Beyond Integration or Adaptation: The Challenge for Higher Education and Gen Y.

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Abstract: Research on higher education student retention and transition has been an ongoing focus since the 1950s. During the past decade research into this area has gathered momentum as institutions of higher education increasingly recognise the economic and social costs of failing to retain and transition future graduates. Transition approaches are generally one of integration or adaptation. In this paper I examine Gen Y's learner characteristics and relate that to integration and adaptation discourses. I argue that transition is a complex issue and that there is a compelling case for both adaptation and integration approaches. I also propose that consideration of Gen Y characteristics could usefully inform how effective transition is conceptualised in higher education.

Keywords: First Year in Higher Education, Transition, Integration, Adaptation
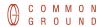
Introduction

A S I WRITE this paper it is 'O' week. It is a time when the focus is on supporting and transitioning first year students through the first days and weeks of the year. My inbox is full of emails about the incoming cohort of new students and how best to meet their transitional needs. The following email excerpt exemplifies some of the proposed academic and social measures to engage and retain first year students.

As you are aware we have tried to lift the program to better engage with students. The focus is on trying to retain students. We have:

- Hand outs for students including all relevant info on a memory stick
- Structured transition program with prize incentives to complete
- Mentor program – to identify and assist in identifying 'at risk' students
- A First Year Coordinator and Student Support
- Improved lunch and venue

If you are around and especially if you are teaching first years can you please attend? Staff who are teaching first year - there is a slot in the program to briefly introduce yourself, your subject and arrangements re lectures and tutorials in the first week. (Personal communication, 23 February, 2010)

Many of the strategies mentioned in the email such as mentoring, a first year coordinator to support and guide students, and introductory program sessions have been informed by the considerable body of research on first year transition and are now common practice in Australian institutions of higher education. Transitioning and retaining students has been a higher education concern for over 50 years and during this time, how transition is understood,

COMMON GROUND

conceptualised, and realised has subtly changed. This is evident in the changing discourses around transition. Early discourses were about retention and integration into the institution whereas transition is currently framed by discourses of persistence, engagement, and adaptation (Zepke & Leach, 2005). In this paper, I consider integration and adaptation approaches to first year transition by focusing on the Gen Y student. I argue that the Gen Y student offers unique insights for re-examining how we transition first year students. My argument also points to questions about what is valued in higher education and what discourses are important for the Gen Y student to transition into.

In 1993, Tinto cautioned that transition measures were conceptualised as a one size fits all approach and that a focus on specific strategies for a diverse range of students was needed. While there has been some research into transition and student diversity (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009; Wingate, 2007) it is still quite limited. Some important transition considerations have had little attention such as transition strategies for postgraduate students (especially those who may not have completed an undergraduate degree, or whose undergraduate degree was completed many years prior to their postgraduate entry), mature age students, and indigenous students. Gen Y students are 'different' from previous generations of first year students. While those who teach into first year programs will confirm this anecdotally, it is also recognised in the literature (Bourke & Mechler, 2010; Twenge, 2000).

Over half (53%) of Australian higher education first year students are recent high school graduates, while 36% are aged between 20 and 29 (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). This means that approximately 90% of the first year student body are members of the birth cohort commonly known as Gen Y. While much has been written about strategies to engage first year students in general, there has been very little research on the relationship between Gen Y traits and dispositions and their transition needs. This paper investigates that relationship. To do so, I firstly provide theoretical justification for a generational focus. This justification is based on Mannheim's (1952) thesis that the historical and temporal location of birth cohorts will influence and determine generational characteristics. I then explicate some of Gen Y's generational characteristics and finally discuss transition based on Gen Y and valued discourses in higher education.

Theory of Generations

While popular culture and popular media readily accept and promote the notion that generational cohorts will evidence particular beliefs, behaviours, and characteristics, academia is more cautious about such claims preferring to support generational claims with a theoretical basis and rigorous research (Donnison, 2007). Mannheim (1952) provides such a basis. His generational theory provides an informed and scholarly way of thinking about what he refers to as the problem of generations (p. 290). He uses the key concepts of *generational location*, *generation as actuality*, and *generation units* to explain the similarities and differences that are characteristic of people born during different time periods (Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Mannheim, 1952).

Generational Location

Generational location refers to the chronological location of cohorts of individuals at the same age having specific resources and potential experiences available to them that are characteristic of that time.

> [B]elonging to the same generation or age group, endow[s] the individuals sharing in [it] with a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limits them to a specific range of potential experiences, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action. (Mannheim, 1952, p. 291)

As with all generational cohorts, the exact generational location of Gen Y is disputed. The birthdates range from 1976 to 1983 with the majority of authors favouring the early to mid eighties as the beginning of Gen Y (Anderson, 2000-2001; Gardener & Eng, 2005; Gronbach, 2000; Tsui, 2000). The span of the generation also varies with the final birthdates of Gen Y ranging from 1994 to mid 2000 (Darko, 2000; Gardener & Eng, 2005). It is becoming commonly accepted that Gen Y is no longer being born and that a new generation is starting to emerge. The name of this generation has yet to be determined however suggestions include Gen Z or Gen C (for creative). The majority of students entering higher education are Gen Y having been born in the late 1980s to the early and mid 1990s.

Much of the criticism about generations is targeted at the assumption that they share similar characteristics, thoughts, and behaviours. Despite this criticism there is counter evidence that age cohorts can be an explanatory category (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004). Mannheim (1952, p. 302) explains how individuals born within the same historical period will exhibit similar characteristics by referring to the concepts of *generation as actuality* and *generation unit*. Inherent within one's generational location are specific and particular social, cultural, political, economic, and historical processes that allow for a potential range of experiences, discourses, opportunities, and life chances (Edmunds & Turner, 2002). However, just because these are available does not necessarily mean that all born during that period will partake of them. G*eneration as actuality* refers to individuals born at a similar time and location and experiencing and responding to the same historical events and phenomena in their youth that is inherent within their location (Donnison, 2007). Finally, *generation units* are subgroups of youth in actual generations who realise and enact their common experiences in different and specific ways often forming particular and specific attitudes, behaviours, language, dress, slogans, and consciousnesses. Current examples of these include Emos, Surfies, Skaties, Gamers, and Ravers. Edmunds and Turner (2002) summarise the relationship between generational location, generation as actuality, and generation unit:

> A 'generational location' is a cluster of opportunities or life chances that constitute the 'fate' of a generation. There emerges a 'generation as actuality' that shares a set of historical responses to its location and then within a generation there are generation units which articulate structures of knowledge or a consciousness that express their particular location. (p. 10)

Given Mannheim's thesis, it would be expected that Gen Y would exhibit particular characteristics that have been informed by the opportunities and possibilities inherent in the past 30 years. Twenge, Zhang, and Im (2004) support this thesis. They argue that different time periods produce different cultures which affect birth cohorts.

> The study of birth cohort/time period differences is primarily a study of culture, as historical eras are different cultures. . . Recent research and theory in psychology has recognized that environments vary between countries and regions, producing differences in personality, emotion, perception, and behaviour. (p. 309)

In the following I draw upon the work of Twenge and colleagues to build a picture of the Gen Y student of 2010.

Gen Y Characteristics

What is written about Gen Y is familiar and predictable. According to a number of commentators, they are inseparable from their technologies, value their peers, respect their grandparents, are tribal yet global in outlook, are mobile in terms of career, lives and travel, are confident, collaborative, optimistic, moral, community minded, goal oriented, altruistic, team players, have high self esteem, are traditional, conservative, and rule-following (Durrett, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Nimon, 2007; Raines, 2002; Weiss, 2003; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000; Zemke, 2001). This list is not exhaustive; the accolades for this generation outweigh the criticisms. Generalisations about Gen Y began in the early 1990s and were largely driven by advertising and marketing interests that sought to tap into the lucrative Gen Y market. Since the early 2000s workplace and higher education research on the generation has become more prolific as Gen Y have aged and entered into tertiary institutions and workplaces (cf. Raines, 2002; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000; Nimon, 2007). Howe and Strauss (2000; 2003) have been particularly influential in determining what this birth cohort is supposedly like and many of the claims being made about them can be traced back to these two authors. However, their work has come under criticism for its methodology and generalisability (Hoover, 2009; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

Jean Twenge, working in the area of psychology, has made some significant and valuable contributions to understanding Gen Y using cross-temporal meta-analysis; that is examining like age data samples collected at different historical times (Twenge & Im, 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). Her studies are significant for their sample size commonly drawing on large numbers of studies that have involved many North American college age students. For example she reviewed data from 1.4 million college age students who had completed personality, attitude, psychopathology, or behaviour questionnaires from 1930 to 2008 (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). While her data refers to North American first year students, the findings are applicable to the Australian context given the cultural and educational similarities.

Twenge's findings contradict some of the published material on this generation. Unlike the belief that Gen Y have sunny and optimistic personalities (Habley, 1995; Levere, 1999; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000) she found that college students have become increasingly more anxious and neurotic from the period 1952 to 1993 and prone to depression (Twenge, 2000). Her research also indicates that college students' self-esteem has continued to increase over a 30 year period and that current Gen Y college students have significantly higher self-esteem than their parents at a similar age (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). However, she cautioned that having high self-esteem did not correlate with wanting to solve social problems but rather did correlate with lower SAT [standardised tests for North American college admission] scores and that while their self-esteem had increased, their more 'competency

based' self-esteem had stagnated which led the researchers to conclude that 'elevated self views may be built on a foundation of sand' (Twenge & Campbell, 2001, p. 341). That Gen Y students are not as altruistic and community minded as others have indicated (Howe & Strauss, 2003) is further supported by Twenge, Zhang, and Im (2004). They investigated how college students viewed their world using the psychological constructs of external and internal locus of control. Their results showed that college students, over the 40 year period from 1960 to 2002, have become substantially more external in their locus of control believing that there is little they can do to change their world. An external locus of control results in lower well being, depression, anxiety, poor coping skills, weakened self control, inability to delay gratification, lower school achievement, apathy, and a culture of victimisation.

The literature on the generation suggests that they are conservative, polite and rule-following (Howe & Strauss, 2000; 2003). However, Twenge and Im (2007) found that first year college students have become less concerned about being polite, conventional, and acceptable to others. Additionally, these authors also say that today's college student is less likely to conform, follow cultural norms, repress their feelings, and thus will complain more and be more emotional and uninhibited. Finally, Gen Y students are significantly more narcissistic than previous generation of college students to the point where their levels of narcissism are similar to that of celebrities (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Narcissism manifests as overconfidence, having a distorted judgement of one's abilities, positive self esteem, social extroversion, and attention seeking behaviours.

Twenge and others portray a Gen Y college student that differs in some respects to common and anecdotal understandings of the generation. Individualistic as opposed to communal, prone to anxiety and depression as opposed to sunny and optimistic, self serving as opposed to community minded, apathetic as opposed to socially activist, and nonconformist as opposed to conformist. Traits that tally with popular understandings include having a high self esteem, confident, assertive, agenic (especially for females) and extroverted. In the following, I examine how best to transition Gen Y students into higher education given these traits and characteristics. This examination is framed from within the discourses of integration and adaptation.

Adaptation or Integration

There are two theoretical ways of understanding student transition into higher education (Zepke & Leach, 2005). The first and more traditional is that of integration. This approach problematises the student assuming their lack of cultural fit with the institution which then demands a process of assimilation into appropriate discourses (Tinto, 1975). The second and emerging approach problematises the institution assuming that it is responsible for adapting its practices to accommodate and value student diversity (Lawrence, 2002; Zepke & Leach, 2005). Integration and adaptation approaches to transitioning students, are underpinned by an assumption that some discourses and cultural capital are more valuable than others. They are also underpinned by an acknowledgement that successful transition requires engagement with the institution and with learning.

An adaptation approach to student transition foregrounds the student's cultural capital and learning preferences in designing transition strategies and learning and teaching approaches (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). Indeed, McInnes, James, and Hartley (2005) note that today's students expect universities to adapt to their busy and rich lives rather than

adapt their lives to the organisational culture. Given an institutional emphasis on valuing student diversity (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006), an adaptation approach would appear to be most appropriate for transitioning and engaging first year Gen Y students. This approach would allow Gen Y students to:

> maintain their identity in their culture of origin, retain their social networks outside the institution, have their cultural capital valued by the institution and experience learning that fits with their preferences. (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p. 54)

However, I argue that while an adaptation approach appears most appropriate, especially, within current social justice discourses of equality and valuing diversity it may not be in the longer term learning interests of the Gen Y student. I base this argument on the value of particular discourses in higher education.

Over time certain higher education discourses have become highly valued in the academy such as discourses around research, teaching, and learning (Boulton & Lucas, 2008). Their discursive value on the imaginary hierarchy of higher education values shifts periodically depending upon economic, political, and cultural imperatives, however, they essentially remain fundamental to the academy. Certain stakeholders, of course, are concerned with some discourses more than others. Students must particularly engage with and hopefully master the discourses of academic learning to be successful. Graduate attributes are a public declaration of the particular academic discourses that institutions value in their graduates. In 2010, these are commonly expressed as knowledges and skills and include literacy and numeracy skills, critical thinking skills, collaboration and cooperation skills, and domain specific knowledge. For example, Griffith University express their graduate attributes as:

- Knowledgeable and Skilled in their Disciplines
- Effective Communicators and Team Members
- Innovative and Creative, with Critical Judgement
- Socially Responsible and Engaged in their Communities
- Competent in Culturally Diverse and International Environments (Griffith University, 2010).

A successful student can be said to be one who has, potentially, demonstrated institutional graduate attributes and thus, hopefully, also mastered valued institutional discourses around learning. Underpinning graduate attributes are desired learner behaviours such as being confident, agenic, assertive, independent yet collaborative, a critical thinker, and a problem solver. This list is not exhaustive. Examining Twenge and her colleagues' findings, it would appear that Gen Y possess some of these desired learner qualities: they are confident (although, overly so); independent; extroverted; and assertive. However, they also possess other traits that may not be as beneficial to their learning and may hinder their acquisition of valued academic discourses.

Institutions of higher education provide academic and learner support, to varying degrees, to facilitate student's integration into what the academy deems are valued higher education discourses because it is understood that having certain skills, knowledges, dispositions and potentialities are in the student's present and long term interests. If Twenge is correct, there are certain Gen Y traits which may negatively impact on their engagement with learning

and potentially influence their roles as future citizens and professionals. These include their predisposition towards anxiety, poor coping skills, diminished need for social approval resulting in a lack of conformity and rule following, overconfidence in their abilities, being individualistic and self serving, and having an external locus of control.

An adaptation approach to student integration would suggest that 'universities . . . initiate changes in their own structures and practices to better meet the needs of their changing student body' (Lawrence, 2002, p. 2). In terms of Gen Y this would mean that the 'institution accept and recognize diverse learners' goals and cultural capital and *adapt* their mores and practices to accommodate these in a learner-centred way' (Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006, p. 588, italics in original). There are certain aspects of Gen Y culture that demand an informed and concrete response from higher education such as adapting existing pedagogies to suit Gen Y's predilection for information and communication technologies (Donnison, 2009). However, some Gen Y learner characteristics and traits, as identified above, may not be in the student's best learner interest and thus adapting institutional processes and structures to suit those is not necessarily warranted. Rather, as in the case of Gen Y, an approach which supports them to master and demonstrate valued higher education discourses is more appropriate in terms of their learning needs. That is, an integration approach is also needed.

Concluding Remarks

Transitioning first year students into higher education is a complex issue. The number of Australian and international conferences on the first year in higher education and journals dedicated to this research area (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009) attest to this. Much of the literature on first year transition advocates for certain strategies and approaches or models of best practice. There is less literature that critically examines the why and wherefore of our transition practices. Conversations around transitioning first year students need to be richer than whether to simply integrate or adapt (Tinto, 2003). These conversations might commence with discussions about what discourses are valued in higher education, why they are valued, and what does this mean for our first year students and their transition into and beyond the university. Further, if we are to take seriously cohort attributes then we need to consider what this implies for transition practices. For example, if Gen Y exhibit particular characteristics and traits, how might we provide a better fit between what we offer and their transitional needs? This might involve a more 'targeted' approach rather than the broad-brush approaches that currently characterise transition strategies. For example, given their inclination towards an external locus of control and resulting anxiety, measures might include modelling independent responsibility, providing scaffolded learning tasks and assessment, and providing assistance to set personal goals and formulate personal action plans.

Conversations around first year transition are more critical than ever given current Australian higher education reforms that advocate wider participation and the inclusion of non-traditional students into higher education (Bradley, 2008). These future students will potentially have academic and social needs that will require carefully considered transitional support if we are to facilitate their entry into valuable higher education discourses.

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