

## CAMPUS DIALOGUE

# The South African National Resource Centre (SANRC) for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition Conference 2015

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Over the past two decades, the South African higher education community has introduced many diverse and innovative programmes to improve the first-year experience (FYE) for students, such as orientation, peer learning, supplemental instruction, academic support services, and different curriculum initiatives. However, such initiatives have tended to be institutionally based and without the benefit of coordination and integration. South Africa is yet to conduct a system-wide conversation about its collective goals for first-year students at South Africa's universities and the most effective methods to attain such goals. As such, South Africa's higher education system remains continually plagued by the matter of student success and throughput. Increasing pressure is brought to bear upon universities to recruit, retain and, ultimately, graduate those students who become lost to the system in the first year of study.

It is to this end that the South African National Resource Centre (SANRC) for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, in collaboration with the National Resource Center (NRC) for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition based at the University of South Carolina (USC) in the United States, has been set up for the dual purpose of integrating FYE initiatives and providing national resources aimed at improving student transitions and success. The SANRC was established through a collaborative Teaching Development Grant (TDG) from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

A key event for the SANRC is the annual convening of the SANRC First-Year Experience (FYE) and Students in Transition Conference. The conference is broadly intended to serve as an opportunity for university leaders, educators, and academic and professional staff who work with first-year students to exchange both scholarly and practical information about student success and transitions.

The inaugural SANRC FYE and Students in Transition Conference took place from 19 to 21 May 2015 in Johannesburg. The conference was preceded by a workshop comprising a number of intensive, thematically-based 'research incubator' sessions. These

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pre-conference sessions were led and facilitated by leading scholars and experts in the FYE field. Dr Nelia Frade and Dr Jenni Underhill from the University of Johannesburg (UJ) addressed the role of senior students in enhancing and transforming the first-year experience for students. Dr Merridy Wilson-Strydom from the University of the Free State (UFS) led a session on the pre-university experience and the extent to which it informs the first year of study for students. A critical perspective on the concept of student success was jointly shared by Dr Danny Fontaine from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Ms Soraya Motsabi from UJ. A dedicated research incubator writing session was led by Prof. Brenda Leibowitz from UJ and Prof. Chris Winberg and Prof. James Garraway from the Cape Peninsula University Technikon (CPUT). Dr Jennifer Winstead from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) led a session on the learning outcomes of out-of-the-classroom involvement, including those found within FYE programmes at NMMU. All of the sessions garnered huge interest and support from delegates and clearly indicated the ‘appetite’ which exists among FYE scholars and practitioners for sustained critical engagement with one another.

The conference began in earnest with keynote presentations by the NRC’s Dr Jennifer Keup, Director of the NRC (20 May 2015) and Dr Dallin George-Young, Assistant Director for Research Grants and Assessments at the NRC (21 May 2015). The work of the NRC was highlighted in both presentations. Dr Keup spoke of the conceptual foundations of the FYE ‘movement’, at both a national and international level, and the key role played by the NRC in grounding and consolidating this FYE constituency through its core commitments to thought leadership, scholarly research, the nexus between research and practice, and collaborations and networking. Dr Keup placed particular emphasis on the mutuality aspect of the partnership between the SANRC and the NRC, highlighting shared aspirations and strategies as well as the intention to commit to a dual transfer of learning between the two institutions.

The keynote presentation by Dr Dallin George-Young focused on key findings from the SANRC 2014 South African Survey of Peer Leaders. This survey is based on the International Survey of Peer Leaders conducted by the NRC. It was conducted for the SANRC by Dr Nelia Frade, who is based at the Academic Development Centre (ADC) at UJ. Dr Young’s contention that the student peer group is the single-most important source of influence on the growth and development of students allowed many delegates to reflect critically on their respective institutional experiences with peer leaders. The SANRC is currently working on writing up the completed findings of the 2014 South African Survey of Peer Leaders.

In addition to conference presentations, an FYE Summit was held on the last day of the conference. A selected group of higher education stakeholders were invited to the FYE Summit in order to help the SANRC clarify and define its research agenda based on the multiple, varied needs of the South African FYE constituency. Several interesting strands of thinking about the FYE experience emerged from the summit.

One strand of thinking focused on the basket of multiple issues, often socio-economic in nature, which affect student retention in the first year, including financial problems,

stressful home environments, accommodation, food insecurity, etc. The discussion also focused on issues at the institutional level, such as curriculum design, admission procedures, and career guidance. The summit recognised that such issues related to retention are highly complex and often beyond institutional control. As such, it was agreed that they require a systemic and multipronged approach.

Another strand of thinking related to the matter of funding. The question was posed: To what extent does the allocation of funding influence student retention? A tentative proposal emerged that national funding sources for FYE programmes should be explored in a collaborative context. The SANRC was requested to consider exploring possibilities with the DHET and the NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) for a differentiated model of funding which takes into account the different needs of students. The SANRC was asked if it might possibly support the NSFAS in thinking critically about the existing NSFAS funding model.

A final aspect of the thinking at the FYE Summit was that of key interventions at an institutional level which would make a tangible difference to the FYE experience for students. It was argued that the first year can be seen as the time to prepare students academically and to develop the behaviours required for persistence beyond the first year into undergraduate and postgraduate transitions. In terms of the matter of persistence in higher education, certain 'change-behaviour models' could be deployed in order to change student behaviours and attitudes in respect of the first year.

The SANRC FYE and Students in Transition Conference provided a rich source of insights and information around which the SANRC is now designing its research agenda. A forthcoming edition of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)* will also feature a range of articles and papers from the conference. More information about the SANRC FYE Conference 2015, including the SANRC 2014 South African Survey of Peer Leaders, can be obtained from the SANRC website: <http://sanrc.co.za>.

