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*Editorial*

The need to establish institutional programs that are aimed at supporting the transition of diverse cohorts of students to learning in higher education (HE) while ensuring stimulating and engaging high quality learning environments is greater now than ever before. Reassuringly, the 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference held in Adelaide, Australia in June this year attracted a record number of submissions about programs and practices related to the conference theme of *Access – Aspiration – Achievement*. The authors of the top ranked refereed papers and shorter nuts and bolts submissions were invited to prepare their manuscripts for publication in this inaugural issue. The convention of publishing “best in conference” in one of the issues each year will continue in the future. The nuts and bolts selections have been reconfigured as “practice reports” and include feedback received at the conference.

The invited feature article—another convention to be followed in future issues—sets a benchmark for advancing institutional responses to the first year experience (FYE). Using a case study of policy and practice, the authors describe the establishment of a third generation approach to the FYE: transition pedagogy. They provide compelling evidence which shows that this framework for designing and enacting FYE policy and practice transcends traditional academic-professional divides and results in effective sustainable strategies for supporting new and diverse cohorts of HE students.

Building aspiration for a university experience in communities where students do not traditionally complete secondary schooling, let alone proceed to HE, is a goal for many Australian universities. Skene (Practice Report [PR]) reports on the early stages of an extensive program with 24 remote and disadvantaged schools that aims to redress the unacceptably low participation rates of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, Indigenous students and rural and remote students. Access to HE can also be complicated by the range of offerings available to secondary students. Wright (Article [A]) contends that student choice and subsequent persistence in HE may be influenced by students’ previous exposure to domain knowledge. In a large study of the curriculum at 20 secondary schools, he explores the connection between diversity in secondary school experiences and persistence in first year at university. Uncertainty related to course choice in first year can also be addressed through curriculum opportunities that allow students to explore their course choices through authentic industry experiences. Focusing on this, Wood (A) reports on a longitudinal action learning study of the challenges and benefits of an enquiry learning approach to course design and its impact on student engagement.

Equitable access and early success in HE are also influenced by the significant aspects of student confidence and proficiency in academic skills. Adam and colleagues (A) report on UniStart, a program that has successfully nurtured critical thinking and independent study skills in commencing students. A further example of developing critical enquiry skills by engaging first year students in authentic (but in this case, personalized) learning activities is described by FitzPatrick and colleagues (PR) who present a case study of teaching research techniques to first year marketing students.

Access to the culture of academic institutions is more complex for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. For international students, this has been recognized by a set of

principles to guide policy and practice for the attainment of English language proficiency. Murray (A) critically examines the meaning of proficiency and proposes that the inclusion of academic literacy and professional communication skills is needed to fully implement the principles. From another perspective, access to higher education for Indigenous Australian students requires practices that are culturally sensitive and safe environments for dialogues about sensitive issues such as race and culture. Mackinlay and Barney (PR) use problem based learning in an Indigenous studies unit to encourage personal and emotional engagement and critical reflection which facilitate action for change. Access to participation in university communities can also mean being familiar with the range of media available for staff to communicate with students. Lodge (PR) explores first year students' preferred mode for receiving communications on academic and non-academic topics.

Studies of the issues underpinning disengagement have led to interest in the psychological health of contemporary students. Law students in particular are thought to be more vulnerable to distress than other cohorts and therefore more at risk of not attaining qualifications. Field and Kift (A) argue that curriculum design that intentionally harnesses assessment and feedback can play an important role in supporting learning development and preventing psychological distress in first year law students.

Finally, and in a sense, tying this issue together through the eyes of students, Cashmore and colleagues (PR) bring forth the student voice and describe a longitudinal ethnographic study that involves undergraduate students capturing their extensive and complex experiences of social and academic transition.

What we have in this inaugural issue is a rich collection of research articles and practice reports that cover a range of issues associated with the access, aspiration and achievement of students in their first year in higher education. They show that the sector is beginning to move away from discrete pockets of excellence towards integrated systematic FYE initiatives that involve both curricula and co-curricular activities working in unison. Many of these initiatives are based on institution-wide or inter-sectorial academic and professional partnerships and have evidence that shows these initiatives are positively impacting on the experience of commencing students. Transition pedagogy—the focus of the feature article—is becoming increasingly evident in these reported FYE activities.

*We hope you enjoy the first issue of the International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education.*

Karen J. Nelson  
John A. Clarke  
Sally M. Kift

Co-editors  
International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education

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