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Keynote Paper

The changing student experience: Who's driving it and where is it going?

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*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.
The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion.
As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.*
Abraham Lincoln

Introduction

From time to time I manage to escape from my desk to take a breath and grab some thinking time away from my computer screen. Despite the ubiquity of online journals and books, there is nothing quite like the indulgence of walking among aisles of books, nothing to replace the scent of a brand new publication, nothing quite like the old-fashioned art of flicking through the pages and getting lost for a few moments between the covers of a book. On a recent visit to the university bookshop I was curious to see what was “new” in the higher education section. There were the familiar texts on the art of university teaching, a growing number of publications on e-learning and how to engage students online, and a similarly growing collection of titles on the contentious topic of what it is to be a “university” in the 21st century. The latter group included such titles as: *Universities in the Marketplace*, *The University of the Global Age*, *Pursuing the Endless Frontier*, and *University Inc.: The corporate corruption of higher education*.

My search in the “Education” section for new insights on the university student experience in the 21st century proved fruitless. The closest I came to any attempt to chart the new millennium student experience was in the “Business” section where a bright red cover caught my eye: *Generation Y: Thriving and surviving with generation Y at work*. While this text provided useful glimpses into the lives of Yers, as they are called, I was left to draw my own conclusions about how the values, expectations and lifestyles of this emerging Y Generation might impact on universities and their practices.

There is remarkably little in the current literature on who our students are, how their priorities and expectations differ from those of the X generation or the baby boomers, and what these changes might mean for universities. While the university in the global age is considered an important and fascinating subject (King, 2004), there is a dearth of research on the impact on universities of changes in students' lives, priorities and experiences. As Lincoln observed, “our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew”. The occasion may be “piled high with difficulty” but it is equally piled high with opportunity for those who seek to understand not simply changes in universities, but also changes in the students who inhabit them.

This keynote paper opens by sketching some of the broad transformations occurring in higher education at the global and national levels. Attention then turns to a discussion of the characteristics of the Y Generation and what distinguishes them from previous generations of students. The discussion is underpinned by empirical data from a ten-year trend analysis of the first year student experience in Australian universities (Krause et al., 2005). The paper concludes with implications of these changes for university practitioners and policy makers.

Changes in higher education: The context

The changing student experience in Australian higher education must be interpreted in the context of significant national and international changes in higher education over the past decade. Internationally, we have witnessed unsurpassed trade in the higher education sector in recent years. This trade has come in the form of student movements across the globe for the purposes of studying in other countries. Australia, in particular, has become a significant exporter of higher education. The sector has seen a threefold increase in undergraduate student enrolments since 1994, predominantly from South-East Asia.

A second international trend has been enabled by exponential growth in the availability and capabilities of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In recent years we have experienced a rapid expansion of online delivery as a means of transcending geographical and institutional boundaries and of capturing international markets. Related to this has been an equally rapid rise in the establishment of offshore campuses. Australian institutions have been particularly active in this arena. However, Australia is now starting to experience the reverse trend, where large US institutions such as Carnegie Mellon are beginning to explore the “offshore” opportunities offered by locating on Australian shores.

With such extensive global movements of people, resources and course delivery options, the international higher education sector has witnessed an inevitable rise in efforts to compare institutions on a range of quality indicators. Two of the most widely cited international rankings are those issued by Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University along with the UK’s *Times Higher World University Rankings*.

At the national level, too, recent policy shifts have resulted in the publication of a ranking of Australian universities on the basis of quality of teaching indicators which revolve around graduate student survey responses and undergraduate attrition and progression indicators. Reduced federal funding and increased competition in the sector have been accompanied by the mandate to provide evidence of quality in all aspects of institutional practice. The Australian Universities Quality Agency has played a significant role in this respect since its inception in 2000. As the pressure to compete and succeed in the volatile higher education market increases, Australian universities find themselves re-examining policies and practices as never before. In this competitive client-focussed market environment, there is an imperative to define what is distinctive about universities and what they offer. Branding has become the name of the game, with students the major clients.

The “student as client” mindset has met with mixed reactions in the higher education sector. Marketing offices realise their existence depends on successful market research which takes into account the demands and expectations of the future student market, both domestic and international. Academics, by contrast, argue vigorously for the primacy of maintaining disciplinary integrity and academic standards. Meanwhile, student support staff find themselves caught somewhere in the middle – trying to provide support services to students who are highly sensitive to the mixed messages often received from different sectors of their institution.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to deliberate on the relative merits and limitations of a market-driven approach to higher education; except to argue that those who ignore market forces in higher education do so at their peril. Nevertheless, I strongly contend for the critical importance of informed debate on the kinds of policies, processes and practices characterising universities in such an environment. This is clearly a focal point for the 2005 Student Experience Conference at Charles Sturt University. There has never been a more opportune time to focus on what good practice in practice looks like across all dimensions of the undergraduate higher education sector, from community outreach to transition support, from innovative teaching and assessment approaches to equity initiatives. All these practices and the policies underpinning them are pivotal in determining who we are and how we offer and support the highest quality higher education for all students in the 21st century.

Undergraduate students of the 21st century: Who are the Y generation?

Having explored several of the major national and international trends in the higher education sector over the past decade, our focus now shifts to emerging characteristics of current and prospective undergraduate students – their values, experiences and expectations. Many of the change factors identified earlier are in fact drivers for change in the student experience. Factors such as increased competition and internationalisation within the sector, dramatically transformed funding policies, and rapid expansion of ICT capabilities and availability are undoubtedly driving some of the changes in the ways students engage with universities. But there are several other drivers undergirding the changing student experience. These stem from personal, economic, and sociopolitical factors which conflate to bring about the unique Y Generation phenomenon.

The students entering higher education for the first time in 2005 are variously labelled Generation Y, Net-genners, Millennials, Digital Natives, Echo Boomers, or simply Yers. There are approximately 4.5 million of them in Australia – adolescents and young adults born between 1978 and 1994 (Sheahan, 2005).

Their parents were babyboomers many of whom, during the 1980s and 1990s experienced labour market upheavals, otherwise labelled rightsizing, downsizing or restructuring. Many of today's Yers have seen their parents give a lifetime's commitment to a company, only to be rewarded with redundancy and dismissal after the euphemistically titled process of rationalisation. It is no wonder, then, that the Y Generation feel betrayed by the labour market (Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Zemke et al., 2000). Nevertheless, they use it to their advantage. A recent national study of the undergraduate first year experience in Australian universities found that in five years, the proportion of full-time first year students committed to part-time paid work had increased from 51 per cent to 55 per cent (Krause et al., 2005). While the majority of undergraduate Yers are employed part-time, they are more likely to work to live rather than live to work (McBride, 2005). They are not impressed by authority, sceptical about organisational commitment, and have little expectation of workplace stability. The concept of "career for a lifetime" is alien to them.

The Y Generation are technoliterate – the first generation to grow up with computers. They are more comfortable typing on keyboards than writing with pen and paper, and they are often obsessed with the latest technologies and the mobility and access they offer. Yers are a wired and wireless generation rolled into one. The internet and internationalisation of education and society as a whole has provided this emerging generation with a global perspective. As a result, they tend to embrace and be tolerant of diversity. One obvious reason for this is that they are so heterogenous and racially and ethnically diverse as a group (Neuborne, 1999).

They are sometimes perceived as arrogant and street smart, uncommitted, lacking in loyalty, self-gratifying and lacking in career direction. However, they tend to be more optimistic, entrepreneurial and idealistic than their parents. They value wisdom and truth over authority, they are confident, sociable and lifestyle driven (Allen, 2003). Their motto tends to be "Get a Life" rather than work for a living (Scully, 2003).

Undergraduate Yers trade with expertise in the knowledge economy and study their career options carefully. They are familiar with their university's marketing material and tend to have a clear sense of purpose on entering university. Following is a summary of the main differences between a sample of emergent Generation Y first year students surveyed in 2004 and their tail-end X Generation counterparts who were surveyed a decade earlier. Empirical data supporting this summary are available in the research report documenting the national trend study: *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a decade of national studies* (Krause et al., 2005).

Compared to 10 years ago, the 21st century first year student is more likely to:

- be clearer about why s/he has come to university;
- consider him/herself a 'client' being served by the university;

- want a 'portable degree' which will prepare her/him for multiple career pathways;
- expect the choice of combined/dual degrees; and
- expect the accompanying resources (technology, anywhere anytime, seamless support) to help them achieve this aim.

The Y Generation students in 2004 are more likely than their counterparts in 1994 to:

- really enjoy being a university student;
- regularly seek advice from academic staff; and
- be relatively satisfied with the quality of teaching at university (see also Hillman, 2005).

First year students tend to spend significantly less time on average on campus than they did ten years ago (16 hours compared to 18 hours per week). They are typically employed for 10-15 hours per week and spend at least 8 hours per week online for study and recreation. We have no comparative ten-year data on the last variable – a sobering reminder of the dramatic impact of ICTs on students' experiences and engagement over the past decade. The Y Generation are much more connected than previous generations. This is evident in the ease with which they report working with other students in groupwork and teamwork settings at university. It should be emphasised, however, that not all students share these sentiments. International students sampled were much less likely to report feeling comfortable contributing to class discussions, though they were more likely than their domestic counterparts to work with peers on group assignments.

The Y Generation of university students (in 2004) is less likely than the X Generation tail-enders (in 1994) to:

- borrow books from the university library;
- photocopy journal articles and notes;
- be interested in extra-curricular activities at university; and
- spend time on the university campus.

This brief overview highlights some of the notable ways in which the Y Generation is defining itself. They are the focus of attention for politicians and market analysts around the world. What, then, are the implications for those charged with supporting, teaching and designing policy for Yers in the university of the 21st century? The final section outlines eight principles to guide good practice in this regard.

Where to from here? Eight Principles for Good Practice in Practice

The following principles are provided as a basis for informing planning, policy making and practice among higher education practitioners.

1. Uphold standards and make them explicit

Maintaining standards in an era of ever-increasing financial constraints is an ongoing struggle, but one that is well worth the fight. Bok (2003) argues that:

“By compromising basic academic principles, universities tamper with ideals that give meaning to the scholarly community and win respect from the public. These common values are the glue that binds together an institution Defending these academic values, even at the risk of financial sacrifice, evokes the admiration of students, faculty, and alumni” (pp. 206-207).

We know that the Y Generation values integrity and authenticity over and above marketing hype that never delivers on its promises (Neuborne, 1999). Some strategies for maintaining standards in your practice include:

- Don't compromise on what you know to be good practice in your area in the face of student demands and unrealistic expectations. Rather, take steps to shape and manage student expectations so that they are aligned with practices which will best support them and their learning.
- Be clear about your goals and communicate them clearly. Doing something just because it's always been done that way will not work for Generation Y.

- You are working with the Why Generation – they value understanding why you do things the way you do. Take time to make your practices explicit and where appropriate, tell them why you have chosen certain approaches over others.
- Be consistent. Don't forget – this is a connected generation. They talk to each other on a daily basis and will soon identify inconsistent practices on your part. Integrity and consistency with sound reasoning behind your practices is a key to success.
- Students will test to see if you are serious about the standards you set and whether you will keep them accountable.

2. Understand and support diversity in the student experience

- Equity policies need to translate into practice in all areas of the institution. For instance, consider the social support needs of rural students or those from under-represented high schools on your campus. Are you providing a range of activities to meet these students' needs and support their integration into the learning community?
- Equip all staff with strategies for supporting and teaching students from diverse backgrounds. This may be achieved through workshops, publications, and faculty-based initiatives targeted at the unique needs of particular disciplines and student cohorts.
- Bring student affairs and general staff members together with academics to discuss common challenges and strategies.
- Explore ways to make internationalisation a verb not just a noun across the campus. Internationalisation should be as enriching for domestic students learning from international students, as it is for international students who are living and learning in Australian universities. Focus on strategies to connect students across potential cultural and linguistic divides, both within and beyond the classroom. Address the potential "us and them" mentality in classrooms by ensuring that groupwork activities are designed to include students from different backgrounds working together. In many cases this means the academic must take the lead in initiating cross-cultural collaborative group activities.

3. Make ICTs work for you and them

- If you are going to use ICTs in student support or teaching contexts, it is better to start small and use them well, than attempt too much and fail.
- The most important lesson to learn is how to set ICT limits for yourself and for the students. In academic contexts, it is worthwhile being explicit about how and why ICTs will and will not be used in your course. Whenever possible, find out what colleagues are doing with ICTs. If your practices are different, let students know why this is the case. If you don't, students will no doubt raise the issue with you at some stage. Take time to be explicit about your goals for student learning in the class and the role technology plays in achieving those. Students will respect the fact that you have taken the time to think about the issues and explain your approach, even if perhaps not entirely satisfied in terms of getting what they wanted online.
- Generation Y are used to the efficiencies produced by ICTs. They will expect seamless online support. Student services which may be structurally separated within the institution must be easily accessible and interconnected online.
- Where possible, seek and respond to student advice on how they would use the technology to support and help students like themselves.
- ICTs provide an excellent vehicle for keeping materials updated, tailoring resources to particular audiences and groups of students, creating online communities, communicating with individuals, and giving students responsibility for their own learning.
- However, students may expect 24/7 access to you and your resources unless you set limits on your availability online and the forms of communication you will use.

4. Channel student ambitions

- The Y Generation of university students are goal-oriented and ambitious (Allen, 2003; Sheahan, 2005). They value opportunities to learn and take responsibility.
- A mentoring, apprenticeship approach, rather than a dictatorial approach, is an ideal way to teach and work with them. Mentoring may take many forms. Peer mentoring programs have been found to be particularly effective. Academic staff members may also function as important mentors in the lives of Yers seeking opportunities to develop their skills and take on responsibilities in the university environment.
- Careers advice throughout the undergraduate years is critical. They are keen to know about how their learning relates to career opportunities from the beginning of their university experience.

5. Celebrate their social consciousness

- Yers are increasingly known for their open-mindedness, tolerance of diversity, social and environmental consciousness and strong sense of social justice (Sheahan, 2005; Taylor, 2003). Provide opportunities to develop leadership skills and be involved in volunteer activities both across the campus and within communities. An example of this is the new Centre for Student Leadership and Civic Engagement at Griffith University.

6. Capitalise on problem solving capacities

- The Y Generation are fast learners, well acquainted with discovery learning skills such as those required in computer games.
- Take every opportunity to use problems and cases as part of the learning process.
- They value independent thinking and the freedom to choose. Give them options wherever appropriate – make the most of their desire for flexibility. This may extend to flexibility in thinking and creative problem-solving.
- Include students in as many aspects of program design as practicable. In some universities students contribute to curriculum change, in others they develop their own research tasks or learning activities. Use student feedback to improve student services where appropriate, but always make a point of letting students know that their feedback has been used. Most of all they respect someone who seeks their views and then provides a response.

7. Keep them connected

- Yers are a connected generation. They connect through email, mobile phones and online chat. Use these methods, along with face-to-face contact to build up connections and a sense of belonging within your learning community.
- Take into account demographic subgroup differences in the ways students choose to connect, particularly in online environments (Krause, 2005).
- They are used to communicating on the run. It may take some time to channel their energies into focussed group and team activities but it can be done.

8. Do not give up on pastoral care

- For all their sophistication and global knowledge, the Y Generation still needs support. In fact, some say they need it more than their parents did.
- International students are most commonly living in rented accommodation during their university study in Australia (Krause et al., 2005). They lack the support of family and friends who may be far away, and need to be supported to make meaningful connections with peers and the university community.
- Sheahan comments on the paradox of the Y Generation who simultaneously want their independence, “but still need my parents to help me with necessities like new shoes and stuff” (Sheahan, 2005, p.43). They want “independence with strings” (p.43).
- This combination of independence and strings raises many challenges for student support professionals and academics alike. In supporting the Y

Generation, there is a need to strike a balance between fostering independence and providing scaffolded support for a diverse range of student needs.

- For all their optimism and creativity, statistics reveal that increasing proportions of Yers at university are self-identifying as having a medical disability (James et al., 2004), while emotional health is the number one reason why first year students consider leaving university study (Krause et al., 2005). These are just some of the good reasons for continuing to monitor the experience of university Yers as they enter and progress through higher education in the future.

We face an important watershed in the history of Australian higher education. Let history judge us as practitioners, researchers and policy makers who did not turn a blind eye to change, but tackled it head on. May we be judged as those who worked with, not against, Generation Y and led them one step beyond “why”, to ask “why not?”.

“You see things; and you say, ‘Why?’
But I dream things that never were;
and I say, ‘Why not?’ ”
(George Bernard Shaw, *Back To Methuselah*)

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