

A fourth generation approach to transition in the first year in higher education: First year in higher education community of practice (FYHECoP)

Sorrel Penn-Edwards

Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

Sharn Donnison

University of the Sunshine Coast, Sunshine Coast, Australia

Abstract

We propose that higher education institutions move beyond the third generation approach to transition pedagogy (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010) to a fourth generation approach. We argue that higher education institutions are, as Abraham Lincoln extols, of the people, by the people, for the people and that all major stakeholders: educationalists; social groups; and civic bodies should be involved in supporting the transition of the higher education first year student. We suggest that university-community partnerships, specifically, those involving the wider social/civic community, have an integral part to play at each point in the progression of the student through undergraduate studies. Our fourth generation approach extends Kift's (2008) exhortation that the first year experience is "everybody's business" by being characterised and driven by a social and civic "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998).

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Introduction

Considerable research has been undertaken on the First Year in Higher Education Experience (FYHE) over the past 40 years with a currently recognised emphasis on the “importance and centrality” of the transition experience to undergraduate student success in tertiary studies (Nelson, Smith & Clarke, 2012, p. 185). Given this context and the considerable academic, administrative and financial effort it represents, it is not surprising that targeted measures and approaches to assist students in their successful and effective transition to higher education have become embedded within wider institutional practices.

It is now accepted in FYHE research and practice that higher education institutions have transitioned to enacting a third generation approach labelled as transition pedagogy (Kift & Nelson, 2005) which is predominately focused on achieving *institution-wide adoption, dissemination* and *sustainability* aimed at student engagement and retention (Nelson et al., 2012). While third generation transition pedagogy has been invaluable in terms of refining, amalgamating, and systematising disparate approaches and practices across the sector and has had a significant impact on the quality and success of the first year undergraduate experience, we contend that there is a need for a less insular approach which moves beyond the boundaries of the higher education institution.

At the heart of our proposal is firstly, a formal acknowledgement that higher education institutions are “of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln, 1863, para. 3); that a society is comprised of many communities, the higher education institution being only one. Secondly, that

the first year undergraduate’s transition is enhanced when the student is validated through an “enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). Such agents include “classmates, family members, spouses, children, partners” (Rendón, 2002, p. 645). Thirdly, our proposal also addresses student concerns about the relativeness of their study within the wider social context which is acknowledged by researchers of first year researchers as a strong indicator of retention (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009).

While acknowledging that institutions of higher education have a history of community involvement, we suggest that this relationship has not extended to considering the role and expertise of the wider community in co-supporting the student who is entering first year studies and transitioning into their academic studies especially in terms of formalised communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). While first year transition has been considered within the context of a community of practice (Donnison, Edwards, Itter, Martin, & Yager, 2009) we argue that a community of practice within the domain of first year in higher education, whose members include the wider non-education community, and whose purpose is to develop shared practices and resources to facilitate first year students’ transition is rare.

In this paper, we present an argument for a more inclusive approach to the first year undergraduate experience that is characterised by a proposed neoteric “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) that is comprised of the higher education institution and the wider non-education community, specifically *social* and *civic*

aspects of society where social aspects refer to students' informal and formal personal connections - family and friends, school, local community and so on, and civic society refers to community associations, organisations, and groups external to the university and independent from business and governmental organisations (InnovateUs, 2011, para. 4). The proposed First Year in Higher Education Community of Practice (FYHECoP) comprises the students, the higher education institution, and the wider social/civic non-education community in which that university is situated.

To contextualise our proposal we discuss the relationship between higher education and the community, we then describe several models of higher education and community partnerships around three student life stages, pre-enrolment, enrolment and graduation. The 4th Generation Approach is then discussed as a means of consolidating the dichotomy of the forms taken by a higher education institution of the 21st century discussed below.

Relationship between higher education and the wider community/society

Higher education has a social compact with their communities to provide “public benefits for a healthier present and future”; be “genuinely committed to serving our students and the larger society”; and promote a “more effective strategy to reach talented students from lower-income families” (Faulkner, 2013, paras. 4-8). Similarly, Tight (2012) argues that higher education has a mission to consider “the regional impact of universities on their surroundings, in terms of employment, financial, and cultural benefits” (p. 142) and Reid (2010) stresses that “there is a

need to return to a renewed emphasis on democratic public purposes for Australian education” (p. 2).

Williams and Cherednichenko (2007) suggest the use of Benson and Harkavy's (2002) phrase University Civic Responsibility Movement to embody the dimensions of higher education of the 21st century. This concept is similar to Wenger's (1998, 2011) new institutional social compact and locates responsibility squarely between the education institution and the non-education community. Indeed, Sullivan (2000) states, forcefully, that higher education will only be able to contribute to the general welfare of a society if it is seen as “serving some larger public purpose as a citizen within civil society rather than simply as a self-aggrandising creature of the market” (p. 25).

These arguments lend support to our proposal for considering a 4th generation approach to first year transition in higher education based around communities of practice that encompass not only those within the institution but also those from without. Higher education-community partnerships have been a part of the higher education's mission for many years and have taken many forms. However, arguably as a response to the current economic and social justice discourses about the role of the university in sustaining an economically viable and socially just society, they appear to be proliferating (Williams & Cherednichenko, 2007).

Forms of higher education-community partnerships

A large body of literature is focused on higher education-community partnerships with entire journals dedicated to this research and practice: *International Journal*

of *Community Research and Engagement* and *Australasian Journal of University Community Engagement*, and professional alliances, such as *Engagement Australia* (formerly *Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance*). The recent increase of such journals and professional alliances indicates the timeliness, significance and scope of such partnerships.

In the above literature the external community is portrayed as diverse and includes local businesses, industries, other educational providers such as schools and TAFEs, public agencies, local government agencies, civic groups, diverse cultural groups (Tryon & Ross, 2012) and to a lesser extent, and usually in conjunction with Community Colleges¹, parents and families (Rendón, 2002). How universities engage with their communities is complex and variable, dependent upon unique political, geographical, and historical contexts (Spanier, 2004, p. 10). In general, partnerships take the form of institutional-led joint collaborations around the three pillars of institutional work: research; service; and learning and teaching. In this paper, we are specifically interested in communities of practice around learning and teaching as this is considered critical for first year transition (Tinto, 2012).

We propose that most higher education-community partnerships focused on learning and teaching exhibit a chronological linear model centred on three stages:

Stage 1. Student pre-enrolment (Entry Programs situated predominantly in a community-school context in preparing students for entry; Access and Outreach Programs);

Stage 2. Enrolled student (situated in a higher education institute context, albeit some disciplines have necessary work experience - Work Integrated Learning - within the professional community context); and

Stage 3. Graduate (who moves fully into the community-employment context).

Stage 1. Student pre-enrolment

In the pre-enrolment stage, there are many higher education-high school programs that encourage senior secondary students to undertake university courses while still at school, such as the *GUESTS program* (Griffith University, 2013), the UniSA Connect program (University of South Australia, 2013) and *Head Start* programs offered by 32 universities in Australia and many internationally.

In addition, most Australian tertiary institutions offer general skills-based introductory courses and bridging programs to pre-enrolled students that provide alternative pathways for tertiary entry. These programs are designed to assist non-school leavers to successfully transition into undergraduate programs through assisting them to manage and take responsibility for their own learning (Huijser, Bedford & Bull, 2008). While these types of enabling and pre-enrolment programs have a high attrition rate (a reported rate of 50% non-completion), students who do persevere, generally go on to have a successful undergraduate experience (Muldoon, O'Brien, Pendreigh, & Wijeyewardene, 2009).

¹ Community Colleges in North America typically offer a two year curriculum that leads to an Associate Degree. Entry into a Community College is open to anyone holding a high school diploma.

At the pre-enrolment stage, access and outreach programs are also common and generally take the form of scholarships and support programs for under-represented minority students who may enter via ways other than the normal direct-from-school entry (Perna, Walsh, & Fester, 2011). Examples include Auckland University of Technology's government-funded scholarship-style program, *Pathways to University* that "covers tuition and course fees for up to one year of study ..., and provides pastoral care with administrative support" (Terrell, 2004, p. 427) and Victoria University's *Access and Success in the West* program that aims to improve educational experiences for young people in the low socioeconomic western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia "as well as increas[e] the capacity of their teachers and families to support this improvement" (Williams & Cherednichenko, 2007, p. 7).

Stage 2. Enrolled student

Once enrolled, students may participate in institute-community partnerships where: (i) the institution works on community based problems; (ii) the students work in the community for workplace learning; and (iii) individuals from the community contribute to program development, and teaching and learning.

(i) Institutions solving community-based problems

The European science shop model is a renowned example of higher education and community working together to solve community-based problems and is, most notably, a partnership idea that originated within the community (Leydesdorff & Ward, 2005). In this model, projects are initiated by the community based on their perceived needs and are generally interdisciplinary in nature, bringing

together academic staff, students and community members to focus multiple lenses on the issue or problem. Community participation occurs through all stages of the project. The findings are framed by social action goals and are given back to the community (Tryon & Ross, 2012).

(ii) Tertiary students learning and working in the community

It is common practice for tertiary students to engage in some form of community based learning or work as part of their academic studies (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) and is variously referred to as work integrated learning (WIL), service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999), community engagement, experiential learning (Closson & Nelson, 2009) and/or community service learning (Butcher et al., 2003). How community service learning is conceptualised and operationalised varies, however Simon (as cited in Eyler & Giles, 1999, pp. 4-5) suggests that the goals of community service learning include understanding about and providing service to the community; learning through engaging in community service; and using community service to support learning and vice versa.

In many disciplines service learning is integral to learning and teaching, for example, first year medical students at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry visit The Deaf Strong Hospital to develop multicultural sensitivity to deaf and non-English-speaking patients (Thew, Smith, Chang, & Starr, 2012) and Donnison and Itter (2010) report on the professional, personal, academic and transitional benefits of community engagement for a group of first year Australian preservice teachers.

(iii) Individuals and groups from the community collaborating with higher education

Community involvement in learning and teaching in higher education is a recognised and valued practice. It is accepted practice to include industry partners as sessional academics and/or guest lecturers to engage students in authentic learning and is particularly conventional in pre-service courses such as business (Riebe, Sibson, Roepen, & Meakins, 2013), teacher education (Johnston & Rakestraw, 2013), and the health professions (Hawkins, Hertweck, Salls, Laird, & Goreczny, 2012). It is also, often, an externally mandated requirement of many professional degrees such as nursing and education where external advisory committees comprising key stakeholders and groups in the community consult on program and course development.

Stage 3. Graduate

During the last period of study, the soon-to-be graduate may be wooed by the community with a view to employment and commonly takes the form of informal information or promotional activities on-campus. In Australia 11% of employed graduates found their employment through Career Fairs and visiting employers (Graduate Career Australia, 2012, p. 2). Most higher education institutions also arrange formal internships for their students with potential employers which provide the student with “an opportunity to develop [their] skills beyond the classroom and gain a competitive edge in the job market” (University of Queensland, 2012, para. 1).

This brief review of the literature indicates that higher education-community

partnerships, in many forms, are burgeoning across the world and will undoubtedly, be a significant attribute of higher education in the 21st century. Nonetheless, these admirable developments are rarely utilised to specifically facilitate the transition of first year students *once enrolled* in the institution.

A 4th generation approach to first year transition: Responsive, respectful, transparent

Duderstadt (2000) suggests that a university can “attract exciting, talented people, ... stimulate economic growth, ... serve as the cultural centre” and beyond this “assist the city in the development of a strategic vision of the future” saying that “universities should strive to be good citizens and to work with their communities to improve the future quality of life for everyone” (p. 59). The proposed 4th generation approach to first year transition responds to this sentiment. We present our proposal under three headings: responsive; respectful and transparent.

Responsive

The 21st century student has an expectation that learning is relevant to careers in the real world, be they local, national and/or international. As mentioned earlier, higher education institutions are specialised communities within their society and should function as an active integrative component of that society rather than independent of it. As Wenger (2011) says:

The school is not the privileged locus of learning. It is not a self-contained, closed world in which students acquire

knowledge ... but a part of a broader learning system ... they have to be in the service of the learning that happens in the world. (p. 5)

As such, higher education should be responsive to and link with the student's social communities (family and friends, school, local community and so on) and also to the wider non-education civic community such as "professional groups, labour unions, [and] religious associations, organisations fighting for citizen rights" (InnovateUs, 2011, para. 4). It is clear that connections exist between higher education institutes and social communities and are being further developed by higher education; it is the civic community that lacks a role, particularly with regards to the transition of higher education first year students.

Respectful

In Australia, rates of non-traditional commencing undergraduates are increasing; 18% are from a low socioeconomic background; 40% are first in family to attend higher education; 51% are living at home and/or are financially dependent on parents; and 16% are mature age (older than 25), with 10% having dependents (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010).

Higher education institutions have traditionally adopted assimilation principles where students and community partners adjust to the institution's ways of working, however because of increasing student diversity, there is a call for higher education to "adapt to changing student expectations [and student diversity]" (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 169) by being respectful of the *knowledge* and *social and cultural capital* (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 169) that students bring with them as they

commence their studies. Yorke, who specialises in higher education and employability as well as the first year experience, encapsulates this when referring to the inclusion of Somali refugee students in an inner London university:

Isn't there a way where you [institutions] can actually work on what they [students] know and what they understand and the way they understand things and bring that to the curriculum rather than apply your curriculum to them? (Nelson, Clarke, & Kift, 2011, p. 5)

In accord with Yorke's plea, as family and friends intimately know the student, they also possess knowledge and social and cultural capital to assist with the first year student's transition; as do civic bodies and local communities that have helped shape the student. To honour what the student brings (Yorke, in interview with Nelson et al., 2011) means valuing and utilising the students' explicit understandings as well as their social and cultural connections. Our proposed 4th Generation Approach - FYHECoP would achieve this aim.

Transparent

To foster the higher education-non-education communities of practice discussed in this paper, institutions need to transform how they operate, including the way they communicate with those outside the academic world. Principally, higher education needs to become more *transparent* in "opening up our institutions to new audiences" (Spanier, 2004, p. 8) and more communicative with the public through knowledge sharing and listening to the wider community as a prerequisite to helping solve some of society's and higher education's most pressing problems (p. 8). Higher education's retention rates - anchored in the First Year Experience, and

widening access to non-tradition students are two such problems.

The proposed 4th Generation Approach is not another pre-entry or enrolment project like current access programs or community work. It is an institutional approach to the relationship between the institution and the wider non-education social and civic society centred on being responsive, respectful and transparent. In many ways we are placing the institution firmly within the community. A community has many professionals and experts; the higher education institution is just one collection within the wider community that should function in conjunction with the wider community creating a jointly owned professional education-social and civic society community of practice where the support of higher education students, particularly new first year students is everybody's business (Kift, 2008).

Recommendations

Although our aim in this paper is to provide a direction rather than a blueprint, a number of practical recommendations emerge from the literature review and the attendant discussions. These recommendations are not exhaustive and assume that an institution already includes the practices reviewed in this paper, for example, guest professional speakers, and early access programs. An institution adopting a 4th generation FYE model would be seen to initiate and work with three foci: sectorial, institutional, and student-centred:

1. To assure community involvement at all stages the institution ideally would:

- Constitutionally rule that all planning bodies comprise equal institution and community representation;

- Specifically use expertise from the wider social and civic community when planning strategies for transition and engagement (Thompson, Head, Rikard, McNeil, &White, 2012, p. 100); and

- Allow public access to summarised program and course information, aims and expectations and work exemplars.

2. To ensure adoption of good practice and ensure consistency the institution ideally would:

- Explicitly and formally adopt a 4th generation transition approach enacted in First Year policies and practices; and
- Identify points early in the first year program where guests from the wider community can participate in sharing knowledge of life experience, for example, resilience, health, balancing work and study.

3. To holistically support students the institution ideally would:

- Acknowledge and incorporate student's prior knowledge, social and cultural capital in designing and administering learning and teaching and assessment;
- Encourage social and civic members to act as advisors and mentors for students. Future career mentors, past graduates, and respected public figures can have ongoing contact with students, possibly, via the web and social media;
- Actively engage families, friends, schools, youth and sporting groups in the transition program. For example,

families of second year students can mentor commencing students and their families; and

- Ascertain how students can contribute to the wider community, such as volunteering, and value this in the program of study.

The proposed 4th Generation Approach to transition in the first year in higher education extends the pedagogical transition approaches of Kift et al. (2010) by arguing that the university-community relationship be embedded in the context of the wider social and civic community. This community of practice has a place at each point in the progression of the student through their studies and is an integral part of the first year student transition.

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