

**First-year Experience Conference: Opening Conversations on First-year Success
Stellenbosch, Tuesday 9 September 2008**

**First-year experience as terrain of failure or platform for development?
Critical choices for higher education**

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The traditional image of first year at a university is one of exciting intellectual and personal discoveries, independence in thought and behaviour, widening horizons and growth in confidence. This is close to reality for some students, but for many others – in fact, the majority in South Africa – the experience is marred by failure, loss of confidence, and perhaps disillusionment. This has far-reaching consequences for the individual, for the development of South Africa's talent, and thus for social, economic and political well-being. If this situation is avoidable, surely all reasonable efforts should be made to avoid it.

The fact that improving the learning experience is persistently under-prioritised in the academic community arises primarily from a range of cultural and attitudinal factors but may be exacerbated by a lack of clear analysis of the choices confronting the sector, and their consequences. Such choices, whether they are explicit or implicit, have critical implications for the nature and outcomes of the learning experience, particularly the first-year experience, of the great majority of South African students.

Drawing particularly on some recent South African and American research, this presentation will: (a) outline the significance of first-year performance for the individual, for the higher education sector and for development; (b) discuss the special role and purposes of first-year learning in the educational continuum; (c) assess aspects of current praxis against these purposes; and (d) consider some key choices that must be made if there is to be substantial positive change in the first-year experience of South Africa's increasingly diverse student intake.