

PUBLISHED VERSION

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Introduction


Universities in transition: Foregrounding social contexts of knowledge in the first year experience, 2014 / Brook, H., Fergie, D., Maeorg, M., Michell, D. (ed./s), pp.1-9

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Originally published at: <https://doi.org/10.20851/universities-transition-00>

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26 October 2021

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/98403>

Introduction

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For some time now the terms 'transition to university' and 'first-year experience' have been at the centre of discussion and discourse at, and about, Australian universities. For those university administrators, researchers and teachers involved, this focus has been framed by a number of interlinked factors ranging from social justice concerns — the moral imperative to foster the participation and success at tertiary level of 'non-traditional' students from socially diverse and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds — to the hard economic realities confronting the contemporary corporatising university. In the midst of changing global economic conditions affecting the international student market, as well as shifting domestic politics surrounding university funding, the equation of dollars with student numbers has remained a constant, and has kept universities' attention on the current 'three Rs' of higher education — recruitment, retention, reward — and, in particular, on the critical phase of students' entry into the tertiary institution environment.

In recent times, reforms launched by the 2009 Federal Labor Government (in office from 2007-13) sharpened the focus on student transition into university and the 'three Rs'. The aim of those reforms was to increase the number of graduates between the ages of 25 and 34 years from 32 per cent of the population to 40 per cent by 2025. In order to meet this ambitious target, universities were offered financial incentives to increase the proportion of students from low socio-

economic status (SES) backgrounds from 15 per cent to a more representative 25 per cent of the student population, a key platform in the Government of the day's strategy (Australian Government, 2009: 12-13). Because Australia's drop-out rate was high (28 per cent in 2005) relative to comparable countries, the need for student retention was emphasised. To this end, funds were injected specifically to improve the student learning experience, offer effective student services, and sustain student engagement. Economic and social rewards have been expected to flow from the Government's program to recruit more students from low SES backgrounds and improve the retention of all students, leading to a more globally competitive and 'stronger and fairer Australia' (ibid.: 7).

In the light of such initiatives — and current concerns and debates, as this book goes to press, about the impact of the new government's policy of deregulation and anticipated funding cuts — university campuses and committee rooms have been abuzz with research and comment about students, particularly first-year students. The chapters in this book have been prompted by several ideas in circulation amongst university managers, administrators, professional staff and academics alike — ideas that, in our view, should be debated and challenged. These include the idea that universities are (already) well-equipped and flexible enough to accommodate a more diverse student body; that those new to university culture will experience it as inevitably welcoming and enriching; and that support for first-year students is best conceptualised as something additional to, or separate from, day-to-day teaching and learning activities. Most of all, however, the chapters in this book respond critically to the idea that extending university participation to a more diverse and more disadvantaged student body involves correcting a deficit on the part of those students. Informed by this 'deficit model', university staff strategise ways to equip students for university study, often assuming, for instance, that those who come from poorer backgrounds will be poorer students: less intelligent, less engaged, less able to meet the demands made of them. This model implies that the task of extending access to higher education in ways that accord with a commitment to social justice involves remediation of these 'other' students.

Given the complex social composition of universities and range of views on offer, we note also that many staff reject, as we do, this deficit model of students. Some have in its place a deficit model of universities, meaning that it

is the university as a social institution which requires remediation, not students from 'other' backgrounds. While we commend the supportive attitude toward students this approach embraces, we believe (as argued in particular by Marcia Devlin and Jade McKay in Chapter 4) that deficit models per se are insufficient to address the challenges currently confronting Australian universities. Such models, we maintain, are counter-productively one-sided, polarising, and myopic in their failure to recognise the strengths that both students and institutions bring to educational engagement. More fundamentally, such discourses reflect and reproduce overly generalised, distanced, 'top-down' perspectives on higher education processes, and entail assumptions about both 'the student' and 'the university' which fail to take into account the complex and diverse social relations, identities and contexts involved. For instance, the 'non-traditional student' is all too easily constructed as a 'type' with attendant 'typical' issues — the 'typical' low SES student, the 'typical' Asian student, the 'typical' Regional and Remote student — in opposition to an equally 'typified' but often unmarked local high school leaver. Similarly we caution against the tendency, as evidenced in the creeping bureaucratic 'standardisation' of teaching and learning procedures in the name of pedagogic and managerial accountability, to imagine and reify 'the university' as a relatively singular, contained and homogenous entity that can be straightforwardly addressed, and redressed, *en masse*.

In this book we acknowledge that universities are social universes in their own right. Moreover, we note that these institutions are complexly embedded in myriad other social domains, such as global fields of practice, which extend beyond local campuses. We therefore foreground a view of universities as sites of multiple, complex and diverse social relations, identities, communities, knowledges and practices. At the heart of the book are people enrolling at university for the first time and entering into the broad variety of social relations and contexts entailed in their 'coming to know' at, of and through university. By recasting 'the transition to university' as simultaneously and necessarily entailing a transition of university — indeed universities — and of their many and varied constitutive relations, structures and practices, we seek to reconceptualise the 'first-year experience' in terms of multiple and dynamic processes of dialogue and exchange amongst all participants. By carefully and critically examining the social relations involved in the movement of neophytes/new scholars into this complex and shifting ensemble

of communities, contexts and worldviews, we interrogate taken-for-granted understandings of what 'the university' is, and consider what universities might yet become. In this way the book lays out challenges for all those involved in contemporary higher education in Australia and beyond.

Our commitment to conversing across institutional divisions in higher education is reflected in the range of contributors to this book. Included here are researchers with key expertise in first-year transition, and/or the first-year university experience; university administrators embracing institutional change in keeping with the needs of twenty-first century students; lecturers and researchers with particular insights relating to power relations; and academics teaching first-year students. Also reflective of our commitment to diversity and interdisciplinarity are the variety of methods contributors have used to explore their areas of concern and interest. Some writers review and critique current teaching and learning practices, models of student transition and higher education policy documents; others have employed social research methods of surveys, interviews and reflexivity.

Outline of the book

The chapters comprising this volume all engage, in varying ways and to varying extents, with questions and issues ranging from the general and theoretical to the particular and substantive. While contributors tack between these two poles even within chapters, we have sought to chart the course of the book in terms of a broad movement from the former towards the latter in three stages: *reconceptualisation*, *reevaluation* and *realisation*.

The first section is devoted to broad, deep re-thinking of the very nature of 'transition' and of 'universities', and of processes and practices of 'coming to know' and 'coming to be' in higher education. While grounded in particular pedagogic and research experiences, the two chapters in Part 1 offer especially expansive and critical reconceptualisations of the wider landscape of contemporary higher education, challenging key taken-for-granted assumptions informing approaches to transition in Australian universities. While maintaining this critical attention to the bigger picture, successive parts of the book increasingly focus on the particular and local. The four chapters comprising Part 2 revolve around the reevaluation of several 'non-traditional' student groups and their discursive and experiential engagement with universities. Contexts for this reevaluation include

policy documents as well as classrooms and campuses, figuring students as subjects engaged in relationships with policy-makers, academics, communities, and each other. The third and last section brings the reader close to processes of effecting transformations on campus in the interests of all — in the creation of new learning spaces, the promotion of engagement in classroom contexts, and in prompting shifts in consciousness for students and staff. Together, the three chapters in Part 3 demonstrate a variety of ways the first-year experience of higher education can be made more flexible to the needs of an increasingly diversified student body.

Part 1: Reconceptualising: transition and universities

The book opens with an examination of what Trevor Gale and Stephen Parker see as three primary modes of conceptualising transition to university. Transition as Induction (T_1) researchers conceive of students transitioning to university along a 'pathway' which can be smoothed out by institutions providing appropriate support services and curricular activities, and preferably integrating both social and academic domains to enhance the student experience. Transition as Development (T_2) researchers, however, focus more on transition to university as a crucial stage in the development of an *identity* as a university student on the way to becoming somebody else, for example, a teacher or doctor, and thus the emphasis is more on change at an individual level. The third conception of transition is Transition as Becoming (T_3) which challenges normative accounts of transition to university — and even the concept of transition as a singular event — and argues that the voices of the students themselves are absent from these accounts. Developing an understanding of the students instead of continually privileging institutional processes will require that institutions become more open and flexible, not only to varying pathways through university but also to non-normative epistemologies.

In Chapter 2, Deane Fergie broadens the conceptual frame of inquiry into transition and universities. Taking a practice perspective she argues that there is a core but richly variegated approach to coming to know, which frames universities and university transitions. She names this practice 'research-learning' and explores its richly variegated expression in the different fields of knowledge practice and their constitution in different 'communities of research-learning practice' which transcend any particular university in global trajectories. This reconfigures ideas of transition from a simple view of the ins and outs of undergraduate student

transition to a focus on coming to know, and different ways of coming to know, which includes the transitions of all who work in a university. This perspective also reconfigures the research-teaching divide that looms in an academic-centric view of university life, and invites us to consider whether, by thinking about how learning is constituted in and constitutive of communities of practice, we might enrich the educational experiences which academics lead and, in important ways, share with students. In the end she asks us to consider the fruits of our research-learning practice.

Part 2: Revaluating: 'non-traditional' student groups in higher education

Angelique Bletsas and Dee Michell (Chapter 3) take Australian culture as their focus. In a direct challenge to characterisations of low SES students as academically or aspirationally deficient, they suggest the low valuation of low SES students is a cultural assessment and evidence of classism in the academy. While 'classism' is a term rarely used in Australia, it is very much in evidence in the United States, where a number of scholars have called for this discriminatory practice to be added to the equity agenda. Although not suggesting that the authors of the Bradley Review (the comprehensive review of the Australian Higher Education sector and key document sparking changes in Government policy) are classist, Bletsas and Michell do, however, argue that classism remains evident within that document.

In a trenchant critique of 'deficit models' as such, Devlin and McKay (Chapter 4) seek to find a way by which the voices and experiences of students from low SES backgrounds can be valued and used in 'joint ventures' to change the institution. Devlin and McKay begin by arguing that neither low SES students nor universities should be conceived as 'the problem' and suggest the need for a two-way exchange to bridge the 'socio-cultural incongruence' between the two. In this exchange, staff come to know such students and the ways in which their needs might differ from other students, as well as the many strengths they bring to the university. By facilitating and supporting students to learn academic discourse while not devaluing the non-academic discourse students arrive with, low SES students can transition to and through higher education successfully.

In Chapter 5, Xianlin Song looks at the difficulties Chinese international students have in coping at university in Australia and suggests ways to improve

this important exchange of knowledge — an exchange which has been ongoing for centuries. First, she critiques a prevailing view of Western education as superior to Chinese, and commensurate imaginings of Chinese students as arriving with an inferior education and inadequate, non-critical study habits. Next, Song challenges any assumption that knowledge exchange in higher education involves only knowledge transmission from Australian educators to Chinese nationals. Finally, she argues for heterogeneous pedagogies that have a respectful regard for all students.

In Chapter 6, Michael Maeorg challenges the deficit model as it applies to Regional and Remote students. Coming to urban universities from culturally 'different' rural areas, and without the support of a network of peers and family members, these students are often characterised as self-evidently disadvantaged and 'deficient' in terms of a number of areas, including peer engagement and social integration. While not wanting to dismiss the particular difficulties and challenges this demographic of students face, Maeorg argues that such students are often well aware of significant socio-cultural competencies they have accrued, thanks to their socialisation in community-oriented rural settings, and practise effective deployment of these competencies in the university environment. Indeed, Maeorg observes that Regional and Remote students themselves note the difficulties that local middle class school-leavers have in coping with the diversity of students at university, with many appearing to manage or even deny this difference by 'closing ranks'.

Part 3: Realising: transformations on campus

In Chapter 7, Pascale Quester, Kendra Backstrom and Slavka Kovacevic describe the co-creation process which informed the building of innovative learning infrastructure at the University of Adelaide. 'The Hub' was designed to accommodate changes in student learning behaviours which had been occurring over a number of years. In a practical manifestation of Devlin and McKay's call for a two-way exchange between institutions and students (in this case the student body as a whole), and T3 researchers' call for universities to become more open and flexible, Hub planners moved away from an autocratic approach and consulted with students, reflecting a desire on the part of key administrators to become more student-centred and to change the previously wary relationship between

the university and its students. The result was the co-creation of a vibrant facility which brings together counselling and academic support services as well as spaces for students to study individually or in groups.

Not only are particular 'non-traditional' subsets of the student population sometimes considered a problem; so, too, is the entire student body, particularly when it comes to general yet sophisticated skills development such as critical thinking. Chris Beasley and Benito Cao (Chapter 8) take issue with this version of the deficit model and its problematisation of students as lacking critical analytical aptitudes and skills. Drawing on a research project conducted with first-year Politics students, Beasley and Cao conclude that, contrary to the literature, novice students do have an understanding of what critical thinking entails, and value it as a skill with applications not only in the study of Politics but to their university studies in general.

Knowing both where students come from (personally, socially and academically) and the skills they bring with them to university is fundamental to navigating easier transition pathways. In each of the previous chapters, understanding epistemology as always/already rooted in social relations is a key element of our collective approach and analysis. In Chapter 9, Heather Brook and Dee Michell explain how an almost incidental classroom exercise in getting to know their students affected them and their teaching practice.

In combination, the essays across all parts of this volume are optimistic about the general and particular challenges associated with broadening and extending access to university. We express confidence in the talents, skills and capabilities that well-supported students bring to their initial experience at university, arguing, in sum, that modelling transition for non-traditional students as an exercise in recuperating a deficient student body is misguided. We suggest, too, that while such characterisations may not always be obvious or direct, they often underpin institutional attitudes and approaches to access and equity in universities. We hope, in the essays presented here, that some alternative conceptions — from the general to the particular — can be identified and championed.

References

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