Curriculum Review: Through the FYE lens

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Abstract

The prominence of First Year Experience (FYE) in Higher Education (HE) is gaining momentum in Asia as it focuses on becoming a global educational hub. Studies suggest that for students to succeed in HE, they have to be engaged in curricula that supports their first year needs. Therefore, the objective of this paper was to review the current attrition trends, outline steps for FYE implementation in the curriculum and emphasizes the need for identifying shifts before implementing FYE initiatives. This paper synthesizes two governing FYE theories; Kift (2008) and Tinto (2012) in reviewing the curricula using the key components of Transitional skills, Academic and Social initiatives. This will be the bases of an in-depth discussion on the current trends in FYE and incorporating them into the curricula.

Higher Education (HE) dilemma

Higher Education (HE) is fast becoming a dominant component of many economies globally. With the main initiative to establish a knowledge driven economy, Malaysia has also placed the education sector in the forefront of its development. With these new developments alongside other initiatives to promote Malaysia as an educational center, there has been an escalation of students entering higher education. By 2025, the Malaysian Education Ministry aims to increase access to higher education by increasing tertiary enrolment rates from 36% to 53% (Chapman, 2015). Although there seems to be an increase of students, keeping students in a 3-4 year undergraduate or postgraduate course is easily becoming a challenge. The scenario faced by public and private universities are similar whereby, it is the general trend that every year attrition rates increase, due to high competition between educational institutions, coupled with the escalating cost of student recruitment. (Govindarajo and Kumar, 2012).

What are the current trends in attrition and main causes of attrition?

1. Transition from secondary school to university
   The learning outcomes of secondary schools are dissimilar to those of universities, as both have vastly different intentions. Draper (2008) argues the focus of schools is to make the lessons interesting and useful for the students and not to prepare them for Higher Education. Due to this disconnect, the student becomes the victim of this transition process, as there are vast changes from teaching to learning pedagogies, environments, quantity of knowledge, in these two stages of their educational process. (Krause et al. 2005; Yorke and Longden; 2007)

2. External university factors
   Draper (2008) indicates that external factors include family attributes; financial stability, social standing, individual attributes and prior qualification contribute to attrition in HE. Therefore, how much power do universities have over the influence of these external factors?
3. **Lack of knowledge of student’s needs**

Bovill, Bulley and Morss (2011) point out that students were consulted less often than employers and other stakeholders when designing curriculums which meet student’s needs and wants. Therefore, whose needs are educators fulfilling? Currently, the focus of most university level courses is to develop individuals who contribute to the workforce of the country (Dathan, 2013). Further, the latest Malaysian Education Blueprint for Higher Education 2015-2025 launched by the Malaysian Prime Minister, clearly indicates the focal point of HE is in molding the future workforce of the country and to change the mindset of graduates from being ‘job-seekers’ to ‘job-creators’ (Chapman et al., 2015). This societal need is placed far above the student’s individual need and contributes to student attrition, as it furthers the gap between high school and university and thus causing the transition process to be even more daunting.

Concurrently, there are extensive studies which support the notion that first-year student experience (FYE). It is regarded as a critical transition period for new students to settle into university life and emphasizes its importance in relation to successful learning and retention (Tinto, 2002; Thomas, 2012; Morgan, 2012). Additionally, Hughes (2002) elaborates that attrition rates are a reflection of problems with the course, mainly in areas of the delivery mode, content or design. Therefore, what steps can be taken to address FYE issues within the course. The first effective method would be to look within and return to the basics; the curriculum.

To begin, we would need clear methods to identify, modify and implement FYE initiatives. Ultimately this will provide some direction in identifying effective transitional pedagogies to be incorporated within the curricula to aid student retention.

**How would we start on this FYE journey?**

- **Step 1:** The initial step would be to focus on evaluating the existing curricula
- **Step 2:** Then evaluate current subscribed FYE initiatives
- **Step 3:** Identifying the strengths and weakness in the curriculum in the effort to reduce attrition rates amongst its students.
- **Step 4:** Introduce relevant FYE practices in the areas of weakness in the curricula
- **Step 5:** Reflect and assess the FYE initiative for effectiveness

On a basic level ‘curriculum’ can simply be defined as ‘an interactive process developed among learners, teachers, materials and the environment’ (Chen, 2007). Nevertheless, in today’s educational climate the term curriculum extends far beyond teachers, classrooms and content, but places students in the center thus broadening this term. In studying this issue, we need to acknowledge the 3 basic areas of FYE. Firstly, the term ‘Transitional skills’ or ‘Induction to Study’ is also commonly used and refers to the ‘activity of learning how to study at university’ (Morgan, 2013, p.1449). These skills are imperative to student’s success at university. Frankola (2001) and Potter and Bye (2014) lists the main reasons for student dropout rates was due to weak time management skills, specific learning styles, lack of motivation, lack of preparedness for university, poor study strategies and inefficient technological knowledge. What are the other skills students lacks in our classrooms today? By addressing this and reflecting it in the curriculum components will there be ease in transition from secondary school to university.

In addition, Kift, (2004) coined the term ‘transitional pedagogy’ or ‘academic integration’ when relating to the review of the curriculum and should be primarily used to scaffold and mediate the
first year learning experience for existing cohorts. When reviewing the curriculum it is also imperative that there is a ‘focus on articulating, implementing and sustaining first year curriculum design that is engaging, supportive, intentional, relevant and social’ (STAR, 2005). Therefore, how do educators examine and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum? Finally, Closson and Nelson (2009) stress the importance of social integration which is seen as providing opportunities for the first year student to build friendships and develop partnership within the community for a deep sense of belonging and purpose. Therefore, the first step in combating attrition is by re-examining the curriculum in accordance to the three basic areas identified; transitional skills, academic initiatives and social aspects in order to identify shifts in these components.

Based on the above, the three pillars of FYE initiatives are simplified as below and can be used as a blueprint when initiating a curriculum review.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-Year Framework</th>
<th>Recommended practices by</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic integration</td>
<td>Kift (2008) and Keup’s (2006) first year curriculum design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
<td>Closson and Nelson (2009) and Draper (2008)</td>
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**Table 1: FYE framework**

**Discussion**

The goal of FYE programs is to enable a smooth transition for high school leavers into university. It is hoped that this would provide students with a strong foundation year to support them throughout their university days and in turn reduce university attrition rates. Although past studies have been carried out by universities on a large scale, first year curricular reviews need to be conducted on a micro level within each program with the university to yield success. Therefore, taking on such a task would need careful discussion, dialogue with stakeholders and thorough research in identifying emerging trends to address these issues; Is there flexibility within the curriculum to incorporated FYE initiatives? What are the main constrains experienced by academics when implementing FYE initiative in their courses? Are these constrains subject specific? Have we reflected on the FYE practices initiated? Have we assessed the effectiveness of implemented FYE initiatives? Which FYE practice has the most impact on attrition?

Only when we have placed the learner in the center of education again, provided significant opportunities for students to experience sound transition skills, created a wholesome academic and social environment, will we have a holistic and impactful first year experience program.

**References**


