

BOOK REVIEW

A. Funston, M. Gil & G. Gilmore (Eds). (2014). *Strong starts, supported transitions and student success*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Reviewed by Birgit Schreiber*

Frameworks for extended support in foundation programmes have recently been critiqued as focusing on an othered, separated and identified group of students while leaving exclusionary practices unchallenged in the mainstream of the university (Bozalek & Leibowitz, 2015). Various African researchers (Akojee & Nkomo, 2007; Kioko, 2010; Ndebele, 1995; Vilakazi, 1986) support the argument that institutional practices, pedagogies and structural issues premised on notions of assimilation require re-visioning in order to shift student persistence rates.

These sentiments expressed by African authors are cogently echoed by the Australian researchers, collected in *Strong starts, supported transitions and student success*. The editors Andrew Funston, Miguel Gil and Gwen Gilmore have attracted innovative thinkers and novel practitioners who reflect on their work in the transition, retention and persistence spaces. Collectively, the chapters argue for a systemic and collaborative approach to changing systems and cultures, programme designs and pedagogies in order to “acknowledge the totality of the students’ learning experience” (p. 15).

Gil builds on Kift, Nelson and Clark’s (2010) concept of “tradition pedagogy” (p. 15) and distinguishes between the integrative–assimilative approaches to support that aim at integrating students into the status quo of higher education, and the “adaptive” model that “assumes that students come with different degrees of cultural and social capital that need to be valued and fostered as true strengths” (p. 16). Each chapter in the book underscores this fundamental theme of student-centred principle, which is the outstanding value of this interesting book.

The chapters discuss cases studies, explore challenges and showcase scaffolded designs to system-wide frameworks for embedding “transition pedagogies” into the mainstream of universities. Various chapters respond directly to Tinto’s observation that “most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistent” (p. 146) and discuss approaches

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and practices that shift persistence rates in the students within these “whole-of-institutions” approaches that focus on the FYE stages and are “key to the attrition puzzle” (p. 149).

For me, one of the most exciting chapters is Brian Zammit’s “Embedding a third-generation transition pedagogy: The role of core foundation units”, in which he explores debates on attrition and argues that it is not monocausal. Transition pedagogy is premised on the acknowledgement of socio-cultural incongruencies, combined with curricular and co-curricular articulation as well as institutional culture and climate issues, and proposes a model that shifts persistence rates. Citing Kift *et al.* (2010), he applies the third-generation transition pedagogy to the case study in this chapter.

This book contributes to the scholarship on concepts of persistence, success, attrition and institutional culture and opens critical debates on pervasive and systemic issues that often impair progress. Add-on, short-term and other such insular interventions remain impotent at challenging the exclusionary status quo. The authors provide cogent examples, cases and evidence to lend weight to the argument that institutional efforts and systemic collaborations are probably the most potent methods of addressing the broad concerns of persistence and success. “Whole-of-institution” (p. xi) approaches, also called collegial and systemic (Reason, 2009), are the most effective in terms of triggering substantial shifts towards enhancing students’ chances of persistence (Reason, 2009).

The book is a collection of chapters that offer critical insights into, and expand, the scholarship about FYE. The chapters begin with Funston, Gil and Gilmore exploring the constructs and assumptions embedded in FYE discourses, and encourage the reader to review assumptions about the role of higher education within discourses of equity, access and participation. FYE is sometimes viewed in instrumentalist terms about retention of “indigenous” or “previously disadvantaged” groups of students, and Funston, Gil and Gilmore challenge this view as assimilationist and present the “whole-of-institution approach”, which highlights the importance of “executive led and holistic approaches” (p. 15), culture and climate shift within institutions.

Through critical reflection, scholarship, research and insightful narrative, the editors and authors do not offer simplistic solutions but illuminate the profound challenges in employing transformative strategies truly to transform higher education. Each chapter offers a detailed case study to illustrate how transition pedagogy manifests in FYE spaces, thus impacting institutional change. This is perhaps the one area in which this book may have been more explicit. There is little exploration of how the FYE, even if re-thought in radical terms, changes the overall traditional practices of mainstream senior years in the undergraduate and postgraduate sector.

Overall, the book is an extremely valuable resource for anyone in higher education who is committed to the complex tasks of realising the ideals of higher education as an equaliser.

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