



Special Issue

Guest Editorial – Systems and cultures of first-year success: evidence, relationships and change

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This third part of the Special Issue brings together papers where the focus is beyond the curriculum setting (see part two) and while students remain key to the work explored here (see part one), the lens here is wider. This section explores institutional strategies, wider theorising and reflection. We see authors considering systemic changes and broader contextual considerations for supporting first year students in a tertiary world. Initiatives described in this section are focused on changing cultures, they are often university wide, or sometimes across universities.

We note that in the wider context of European first-year experience, there are ongoing developments, which are likely to continue to shape university practices and support for student success across European settings. Some papers in this Special Issue (including Van Wiele's paper in this section) are based on Erasmus + European projects for example, which are now well established. More recently the European University Association (n.d.) has been exploring quality processes, teaching development and other aspects of HE systemic framing around student experience. Our own European First Year Experience Conference, which was the catalyst for this Special Issue, continues to reach more countries and frame ideas and practices in local, institutional, national and European settings. The future of student success in a tertiary world looks bright.

Institutional initiatives

Many institutions across Europe are grappling with finding the best ways to support students into university. As student demographics and characteristics change, how can institutions create systems and processes that are flexible enough to address changing student needs? How can we build these adaptable and responsive institutions that recognise the shortcomings of the institution, not the students (McNair et al., 2016)?

Several of the articles in this part of the Special issue describe examples of how institutions have developed approaches and strategies to enable effective transition. Thomas's (2012, p.21) report from the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success programme' argues that senior leaders in universities need to take responsibility for 'managing and promoting student engagement', and she offers several ways to do this. Some of the papers in this Special Issue draw on Thomas's work. Cronin's vignette, for example, considers

how to create belonging in a small teacher education college in Ireland. O’Sullivan et al.’s case study, in a larger institution in Ireland, describes a suite of programmes working across the whole institution ‘grounded in student engagement, transition pedagogy and academic coaching’. In their account we see student support teams working with academic development teams. Across all three parts of this Special Issue we have noted examples of staff and students across roles and departments working together to better support student transitions. This requires a boldness of approach and bravery to work outside of a person’s comfort zone. These initiatives are the work of integrated practitioners (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022) who are enabled to work outside of their silos and across boundaries (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010), as they seek to improve the student experience.

Bollansee and Foulon at KU Leuven in Belgium present a case study describing a university-wide onboarding framework’ and their early findings suggest that the programme ‘enhances early academic engagement, social connectedness and students’ sense of belonging’. They also highlight the importance of ‘shared vision, stakeholder co-creation, and continuous evaluation and argue persuasively for ‘balancing standardisation with local adaptability in a multi-campus context’. Van Wiele’s case study reports on an Erasmus+ project ‘Supporting under-represented first years’. Their findings argue for universities to ‘take structural action to embed equity and inclusion’. They also emphasise that students from under-represented groups should be included as co-creators of change. Ferreira et al. in their On The Horizon paper report on an institutional approach to promoting first year student success in a Portuguese university. This project involves a range of initiatives organised around three ‘lines of action’: ‘academic integration of new students and institutional capacity building’; ‘development of academic and social skills’; and ‘academic drop-out prevention’. What these articles are describing are a range of activities within an institution that aim to change the culture of that institution and the way in which they think of their students and how they are enabled to be successful. It feeds back into Lizzio’s (2006) student lifecycle approach: for change and innovation to be impactful, it needs to be at the heart of the institution and within the culture.

Some countries in Europe have open access to HE, with completion of secondary education the only pre-requisite, and how this is managed in different contexts can depend on both the institution and the wider national setting. Examples of papers addressing this issue include Pierlet et al. who consider the role of study and career guidance in helping open access students successfully engage in HE in Flanders. Coenen and Sevens provide an example of developing a ‘matching programme’ using positioning tests, also in a Belgian university. They offer an example that helps students choose the right programme and to make a successful academic transfer.

Institutional initiatives focused on specific challenges

Some of the institutional initiatives explored in this part of the Special Issue focus on one or more specific aspects of student experience. Here we see universities responding to institutional, national, or even global challenges. Several institutions are developing responses to GenAI and considering how best to frame an institutional approach to this for first year students. Douglas et al.’s vignette shares their experience of creating guidance and activity supporting students to successfully navigate AI in a Scottish University. Morari introduces a project at an Irish university called ‘MTU Ethical Learning with GenAI’. Their conclusion, in light of the first phase of the project, is that ‘with the right attitude and dialogue, both staff and students can approach GenAI with more confidence, clarity and care’. Another paper considering institutional responses to AI comes from Biederbeck and Kohls: they describe an extracurricular course ‘Learning with

AI' at Fern Universität in Hagen, Germany. It is about using AI effectively, not prohibiting its use. These articles are about the need to better prepare students for the world they will travel to and create the capacity to adapt and grow. (Lizzio, 2011)

Tessenyi's *On the Horizon* reports on an institutional screening tool being used in a Hungarian university to identify risk factors for drop out. The tool was developed as part of institutional strategy, which is aiming to 'strengthen student wellbeing, academic engagement, and retention'. Howard and Nahar's vignette describes, through a personal lens, the development of the PREPARE framework: a pre-enrolment programme that came about through a collaboration between library academic skills hub, student union, student services, academic staff, quality transformation unit, IT and e learning teams. Bruton and Tormey describe the establishment and impact of a 'Dignity and Respect Support Service' at University College Dublin. Their service works with student leaders to 'foster a safe and respectful campus culture'. Szakál and Kocsis present their vignette as: 'a personal story of systemic change'. They describe working with an online course 'Learning how to learn'. They argue that the course both supported student learning and was instrumental in sparking a broader shift within the University of Szeged in Hungary.

An aspect of transition which is highlighted by some papers in this Special Issue is how we facilitate effective college to university transitions and Millard et al.'s case study is a useful example of this process. They consider McNair et al. (2016)'s argument for reframing the student transition lens from a focus on 'student deficits' to considering 'institutional deficits'. They further argue for institutional transition approaches that consider the 'micro (individual), meso (institutional) and macro (systemic)'. Once again, this approach considers how improvement requires us all to work outside of our silos and across, in this case, sectoral boundaries as we strive to enhance student success.

Thinking conceptually about transitions

In this last part of our Special Issue there are several papers from authors who are reflecting on supporting first year students in a tertiary world through different experiences and theoretical approaches.

Lauridsen and Nielsen from the University of Southern Denmark's Opinion Piece presents an argument for recognising the uncontrollability of the first year experience and suggest that this can provide opportunities for growth. They suggest, using theorists Rosa (2020) and Biesta (2013), that we look to find a balance between control and chaos to support first year students to grow 'through the inevitable struggles of transition'.

Herman van de Mosselaer has been involved in supporting first year student experience for 45 years. His vignette offers useful personal insights on what works in Flemish education but also discusses the successful Lemo instrument (Donche et al., 2010), since used in many universities, that he and colleagues developed to support students with self-motivation, learning strategies and self-efficacy.

Hughes reflective analysis considers transition through the lens of needs theory (Human Givens Theory HGT developed by Griffin and Tyrell (2024), he presents a thoughtful discussion considering student transitions in relation to a range of different theories but focuses on HGT. He concludes by suggesting we look at transition through a wider lens – considering what we can learn from wider life transitions that might help identify best approaches to supporting first year students.

Carey and Nutt, two of the editors for this Special Issue, offer an opinion piece to end the collection structured as a conversation between the current chair of the European First Year Experience Conference and Network and the previous chair. They use their own conversation to explore the importance of dialogue

and informal conversations in the 20-year story of the EFYE conference. They close their paper by suggesting that ‘friendly supportive conversations between ordinary practitioners can have influence and make an impact across a variety of settings in a tertiary world, in ways that are not always immediately apparent’.

The articles in this last section show that first-year experience work is not only a matter of supporting and working with students (Part 1) or redesigning curricula (Part 2), it also depends on the wider institutional and inter-institutional conditions that shape access, belonging, safety, learning confidence, ethical practice, and professional change. Through this Part, we hope you are curious and brave to ask if your institutions are ready for students, not only whether students are ready for tertiary education (McNair, 2016). We also hope that you enjoy reading the articles in this third section of the Special issue and that your reading leads to many important conversations for change. Papers in this subsection explore curriculum in the broadest sense: not only module or course content, but the designed learning journey, the hidden curriculum, assessment, induction, disciplinary belonging, skills development, professional identity and co-curricular practices that are aligned with learning. Support for those who teach first year students is an important element of this sub-theme.

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