

## ‘I’ll be there for you’– Comparative Insights on First-Year Experience (FYE) Policies of Belonging in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### Abstract

Increased pressure placed on first-year experience (FYE) policy to carve strategic pathways for navigating higher education internationally is how institutions grapple with challenges of retaining and graduating students (Nutt & Calderon, 2009). However globally, higher education is somewhat divided on an equitable, inclusive understanding of completion, and the corresponding approaches prioritizing social adjustment and belonging over academic adjustment. In this article, the author brings forth novel discussion about the need for prioritizing social adjustment over the historically celebrated and more tangible academic adjustment. Further, the discussion extends by including 21<sup>st</sup> century considerations about social justice and their relationship to social adjustment which ultimately serves as the primer for building academic skills. Finally, the author offers a synthesis of international perspectives that illustrate how first-year programming around the globe practices the prioritization of social adjustment to mitigate challenges in academic adjustment as well as implications and broader conclusions from the field.

*Keywords:* belonging, 21<sup>st</sup> century international education, narrative, student success, first-year experience

### Introduction

Globally, the demand for higher education continues to increase with the number of students more than doubling from 2000-2014 (UNESO, 2014). Yet, in the US not even 50% of students are completing two- & four-year degrees on time (Complete College America (CCA), 2019). Comparatively,

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in the wider global snapshot, UNESCO authors also note “a defining characteristic of most higher education systems are the large disparities in access and completion, especially by income and wealth” as well as race/ethnicity and gender (CCA 2019; UNESCO, 2014). The increased pressure placed on the first-year experience (FYE) policy to carve strategic pathways for navigating higher education internationally is how institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century grapple with challenges of retaining and graduating their students (Nutt & Calderon, 2009). The availability of scholarship and pervasiveness of FYE policy initiatives, or a multiplex of “intentional academic and co-curricular efforts within and across postsecondary institutions” to emphasize academic and social adjustment (Koch, 2007, p. 23) is robust and expansive in the United States (US) and abroad. However, higher education around the globe is somewhat divided on an equitable, inclusive understanding of completion, and the corresponding approaches which prioritize social adjustment and belonging over academic adjustment for long-term student success.

### **Historically—Academic Adjustment > Social Adjustment**

The rise in FYE policy began in the US in the 90s as campuses and has since grown globally in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as everchanging diverse student populations were wrestling with a fit, insufficient peer support as well as navigating academic choices in a more complex higher education system (Rubin, 2019). The National Resource Center (NRC) for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, the leading repository informing FYE policy globally, found nearly 52% of American colleges articulate FYE policy including programming, initiatives, or extended orientation models (Koch, 2007) while nearly 90% of those attach course credit (U.S. Department of Education (DOE) 2016). In a contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century frame, universities in the US & internationally are experiencing diversity on their campuses like never before, yet there is not wide agreement about how FYE policy should be prioritizing *social* adjustment over *academic* success strategies to alleviate access, persistence, and ultimately completion challenges.

The collective conversation concerned with FYE policy scholarship in the US and abroad underscores academic success strategies rather than *social* when it comes to institutional wide policy and practice (Dorsett, 2017; Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2007). *Academic* success strategies and adjustment can include but are not limited to, skills in critical thinking, time management, academic mapping, career planning whereas *social* adjustment encourages engagement to campus emphasizing belonging and helping students to identify spaces of social and cultural capital (Koch & Gardner, 2014). Of the institutions which offer course credit, 80% of these institutional objectives reflect the prioritization of policy in *academic* success strategies, not just in the US, but also internationally (Dorsett, 2017; Kinzie, 2013; Koch & Gardner, 2014). Some studies concerned with participation in FYEs suggest a positive impact on progression to graduation (U.S.DOE, 2016) regardless of demographic details like race, class, gender, or residential status (Nutt & Calderon 2009; UNESCO, 2014). However, historical and recent data show evidence to the contrary when it comes to equity in completion. This is especially true when considering minority and/or underserved student populations in the US, Europe, Asia, & South America, including low-income students and first-generation college students, around the globe continue to be surpassed by their wealthy and majority counterparts in college completion across the full range of institutional types (CCA, 2019; UNESCO, 2017; U.S.DOE, 2016).

Historically, institutions have looked to utility skill sets and create FYE policy which reflects remediation and considerations which place academic adjustment and the corresponding skills as priority aims (Harvey et al., 2007). However, considerations for placing more importance on social adjustment, and the long-term impact on student success both in the US and internationally should be reconsidered in light of the ever-changing and transformed 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment (Jia & Molone, 2014; Kerpen, 2017; Koch & Gardner, 2014; Yeager et al., 2014). In responding to demand to graduate more of its students, higher education around the globe has been tasked to ask and answer the question --what makes the biggest difference in completion for the student?

When it comes to implementing FYE policy which positively and personally impacts degree completion, prioritizing remediation of academic skills and adjustment may not be the answer (Kerpen, 2017; Koch & Gardner, 2014; & Yeager et al., 2014). Far more impactful are FYE policies that reflect intentionally designed efforts which underscore social adjustment as the priority. Implementation of FYE policy reflecting prioritization of social adjustment creates space for a learner to explore their sense of intrinsic motivation to the context of learning and in connecting with others, peer belonging, and the alignment to self-concept in relation to their identity (Jia & Molone 2014; Kerpen, 2017; UNESCO, 2017; Yeager et al., 2014). Fundamentally, a learner must feel like higher education is a place where they belong, where they are capable of doing well, where others like them have succeeded in the past, and where they can connect with others when they encounter obstacles (Yeager et al., 2014). Recently, scholars concerned with addressing the disparities incompletion in the 21<sup>st</sup> - century are beginning to realize that the script must be flipped and the FYE policies that make the biggest difference for students in the US and around the globe has everything to do with who a student connects and very little to do with what the student is learning.

More recent FYE scholarship in the US, the UK, Europe & Australia has begun to underscore sociocultural dimensions impacting completion suggesting, further, that students experience a sense of purpose, feelings of fit, and belonging within higher education contexts at varying degrees (Dorsett, 2017; Ferreyra, Avitabile, Botero, Álvarez, Paz, & Urzúa, 2017; Nutt & Calderon, 2017; & Yeager et al., 2014). The narrative of who attends college—affluent and traditionally aged students 18-20, what major they should choose—influenced by social constructions, and their perceptions of ability to academically perform in a variety of disciplines plays an impactful role in persistence to graduation (Kerpen, 2017) not just in the US, but around the globe (Dorsett, 2017; Ferreyra et al., 2017; Nutt & Calderon, 2017; Yeager et al., 2014).

### **International Perspectives: Strategies of Social Adjustment**

In Nutt and Calderon's (2009) collection of international perspectives on the FYE, the most comprehensive publication on international FYE policy around the globe to date, Australia, Canada, England, Japan, Morocco, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Portugal, South Africa, Sweden, Wales, & the UAE are showcased as case studies to illustrate recurring trends which prioritize social adjustment practices. Authors, here, demonstrate the impact of prioritizing social adjustment and how these practices uniquely manifest via interventions of peer support, peer learning, and peer assistance/mentorship. Interventions place special importance on social adjustment and how social adjustment can even serve as a powerful primer to academic adjustment. The analysis of individual cases around the globe is meant to offer comparative value illustrating ways social adjustment functions as a prequel to academic adjustment. Further, these illustrations serve as an additional warrant for changing how FYE policy is developed to emphasize social adjustment and ways that future research might operationalize social adjustment efforts to measure their ultimate impact on the diversity of learners' experiences within 21<sup>st</sup> century educative contexts internationally.

Australian universities are not unlike US universities in the ways that they experience obstacles to completion and in how they develop FYE policy to mitigate these obstacles. Of the biggest challenges is critical thinking and "intellectual stimulation across all learners –including those most able" (O'Shea in Nutt & Calderon's, 2009, p. 26). Critical thinking serves as a core aim in Australian FYE policy and remedies to bridge the learning divide between traditionally-aged learners, and those who are not so nontraditional in a modern learning context. Australian FYEs employ "Transition to Study" peer-led workshops to build familiarity with the campus and academic skills like critical thinking which are needed to be successful. Learners share connecting with peers and comparing feelings about starting Uni and how these influence feelings of fit, belonging, and perceived ability relative to certain disciplines (O'Shea in Nutt & Calderon's 2009, p. 29). Further, worth noting is that FYEs are critical spaces where a student beginning to unpack their perceived ability and areas of competency. They are engaged in

forecasting their plans and integrating how their academic plans align with their perceived ability across a range of disciplinary topics. However, a student's perception of their aptitude in any domain can outweigh their historical and actual aptitude in that performance area (Tough, 2014). This ultimately suggests that a student's perception of their ability to do well, how they reconcile that aptitude with peers and other individuals within the context of an FYE, can far exceed their actual ability when it comes to long term success, and ultimately, completion. Yet, like the US, actual institutional aims in FYE policy across 39 public Australian campuses targets academic adjustment, and the assessment of those efforts (Koch & Gardner 2014; Nutt & Calderon 2017).

A similar noteworthy strategy was employed in Portugal and Spain where learners read narratives from fictional first-year college students who report their own academic experiences. "In both samples, findings confirm the program efficacy to teach efficient learning strategies and to promote self-regulation," but, more importantly, underscore that connecting with a perceived peer and utilizing a narrative of experience (even when that narrative is fake) functions as an essential primer and serves as the prequel to building academic adjustment skills (Rosário, González-Pienda, Valle, Ribeiro, & Guimarães, 2010, p. 411). Japan is another case to echo how social adjustment primes learning geared towards academic adjustment. At Kanasai University peer-supported communities of learning were established as a strategy to address a lack of confidence and communication skill in first-year learners. While communication skills sets are inherently crucial to academic adjustment, they are made more accessible, more approachable, and more possible by prioritization of social adjustment strategies.

### **Inherent Challenges: Social Adjustment Policy**

More recently, in the US, universities are making strides to assuage completion disparities using narrative, or success stories of other students from similar demographic backgrounds, as a strategic intervention to enhance belonging and academic performance (Tough, 2014). However, it is not so simple as establishing a policy of friend-making, shared narratives, and storytelling to prioritize social

adjustment within the FYE for several reasons. One of the primary reasons is that while FYEs are a key policy characteristic across higher education internationally, they are largely optional courses, self-selected by those who have performed well academically in the past (Ferreyra et al., 2017), who understand their function (Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Rubin, 2019; U.S.DOE, 2016). Secondly, FYEs are consistently being eliminated from general education university requirements as a time to completion is being universally trimmed down to cut costs in 21<sup>st</sup>- century education (Dorsett, 2017; Ferreyra, et al., 2017; U.S.DOE 2016). Lastly, it is essential to also reconcile the sharp gap between historically transactional styles of learning in K-12 environments and the interactive real-time vulnerability required to critically think interrogate, and reflect on formative aspects of social identity, experiences driven by race, socioeconomic status, and their collective impact on self-concept and academic ability (Yeager et al., 2014).

Jia and Maloney (2014), of Auckland University of Technology (AUT) note shortcomings in evidenced-based approaches to understanding and implementing social over academic FYE policy [and that] "...the various reasons for non-completion behavior remains elusive, it has been widely recognized that individual characteristics, student educational backgrounds, and institutional factors are the main determinants of these outcomes." (p. 130). The authors underscore limited availability globally across scholarship about FYE policy and gaps in understanding which target individualized experiences and those variables impacting social adjustment (Jia & Molone, 2014). Further, scholars here, are keen spotlight FYE policy emphasizing social adjustment over academic adjustment may hold higher potential to bolster completion (Jia & Molone, 2014; Kerpen, 2017; Yeager et al., 2014). But, ultimately, social adjustment policy implementation & understandings lag behind because evidence-based explorations are stuck in a cycle which reflects and reproduces the less elusive and simpler to operationalize academic adjustment policies and practices.

The nuanced challenges of understanding and implementing social adjustment in FYE policy research are also compounded by what informs FYE policy and scholarship globally. While popularity grows around the globe to implement FYE policy much of these are rooted in western cultural dimensions, western practices, and a western narrative of higher education (Dorsett, 2017; Koch & Gardner, 2014). FYE policy and best practices worldwide are informed by the NRC & FYE scholarship that is localized to American students, their experiences, with predominant attention to Caucasian learners (Dorsett, 2017; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Kinzie, 2013) and the multiplex of sociocultural issues encountered relative to this demographic (Harvey et al., 2007). Globally, scholars take issue with the inherent shortcomings in research approaches that place importance on academic adjustment over social adjustment and how that is continues to be reflected and reproduced in the wider body of scholarship concerned with FYE policy. Further, scholarship concerned with social adjustment in FYE policy notes the counter-intuitive nature of conducting research by and for students who are already outperforming their minority counterparts (Dorsett, 2017; Tough, 2014; Yeager et al., 2014).

The current FYE policy offers limited applicability to the diverse demographic reflected in the 21<sup>st</sup> - century educational landscape. But, the age of transformation and the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education context serves as a powerful mandate and renewed imperative to explore how social adjustment and belonging impact persistence, and completion. A renewed imperative in FYE policy and practice prioritizing individualized experiences reflecting social adjustment, over the more popular academic strategies, more directly reflect the diversity of contemporary learners and could serve as a turning point in the college completion conundrum.

Ultimately, changing institutional policy to focus on aspects of social adjustment, like belonging, means changing the conversation about what is shaping attrition across the US and globally. It also means flipping the script on the classic narrative about who gets to graduate and what it means to be a college student. If higher education policy can prioritize social adjustment by carving out new spaces for

inclusive communities that celebrate the diversity reflected on their campuses in meaningful ways, then they may find that students are more able to build and translate efforts made in social adjustment more readily into academic success skillsets when they inevitably encounter challenges across their academic journey.

### Author Note

Dr. NguyenVoges is an Associate Professor of Education and the Director of the Master of Arts Program in Educational Innovations with more than 10 years of teaching experience across 11 different international adult and higher education contexts. Her research explores the practice of adult learning theory targeting experiential learning, narrative, critical reflection, and sociocultural influences on student development and study abroad participation. Her most recent work underscores the concepts of mindset, belonging, and 21<sup>st</sup> century education focusing on digital and hybrid learning environments.

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