

Editorial

Since the inception of this journal, it has been the practice to devote an issue each year to the outcomes of our annual conference on the first year experience in higher education. As befits its growing reputation and following, the conference, for this its 15th year, was renamed *The International First Year in Higher Education Conference*. Four of the highest rated papers and five of the best Nuts and Bolts presentations were selected and their authors offered the opportunity to revamp the papers as *Articles* or the presentations as *Practice Reports*. In the latter, the authors were requested to augment their manuscript with the outcomes of the discussion that ensued during and after the presentations. All of the nine items address the conference theme of *New Horizons*. Three of the editors of this journal and the journal manager recently published a comprehensive meta-analysis of nearly 400 items of Australasian literature on the first year experience in higher education covering the decade 2000-2010 (Nelson, Clarke, Kift & Creagh, 2011). They concluded that research and practice had matured over the decade and researchers and practitioners were "on the cusp" with regard to future developments. The *Articles* and *Practice Reports* in this issue are concrete examples of the approaching horizon of maturity.

Another aspect of this journal from its first issue has been the *Feature*. Here, it is edited highlights of an interview with Professor Liz Thomas from the

United Kingdom who was one of the keynote speakers at the conference. The feature provides an international perspective on the issue of widening participation and the discussion of future-oriented issues provides a *Feature* congruent with the conference theme.

The four *Articles* published this year address some of the big picture issues of first year student engagement: approaches to learning for first year students, learning and academic learning support for mathematics, and the value of being a leader in a peer mentoring program. Common to all four papers is the inextricable relationship between student learning approaches and the provision of support for that learning, which is contextualised for and specifically focused on student learning outcomes. Framing the remaining papers Sharn Donnison and Sorrel Penn-Edwards challenge current approaches to learning in first year. Their paper extends the authors previous work and uses data collected in a qualitative study of 14 students who were interviewed in small focus groups about their approaches to learning in first semester subjects. The study's findings confirmed that students are motivated by assessment and appreciative of support for accomplishing assessment items. Somewhat controversially, Donnison and Penn-Edwards propose we need to *reconsider our understanding of surface approaches to learning* and assessment for first year students and they propose that we need to enable first year

Editorial

student discussions about learning experiences through the provision of a common language. Nadine Adams and her colleagues at Central Queensland University, Australia and Rob Whannell and Bill Allen at the University of the Sunshine Coast (also Australia) focus attention on what may well be a shadow on the horizon of the FYHE - mathematics learning and learning support - a topic that was canvassed in several other publications at this year's conference. Adams, Clinton Hayes, Antony Dekkers, Sherie Elliot and Jinx Atherton describe a set of resources for mathematics learning support which were developed in accord with sets of principles for adult learning and computer-based materials. Adams and her colleagues also report on a survey of 44 students who had accessed mathematics learning support. Their conclusions that *dedicated student spaces and access to specifically designed resources are important to increase independent learning* are sound advice for institutions wishing to provide scaffolded support for mathematics learning. We return to the topic of mathematics learning later in this editorial. In contrast to more frequently reported studies of the benefits to first year students who participate as mentees in peer mentoring programs, Susan Beltman (Curtin University, Australia) and Marcel Schaeben (RWTH-Aachen University, Germany) conceptualise mentoring as a mutually beneficial relationship and discuss the benefits of these programs to the peer mentors. They found four categories of benefits: altruistic, cognitive, social and personal growth arising from their uniquely large study of the experiences of 858 mentors over three years, with the *largest benefit category identified as altruistic*. They propose that these findings have the potential to attract and recruit mentors. It may be that their findings could also be used as new arguments for university-wide peer mentoring programs. The final article by Rob Whannell and Bill Allen returns to mathematics learning and asks important questions about factors leading to success in first year students and how best to cater for diversity in mathematics background and knowledge. Their study of 165 students captured information about previous mathematics achievement and ratings of

constructs identified in previous literature as important to student success in first year university mathematics. Whannell and Allen argue that two responses are indicated by their findings. Firstly, that a preparatory course in mathematics should be taken before rather than concurrently with the commencement of first year mathematics subjects. Secondly, that there should be further attention to using appropriately *supportive pedagogies for teaching mathematics and that these should be accompanied by suitable social support strategies* to increase students mathematical efficacy and reduce their anxiety.

The four Articles published in this issue provide a snapshot of the work that is approaching new horizons of scholarship and practice in the first year in higher education. All of the papers are well grounded in the literature and each makes a unique contribution about a previously under-researched first year challenge. The methods used are robust in their design and application and the studies reach conclusions and make recommendations that can be applied immediately to improve practice and outcomes for first year students.

The issues covered in the *Practice Reports* also represent the key concern for the sector in Australia and internationally, about providing a positive student learning experience in the first year. Mark Smith discusses an institution-wide strategy to assist vocational lecturers to share responsibility for student transition to tertiary learning. He explains an initiative at Unitec in Auckland, New Zealand based on a framework developed out of the transition pedagogy construct and focused on the elements **from, with, of and to**. He explores some of the challenges involved in implementing that framework. Greg Jenkins and colleagues from the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia consider the use of *Facebook* in supporting student transition to higher education. They provide a justification for the use of *Facebook* in this context and provide practical tips about setting up and operating a first year *Facebook* page that supports students in communicating and interacting with each other, as

well as supporting academic staff in communicating with students. This approach is identified as a positive way of enacting organising principles for first year curriculum design (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). Mark Brown and colleagues from Massey University in New Zealand and Charles Sturt University in Australia, both multi-campus universities, provide an analysis of the efficacy of the achievement of social inclusion for distance learners. This research was promoted by concern about low retention and completion rates for this student cohort. The report presents a selection of learner stories that indicate their experience of a superficial level of social inclusion. These stories challenge the first year community to achieve deeper levels of social inclusion for distance students in order to create a positive learning environment for them. Willem van Schoor's report out of the University of South Africa—another multi-campus institution—is also concerned about positive learning experiences for distance learners. He explores the issue of agency in first year distance students and presents the findings of a pilot program with students who had failed a first year economics course. The pilot program was structured according to the *Transformed Situated Agency Model* and was successful in supporting student agency through online facilitation. In the final *Practice Report*, Amanda Richardson and colleagues from the University of South Australia consider issues of student health and well-being in the transition process to tertiary education. The report presents a research project that compares the experiences and coping strategies of first year students who *thrive* in transition to university with those who *just survive*. They concluded that keys to successful transition include the formation of close social relationships with peers, good time management and organisational skills, and effective coping strategies.

As with the articles these practice reports make a valuable contribution to teaching and learning practice and scholarship concerning the first year in higher education. We are particularly pleased to publish this set of papers which were selected from a much larger set of very high quality papers

submitted to the 15th International First Year in Higher Education Conference.

This overview of the *Feature, Articles, and Practice Reports* reflects the “on the cusp (horizon)” optimism and the developing maturity alluded to earlier. These features are demonstrated in such aspects as the emphases on: the whole-of-university in sampling and project implementation, the adoption of a holistic view of students, and academic and professional staff cooperation; and the utilisation of sophisticated concepts and theoretical foundations to create new knowledge on which enhanced practices can be established.

This snapshot of current research and practice reflects James' (2011) recent assertion that “the field of research into the first year experience has grown and matured significantly” (p. iii).

References

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Karen J. Nelson
Editor-in-chief

John A. Clarke
Sally M. Kift
Rachael Field
Co-editors

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