

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

Ian Scott
First-Year Experience Conference
Stellenbosch, September 2008

FYE in context

- Concerns about FYE: quality and effectiveness
- Contemporary conditions reminiscent of post-WW1 period of HE expansion
 - and origins of the FYE movement
- What has been achieved in this time?
- Why is improvement so hard?

2

Why is it so hard?

- Competing demands on academic time, energy and creativity
 - matters of deep culture and identity
 - dichotomies force choices to be made
- How can educational concerns be given due weight within prevailing conditions?
 - unless there is compelling need or vision

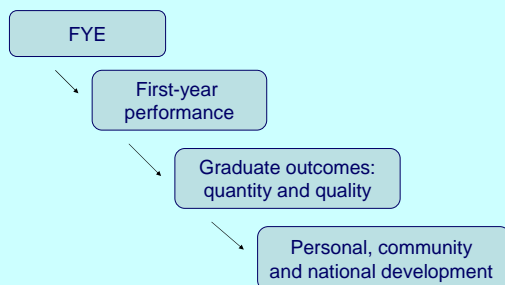
3

What can be done?

- The importance of setting out the case for educational improvement in higher education
 - for state and public as well as the academic community
 - as a basis for understanding key choices (implicit and explicit) and their consequences
- The role of “the converted”
 - and the importance of change strategy

4

Significance of the first-year experience



5

Quantitative measures of HE contribution

- Performance analysis derived from DoE's cohort studies of the 2000 and 2001 intakes of first-time entering students, published in HE Monitor 6 (CHE)
- Acknowledgements:
 - Council on Higher Education: 'Improving Teaching and Learning for Success'
 - Department of Education
 - Nan Yeld and Jane Hendry (UCT)

6

Participation rates* and their significance

- Overall: 16%
- White: 61%
- Indian: 50%
- Black: 12%
- Coloured: 12%

* Approximate gross enrolment rates derived from HEMIS 2004: all participants as % of 20-24 age-group

7

Implications of the participation rates

- The view that a large proportion of current students 'do not belong' in higher education is not tenable
- Current intake has high potential
 - so what becomes of it?

8

First-year attrition

- About 30% drop out or are excluded in first year
 - >20% of contact students (about 25,000)
- Experience of failure goes well beyond this
- Shortcomings of survey research on factors affecting retention
 - lack of research on the relationship between academic performance, financial issues, wellness and attrition

9

Whose responsibility?

- Factors beyond the higher education sector's control
 - 'money and poor schooling' (M&G 2006)
- Factors within the higher education sector's control
 - The educational process in higher education is itself a major variable affecting who succeeds and fails

10

Student performance after 5 years: Overall

Graduated	30%
Still registered	14%
Left without graduating	56%
Estimated completion rate	44%

11

Student performance after 5 years: Contact university programmes

Graduated	50%
Still registered	12%
Left original institution	38%
Students 'lost'	≈15,000

12

**Graduation within 5 years:
General academic first B-degrees, excl Unisa**

<i>CESM</i>	<i>Grad</i>	<i>Still in</i>
04: Business/Management	50%	7%
15: Life and Phys Sciences	47%	13%
22: Social Sciences	53%	6%
12: Languages	47%	7%

13

**Student performance after 5 years:
Contact technikon programmes**

Graduated	32%
Still registered	10%
Left original institution	58%
Students 'lost'	≈25,000

14

**Graduation within 5 years:
National Diplomas, excl distance ed (TSA)**

<i>CESM</i>	<i>Grad</i>	<i>Still in</i>
04: Business/Management	33%	8%
06: Computer Science	34%	11%
08: Engineering	17%	14%
12: Soc Services/Pub Admin	29%	6%

15

Outcomes

- Among the CESMs and qualification types analysed:
 - in the contact universities, only two cases where loss may be under 40%
 - in the contact 'technikon' programmes, no cases where loss will be under 50%
- Students 'lost' from 2000 intake: 65,000

16

The pipeline to postgraduate study

- Number of PhDs per million of population:
 - SA 14
 - Japan ~120; S Korea ~150
- The "PhD project" not taking account of the undergraduate pyramid
 - one among various examples of non-joined-up policy development

17

**Equity of outcomes:
the central challenge**

- Under 5% of the black age-group are succeeding in higher education in South Africa
 - of higher education GER of 5% in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2007)

18

Equity of outcomes
Graduation within 5 years in
general academic first B-degrees, excl UNISA

CESM	Black	White
04: Business/Management	33%	72%
15: Life and Phys Sciences	31%	63%
22: Social Sciences	34%	68%
12: Languages	32%	68%

19

Equity of outcomes
Graduation within 5 years
in National Diplomas, excl distance ed (TSA)

CESM	Black	White
04: Business/Management	31%	44%
06: Computer Science	33%	43%
08: Engineering	16%	28%
12: Soc Services/Pub Admin	29%	23%

20

Implications

- Output not matching national needs in respect of 'economic growth ... and social cohesion' (Pandor 2005)
- Current system not meeting the needs of the majority
- Pressing need to widen *successful* participation
- The performance patterns are persistent
- The equity and development agendas have converged
 - Substantially improving the performance of the majority requires systemic change

21

What can be done?

- Analysis and understanding of the role of the first-year experience
 - and the choices that can be made about it
- Focus here on academic issues
 - in the context of a holistic view of student development

22

Key role of the FYE

- A special but not discrete stage in the educational continuum
 - importance of understanding what comes before as well as preparing for what is to come
 - a platform for developing potential in new modes
 - unique opportunities and responsibilities to the individual and the country
- Judging design and delivery of FYE against these purposes

23

Choice #1:
Who belongs in higher education?

- FY as the first point where completing the preceding educational phase does not entitle the learner to enter the next
 - so there is a choice about who to accommodate
- Different attitudes to the choice
 - FY as filter: "rooting out", pride in failure rate
 - growing enrolment as source of revenue
 - inclusiveness with good intentions
 - conflicting views between and within key groups

24

Choice #1

- What understandings drive the choice?
 - ideas of intelligence, or preparedness for 'universal' HE expectations: removing the 'unteachable'?
 - recognition of 'potential' and the possibility of realising it?
 - responding to national developmental needs?
- Conflicting interests among interested parties

25

Choice #1

- Implications of making the choice responsibly
 - access without success as a hollow concept
 - accommodation = design and practice meeting the legitimate learning needs of the intake
- Profound consequences of the choice and of matching HE design and practice with it
 - will determine much of the nature of the sector and the fulfilment of its obligations

26

Choice #2: Macro-curricular frameworks

- Curriculum enacts our philosophy and intentions
 - curriculum as a framework that strongly affects what we can do and who will succeed
- Is the "4-year degree" the answer?
 - the 'articulation gap' as a key cause of attrition

27

Graduated in regulation time: General academic first B-degrees, excl Unisa

04: Business/Management	24%
15: Life and Physical Sciences	21%
22: Social Sciences	29%
12: Languages	28%

28

Graduated in regulation time: National Diplomas, excl distance ed (TSA)

04: Business/Management	18%
06: Computer Science	14%
08: Engineering	5%
12: Soc Services/Pub Admin	13%

29

Graduated in regulation time, by "race": General academic first B-degrees, excl dist ed

<i>CESM</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>
04: Business/Management	11%	43%
15: Life and Phys Sciences	11%	35%
22: Social Sciences	14%	43%
12: Languages	13%	52%

30

Choice #2

- Curriculum reform as an opportunity for creativity and contextualisation
 - allowing for diversity through flexibility
 - allowing space for balancing depth and breadth, local and international
 - allowing space for development of contemporary skills
 - addressing the 'basics' in sensitive ways
- Particular opportunity for FYE
 - Certain key matters can only be addressed in FY

31

Choice #2

- In whose interests is the status quo?
- Do we have the vision, will and capacity to make the effort needed to change our inherited structures?

32

Choice #3: Giving real "attention" to the educational process in HE

- Can we claim that we are doing justice to the real challenges for FY and general undergraduate education?
 - Why are so many diminished by the experience?
- The way we (choose to) do things makes a material difference to outcomes and to who succeeds
 - international and local experience

33

Choice #3

- US Education Sector Report:
 - "If there is a single factor that seems to distinguish colleges and universities that have truly made a difference on behalf of minority students, it is attention." (Carey 2008)
- So what constitutes "attention"?
 - effort
 - professional accountability
 - systematic enquiry and research: the scholarship of teaching and learning

34

Choice #3

- How do we get "attention"?
 - raising the status of "teaching"
 - recognising education-related research as a valid and intellectually challenging field
 - giving respect to educational expertise
- Is the academic community willing to recognise and respect educational expertise in this way?
 - Where are current policies taking us?
 - High stakes of the choice

35

In summary: Key conditions within HE control

- Understanding who belongs in HE, on grounds of potential, social justice and national needs
- Aligning the design of the system with the learning needs of the majority of the (needed) intake
- Dealing creatively with diversity (and desired outcomes) in mainstream provision through effective teaching
- Not necessarily at odds with research

36

So why is it so hard?

- What do the choices say about our values and identity?
 - but the choices may not be explicit and the consequences not clear
- Choices affected by age-old tensions
 - but new implications have arisen from economic globalisation and its effects on developing countries

37

Integrity, in its two senses of 'bringing together' and 'soundness of moral principle', is central to academic identity and resolving tensions between core academic roles. (Rowland 2007)

38

References

- Rowland, S. 2007. The integrity of academic enquiry. *International policies and practices for academic enquiry: An international colloquium*. Winchester, 19–21 April.
http://portal-live.solent.ac.uk/university/rconference/2007/resources/stephen_rowland.pdf
- Scott, I., Yeld, N. and Hendry, J. 2007. *A case for improving teaching and learning in South African higher education*. Higher Education Monitor No. 6. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
<http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000155/index.php>
- UNESCO 2007. *Education For All Report 2008*. Paris: UNESCO

39