



Feedback: FYE Conference 2008

“Being that as it may, in Africa we are in urgent need of most basic of modern human needs – we do not need our children to be astronauts, or engineers – nay, we first need them to have food to eat and clothes to wear – whilst some children elsewhere are building pocket radios, we scavenge for food, shelter, and for education...but we must resist the temptation to give up”:Ishmael

Introduction

The First Year Experience (FYE) conference 2008, held in Stellenbosch Protea Hotel on 8 – 10 September 2008, was aimed at opening conversations on various issues pertaining to the experiences of first year learners at high education institutions; see more details from the conference website (<http://academic.sun.ac.za/fyeconference2008/>). Much of the discussion focused on the "supporting" of first years' adaptation process during the transitional period - from high-school to tertiary. Another point of focus was on discerning how learners behave and how they felt in general about learning and the university life (including the challenges that they are faced with e.g. HIV/AIDS).

It is not the aim of this brief report to give details on events of the conference or to summarize all presentations and articles submitted at the FYE conference, but to give an indication of what was covered across different domains of learning and teaching of first years in universities around the world. More specifically, issues that came up during panel discussions, sessions that we attended, and open talks held during the conference sessions, will be briefly discussed.

Presentations, views and discussions on various issues

The issue of good writing skills was also lengthily discussed - in particular, Plagiarism – it was clear from all presentations and discussions that plagiarism is still a very intricate form of cheating to deal with, and very difficult indeed to even define what it is or what it is not.

Some of the hot topics were around assessment for first years - particularly the fairness of assessment criteria in use in many tertiary institutions, this also led to discussion of profiling, e-assessment, and record tracking mechanisms for learners so that the institution is aware of who they are evaluating – taking into account their history and background both social and academic. The notion of “early warning systems” was also



discussed – where early assessment is done and when results suggest that a learner is having some difficulties with the course/study contents, interventions are made by the lecturers and the parents to address any issues that might be affecting learner's academic performance.

Many institutions have many different programmes in place to support first years orientation process, some have special enrolment programmes (e.g. University of Cincinnati, USA) and form "study communities" where groups of learners from the same department (e.g. Business studies, Computer Science, etc.) become a community or some form of a "special interest group" from first year until graduation – this way forming a platform for exchange of ideas and experiences among learners.

The issue of dual-language for medium of instruction was also touched by other presenters, attempting to establish how mother-tongue usage in high education enhances learner's performance and also how learners and lecturers felt about the use of first languages (Zulu in the case that the presenter discussed) in study materials such as manuals – this discussion, on a much broader view, answers to the call for mother-tongue education.

Most of the presentations focused on providing statistics gathered during evaluation of techniques, or programmes that they have introduced in their institutions, suggestions and recommendations were also presented as to how first years' experiences can be improved, to make a meaningful and progressive impact on the academic lives of these first years. Our presentation, which was on the last day, proposed a (virtual) mentorship as a tool to improve learner success in Higher Education. Read more at <http://academic.sun.ac.za/fyeconference2008/Documentation/FYE%20Conference%20Abstracts.pdf>

High rate of learners dropping out before completing their studies were also highlighted as some of the key worrying factors, particularly the drop-out rate of first year learners on their first semesters of their studies.

Failure rate on first-year courses/modules were also discussed from various institutions' points of view - citing many issues as contributory factors to the poor indicators (high failure rate, drop-out rate, poor writing skills, etc.).

Some also looked at "gate-way" modules and suggested that such modules should be given utmost care to ensure that learners do progress in their studies - these are modules you need to stay on course. As an example, the presenter from UNISA evaluated the first year module on programming - she did a comparison of C++ and Python (syntax and constructs), to determine which one is more suitable to be a first year subject/module - arguing that to understand C++ on first encounter has proven to be a very difficult and impractical thing for first years - indirectly or directly resulting in course/career change or complete drop-out from these first year learners.



Conclusion

It was clear from the issues raised during the conference proceedings that challenges are very similar amongst different institutions and that much of the research should be directed into finding out how effective the suggested or proposed support programmes and methods really are in enhancing first year learners' experience in higher learning institutions. It is also worth investigating as to whether there are technical difficulties that learners experience when they enter tertiary institution or whether it is only a matter of psychological efficiencies on the part of the learner in dealing with change in general – that is, do these learners have problems with “learning” contents of tertiary education or do they have problems adapting to the tertiary lifestyle? With this knowledge, it is then much easier for institutions to re-aligned their first year support programmes in line with the actual needs of first years – whether this be adopting tutorship policies, mentorship programmes, or life-coaching programmes.

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