



Welcome to this Special Issue on enabling first year student success in a tertiary world

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Introduction

Welcome to our Special Issue on supporting student success in a tertiary world. The idea emerged from discussions among members of the European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference Organising Committee following the publication of Carey et al. (2024), which explored how EFYE had evolved from an annual conference series into a cross-role and cross-national development community, and considered its emerging potential as a wider movement for change, and therefore how a Special Issue could support a resource for this growing community.

At the 19th conference, held at KU Leuven in Belgium in 2025, the conference theme was 'Researching first year experiences'. As we began to plan for the 20th conference, hosted by Szeged University in Hungary, we realised it was time to consider how we might raise the prominence of the research and practice presented at the conferences, and share some of the rich material and ideas we were seeing across Europe that were designed to better support student transitions. While the conference was the initiator for this Special Issue, the call to publish was an open one inviting research, practice and reflections on supporting student success beyond the EFYE community. We saw this issue as a potential resource on FYE for the future and as a catalyst for others to continue to share knowledge about 'what works' (in Thomas's 2012 terms).

While the 20-year anniversary of the EFYE conference was the provocation, and many of the authors who responded to our call had attended and presented at the conference, there are a range of examples of practice and research presented here. The majority are European. Some papers are expansions of previous presentations disseminated at EFYE conferences from previous years.

The EFYE journey has been about mutual learning and development and sharing growth as it happens. Different countries and different institutions within those countries may have engaged at different points and in different ways with strategies to support student success, but we have continued to learn from each other. These differences in perspective and national/local priorities are apparent in this collection.

Our call for submissions produced an overwhelmingly positive response and as a result this Special Issue includes 63 papers of various types. 15 countries are represented: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, England,

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Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, Sweden, Wales. There are 150 unique authors including 12 student co-authors and one student sole author. It is potentially an enormous resource for those concerned with more effective ways to support student success. The wealth of the perspectives means the Special Issue is divided into three sections, which are explained below.

First-Year Experience (FYE)

The first-year experience encompasses: pre-entry; first few days and weeks; the rest of the first year; and effectively exits to the next stage. FYE includes postgraduate as well as undergraduate. It can also include direct entry to an undergraduate programme (e.g. entering at year two). All these students experience firsts of so many experiences and encounter a range of often unexpected, critical moments. Higher education institutions around the world, and notably in Europe, have increasingly, over the last 20+ years, recognised the significance of creating an effective first stage or first year. (Bonne & Nutt, 2016; Carey, et al., 2025; Jansen & van der Meer, 2012; Nutt & Calderon, 2009; Tinto 2016; Yorke & Longden, 2009). This work builds on earlier national work exploring first year student success in the US (e.g. see Gardner, 2023; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989) and Australia (e.g. see James et al. 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008) Some of these authors have spoken at EFYE Conferences sharing the history and building support for ongoing developments in Europe.

The first-year experience is not owned by one group, one curriculum space, or one intervention type. It is produced through the interaction of students, academic staff, professional services, institutional systems, disciplinary cultures, peer communities and wider policy/practice contexts. Students should be at the heart of FYE work, but not treated as the only actors. Students, academics, professional services, managers, researchers, policy-makers and even estates/timetabling colleagues may all hold different 'pieces of the jigsaw'.

Kift's (2019) transition pedagogy talks about getting all key people around the table, though we note it is incredibly hard to draw fully and effectively on all those involved in developing appropriate and successful FYEs. Co-creation is about engaging with and recognising all relevant perspectives and angles. How do we make sure all voices are not only heard but are included in developing practices? This Special has papers from a wide range of players involved in supporting student success. This reflects the nature of the EFYE conference and network and we hope contributes to the ongoing conversations and practices related to enhancing all first-year experiences.

Three themes to the Special Issue

There are so many stories to tell, and we were amazed and delighted with the response to the call for this Special Issue. This has led to a rich and vibrant collection of ideas and examples. To manage the number of excellent articles, this Special Issue has been split into three parts, all published together. We have themed these sections for easier access and readability but we encourage readers to dive in and explore all three parts.

As part of our own learning and development and to grow EFYE's genuine involvement of students in all aspects of what we do, one of the key themes that emerged from this Special Issue is: '*Students experiencing and shaping the first year: agency, belonging and participation*'. The articles in part one of the Special reveal the importance of student involvement and student focused practices.

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It is a risk that “student involvement” can sometimes mean little more than surveys, consultation or feedback forms, rather than genuine partnership, co-creation or student leadership. Questions to consider in planning first-year experiences, in which students are central include: Where is there co-creation rather than pre-consultation?; How is student-staff partnership or student leadership developing?

The second theme, and part two, of the Special Issue, focuses on *‘Designing transition through curriculum: from induction to embedded practice’* as many papers presented examples and ideas for supporting student success and aspects of the first-year experience through the curriculum. However, when establishing this theme we are considering curriculum in the broadest sense, and we note that curricula decisions are often relevant across the other two themes too.

The third theme, and part three, *‘Systems and cultures of first-year success: evidence, relationships and change’* highlights the wider issues for supporting student success and draws out examples that are institutionally focused and which explore systemic changes. Also in this last part of the Special Issue we include several conceptual papers, which explore wider issues of student success through theory and reflection.

Cross-cutting themes

While we have separated the Issue into three themes or parts, we would like to note some common themes across the whole set of papers.

The student needs to be central.

A recurring editorial question was: where is the first-year student in this article, intervention, curriculum or initiative? We can easily lose track of the principal participant in the first-year journey.

FYE is relational and ecological.

First-year experiences and student success are supported through interaction and change. Many of the papers describe initiatives, which are changing regularly in response to evaluation and monitoring, but largely in response to the changing nature of student needs, ongoing student experiences and changing cultures in HE.

It is not only about students’ individual adjustment, but also about the environments, relationships, systems and practices that make transition possible. Taking a holistic approach, whether this is in student focused, curricula focused, or in wider institutional work is vital. (Nelson et al., 2009)

Care, connection and mattering cut across all three parts.

This leads us to wonder whether there is a ‘pedagogy of care’ pertinent to supporting student success in a tertiary world. (Noddings, 2005; Robinson, 2020; Yazdani, 2024)

We noted a recurring thread around human connection, care, emotion, belonging/mattering and ‘small things’ that help students feel they matter. Each of the parts in this Issue includes articles that consider the role of meaningful care. The development of relationships is seen as a key element of a successful student experience (Felten & Lambert, 2020)

The diversity of article types is important

The Special Issue includes vignettes, case studies, reflective analyses, opinion pieces, “on the horizon” pieces and research articles. We believe this replicates how FYE knowledge is generated, that is through multiple forms of evidence, reflection and practice-sharing. This is echoed in the EFYE conference, which

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inspired this Special Issue, where we invite: posters, show and tells, practice and research papers, workshops and roundtables. As we have noted elsewhere, EFYE includes a range of social elements, both formal and informal (Carey et al., 2024), enabling a diversity of engagement, not unlike this Special Issue.

The structure of the Special and the types of paper

As we have also noted above, the range of types of paper in this issue represents some of the range of types of evidence and reflection that we draw on for knowledge relating to first-year experience, student transition and student success. There are formats which will be familiar to JPAAP readers: On the Horizon, Research, Case Studies, Opinion Pieces and Reflective Analyses.

However, for this Special Issue we have also introduced a new format: vignettes. The idea for these came from Sheffield and Serbati (2022), who used them in a special issue of the International Journal for Academic Development; used as part of ‘an inclusive perspective ... by offering a kaleidoscope of stories’ and suggested that vignettes ‘capture wide-ranging, lived experiences ... as well as thoughts and feelings ... ranging from passion to frustration to pragmatism’. They are a short form paper, which offers a more personal account of practice or perspective; the vignettes across this Special Issue are thoughtful and personal insights into elements of first year experience. We hope you enjoy this new format to JPAAP; we know our authors engaged with this format very creatively.

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