

The First-Year Experience (FYE) in South Africa: A National Perspective

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List of Acronyms

ADC:	Academic Development Centre
CHE:	Council on Higher Education
CHED:	Centre for Higher Education Development
CPUT:	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
DHET:	Department of Higher Education and Training
DUT:	Durban University of Technology
DVC:	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
EFYE:	European First-Year Experience
FET:	Further Education and Training
FYA:	First-Year Academy
FYE:	First-Year Experience
HAU:	Historically Advantaged University
HDU:	Historically Disadvantaged University
HELTASA:	Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association of South Africa
LIASA:	Library Association of South Africa
NDP:	National Development Plan
NMU:	Nelson Mandela University
NRC:	National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition
QEP:	Quality Enhancement Project
SANRC:	South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition
STARS:	Student Transitions, Achievements, Retention and Success
SU:	Stellenbosch University
TDG:	Teaching Development Grant
UCDG:	University Capacity Development Grant
UCT:	University of Cape Town
UFS:	University of Free State
UJ:	University of Johannesburg
UNIZULU:	University of Zululand
WSU:	Walter Sisulu University

The First-Year Experience (FYE) in South Africa: A National Perspective

This article is offered as a contribution to the larger task of providing a comprehensive study of the 'First-Year Experience' (FYE) in South Africa, i.e., how it is constituted nationally and how it operates in different institutions of higher education across the country. It is a response to the lack of knowledge about the FYE in a national context. Accordingly, the article looks to fill this particular gap in knowledge about how South Africa is responding nationally to the needs of first-year students. Given that the field of FYE is very new and that little sound or evidence-based knowledge about the field exists, this article is based on exploratory research, including that of an initial email-based survey administered in 2016. It contains a number of insights, both descriptive and critical, about the FYE in South Africa as it currently operates. It also offers a prognosis for future development of the FYE in South Africa.

Introduction

Little is currently known or understood about the overall national landscape of the First-Year Experience (FYE) in South Africa. This is in spite of increased institutional commitment to matters of student success and retention as demonstrated by the recent advent of FYE offices and professional staff positions at South Africa's universities. This article was written in response to the need for important baseline data about the FYE in a national context.

The need for research on the national FYE was apparent when the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) was established at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2015 (www.sanrc.co.za).¹ There was a dearth of robust empirical data and those information resources from South African sources which were readily available could be seen as tentative and anecdotal. The new Centre immediately set out to initiate exploratory research, i.e., "research whose primary purpose is to understand a little understood issue or phenomenon and to develop preliminary ideas about it and move toward refined research questions", and which is used when "the subject is very new, we know nothing or little about it and no one has yet explored it" (Neuman, 2014: 38).

Initially, it was hoped that an email-based survey questionnaire would serve as a useful methodological tool to obtain national information about South Africa's FYE. Toward this end, a questionnaire was sent out in March 2016 which targeted South Africa's 26 public universities.² Although the survey yielded a positive response rate of 85%,³ it quickly became

evident that the data obtained therein would not serve as an accurate reflection of the national FYE. The resulting data contained many gaps and the unevenness of the information complicated the matter of making comparative analyses between and among different institutions.⁴ Some of the data is nonetheless of some value in terms of guiding the insights offered in this article.

It was thereafter decided to rather adopt a more critically reflective stance toward the national FYE that was simultaneously descriptive. This article is based on direct experiences and observations of the FYE in South Africa and sustained contact with all of South Africa's public universities in the author's capacity as Director of the SANRC. This position located at the heart of the national Centre has afforded a wide base of experience with regard to the national FYE as well as the key stakeholders in the field. The article also draws on extensive desktop and web-based research.

There are three main parts to the article. The first section provides background and context for the development of the FYE in South Africa. The second section discusses the field broadly, with reference to key issues such as funding, staffing and institutional location. The concluding section of the article provides a considered prognosis for future development of the FYE in South Africa. In doing so, the article sketches, in broad strokes, an outline of the national picture of South Africa's FYE.

What is the FYE?

Much of the leading conceptual work about FYE is derived from an extensive pool of literature which tends to be largely but not exclusively North-American in origin. Barefoot, et al. (1999) has advanced the useful definition of "the first-year experience programme (as) represent (ing) an intentional and comprehensive programme that consists of different components working together to increase academic performance, provide a cohesive learning experience, increase student persistence, assist in the transition to college, facilitate a sense of commitment and community to the university and increase personal development." Koch and Gardner (2014: 13) describe the FYE as "not a single programme or initiative but rather an intentional combination of curricula and co-curricula efforts within and across postsecondary institutions."

By contrast, there currently exists very little by way of a uniquely South African take on the concept of the First-Year Experience. The national literature has tended to focus on data related to poor performance of the higher education sector and case study-type work about individual universities (Scott, 2016; Leibowitz, et al., 2012). A gap exists in terms of an explicit theoretically-based understanding of the FYE and one which speaks to the unique educational context of South Africa.

Institution-Facing Perspective

The ‘first-year experience’ can be understood in different ways. In theory, every student who enters the higher education system has an experience of sorts. The foundational premise of the FYE concept is that the experience of students has been largely shaped by the nature and quality of their encounter with the institution. With this in mind, the FYE is theoretically distinguished by its institution-facing, rather than student-facing, perspective. John Gardner emphasises intentionality as an important element in the FYE, i.e. “(the)deliberateness, (the) effort to make things happen by design, i.e. those things that must happen if students are likely to be successful (Gardner, 1986: 267).

The FYE is primarily defined by an institutional intentionality to create a supportive environment for its first-year student population as well as by the organised and integrated nature of the institutional effort. A starting point for a conceptualisation of the FYE would be the acknowledgment of the first year of study as a critical phase in the academic, psychosocial and intellectual development of students, the recognition of the multi-faceted needs of first-year students, and the intentional effort thereafter to craft an experience which is supportive and empowering for first-year students.

FYE as a ‘Change’ or ‘Reform’ Movement

The FYE is often referred to as a ‘change’ or ‘reform movement’ in the higher education sector. The FYE can be seen as the impetus for change in institutional culture, or as Dietsche (2012:38) notes, “a change in the way higher education institutions interact with students, create learning environments and engineer opportunities for specific experiences.” It can be conceptualised as a redefinition of the relationship of institutions to their students. The FYE encourages

institutions to engage with students and their experiences from a stance of intentionality, care and a greater degree of responsibility for the educational outcomes of students.

An Underlying Value System for the FYE

The FYE is also characterised by a particular value system. This value system can be described as one which is humanistic and centrally focused on the experiences of students and their overall well-being. It draws from a deep pool of academic literature, mainly derived from the field of education but not limited to this field. For example, the FYE is strongly influenced by macro-sociological perspectives about social integration and its role in preventing conflict, harmonising human behavior and establishing social order (Tonnies, 1887; Durkheim, 1897; Lockwood, 1964). Anthropological literature about rites of passage in society (van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969) also bears significance for the FYE in terms of the complex series of transitions experienced by students in the higher education space. Literature about rites of passage helps reinforce the need for institutions to support students as they transition from one phase of life to the next as part of the complex journey through the higher education system.

Influence of Academic Literature on Student Retention and Student Success

South Africa's FYE has been predominantly shaped and influenced by academic work in the field of higher education. Some of the leading work in the field is authored by professors of higher education who are internationally-established voices of authority in the field. For example, a key figure in the FYE field is that of Vincent Tinto, a sociologist and professor of higher education. Despite having received much critique and revision over the last three decades (Braxton et al., 1997; Braxton, 2000 and Metz, 2004), Tinto's large body of theoretical work remains an enduring framework for understanding student retention and success. Tinto's book *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* (2012) advocates an institution-facing perspective with a focus on institutional policies and practices which hinder student persistence and retention. In line with the contention that students depart from higher education on account of the quality of their interactions with the institution, institutions are encouraged to provide and implement intentional and student-oriented programmes and facilities in order to retain students. Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini's acclaimed work *How College Affects Students* (1991) makes a cogent argument for recognition of the impact of the institution and its structural make-up on issues of student retention and persistence.

Similarly, Alexander Astin (1984) has argued that student involvement is enhanced by the availability of support programmes and services which would increase persistence among students and in turn, retention. Astin emphasised student involvement and the “quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (Astin, 1984: 307) as integral to student success. Astin’s work has become known as the theory of student involvement.

Educational invitational theory is commonly posited as an important part of the FYE body of literature as it offers a theoretical tool with which to interrogate the workings of the institution in terms of the experiences of students and their ability to flourish and succeed in the higher education environment (Purkey, 1978; Novak and Purkey, 1996). Invitational theory argues that the conditions for student success are best enhanced when students are intentionally encouraged and ‘invited’ into the world of higher education. Invitational theory is focused upon making the learning experience an enriching and personally fulfilling experience for all involved in the educative process. It resonates with the contention that “first-year students can and will do better when placed in intentional intellectual and social campus environments that challenge and support their efforts to succeed” (Gardner et al., 2005: 524).

Shared Aims and Values Across Different Contexts

FYE’s conceptual underpinnings are essentially about shared aims and values. Literature in the field draws attention to how differentially the FYE is constituted in various contexts, whilst built on FYE values and principles. The FYE varies by institutional context as well as the specificity of particular student characteristics at any given point in time. This point is helpfully echoed by Harvey, et al. (2006: 5): “The first-year experience is not a homogeneous experience, but a multiplicity of experiences contingent on every type of institution and student characteristics.” There can, then, be no uniform blueprint for how an FYE should be constituted. Institutions can and should learn from each other’s FYE programmes whilst seeking to develop and enhance their FYE in their own particular institutional settings. As noted by Johnston (2010:3), “the term FYE is perhaps best seen as a helpful shorthand for a complex and dynamic reality.”

The FYE comes to South Africa

Having reviewed the question of what is FYE, the article now turns to the consideration of key influences on the development of the FYE in South Africa: What have been the key factors which have been conducive to the development of the national FYE?

Historical Factors

First of all, an understanding of the development of South Africa's FYE must be informed by historical factors pertaining to the higher education sector and the consequent dramatic changes made by the post-apartheid era to the institutional landscape. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the existing spread of universities in South Africa. In line with the scope of this article, it does not include further education training colleges (FETs) and private higher education service providers. Figure 1 allows for a reflection on the great diversity in the university sector, for example in terms of geographic spread, number of different campuses and institutional types. It also allows reflection on the great trajectory of change on which the higher education sector has travelled since the advent of democracy in 1994.

Figure 1

MAP OF SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

KEY FOR MAP

-  TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITIES
-  COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES
-  UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY
-  INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT FIRST-YEAR DESIGNATED OFFICES
-  INSTITUTIONS WITH FIRST-YEAR DESIGNATED OFFICES

TYPES OF INSTITUTIONS

TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITIES	CAMPUSES
University of Cape Town (6)	• Upper Campus, Middle & Lower Campus, Health Science Campus, Grootte Schuur Campus, Hiddingh Campus and Breakwater Campus
University of Fort Hare (3)	• Alice Campus, Bisho Campus and East London Campus
University of Free State (3)	• Bloemfontein Campus, South Campus and Qwa-Qwa Campus
University of KwaZulu Natal (5)	• Edgewood, Howard, Medical School, Pietermaritzburg and Westville Campus
University of Limpopo (2)	• Ga-Rankuwa and Polokwane Campus
University of Pretoria (7)	• Groenkloof, Hammankraal, HPC, LG De Villiers, Mamelodi, Medical and Onderstepoort Campus
Rhodes University (1)	• Rhodes University Campus
Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University	• Ga Rankuwa Campus
University of Stellenbosch (5)	• Stellenbosch Main Campus, Tygerberg, Bellville Park, Saldanha, Ukwanda Rural Clinical School Campus
University of Western Cape (5)	• East, North, West, South and Central Campus
University of Witwatersrand (5)	• East, West, Education, Medical and Management Campus
COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES	CAMPUSES
University of South Africa (3)	• Muckleneuk, Sunnyside and UNISA science campus
Nelson Mandela University (6)	• North, South, 2nd Avenue, Missionvale, Birdstreet and George Campus
University of Johannesburg (4)	• Auckland Park, Bunting Road, Doornfontein and Soweto Campus
University of Venda (1)	• UV Main Campus
Walter Sisulu University (4)	• Buffalo City, Butterworth, Mthata and Queenstown Campus
University of Zululand (2)	• Richardsbay and KwaDlangezwa Campus
University of Mpumalanga (1)	• UM main Campus
North West University (3)	• Mafikeng, Potchefstroom and Vanderbijlpark Campus
Sol Plaatje University (2 buildings)	• Old Legislature and William Prescod School Buildings
UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY	CAMPUSES
Cape Peninsula University of Technology (6)	• Granger Bay, Mowbray, Wellington, Athlone, Cape Town and Belville Campus
Central University of Technology (2)	• Welkom and Bloemfontein Campus
Durban University of Technology (7)	• Brickfield, City, Indumiso, ML Sultan, Riteson, Riverside and Steve Biko
Mangosuthu University of Technology (1)	• Umlazi Campus
Tshwane University of Technology (6)	• Nelspruit, Pretoria, Emalahlani, Polokwane, Soshanguve and Ga-Rankuwa Campus
Vaal University of Technology (4)	• Secunda, Ekurhuleni, Upington and Vaal Triangle Campus

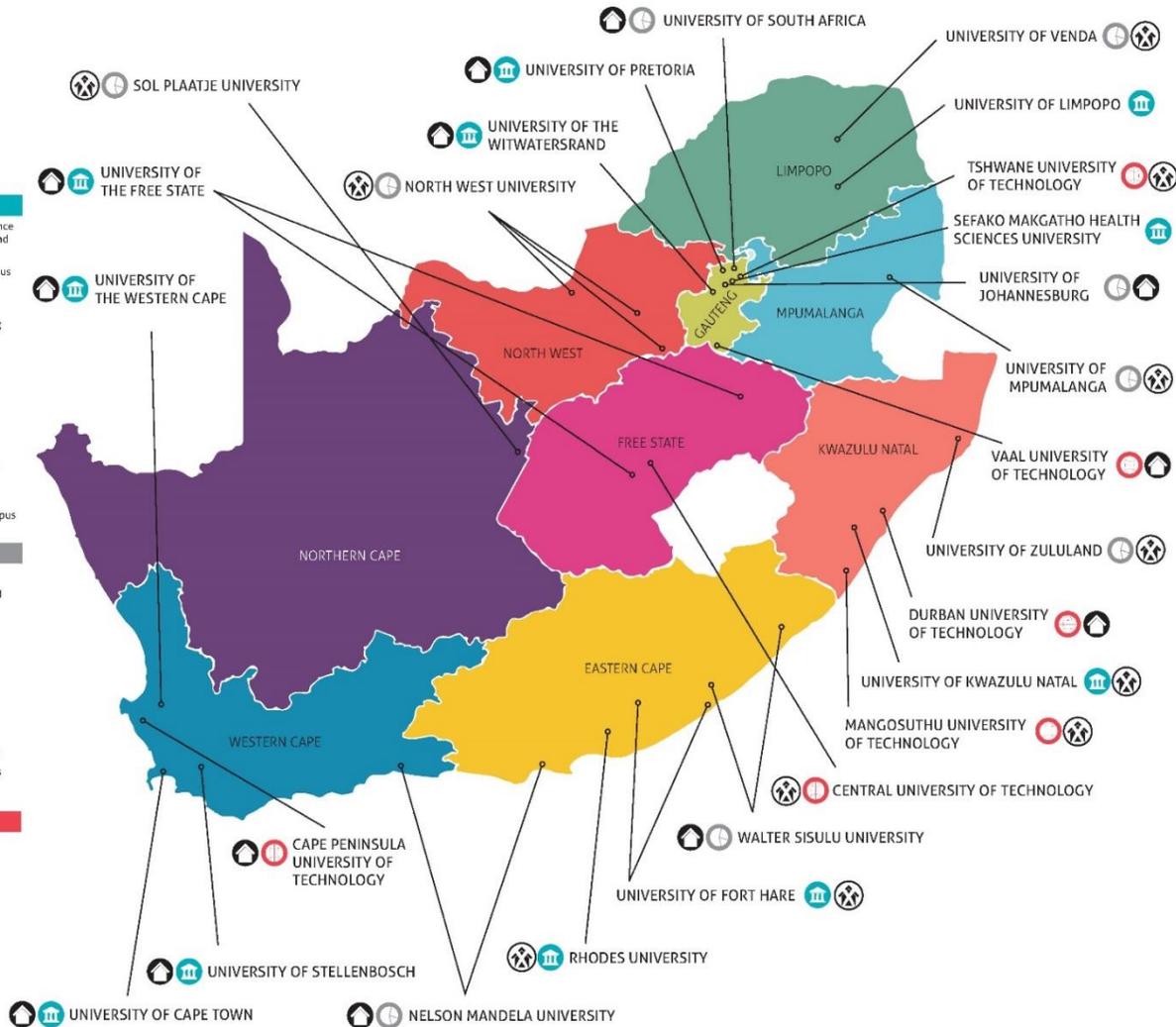


Figure 1 is indicative of the complex nature of the institutional terrain within which the FYE must integrate. It is imperative to acknowledge the contemporary state of universities in South Africa as functioning directly in relation to the history of white political, economic and cultural domination in a context of unequal power relations as established in the era of colonialism, segregationism, and apartheid rule (Bunting, 2006; Badat, 1999). South Africa's universities have traversed a long path from the days of their early beginnings under colonialism and later apartheid rule. Under apartheid the higher education system was fundamentally unequal: eleven universities primarily served white South Africans and only limited forms of tertiary education were provided to those who were not classified "white."⁵ Institutions were resourced in highly differential and unequal ways and the intellectual agenda of each institution differed vastly according to the racial designs of the apartheid state. The system was also unwieldy, with as many as eight different government authorities responsible for governing the various racially and ethnically-based institutions.

In a post-apartheid context, the system was dramatically overhauled and rationalised with a single national department put in place to oversee the sector. Far-reaching changes were made to the form and functioning of South Africa's universities, such as the merger of technikons and colleges into universities (Jansen, 2002). As indicated by Figure 1, the institutional landscape now includes 26 public universities of a variety of different institutional types such as traditional universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities. To date, many of the old patterns and divisions of the apartheid past have remained locked in place. The Council on Higher Education acknowledged in 2010, "there are still significant differences in the resources, skill levels and outputs of those institutions that were historically white (the historically advantaged universities or HAU's) and those that served other racial groups (the historically disadvantaged universities or HDU's)," adding that "these distinctions have become blurred in the past decade but continue to influence the culture of institutions and campuses" (CHE, 2010: 19).

The implications of historically based fault-lines in the institutional landscape bear consideration in light of the complex terrain within which the FYE has inserted itself. Many questions arise, some of which are political and others which are purely logistical. For example, how would the FYE operate equitably across the many vastly geographically dispersed campuses, some of which only serve poor black students? How would the so-called 'new' institutions, i.e., Mpumalanga University and Sol Plaatje University, grow to the point where

they could reasonably serve the needs of first-year students? Given the broader societal context of divisions and inequities, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where the FYE is easily and uniformly integrated into the institutional structures of South Africa's universities. It is unlikely that there will be a straightforward path for the adoption of the FYE in South Africa.

As a change movement, it is predicted that the FYE will test the capacity of South Africa's universities for change. The successful development of the FYE is contingent on South Africa's universities to absorb and effect change. Studies about change in higher education and the effects of 'institutional culture' on institutions (Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Smart et al., 1997; Tierney and Lanford, 2018) could well serve as a compass for the FYE in the future as the field grows and matures.

A Responsive Post-1994 Political Climate

Without doubt, one of the most critical factors which helped establish the FYE in South Africa is the advent of post-apartheid democracy in 1994 – and with that, the opening up of a highly unequal, insular and racially and ethnically fragmented higher education space (Bunting, 2006). The flurry of change and consequent spirit of transformation engendered by the post-apartheid era with its central focus on social justice, provided a political climate which was open to all things new and transformation-oriented. Among the many far-reaching changes of the post-apartheid era (including increased student numbers, changing student demographics, large-scale restructuring of institutions, and brand-new policy goals), a new and greater responsiveness toward the needs of students can be seen as one of the more positive gains of the time. This provided the right kind of receptive environment and enabling conditions for the development and establishment of FYE in South Africa.

The growth of the FYE in South Africa is situated in the context of the urgent need to improve student success rates in South Africa in line with the political imperatives of the time. South Africa's *National Plan for Higher Education* (2001) called directly upon higher education institutions to improve educational quality and show greater effectiveness in teaching and learning. The Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training stated that the improvement of throughput rates was "the top strategic priority of university education" (DHET, 2012). Institutions of higher education were actively challenged to reconsider their responsibilities toward their students, in the context of what Webstock and Fisher (CHE, 2016:19) call "the

social justice imperative – the need for fundamental transformation of the system and the institutions within it to create a more equitable platform in which all races and classes have equal opportunities to realise their potential as part of the democratisation project and in which past inequities were addressed.”

South Africa’s National Development Plan (NDP, 2011: 271) recognised that, “while the South African higher education system functions relatively well, higher education faces major challenges: low participation rates, high attrition rates, a curriculum that does not speak to society and its needs, the absence of an enabling environment that allows every individual to express and reach full potential, and poor knowledge production that often does not translate into innovation.” Amidst this complex set of challenges faced by the higher education system, problems of low participation, poor throughput rates and high attrition became elevated in profile. Statistical data from government sources in the form of multi-year cohort tracking showed that the first year of study is (and continues to be) a critical point of attrition for the higher education system.

There has also been growing recognition of the long-standing nature of the problem, lending impetus to the need to address the issue of student success on a national basis. Work by Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) has shown that problems of low throughput and overall poor performance were in fact not new to the country. Akoojee and Nkomo show that poor throughput had historically been a sore spot for South Africa’s universities, with Commissions having been appointed by successive apartheid governments to address the matter on behalf of white students. Urgent attention to the long-standing matters of student success was deemed a top priority.

Political attention and resources were assigned to help address the problem of poor throughput. Several high-profile interventions were put in place to help remedy the situation. Higher education funds were earmarked for student success initiatives. A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform was released by the Council on Higher Education as a means of helping influence poor educational outcomes (CHE, 2013). The Council on Higher Education also developed the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP), a national project intended to stimulate student success in individual institutions of higher education through a wide range of interventions aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning (Strydom and Strydom, 2004). Universities responded to the problem of poor student success rates by way of a number

of strategies. Such strategies included the increase and deepening of the range of academic support initiatives available to students, and the scaling up of support services which are intended to rescue students from being lost to the system.

The influential work of George Kuh (2008) has often been used by universities as a guideline for their work in the field of student support. Many of the strategies and practices used by universities are in line with the concept of high impact educational practices as summarised by George Kuh in his report *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (2008). According to Kuh, high-impact educational practices are broadly defined as “teaching and learning practices that have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students toward increased rates of retention and student engagement” (Kuh, 2008: 9).

It is worth noting here that despite the active pursuit of a transformative agenda for higher education of the previous two decades, the higher education sector continues to be a site of ongoing contestation (Reddy, 2004). It is within this site of contestation that many of the apartheid-inherited cracks and faultlines in the institutional landscape have combined with deeply rooted societal issues such as economic inequalities, racism, and various forms of social injustice, and contributed toward the increased destabilisation of an already volatile sector. The #FeesMustFall campaign of student mobilisation which began in October 2015, crystallised large-scale discontent among students, staff and management bodies about issues such as an alienating curriculum, financial exclusions and the reification of race and class in South Africa’s institutions of higher education (Hodes, 2017). Although the #FeesMustFall movement began peacefully, it then degenerated into violent forms of protest in many institutions resulting in heightened conflict with police and university authorities and the securitisation of many campuses. This movement should not be seen as a new phenomenon but rather a manifestation of unresolved issues simmering beneath the surface of the institutional landscape. #FeesMustFall and all the political and institutional instability that it encompasses, presents sobering possibilities for future destabilisation of the FYE.

Although a pool of literature has quickly sprung up around #FeesMustFall campaign (Booyesen et al, 2010; Luescher, 2016; Langa, 2017), it is noteworthy that none of it has established any form of connection with the FYE. Both the FYE and #FeesMustFall are change movements. Both share key similarities in the transformative mission of the lives and experiences of

students. But #Fees Must Fall has also functioned in highly destructive ways, e.g., shutting down institutions, postponement of examinations and causing arson and damage of university property such as the libraries used by students. It remains to be seen how the FYE can continue its current trajectory of development in the context of ongoing institutional instability. Exploring the connections between the FYE and the #Fees Must Fall movement could inspire a broader understanding of the collective actions and processes that could increase the effect and impact of the FYE movement. This, however, must be the subject of further academic deliberation and merits a larger research project.

Global Higher Education Trends

It is also the case that global higher education trends have influenced the establishment and development of the FYE in South Africa, albeit in an indirect way. Such trends include that of increased financial pressures, greater competitiveness, technological changes, and massification (CHE, 2016). Collectively and individually, these broader higher education trends have helped shape a macro-environment where there is sharper focus on the quality of education as well as greater pressure brought to bear on the higher education system to demonstrate value for students. Institutions are now under keener scrutiny than ever before. The quality of undergraduate education, as well as specifically that of first year of study, has taken on great importance for universities who are anxious about retention rates as well as hard-pressed to demonstrate that they are meeting the needs of students. Student success metrics such as throughput rates provide a powerful impetus to scale-up an improved undergraduate student experience.

One such global higher education trend with direct implications for the FYE is that of massification or the rapid expansion of the student population (Hornsby and Osman, 2014). Massification, or the rapid expansion of the student population, and the concomitant large class sizes which are the result thereof, is of particular concern for the FYE. It is argued that impersonal large-class settings which often require students to passively absorb lecture material “seem to militate against the very elements that promote students’ involvement and intellectual development, learning and success” (Macgregor et al., 2000). Universities have had to reconsider teaching and learning methods for first-year students.

Key International Influences

It is also the case that the development of the FYE in South Africa has been stimulated by international influences, i.e. by the well-established FYE in countries such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom and various European continental countries. The established global presence of the FYE has helped accelerate a drive to establish a similar kind of academic space for the FYE in South Africa. This is especially so as the higher education sector opened up in a post-1994 context and academics became increasingly exposed to international conference circuits as part of a newly-expanded academic world. An important factor in building South Africa's FYE is the professional contacts built at such conferences in tandem with the goodwill and eagerness of many international colleagues to contribute to the country's growing FYE. There is no doubt that, despite the variance in country contexts, the existence of this global network has accelerated the development of the FYE in South Africa.⁶

Contemporary leadership in the global FYE space has been provided predominantly by the National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) based at the University of South Carolina.⁷ The NRC has consistently promoted a global focus on the FYE, such that it is acknowledged that “as a result many institutions around the world have come to realise the value of focusing on first-year students and other students in transition and have come to explore other ways of supporting their first-years” (Nutt and Calderon, 2009:3). The NRC's first International Meeting in 1986 can be seen as the catalyst for many related initiatives in later years such as the Pacific Rim Conferences on the First Year in Higher Education in 1995, the Student Transitions, Achievements Retention and Success (STARS) Conference and the European First-Year Experience (EFYE) Conference in 2005. The earliest national conferences hosted by South Africa were that of the 1st *Southern African Conference on the First-Year Experience: Opening Conversations on First-Year Success* at University of Stellenbosch in 2008 and the other at the University of Johannesburg in 2013. National FYE conferences have since been hosted by the SANRC, with the first one having been convened in 2015.

Being situated as part of a global FYE network has reaped many benefits for South Africa's FYE. It has helped create cooperative alliances for the delegates on the conference circuit, both across and within different institutions. It has provided higher education professionals with the opportunities to seek out and work with other universities both in and beyond one's own country. This is particularly useful in an era of heightened institutional competitiveness. It

enables institutions to learn constructively from each other rather than operating on the basis of isolation and mistrust. The development of a cross-section of outward-looking FYE scholars who can work effectively across and within institutional boundaries and national borders can be seen as a positive gain for South Africa's FYE. The benefits therein will likely be seen in the near to medium term future where it is possible that many other useful alliances can and will be developed.

International academic literature on the FYE has also stimulated the growth of South Africa's FYE. Some of the most popular and frequently cited works in FYE have emerged from the field of education and most notably from professors of higher education mentioned above (e.g., Vincent Tinto, Alexander Astin, George Kuh, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini). These scholars draw on decades of research as well as experience in different higher education environments to argue for the quality of the interaction between students and institutions as the key ingredient in helping students succeed at university.

The leading scholarship in this field has made a clear case for the deployment of FYE programmes as well as adoption of the underlying value system of FYE. The academic weight and significance of the leading scholarship in this field has presented universities with a strong case for institutional change. It has also helped reframe some of the scholarly debates which inform the teaching and learning agendas at many institutions of higher education. For example, Morrow's concept of epistemological access or "access to the knowledge that universities distribute" (Morrow, 2009) has helped stimulate much professional reflection in many institutions in terms of the major pedagogical and curricula-related implications Morrow poses for the way in which learning environments are constituted.

In summary, the existence of key international influences such as the global FYE network in tandem with FYE-related literature has functioned as an important anchor for the FYE in South Africa. It has helped create the kind of favourable environment which has been conducive to establishing the FYE. With the authoritative weight of a global FYE community and supporting academic literature behind the FYE, institutions of higher education have been encouraged, in varying ways, to change how they relate to students. It is for this reason, for example, that the infrastructure of student support services focused on helping students adapt to university life has expanded in many institutions.

The Scope of South Africa's FYE

Exactly what FYE programmes and other forms of support for first-year students have then been developed and made available for first-year students in the country? As a concept, FYE is a relatively recent addition to South Africa's higher education landscape. It is only in the past two decades that FYE has gained widespread popularity and familiarity of use in South Africa's higher education sector. Although there had been many interventions aimed at improving student retention and increasing academic achievement, FYE programmes were not typically regarded as a 'must' for institutions which were then largely oriented toward Darwinian-type notions of 'sink or swim' in the first year of university study.

As an area of academic study, the FYE has previously tended to be seen as a somewhat marginal sub-field located in the broader terrain of academic development and teaching and learning. It has hitherto lacked the anchoring bases of a strong local literature base, specialist journal or even a supporting conference. To date, FYE does not yet have the status of a separate field of academic enquiry in South Africa. The net effect of this is that the field of FYE remains a work in progress in South Africa.

Historical Trajectory of South Africa's FYE

An early starting point in the development of South Africa's FYE is the establishment of the First-Year Academy (FYA) at the University of Stellenbosch in 2006 as part of a systemic approach by University of Stellenbosch to assess and improve upon its approach toward its first-year students (Nutt and Calderon, 2009: 95). Soon thereafter in 2008, Stellenbosch University hosted a national FYE conference. The hosting of this national FYE conference can be seen as a groundbreaking initiative for the country. Stellenbosch University can be singled out for the early leadership role taken by the institution in the field of FYE.

Other significant milestones for South Africa's FYE include: (a) the establishment of a First-Year Special Interest Group (SIG) as part of South Africa's teaching and learning network, the Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA); (b) the inception of the Teaching Development Grant (TDG), a state funding mechanism focused on supporting student success initiatives at South Africa's institutions of higher education; and, (c) establishment of the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, an independent centre which was funded by the selfsame TDG.⁸ Such milestones signaled important progress in the development of South Africa's FYE.

What then are some key areas related to the national picture of FYE in South Africa today? Foremost, it is necessary to point to: (a) the range of support services and mechanisms made available to first-year students to meet their needs at the level of the first year of study and beyond; (b) location of the FYE programmes and how they are constituted at the institutional level; (c) how FYE programmes are funded; and, (d) how they are staffed.

This article cannot hope to capture the entirety of the FYE in South Africa – especially as a large amount of variation exists among FYE programmes. The shape and size of FYE programmes is often contingent upon different factors such as resources, availability of staffing, the supportiveness of organisational cultures toward the FYE, and so on. Similarly, not all of the student support services mentioned herein are available at every university. It is also understood that the presence of such well-intentioned interventions, such as orientation and student services, is in no way indicative of actually how useful or accessible they are to students.⁹ Only future research which is sufficiently fine-grained enough to show variation among the different universities will be able to critically address how the FYE is operating in practice in full.

A *prima facie* observation of South Africa's FYE reveals an uneven FYE landscape in which South African institutions of higher education are seen to be at varying stages of development in terms of their FYE. There are also differing degrees of formality attached to South Africa's FYE programmes. Some institutions such as University of Johannesburg and University of Cape Town have formal well-established programmes. Others, such as Walter Sisulu University (WSU) and University of Zululand (UniZulu) have not yet implemented stand-alone FYE programmes and are in the midst of attempting to implement them. There are also other institutions which do not have formal FYE programmes in place. They are nonetheless able to show that they are significantly invested in supporting their first-year students.

Upon deeper investigation, though, it may be discerned that the FYE is not as uneven as it may first appear. The aforementioned unevenness is offset by what could be described as a slowly emerging pattern of coherence amongst the FYE programmes at different institutions. It has been possible to observe a trend of institutions attempting to learn from each other's practices. The fledgling attempts of institutions to reach out, learn from each other and replicate good practices may well help smooth out the current unevenness.

Range of Support Services and Mechanisms made Available to First-Year Students

Taken as a whole, the field of FYE work taking place at South Africa's universities covers a broad and complex landscape. At a central institutional level there are different ways in which universities are focused on the first-year student population, some of which has involved a deepening of customary institutional activities aimed at first-year students and others which can be seen as new innovations.

With the advent of FYE programmes, it is possible to observe a growing inclination, in certain institutions, toward the reconfiguration of physical spaces such as lecture rooms and libraries, in order to support a more welcoming environment for students and first-year students in particular. For example, the University of Zululand has recently publicly announced its focus on ameliorating the problem of large class sizes in the first year through the redesign of lecture rooms and the provision of relevant technology for both staff and students (Songca, 2018).

Institutional libraries are increasingly at the forefront of innovations to contribute to student success, with a particular focus on support for the first-year student. Many institutions routinely hold sessions introducing first-year students to the library in the first two weeks of the academic semester. Specially designated First-Year librarians are often assigned to students who require assistance. Neerpuh and Thomson (2018) have reported on a growing movement among academic libraries in South Africa to introduce first-year students to library resources and familiarise them with the processes of interacting with library staff and spending time using the library. Their work is in line with the important recognition of the link between student success and the use of academic libraries by the Library Association of South Africa (LIASA), the professional body for librarians in South Africa (www.liasa-new.org.za). Such new initiatives can be seen as important gains for the first-year student population.

Many of the current efforts to support first-year students are based on reinforcing existing and customary institutional practices for students. These include the collection of statistical data, the hosting of orientation programmes and the provision of various tools for student support (academic and non-academic). While institutions have routinely collected statistical data about students at different points in the academic year in order to aid good practice and design relevant interventions for students, it is possible to now detect a keener focus on data related to the first year of study. Many institutions have now developed specific surveys for first-year students in order to gauge their experiences and needs, and respond accordingly.

Orientation programmes are a typical means by which institutions reach out to first-year students and help them adjust to their new environment. According to Mack, orientation programmes are intended to “create an intentional experience that demonstrates to a new student the interrelationship among the college’s various departments and how he/she fits in,” as well as to “provide individuals with a holistic view of the college experience” (Mack, 2010:5). Although orientation programmes in South Africa vary widely in their content and approach, interest is growing in establishing national standards and guidelines for orientation programmes; institutions generally invest a great deal of resources in this activity and are increasingly looking to deepen the content of their orientation programmes.

Institutions also offer a host of support services to first-year students (academic and non-academic). Those that are non-academic generally fall under the category of Student Services and include psychological counselling, financial aid, health services, employment/career guidance and life skills-related services such as financial literacy and study skills. These services are intended to help first-year students adjust to the academic and social demands of university study.

The academic support programmes for first-year students are typically located within centres for academic development and/or teaching and learning. This is in line with the complementary relationship of FYE with the field of what is known as ‘academic development’ (Scott, 2009 and Boughey, 2010).¹⁰ Academic support initiatives can also be based in various departments and faculties. The range of academic support initiatives generally available include foundation programmes, early ‘warning’ systems for students who are perceived as at risk of failing or dropping out, tutor development, peer leadership, mentorship programmes, writing centres and various types of curriculum development initiatives. Some institutions are making use of Supplemental Instruction (SI), a US-based academic support model which consists of small group-based, peer-assisted study sessions aimed at providing support in the context of historically challenging courses (Hurley and Gilbert, 2008). As noted by Jacobs and Stone (2008), SI is intended to support all students, but it is seen as especially effective as an intervention for difficult first-year courses.¹¹

Turning to describe some of the main features of FYE programmes, it has to be noted here that it is not always possible to delineate the precise parameters of an FYE programme – particularly so where it intersects with more general institutional or department-based support mechanisms for first-year students such as those described above.

Location of the FYE Programmes and How they are Constituted at the Institutional Level

FYE programmes are predominantly affiliated with teaching and learning units. The association with teaching and learning serves as the central institutional anchor for South Africa's FYE. For example, the FYE is affiliated with centres dedicated to teaching and learning in the case of University of Cape Town (UCT), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), University of Free State (UFS), Nelson Mandela University (NMU), and Durban University of Technology (DUT).

Some institutions have formal designated FYE programmes which are managed by a central FYE coordinator as well as being faculty-based. A central institutional FYE committee typically serves as the means by which the FYE is able to reach the whole institution. The University of Johannesburg (UJ) is a case in point. From its earliest inception in 2007 as '*Project Mpumelelo (Success)*,' the FYE programme at UJ has been located at the Academic Development Centre (ADC) (De Kadt, 2010). To date the FYE is managed by a single coordinator from within the ADC. The FYE was anchored by a strong commitment to teaching and learning and the role of FYE therein, through a Senate-approved Teaching and Learning Strategy as well as a strong support base from the Faculties and Divisions on all four of UJ's campuses. The acquisition of the full support of senior management such as the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) Academic and the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee has ensured that the FYE is now a staple feature of the institution. The University of Johannesburg is often regarded in an aspirational light as a 'model' FYE by other institutions in South Africa.

The FYE programme at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was established in 2010. The FYE coordinator is located at the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED). The coordinator liaises with a broad institutional structure consisting of key stakeholders such as faculties, residences, and student affairs in order to mainstream the FYE throughout the whole institution. UCT's FYE is also backed by senior institutional support. The wide array of initiatives intended to support first-year students (e.g. pre-admissions counselling with the Careers Service, orientation, early assessment systems, and digital literacy workshops) also serves as an indication of the level of embeddedness of the FYE at UCT (Samson, 2017). The Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) has an FYE coordinator who is based at Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development. The FYE coordinator is the Head of Student Learning at CPUT.

Some institutions (e.g. Wits University, University of Stellenbosch, Rhodes University, University of Pretoria) have located their FYE programmes within the Department of Student Affairs. Rhodes University hosts its Extended First-Year Experience programme ('Sereti')¹² within the Division of Student Affairs. In the case of Wits University, the FYE programme is seen as a function of the division of Student Affairs.

The First-Year Academy (FYA) at Stellenbosch University (SU) was first established in 2006 as an initiative of the Division of Student Affairs. According to the First-Year Academy, "every aspect of the students' experience of university life impacts their chances of achieving success and (*this*) is the reason why the entire University, including residence life, sport, community engagement and recreation has been made part of the scope of the First-Year Academy" (Nutt and Calderon, 2009: 96). Although the First-Year Academy has been scaled down to a certain extent since its early inception in 2006, it remains part of the broader framework under which the institution's FYE is constituted.

Other institutions position their commitment to FYE in a different way. For example, the University of Free State has established the UFS101 module, a compulsory credit-bearing module for all first-year students which aims to "teach students how to engage with complex problems from multiple perspectives; as well as to develop graduates that will be competent citizens and compassionate human beings" (Oosthuizen et al., 2017: 56). Having been first implemented in 2012, the UFS101 has been in existence for some time and has now established itself as an important part of the institution's FYE.

Funding

When it comes to the question of funding FYE programmes the sources of information therein are not always clear or accurate. Funding sources for FYE programmes are generally either drawn from external sources usually in the form of earmarked funds from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)¹³ or from the central operating budgets of institutions. Some institutions indicated in the initial SANRC survey that their FYE funding is a mix of both external funding as well as DHET funds. The amounts for FYE budgets vary. FYE budgets, whether funds are from internal or external sources, can range from approximately R5,000 to R4.4 million on an annual basis (SANRC FYE Survey, 2016).

It may be typically assumed that the level of institutional commitment to the FYE can be gauged from the amount of resources that are assigned therein. However, it is not possible to

gauge the level of institutional commitment to the FYE on the basis of the financial information available. Despite the absence of accurate financial information, it is clear that Teaching Development Grant (TDG) funds, and now since 2017 University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) funds, have played a significant role in the development of South Africa's FYE. Since the TDG first began operating in 2004, it has provided an important pipeline of funding for South Africa's universities. It has served as a strong enabling factor for South Africa's FYE and allowed institutions to increase the scale and depth of the work they are doing in relation to FYE and student support.

Moreover, there is scope for a strengthened commitment to the FYE through the earmarked grants. The UCDG now articulates a dedicated focus on matters of student success and explicitly addresses the FYE. However, it is of concern that funding continues to operate in three-year grant cycles and there is still little sustained resource commitment to institutions.

Staffing

As far as the staffing of FYE programmes is concerned there is a great deal of variation in the staffing complement of South Africa's FYE. The number of staff who are dedicated FYE personnel varies, ranging from as few as a couple to as many as 39. Although a grounding in the field of education is a typical attribute of many who work in the field, FYE also draws in scholars from different academic disciplines; and FYE programmes are also staffed by those with varying kinds of professional expertise (SANRC FYE Survey, 2016).

The permanence of the posts varies, with some on permanent posts while others are on fixed term contracts (SANRC FYE Survey, 2016). Short-term contractual conditions make it difficult to attract highly qualified staff and there are few incentives for existing staff to improve their practice. Consequently, there has been slow progress in terms of the growth of a specific population of FYE scholars and practitioners. Ideally it would be of research interest to learn about how FYE staff are recruited, and to confirm the range of skills, competencies or areas of academic specialisation that would be required in order to work in the field of FYE.

It is of ancillary interest that some of those who work in the field of FYE report that they are over-extended in their current posts and require additional staff to help fully meet the needs of first-year students on the different campuses of their institutions. Some report often having to manage institutional duties which extend beyond the mandate of their FYE work for which

they are principally employed. This means that they do not have the time to research and publish as much as they would wish to do. (Personal communications, 2017).

Conclusion

This article has broadly sketched a picture of a new field which is slowly beginning to cohere under a set of key influences, such as the international higher education environment, the leadership offered by the international FYE movement, and focused political attention by different stakeholders in South Africa. It has also illustrated the variable mix of first-year student support practices and strategies which are being used in universities across South Africa. By way of conclusion some questions about the FYE as well as prospects for continued future development of South Africa's FYE are presented here.

It can be said that not enough is yet known about the FYE to advance definitive conclusions about the field. It is certainly clear that the FYE is still very much at a developmental stage in South Africa. There are, however, a few questions raised herein that bear some discussion in terms of helping South Africa's FYE to progress beyond its current developmental stage.

First, it can be asked: *Are FYE programmes currently configured in the best possible way to serve the needs of students?* With regard to the functioning of FYE programmes, it is important to assess the relationship of FYE programmes to the institution within which they are located as well as the interconnectedness of the various FYE initiatives taking place at the institution. It seems axiomatic that FYE programmes should be sufficiently linked with other parts of the institution which impact directly on first-year students, such as, for example, admissions, student accommodation and financial aid. This would ensure a sufficiently integrated approach for the FYE and may mitigate against students having to encounter the institution on disparate and fragmented terms. As noted by Koch and Gardner (2014:37), "Students can and do make sense of these various pieces on their own- and unfortunately they do so at both their and the institution's peril. The best learning occurs when an institution intentionally connects its first-year components in a meaningful and explicit manner." The case can be made for institutions to intentionally design integrated FYE programmes which link students to the most important institutional departments and services related to their academic and social well-being.

Second, it can also be asked: *Do FYE programmes capitalise on the many institutional relationships which can be leveraged to help grow the programme?* Collaborative partnerships amongst different parts of the institution are recommended for FYE programmes to take hold

and flourish in institutions. Kuh et al. (2005: 157) note that “effective partnerships between those who have the most contact with students – faculty and student affairs professionals” help foster a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility between different stakeholders at the institution. FYE programmes are influenced in varying degrees by the diverse array of stakeholders in the broader university community (faculty, staff, administrators and students). A political process of engagement between the university and its diverse constituencies must be undertaken in order for an FYE programme to become an accepted part of how the institution operates.

One of the most important institutional relationships that could be leveraged for FYE programmes is that of senior leadership. Senior institutional leadership is often cited as one of the key factors in cohering and strengthening the field of FYE. The dynamics of change in higher education are inevitably influenced by the leadership and governance structures of institutions, all of which play a key role in the institutional politics, power relations and coalition-building processes which help to strengthen and embed the FYE, as well as endow it with legitimacy and authority at the institution. Without engagement between senior management at top institutional levels and other key institutional stakeholders, FYE programmes are unlikely to succeed.

Furthermore, it can be asked: *Are FYE programmes able to clearly articulate their key purpose and goals?* According to Kuh, et al (2005: 25) institutions with a consistent record of student success share the following characteristics: “(1) clearly articulated educational purposes and aspirations, and (2) a coherent relatively well-understood philosophy of ‘how we do things here.’” They recommend that a clearly articulated mission and philosophy should be developed to underpin FYE programmes and one that is in tune with the overarching purposes and value systems of the institution. Such a mission statement should find a comfortable ‘fit’ with core institutional purposes and value systems, in order to demonstrate the centrality of matters of student success and FYE to the work of the institution. This would then make it easier to develop a ‘specialist’ focus for the FYE and in turn, attract specialist skills and expertise to the field.

Finally, it is asked: *How are institutions able to support students beyond the first year of study and align the first year to other forms of transition in the higher education journey of students?* In line with the goal of institutional integration, FYE programmes would do well to acknowledge that the first year is one part of many transitions experienced by students in the

entirety of their journey through higher education. FYE programmes should also be able to connect synergistically with other phases of student transition, such as the following years of undergraduate study as well as the postgraduate phase. Coherence with other phases of transition would possibly play a role in contributing toward reducing costs and enhancing the efficiency of FYE programmes. It may also lead to greater educational gains for students in a longer-term context. Ideally, close linkages between different forms of support and different phases of the higher education journey should form the basis for a coherent and well-coordinated first-year experience which is structurally embedded within the institution.

The aforementioned questions have been offered here in the hopes that they may help propel many institutions and FYE programmes into areas of growth hitherto unimagined. It is hoped that such initial questions and the insights presented herein may evolve into a much wider conversation which will strengthen the work being done at South Africa's universities and help sustain the national FYE.

In summary, a cautiously positive prognosis of the future of this slowly-emerging field is advanced here. It is possible to predict that South Africa's FYE movement will progress and mature in the following two decades, to the point where FYE will grow as an academic discipline in its own right and where it will become a core strategic pillar for the operation of institutions in order to help guide the educational purposes and aspirations of institutions. It is possible to imagine, for example, that a research chair in FYE can be created in due course.

The importance of nurturing and encouraging a strong local literature base to support the intellectual life and research needs of South Africa's FYE programmes cannot be over-emphasised. The SANRC is counted as a significant step in terms of raising the profile of FYE and establishing it as a key goal and measure for South Africa's universities. The continued development of the dedicated national centre for South Africa's FYE will ensure an abundance of opportunities to grow the field both in terms of scholarship and practice. The national centre can (and does) provide the foundations for development and coherence of the field through the hosting of a national conference, the publication of academic works on the FYE, and other continuing education opportunities.

The optimism expressed herein is tempered with a realistic appreciation of the limits of South Africa's universities and their capacity to successfully integrate the FYE within the prevailing

context of institutional and societal instability. South Africa's FYE is likely to be as strong or as weak as the various institutions within which it is located. South Africa's FYE cannot divorce itself from institutional realities and their underlying political character as well as the broader socio-economic spectrum from which students come.¹⁴ Moreover, unpredictability is to be expected. The higher education sector and the broader South African society within which it is embedded, is fluid, dynamic and highly unpredictable. That which is currently presented here can be rendered quickly outdated through the rapid pace of change and the differential responses of institutions and other higher education stakeholders. Only limited conclusions can be drawn as to how deeply and measurably the FYE will actually contribute in the long term to the ability of South Africa's universities to retain students and increase their well-being. In spite of the stated optimistic view of future development, the longevity of the FYE in South Africa remains to be seen.

Questions of sustainability loom large for the FYE. At this particular stage of development of South Africa's FYE, financial support of the FYE is perhaps one of the most crucial aspects underlying the future progress of the field. FYE remains largely reliant on DHET funding. Full-fledged financial commitment on the part of institutions is not yet on the cards. While this may simply be a temporary phase, it does require sustained effort on the part of key FYE stakeholders to market and campaign for the FYE. Financial constraints impose limitations on many different aspects of FYE programmes including that of infrastructure, staffing and skills. As the FYE is still fairly new to those outside the higher education sector, its appeal to external funders is as yet undeveloped. Continued support from the DHET is essential in order to grow the FYE and allow the necessary time to cultivate an appropriate range of relationships with other funders – such as that of private and corporate donors – and invite their financial support.

Many more questions about South Africa's FYE could be raised. Right now, it is simply hoped that this article may break new ground in establishing knowledge and understanding of the FYE in South Africa, and help stimulate other similar scholarly research initiatives about the FYE in South Africa. It is anticipated that further work will emerge to 'drill deeper' into the many areas of possible analysis raised herein and provide finer-grained insight into the national FYE. Deeper questions about the efficacy of FYE initiatives, overall sustainability and future progress of the FYE remain intriguing areas of ongoing enquiry.

¹¹ The SANRC is an independent national centre focused on promoting FYE scholarship and practice in South Africa. It was established in 2015 with funds from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

² Private institutions of higher education were excluded from this initial sample on account of the lack of systematic information available as well as the complexities of accreditation processes for private institutions. Although repeated attempts were made to contact South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, little success was experienced in reaching this sector. TVET colleges were therefore not part of the sample targeted for the email survey.

³ The following institutions sent back survey questionnaires in varying degrees of completion: University of Cape Town; Cape Peninsula University of Technology; University of Free State; University of Johannesburg; Nelson Mandela University; University of Pretoria; Stellenbosch University; University of South Africa; Walter Sisulu University; University of the Witwatersrand (Wits); Durban University of Technology; University of KwaZulu Natal; University of Zululand (UniZulu); University of Mpumalanga; Central University of Technology; University of Fort Hare; North West University; and Sol Plaatje University.

⁴ Due to the complexity of how the FYE is constituted at different institutions, the survey was often unable to reach the correct pool of respondents necessary to fully answer the questionnaire. Many respondents also complained about being unable to complete the questionnaire on account of their large workloads.

⁵ The eleven universities designated for white South Africans were classified according to language of instruction: i.e., five Afrikaans-speaking universities (Rand Afrikaans University, Stellenbosch University, University of the Orange Free State, University of Pretoria, and University of Potchefstroom); four English-language universities (University of Natal, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Cape Town, and Rhodes University) and two bilingual universities (University of South Africa and University of Port Elizabeth). There were also separate institutions catering for different race groups: University of Durban-Westville for Indians, University of Western Cape for so-called Coloureds, and four universities for 'Africans' (Medunsa, University of Zululand, University of Fort Hare, University of the North, and Vista University). There was also a further subgroup of institutions for 'Africans' in the so-called independent homelands of Transkei, Venda, and Bophuthatswana (i.e. University of the Transkei, University of Venda and University of Bophuthatswana as they were then named).

⁶ Nutt and Calderon (2009) provide a detailed overview of the international FYE movement in their work 'International Perspectives on the First-Year Experience in Higher Education.'

⁷ The National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) has been instrumental in supporting FYE movements in various countries. For example, the NRC has been working closely with Canadian universities in terms of their FYE and supporting the Canadian Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. The NRC also helped to support and launch the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) in 2015. To date, the NRC and SANRC hold a collaborative Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two organisations.

⁸ See <http://www.sanrc.co.za> for further information about the SANRC and how it operates in line with its mission to strengthen the FYE in South Africa.

⁹ This point is underscored by a 2008 study of poor rural students by the education NGO Rural Education Access Programme (REAP). This study by REAP which showed that support services are not always sufficiently utilised on account of institutional and socio-cultural factors (Jones et al., 2008). The REAP report has noted that "it is not enough to have support systems in place and to expect students to make use of them" (13). The authors argue that institutions need to take into account the students' ability to access such services, with particular reference to students who are second-language English speakers and who may be stigmatised for reaching out for such forms of support.

¹⁰ Volbrecht and Boughey conceptualise academic development as "an open set of practices concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education" (2004: 58). In acknowledging the definitional complexities of the concept of academic development, Leibowitz defines academic development in a broad sense as being "about the creation of conditions supportive of teaching and learning in the broadest sense" (2014: 359). Lewin and Mawoyo characterise AD as "at the heart of issues related to access and success in South Africa, given the importance of academic interventions in creating meaningful access and improving success rates" (2014: 63).

¹¹ Nelson Mandela University (NMU) is the national SI Centre for South Africa. NMU is nationally responsible for the training and accreditation of SI facilitators.

¹² Sereti is a Sesotho word meaning ‘shade’ or ‘the shadow that you cast.’

¹³ The TDG grant has been an important part of the pipeline of state funding to South Africa’s public universities. It has since been replaced by the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) in 2017. The UCDG is a consolidation of both the Teaching Development Grant and the Research Development Grant (RDP), two previous earmarked grants which operated as part of the state’s university funding framework. According to the DHET, the purpose of the UCDG is “to further advance the gains that have been enabled through the TDG and RDG; to ensure that the overlap areas that existed between the TDG and RDG will be more efficiently addressed to avoid duplication and wastage of resources and to enable other areas of university development to be supported that have hitherto been neglected” (DHET, 2013; DHET, 2017).

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