The first year experience in a new higher education landscape:
What are the factors influencing the quality of the student experience? What are priority areas for change and innovation?

Richard James

So much activity around transition and the first year:
- Three major national studies in Australia, at five year intervals (and the fourth being planned for 2009).
- Over a decade of annual conferences.
- First year transition and support programs now part of the HE landscape in Australia and NZ universities.
- Intensive institutional research and evaluation activities.
- High level of research and publication.

What has been achieved? Where is there 'unfinished business'?

What is affecting the character and quality of the first year experience?

What are the major research issues?

What issues might we explore nationally in 2009?

www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au

This morning's presentation and discussion
1. The changing international and national higher education landscape
2. What do we know about the student experience of higher education in Australia?
3. Six priority areas for change and innovation

The forces affecting universities worldwide
- The massification of higher education
- Internationalisation/glocalisation (the importance of university rankings, the rise of China)
- The digital revolution
- Changing expectations in teaching and learning
- Interdisciplinary education is all the rage (The idea of disciplines is so 20th century)

And specifically on the educational front, relentless pressure on the curriculum to do more and more!

Recognition that many social issues and problems require multiple perspectives and multiple modes of inquiry
Disciplines becoming more porous, disciplines intersecting and interacting with each other.

So, interdisciplinary education is all the rage!
In Australia (and probably NZ too) ...

And much institutional re-branding and re-positioning in the market in order to climb above the rest ...

The Bradley Review of Higher Education

Three closely intertwined themes ...

Social inclusion

VET sector sets sights on degrees

Social inclusion

HE-VET relationships

The student experience

Compacts and institutional diversification ...

What we can predict with confidence

1. Mass higher education, globalisation and internationalisation are here to stay.
2. Students’ patterns of engagement with study and campus life will grow more complex and diverse.
3. More people will dip in and out of higher education more often and at different stages in their lives and careers.
4. What makes higher education 'higher' will be unclear. Standards will be a hot topic.
5. Students’ expectations for easy, fast access to digital information will be high, global information repositories for learning will become ubiquitous.
6. But paper is here to stay! And the lecture is probably here to stay.
7. The way in which human brains learn won’t change much at all (?)
The presence of Martin Trow ...

The data sources on the student experience ...
- The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)
- The Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)
- Research by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education:
  - The national First Year Experience study
  - The University Student Finances study for Universities Australia
  - University Student Finances study for Universities Australia
- Centre for the Study of Higher Education

Generalisations are risky ... a large number of variables to consider ...
- Institution, field of study, course
- Part-time, full-time
- Indigenous, non-Indigenous
- International, domestic
- School-leaver, mature-age
- Gender
- Socio-economic background
- etc.

Generalisations are risky ... a large number of variables to consider ...
- Institution, field of study, course
- Part-time, full-time
- Indigenous, non-Indigenous
- International, domestic
- School-leaver, mature-age
- Gender
- Socio-economic background
- etc.

This morning’s presentation and discussion
1. The changing international and national higher education landscape
2. What do we know about the student experience of higher education in Australia?
3. Six priority areas for change and innovation

Broad conclusions on students’ overall satisfaction with course/university experience
- Most students happy most of the time: the overall level of satisfaction with the university experience is high (say 70-75%)
- Typically, the level of dissatisfaction runs at 10-15%.
- Disappointing responses to survey items on “belonging to a learning community” and “the obvious degree of disengagement”
Broad conclusions on satisfaction with teaching

- Slightly lower levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching (65-70% happy)
- Least satisfied responses on:
  - Clarity of expectations (especially first years)
  - Feedback (35-40% unhappy)
  - Interest shown in progress by academic staff (40-45% unhappy)
  - Availability of academic staff

First year students ...

- Signs of increased sense of purpose and greater clarity around career expectations.
- No less, only a minority of school-leavers report that school adequately prepared them for university study. One-third feel they weren’t ready to choose a university course.
- Overall, first year students appear less engaged than later year students.

International students ...

- Slightly lower levels of satisfaction with teaching and courses
- Feelings of isolation, desire for better integration
- Financial circumstances not well understood.

Internationals

Student use of and experience of ICT ...

- Very difficult to understand given the rapid shifts in technology, among other things.
- Much diversity in the levels of student engagement with ICT and the patterns of its use.
- Not all ‘Netgen’ students are expert in using ICT, or all that interested in using it (see Gregor Kennedy’s work).

AUSSE findings (and some USA comparisons)

- ‘Active learning’ lower than in US
- ‘Staff and Student Interactions’ much lower than in US
- ‘Enriching Educational Experiences’ lower than in US. In particular, fewer students reporting participation in community-based learning activities, service learning and the like.
- Low levels of international exchange experiences.

Student finances ...

- A large proportion of students lack adequate financial support and many are highly anxious about ‘making ends meet’ on a week-to-week basis.
- There is anxiety about accumulating debt.
- One in eight students indicate they regularly go without food or other necessities because they cannot afford them. For indigenous students, the comparable figure is much higher — one in four.

AUSSE findings in 2007 compared with 2000

- A smaller proportion of students with annual budgets in deficit, but ...
- Greater reliance on paid work — paid work providing a higher proportion of income.
- Increase in levels of non-cash assistance.
- Decline in Commonwealth assistance for course support.
- More students reporting missing classes to work.
- More students reporting that work was having an adverse effect on their studies.

Patterns of work

- 72.6% per cent of full-time undergraduates reported working during semester.
- On average these students were working 16.8 hours per week.
- One in every six of the full-time undergraduate students who were working during semester was working more than 20 hours per week.
- More than one-third of all the nation’s full-time university students — 32% per cent — were working at least 15 hours per week during semester.
Some important relationships...

- Limited part-time work is positively related to student engagement with study.
- Positive course evaluation is related to engagement. That is, students who report positive course experiences also tend to show stronger patterns of engagement.
- Positive extracurricular experience seems to be associated with more time spent on campus.
- Engagement appears to increase across the year levels.

This morning’s presentation and discussion

1. The changing international and national higher education landscape
2. What do we know about the student experience of higher education in Australia?
3. Six priority areas for change and innovation

Six priority areas for research & development in relation to the quality of the first year in higher education

1. Social inclusion, curriculum and standards
2. New expectations and new patterns of engagement with university life, including the patterns of part-time
3. Work-related learning, community engagement and inter-institutional transfer, jobs after graduation
4. The era of unprecedented access to information and the rise of digital and social
5. The reframing of campus layouts and the blurring of “trans-
demarcationary” boundaries
6. Research experiences in the first year?

1. Social inclusion, curriculum and standards

Continuing social imbalances in HE access and participation in mass systems, despite expansion and compensatory programs.

In Australia, and elsewhere, a growing social polarisation in the most prestigious institutions and courses during the past 5-10 years.

Figure 1: Participation share in Australian universities by socio-economic background, 1991-2002 (per cent)

Access %, based on SES call agents in the Group of Eight universities, 2001 and 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


How to widen participation?

- Relationships with schools?
- New selection criteria and processes?
- The curriculum in the first year?
- Support in the first year?
And the reaction didn’t take long!

Directions

• With massification and more open entry how do we reconcile deeply held academic (and community) values about 'merit' and 'excellence'?

• With 'openness', how do we respond to differing levels of student preparedness while maintaining academic standards (whatever they may be)?

• How do we deal with academics’ concerns about the basic skill levels of school-leavers — and the perceptions that many students are ‘not ready for higher education’?

• What fundamental changes might be needed in first year programs?

The processes for assessing and reporting student learning grow in significance.

Directions…

2. New expectations and new patterns of engagement with university

• There is a new diversity in student expectations of higher education that is not well understood. Dysfunctions resulting from the apparent mismatch of staff and student expectations.

• Higher expectations of level of service/availability, possibly deriving from a stronger consumer orientation.

• The contradictions of Generation Y:
  * digital savvy but oriented towards retro-culture;
  * rebellious but reliant on ‘helicopter parents’.

Directions…

Do we need more research into the ways in which university marketing is affecting student expectations?

How can we actively influence the expectations of first year students?

Accommodating the working student

Significant risks of diminished quality of educational outcomes: many students under significant financial pressure, working students not retaining fully from higher education.

Directions…

Should we put to rest the idea of a FT university student?

Can we address a better integration between work and the development of higher education attributes?

3. Work-related learning, community engagement, knowledge transfer, jobs on campus

The curriculum is transforming to embrace new relationships between universities, industries and communities. This is a hugely challenging arena.

Directions…

How do we construct pedagogically effective activities in these domains?

To what extent can we create work opportunities on campus?

How can assessment practices change to reflect these experiences?

Are first year students ready for these experiences?

4. The era of unprecedented access to information and ‘google scholarship’

The University of Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education

Some personal thoughts on ‘getting real’ about standards...

• Identification implies that notions of standards shift from achievement on entry to ‘value-added’ effects and graduate attributes.

• Thus the emphasis in academic standards must shift from inputs and processes to outcomes. The processes for assessing and reporting student learning grow in importance.

• Globalisation will continue to focus attention on standards. We must give more attention to cross-institutional, cross-national reference points.

Accommodating the working student

Significant risks of diminished quality of educational outcomes: many students under significant financial pressure, working students not retaining fully from higher education.

Directions…

Should we put to rest the idea of a FT university student?

Can we address a better integration between work and the development of higher education attributes?

3. Work-related learning, community engagement, knowledge transfer, jobs on campus

The curriculum is transforming to embrace new relationships between universities, industries and communities. This is a hugely challenging arena.

Directions…

How do we construct pedagogically effective activities in these domains?

To what extent can we create work opportunities on campus?

How can assessment practices change to reflect these experiences?

Are first year students ready for these experiences?

4. The era of unprecedented access to information and ‘google scholarship’

The University of Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education

Some personal thoughts on ‘getting real’ about standards...

• Identification implies that notions of standards shift from achievement on entry to ‘value-added’ effects and graduate attributes.

• Thus the emphasis in academic standards must shift from inputs and processes to outcomes. The processes for assessing and reporting student learning grow in importance.

• Globalisation will continue to focus attention on standards. We must give more attention to cross-institutional, cross-national reference points.
An information-rich environment is wonderful for educators, but there are dangers to be avoided:

- Excessive amounts of unfiltered information can cause bewilderment.
- The shuffling and storing of e-files can instead be being tough to the studying.
- Information scanning can replace sustained engagement with theories and ideas.
- The memorising of fragments of information can be mistaken for knowledge acquisition.

We often see a need to teach students to be “information consumers” — that is, to demystify the processes involved in finding information. However, we sometimes forget the importance of education in what we call “library boundaries.”

The renewal and rethinking of campus spaces is central to addressing the problem of campus infrastructure.

Contemporary IT challenges are closely associated with the role of the learning space. By the way, can you please help me to find an important reference for my essay? As you know, the textbook is really too thick, and as I search online using some keywords, I often end up with thousands of pages. Finding the reference easily becomes very challenging.

The shuffling and storing of e-files can mistakenly be being replaced with sustained engagement and student learning.

Directions...

What are the specific educational problems we are facing?

1. High aesthetic standards;
2. Maximum flexibility in modes of teacher-student interaction;
3. Seamless integration of ICT; and
4. Realistic budgets.

What research experiences might they have? How do these needs differ across disciplines?

Directions...

How do we learn to teach students to be “information consumers” — that is, to demystify the processes involved in finding information? If you are interested, I would like to have a look at the word “autoimmune” and see if it involves in doing something related to health.

The memorising of fragments of information can be mistaken for knowledge acquisition.

Some personal views...

- Adapt a stance that is eclectic and pluralistic rather than doctrinaire — recognise that a variety of approaches to teaching and learning are valuable.
- Assume a “use of existing research” with regard to the educational returns from investment in teaching spaces — don’t decant
- Avoid a superficial mentality that attaches undue emphasis to the role of the learning space.

Directions...

How do we achieve four possibly incompatible goals: confidentiality, meta-analyses, the sketches and discerning information? When was the last time you used an online platform for knowledge acquisition?

The shuffling and storing of e-files can mistakenly be being replaced with sustained engagement and student learning.

Directions...

By the way, can you please help me to find an important reference for my essay? As you know, the textbook is really too thick, and as I search online using some keywords, I often end up with thousands of pages. Finding the reference easily becomes very challenging.

Some personal views...

- Adapt a stance that is eclectic and pluralistic rather than doctrinaire — recognise that a variety of approaches to teaching and learning are valuable.
- Assume a “use of existing research” with regard to the educational returns from investment in teaching spaces — don’t decant
- Avoid a superficial mentality that attaches undue emphasis to the role of the learning space.

Directions...

Do first year students truly benefit from the research character of universities? When was the last time you used an online platform for knowledge acquisition?

What research experiences might they have? How do these differences across disciplines?
STUDENTS AS PARTICIPANTS

- Research-tutored
- Research-based
- Research-led
- Research-oriented

EMPHASIS ON RESEARCH CONTENT

EMPHASIS ON RESEARCH PROCESSES

Curriculum design and the research-teaching nexus (based on Healey 2005)

STUDENTS AS AUDIENCE