture of mixed participant profiles.

Table 1 Designations of conference attendees at two EFYE conferences.

	Bergen 2015	Abertay 2023
Academic/Faculty	15%	21%
Student services, library & professional services	59%	49%
Academic developers	18%	19%
Students/Student organisations	8%	11%
	257 attendees	333 attendees

The fact that around 20% of the participants are academic developers is noteworthy. The role of academic developer generally involves identifying best practice and then sharing it with others in one's own institution, and can also involve participating in institutional evolution and change that bridges internal boundaries (Denny, 2022; Taleo & Vallis, 2022).

EFYE conference: Diverse participants and common interests?

Parkinson et al. (2020, p. 197) discuss the possibility of a 'transformative' aspect to staff development, which they suggest is more likely to happen outside institutions. EFYE was established by a small group who were mostly, but not exclusively, educational developers coming from different HE institutions, with different missions and from several countries in middle and northern Europe. This is important in understanding how this community has grown and developed. Over time the conference has shifted across themes and foci (as noted above) but always the focus has been on developing staff, initiatives and strategies that support students to learn, develop, and succeed.

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011, p. xxii) talk of boundary spanning leadership and "the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across group boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal". This definition must feel very familiar to many involved in staff development and support for student success in HE institutions as they seek to enable institutional evolution and change. It also reflects on the diversity of the EFYE community, which contains a melting pot of academic, professional and student participants who can identify a variety of opportunities and sometimes conflicts that they encounter on their development journeys and as they strive to enhance first year student learning experiences. Millard and Lowe (2022, p. 191) described a key aspect of their role as academic and staff developers as being "positive irritants' within our own organisations, always striving for improvement and never satisfied with the status quo". This approach is quality driven, seeking to improve the standards of our teaching, programmes and the student experience.

The experience of developing and being part of the EFYE conference and network convinces us as a committee that we need to continue to bring together the range of people involved in student transitions and first year experiences to make a genuine difference to student learning. Developing teachers and curricula is central to this. Gardner (2023) explains his own focus on developing staff as working out “how faculty think, work, create, discover and find the very best possible ways to make use of the extraordinary freedom the profession gives us” (p. 125). In contemporary HE, student learning involves a wide range of staff in a diversity of roles, and we need to be learning from each other. This is, we would argue, educational development across boundaries that engages a third space.

Kift (2009) conceptualised this for curriculum and institutional development as ‘transition pedagogy’. While the focus of the examples that Kift and others have developed (Kift, n.d.) is primarily within institutions and is about curricula change within HE settings in Australia, the concept has been picked up in European settings and has become a key driver in the EFYE annual conference series for getting the range of people ‘around the table’ that Kift envisaged.

But it is not just about getting people around the table; there are challenges to working across roles to change pedagogic and support practices. Manathunga (2007) presented the notion of a ‘holistic academic development pedagogy’ (p. 32). She focused on academic developers primarily working with academics, but her concept of holistic development pedagogy has relevance here. If we, as Kift (2009), take a wider position on developing practice, which involves all staff and students who influence first year learning, we can consider the EFYE conferences as holistic and as ‘third space’ practice. Working with the range of student and staff colleagues involved in the academic journey, EFYE conferences enable a developmental community to let go of what Manathunga calls the ‘authority’ (p. 31) of our roles – with the intention of addressing the learning conditions and needs of first year students, and students in transition in the most creative ways possible, realising the benefits of a holistic third space.

EFYE conference as a third space community

The above suggests that one of the strengths of the EFYE conference may be the bringing together of a range of staff and students who influence and shape the student experience and success in their institutions and beyond, and those who develop others involved in student learning. Here we want to explore this multi-role activity as ‘third space’ working (Whitchurch, 2008, 2013) in more detail, and focus on the activity and the development of all involved. There is a growing recognition that third space practice is vital to the future of HE (see Grant, 2021) – this is also sometimes called integrated practice (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022a). The term ‘integrated practice’ highlights the interlinking of both academic and professional practice (p. 280). But many who work in this integrated way, across the conventional role boundaries of HE, experience a sense of ‘liminality’ (Mori et al., 2022). So, this ‘space’ is important but can also be uncomfortable, or undefined.

Third space working across conventional academic/professional boundaries is most often understood and explored within institutions and focused on specific projects and/or resolving particular issues within and outside the curriculum (e.g. retention and student success (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022b)).

While many roles in HE are clearly based in either the academic or professional domain (though individuals in these roles may well be working across and into other domains), some are ‘between’; for example, educational developers and learning technologists. Educational developers can act as important bridges between spaces and staff within an institution (Denny, 2022).

Despite the primary focus of writing and discussions about third space work being based in institutions, there is growing recognition that integrated practice is not constrained by university walls (for a recent discussion on this, see Arnold (2022)). What EFYE has created is just such a third space outside institutions, drawing on the expertise and motivation of staff (and students) to develop and contribute to this space (Carey, 2022). While we recognise that all conferences create learning spaces outside institutional settings, we see the EFYE conference as doing two other things: firstly, bringing together the range of people involved in delivering the student learning experience and secondly making that space a learning community, which has an impact on both participants and potentially on their institutional, and sometimes national, context. First year experience may be considered the 'domain of interest' for this community (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Keeling and Hersh (2012), in discussing their experiences in the USA, identified that learning "is fractured on our campuses" and is "divided not by bad intentions, but by traditions, tensions and training" (p. 64). As a community, the EFYE conference provides a way of connecting and developing all those who participate to provide better learning experiences for students in HE, whilst also creating a greater understanding about others who influence student success. As one student support worker commented when talking about EFYE "it broadens the academic developers view on what is important to students' learning and success and (reminds them) that they should open up for collaboration with other groups of employees in their work".

An aspect of the EFYE conference as a learning community is that it offers a core place of belonging when institutional communities and connections are being constantly disrupted by restructuring, job changes, and political uncertainty (see discussions on HE changes in, for example, Grant (2021); Kernohan and Dickinson (2023); Team Wonkhe (2020); Woodgates (2023)) It is also a community for those who are often alone or one of only a small number of, for example educational developers, or learning support workers in their home institution.

As a previous host of the conference in Norway noted:

A good group of people find their way to most EFYE conferences, even if the themes don't hit their direct work area. This group of people come again and again and gives the conference a social base like a family.

Given the substantial fluctuations in roles and activities for individual staff in HE institutions in the UK and beyond (Hall, 2022, p. 29), EFYE participants may have, or move across, a range of 'jobs' which intersect with student transitions and still maintain their connection to this community. The holistic nature of the development community still holds a place for that individual and provides a core community to learn from, learn with and belong to. But despite the stability of the core, individual members may change over time – a participant may come only one year, but still make connections, experience key learning and change their practice in small ways back home. Or an individual might come when the conference is near enough to their home country, so be in attendance every two or three years, but easily fit back in and find new learning, reassurance and support.

Attending EFYE Conferences provides me with inspiration and enjoyment within my role – it is by far my favourite part of the job – going to EFYE, meeting international colleagues, gaining an international perspective, learning from others, and sharing my own work. [Regular attendee]

What are the characteristics of the EFYE conference community?

As suggested above, we see the EFYE conference as a specific third space for development. People come together from across institutions, countries and roles into a safe space to explore the best ways to support first year student learning and transition. They learn from each other and see the many different perspectives of those involved in this vital part of student experience.

Wenger (Farnsworth et al., 2016) has argued in discussions about his concept of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), that it is “a learning partnership related to a domain of practice” and has articulated how this works: “members of a community of practice may engage in the same practice while working on different tasks in different teams. But they can still learn together” (p. 143). What is particularly helpful in Wenger’s explanation of communities of practice is the notion of the team as part of “a language of learning as a human experience, the experience of people as social beings” (p. 144). We can read about, or be told about, the range of actors and elements that are pertinent to understanding student learning and how to improve teaching and learning, but by interacting with those actors and exploring the elements in a social context (for example at a conference), we may be far more likely as ‘social beings’ to learn.

The field of organisational behaviour, and organisational culture in particular, provides a way to explore the nature of the EFYE community: the type of community it is, and how it works. Edgar Schein’s model (2004) describes organisational culture in three levels that are visible to the individuals making up the organisation, namely:

- Surface manifestations: the most visible level of culture, combining physical objects and observable behaviours;
- Values: determine how work is done and how situations are dealt with, guiding the behaviour of individuals in the organization; and
- Basic assumptions: assumptions are unspoken, often ‘taken for granted’, relating to how individuals behave. Consequently, they can be the most difficult to comprehend (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2019).

Table 2 aligns these levels to highlight how the EFYE conference ‘works’ to both enable the ongoing enhancement of the EFYE community and provide a space for effective learning and development.

Table 2 Levels of organisational culture applied to EFYE conferences and community

Levels of culture	Application to EFYE	
Surface manifestations	Generic examples	EFYE examples
	Ceremonies	Each year the next conference host is announced at the conference dinner with the receipt of a piece of regionally typical headwear.
	Courses	All new participants are invited to attend an EFYE orientation session to introduce them to key theories and terminology of FYE.
	Rites	A pre-conference social event is the traditional start of conference on the evening before the first full day, highlighting the importance of social interaction
	Heroes	The founder of the EFYE conference series, Dr. Diane Nutt, continues to attend EFYE and now chairs the EFYE Awards Committee.
	Language	Specific parallel session types (Show and Tell') are a mainstay of EFYE to provide emerging work a space for sharing and constructive critique. The sessions receive continually positive feedback from participants.
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Respect, responsibility, reciprocity (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). ● Collaboration across institutions and across roles. ● Positive critique and mentoring. ● Student presenters encouraged; co-presenting is common. ● Organising committee members are active participants, focusing on making connections between people from different countries and roles. ● A focus on building relationships and drawing in new participants. ● Hosted on a university campus meaning participants are 'living' or experiencing the environment as 'first years' themselves. 	
Basic assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● FYE is everyone's responsibility and therefore a partnership approach to its development is necessary. ● For change to occur, action is required. Participants in EFYE should drive this change at their own institutions or community, within their sphere of influence. ● Effective practice is evidence based. 	

A participant new to the most recent EFYE event noted the organisational culture of the conference in action when reflecting on their conference experience:

It was my first time, and I didn't know quite what to expect. The conference was amazing! Everyone was really welcoming, I met loads of wonderful people, got to share ideas and chat about "stuff"! Everything I went to was useful, even the session I ended up in by accident. It was by far one of the

best conferences I've been to and the best for coming alone because apart from the first few minutes as registration, I never felt alone.

The orientation session for new participants is a key vehicle to support a sense of belonging to the conference community, with one attendee noting:

[...] it was the first session for those who were new to the conference. This is where I met people and got to know a few people who I spent most of my time with throughout the conference. It is the most inclusive and friendly conference I have been to.

Operating with a model that aligns more closely to a distributed leadership approach, the organising committee seeks to reflect the values and basic assumptions that permeate the culture of EFYE, by encouraging returning participants to engage more fully in conference activity through chairing sessions and supporting future conference hosts. Seeking future hosts from previous participants – and inviting all conference hosts to be part of the organising committee – has supported the transition of the conference series from a standalone conference to a development community. It ensures traditions and culture are passed on whilst encouraging fresh perspectives and challenges for each conference, meaning it meets the needs of the current cohort of participants. This aligns with the experiences noted by Avery and Said (2017), also discussed in Parkinson (2020), in relation to supporting academic (refugee) communities in situ and necessarily outside the institutional setting. The focus of educational development activity is directed by the community itself and the “agenda-setting [should be] determined by the people concerned” (Avery and Said, 2017, p. 106). Wenger (in Farnsworth et al., 2016) suggested that an effective community of practice involved participants “having claim to competence in [that] community” (p. 151).

Impact of the EFYE conference community

Our conference community has had several impacts over the 17 years it has existed, and these will be explored in more detail in this section.

Impact: 'Staff' development examples in relation to individuals and hosting institutions

Hosting the EFYE conference provides a development opportunity for an institution and for its staff. This works in a number of ways, for example: outside voices are brought into institutional development activity; staff from the same institution talk with each other in contexts outside their everyday environment; and institutions can highlight their own successes and build on these through the input of delegates from other contexts. Using conference evaluation feedback, and from a short survey to previous hosts of EFYE, we noticed impact themes identified by participants and hosts, including increase in and support for research for student success; greater focus on FYE at local or national level; opportunities for European collaborative projects; personal professional development and career progression. Below we have included a few examples.

The host of the third conference in Wolverhampton (in 2008) noted:

Hosting the conference had a big impact for us, FYE as a 'thing' enabled conversations about the student journey and how important orientation is. We also saw more people writing about FYE and becoming involved in networks.

An early conference (in Groningen in 2009) had ‘researching the first year experience’ as the key theme. The idea for this theme began at the first EFYE conference through a conversation between two scholars who met there (see Jansen, 2016); their meeting led to an international research collaboration, which fed back into the decision about the topic of the 2009 conference. This initial conversation and the subsequent conference created the ongoing commitment of EFYE conferences to focus on evidence informed practice (Yorke, 2016, p. 49) and encouraged developing research about the first-year experience across countries. The initial conversation also led to the development of the student ‘Readiness and experiences questionnaire’ (Jansen et al. (2013), see Jansen, 2016).

Several regular delegates (including conference hosts from Nottingham and Ghent) led an Erasmus+ project about the use of learning analytics (Onwards from Learning Analytics, n.d.) emerging through networking at EFYE conferences. This project has created a range of resources to support individuals and institutions. Another example of positive outcomes for hosts:

Raised the profile of our team and department within the university and enabled connections to be made with colleagues within the university and internationally. I have also subsequently connected colleagues within my institution with colleagues that I have met at EFYE where there are shared interests.

On an individual level, one of the two (joint) hosts (from Nottingham Trent University), who was fairly early in her career in academic development and research also experienced personal development opportunities:

I have subsequently worked with international colleagues met through EFYE on collaborative projects to support the student experience. Running the event increased my international network greatly [...] and I have continued to re-connect with [them] at later EFYE conferences.

After the conference was hosted in Helsinki, one of the two hosts (it was jointly run between two universities) led the introduction of a first-year experience survey, which is used to support conversations and development activities with academic staff about their programmes and teaching practice, as well as enhancing support services for students starting their studies.

Another previous host (who had been attending EFYE conferences for a number of years prior to hosting) commented on how arranging the EFYE conference in 2015, together with the book he wrote (Sæthre, 2014), gave him significant professional authority. Sæthre says: “University leaders really believed in me and my measures, and also in the suggestion to establish a national network” (personal communication, July 25, 2023).

Impact through: Student organisers and delegates

Students have attended every EFYE conference in varying numbers, and many conferences have had both students and staff on the organising groups. Consequently, there is a legacy of small-scale and larger-scale impact across the years, often related to the way in which the EFYE conference and community has impacted the students’ professional development (Carey, 2022) and career direction.

From student attendee to student lead-presenter

At an early EFYE conference, a Danish student attended the event with other students and their tutor who was presenting a paper about their work with the students. In the early conferences, we invited all students

attending to meet together as a group to help connect across countries and support induction into the conference and community. Two years later at a subsequent conference, a young woman approached the conference chair to say she had been at that meeting (as a first year student) and had been inspired to work with a central department supporting first years. She had also felt able to submit a paper as a student presenter (now in her third year), her first paper. Some years later she attended as a member of staff in a student support unit and presented another paper in conjunction with some of the students she worked with.

From student organiser to conference co-host

The conference at Birmingham City University (BCU, in 2017) had student partnership as a key theme and employed a series of students as part of its organising team, which brought a positive energy to the conference. Fast forward to the conference in Abertay (in 2023), and the local co-chair was one of the BCU student team, who was now working as a Lecturer in Academic Development.

Impact beyond: What's the evidence that the EFYE conference may also be becoming a movement for change?

How is the EFYE conference series working to transform teaching practice or learning support beyond the individual participant or the hosting institution?

Conference hosts have commented on the importance of spreading the geographical placing of the event for having a wider impact and drawing a wider range of European participants. One of our joint authors, who hosted the conference in Norway in 2015 and set up the 'Norwegian Competency Network for Student Success in Higher Education' said of the conference:

The most important thing is probably that we have gained access to research and research-based practice, which has provided arguments for starting up various measures. In particular, this applies to measures that do not directly concern the teaching itself, but more about the holistic learning environment, such as conditions around the students' well-being, motivation and commitment.

The Network for Student Success has members across Norwegian universities and is now influential in developing practices to support first year student experiences and student success.

Another example of EFYE activity acting as a catalyst or enabler for national agendas came from EFYE 2019, hosted by Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), which took the conference theme 'A Good Start is half the work...' quite literally and used the conference as a launch pad to inform the development of a national approach to student success. Collaborating with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, CIT hosted a 'National Think Tank on Student Success' on the final day of EFYE 2019, with more than 80 participants drawn from the Irish HE sector and invited EFYE participants. The key themes of the final strategy document headlined with quotes from EFYE 2019 keynote speakers and EFYE committee members.

What will the future bring for the EFYE conference community? And what challenges do we face? We envisage a growing body of research and enhanced practice across European universities recognising that currently the conference community is reaching across some parts of northern and eastern Europe, but not yet reaching the south. We have always had a few delegates from that area, but we note that change seems to come with hosting the conference and then spreading into that country or region, and hosting the conference remains a challenge for some.

Perhaps one of the key challenges and opportunities for the EFYE conference community as it evolves and grows is to remember its core purpose. EFYE was created as a conference to improve the first-year experience of students. As a community it needs to continue to have this at its heart and to do this we believe it is vitally important to embrace student partners and organisations in that journey. As Curran and Millard (2015) suggested, staff developers need to establish an effective and meaningful partnership with students and student organisations that ensures the prominence of student voices in institutional first year developments and, we would argue more widely in development activities that take place outside of institutional setting as in the work of the EFYE conference. Further work is needed to explore how these voices can be amplified within EFYE, and so supported to be amplified within local institutions. The impact on students who engage in the EFYE conference and community has longer term benefits for their individual career development and the institutions that engage them as students and/or staff, which presents an opportunity for the EFYE community.

Conclusion

The EFYE conference has become a dynamic third space development community. It brings together representatives from a range of roles involved in supporting first year learning experiences wherever and however they happen. It is educational development at work outside of institutional settings that deliberately recognises the significance of shared learning outside institutions (as Parkinson et al. (2020) advocate). It is also a third space activity, which is key to the future of universities (according to Grant (2021)). More than just an annual conference, it is a third space for enabling all staff involved in student learning and developing pedagogy to develop new ideas and approaches in the widest sense.

The relative informality of the EFYE conference and its organising committee has allowed the true common interests and needs of the community to shape the ongoing organisation. But 17+ years of the EFYE conference has developed a community ethos, which has a sense of becoming more of an enabler and movement for change in many European contexts. A piece of delegate feedback from the Abertay conference in 2023 perhaps enshrines the EFYE conference community and its ambition:

I also gained a larger sense of community, of “we’re all in this together”. There was a moment during the first keynote [...] that I suddenly felt so privileged and grateful to be in the world at this moment working alongside so many thoughtful and dedicated HE professionals.

Biographies

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