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## Trialling a 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach to the First Year Experience: The CommUniTI

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### Abstract

*In 2014, we developed a new approach to supporting first year students' transition into higher education building on the work of Kift, Nelson, and Clarke (2010) whose 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Approach is one of transition pedagogy foregrounded by a whole-of-institution transformation. Our 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach focuses on students' social capital and extends the remit beyond the institution. Our approach recognises students' social capital as an unexplored resource to be drawn upon to inform the membership of a Community of Practice (CoP). The CoP members collaboratively develop strategies to support the development of students' important cultural capital, which we consider essential for successful transition. In 2015, we trialled the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach with a Queensland regional university satellite campus. This paper reports on the implementation of the CoP as one element of the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach and the important refinements required for future success.*

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## Introduction

The journey towards Higher Education graduation is often viewed as an individual endeavor, but in reality, it is shared with family, friends, teachers, advisors and fellow students. It is their support in the critical First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) that can determine whether a student will complete their undergraduate journey and achieve their dreams. Kift's (2008) exhortation that the FYHE is "everybody's business" was to ensure holistic support for the First Year (FY) student. This sentiment and Kift, Nelson, and Clarke's (2010) 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Approach laid the foundation for our development of the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach to the FYHE (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014).

The FY student is at the centre of transition approaches with each aiming to encourage and aid the student's "engagement, support and belonging" (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010, p. 1), however the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Approaches emerge from institutional mores and resources. The students are isolated from their backgrounds and society and asked to assimilate into the institution, albeit supported by *transition pedagogy*.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach, however, responds to the widening participation agenda, specifically, of previously marginalised groups in society such as students from Low Socio-Economic Status (LSES) backgrounds and rural and remote students (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). It also responds to Yorke's charge of "honour[ing] what [the students] bring" (in Nelson, Clarke, & Kift, 2011, p. 5) and Zepke and Leach's (2010) position on adapting university processes to suit the student body and student discourses. It is also informed by two key beliefs, that a society comprises many communities, of which a university is only one, and that a FY student is supported in many ways by many people in their local community, beyond those associated with the learning institution. Accordingly, this project is

underpinned by two key Bourdieurian (1984) theoretical concepts: social and cultural capital. Bourdieu (1984) argues that social classes are distinguished by the availability of three forms of capital: cultural, social and economic. Individuals can, potentially, leverage these in the acquisition of resources.

Cultural capital is possessing the appropriate forms of knowledge and *ways of acting and understanding* that forms the currency of specific cultural and institutional contexts. First-in-Family (FIF) students, often, do not possess appropriate forms of cultural capital valued in higher education and can struggle with understanding how to negotiate higher education discourses (Zepke & Leach, 2010) potentially placing them at risk of attrition.

Social capital, on the other hand, refers to the individual and group economic and social benefits inherent in social networks, "social capital refers to the connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). *It's not what you know but who you know* exemplifies social capital in action, where networks of association form a resource for individual benefit. The 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach particularly recognises and values the strategic and significant role that the FY student's *social capital* plays in their successful transition into higher education.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach seeks to extend the institutional practices comprising the 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Approach by acknowledging the holistic nature of the student through involving the student's local community in a Community of Practice (CoP) methodology. In this paper, we report on an initial trial of the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014) conducted at a Queensland university regional campus. We initially describe the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach focusing on its CoP foundations. We then describe the project, its outcomes, and, based on these, consider how a modified 4<sup>th</sup>

Generation Approach can better achieve its aim of using social capital to support FY students.

## Community of Practice and the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach

We believe that parents, friends and/or peers play a key role in a student's learning and that they constitute a valuable resource for the student. As such, we conceptualised an innovative approach to support students in their FYHE that used a CoP comprising university staff, FY students and members of the local community to conceptualise FY transition strategies that were specific to the needs of the students from their particular community. We called this trial CoP, the CommUniTI (Community University Team Initiative).

Communities of Practice have been used extensively in higher education and are not uncommon within the FYHE (Budgen, Main, Callcott, & Harriett, 2014). They are characterised by three concepts—a domain of shared interest with community members having a commitment to the joint enterprise; a community where members develop relationships through engagement in shared activities and discussions; and a practice where the practitioners engage in the negotiation of meaning with each other about the joint enterprise. Consequently, CoP members “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice” (Wenger, 2011, p. 2).

The 4th Generation Approach is informed by Wenger (2011) and it utilises a CoP to advise Program Directors on strategies to support FY students. We believe that such an approach is particularly appropriate for regional campuses because they have a high proportion of students who are the first in their family to attend higher education and students of LSES. In 2014, 17.8% of the student body at the trial site was classified as LSES compared to a national average of 14.9%. Furthermore, 50% of the

region's residents are in the most disadvantaged SES grouping and the 2016 unemployment rate was 8.6% compared to a national average of 5.7% (Australian Government Department of Employment, 2016).

In the following, we explain the methodological approach to the project and the research and then describe how the CommUniTI was conceptualised and enacted over four phases: 1) Investigating the Connections; 2) Establishing the CommUniTI; 3) Actioning the CommUniTI; and 4) Evaluating the Process and Product.

## Methodology

This project is characterised as participatory action research, a “method that enable(s) theories produced by the social sciences to be applied in practice and tested on the basis of their practical effectiveness” (Carr, 2006, p. 423). It follows the practice of “*planning* a change, *acting* and *observing* the process and consequences of the change, *reflecting* on these processes and consequences, *replanning* ...” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007, p. 276). It uses mixed methods research processes, “an approach to inquiry in which the researcher links, in some way ..., both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a unified understanding of a research problem” (Creswell & Garrett, 2008, p. 322). We used a range of qualitative and quantitative methods to collect, collate and analyse data in order to: (i) draw out student connections with their local community through surveys (qualitative and quantitative data) and focus groups; (ii) evaluate the CoP as an initiative by collecting interview data; and (iii) evaluate the outcomes through student survey (qualitative and quantitative data) responses.

## The CommUniTI (Community University Team Initiative) project

### *Phase 1: Investigating the connections*

In Phase 1, we investigated the social connections that the FY students had within their local community. Our purpose for doing this was to identify community members who had established relationships with students and who might like to extend that connection by becoming members of the CommUniTI.

A research assistant recruited students during classes in the first week of semester one. She distributed 100 surveys to FY students across business, nursing and education disciplines. Fifty-five students (55%) responded to the survey. The demographic data showed that 75% of the cohort were female; 64% were aged under 30, 13% were aged 31 – 40, 15% were aged 41 – 50, and 8% did not identify their age; 66% of the cohort were single, 25.5% in a relationship, and the remaining 8.5% were either separated, widowed or failed to select an answer.

Survey respondents were asked about their connections to their local community. Social networks, excluding family and friends, included: sporting groups (48%); church groups (9.6%); gardening clubs, fitness groups, schools (8.3% respectively); and, to a lesser extent, Apex Community Service Clubs, aged care associations, mothers' groups, cultural groups and public libraries (1% respectively). Furthermore, the students' places of previous and current employment, as another dimension of social capital, included the following industries or services: government and local council; hospitality; retail; child care/education; business; banking and

investment; health; manufacturing; self-employment and information technology.

The survey gave some insight into the scope of their social connections. However, it did not identify how these social connections were related to their decision to attend university and their experiences in their first semester. Ascertaining this information was critical to establishing the CommUniTI and, accordingly, focus groups and individual student interviews were conducted.

Three one-hour focus groups and seven thirty-minute individual student interviews were held on the campus at the beginning of semester one. The focus was to delve further into the students' community connections. Students were given a synopsis of the survey data that mapped the community connections as well as stimulus pictures and texts from past students depicting their decision to attend university and how they had been supported in their first year. The synopsis and previous students' pictures prompted a rich discussion between the participants.

The transcribed focus group and interview data were analysed using a form of thematic analysis where themes and categories related to social networks/social capital were identified. To ensure reliability of the coding process, research team members undertook a process of inter-rater reliability where transcripts were independently coded and compared.

The data showed that respondents were encouraged and motivated to attend university by close family members:

I have had a lot of driving force from my mother, in particular, and my step dad too. (Robbie, 18) <sup>1</sup>

[My partner] thought I was smart when no one else had ever said that... I thought gee,

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<sup>1</sup> Confidentiality of participants was maintained with de-identification of data throughout the research process. Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of the data, however, their ages have been identified.

maybe I'm smarter than I think... (Wendy, 30)

[The boyfriend and I] help each other [with academic support] ... I know other people do study groups, but for us, it's a lot easier because we can be sitting around at dinner and discussing stuff whenever we're working on things. (Jenna, 35)

Recent research supports our finding that families play a significant role in guiding and informing the aspirations of their children (Terton & Greenaway, 2015). Twenty-eight percent of the respondents were aged over 30, some with families of their own. For some, their children influenced their decision to study:

I would say my kids were my biggest influence [to attend university]. I'm a single mum. I kind of needed their backing that they were going to actually cope with me being away. (Jenna, 35)

To further determine potential membership of the CommUniTI, the students were asked who was currently supporting them in their first semester and in what ways this support occurred. Responses frequently cited family and friends as well as university teachers and institutional, academic support services.

Analysis of the focus group data identified that support provided by families and friends ranged from psychological support to practical support such as babysitting:

[In] my first week, I had major panic attacks and yeah, [my boyfriend] was the one who kept me coming to class and [said] you can do it. He kept pushing me to keep with it sort of thing until I went through my first lot of assessment and I went okay, I can do it. (Jenna, 35)

Well [my friend], that helps with my daughter... she determines... whether I was here or not. [Without her] ... I would really struggle to be here. (Wendy, 30)

Academic support was sought from University staff and academic services as well as peers, friends and immediate family. Krystal and Jenna speak of family-provided academic support:

Well, if I needed to talk about anything [my sister] would volunteer to Skype to go through things like biology or maths... (Krystal, 24)

The focus group and interview data confirmed the important role that family and friends played in the student's decision to attend university and their successful engagement during their first semester. Other social networks, such as co-workers, neighbours, employers, teachers, or members of social or sporting groups did not feature in the interview discussions, however their influence was evident in the original survey data and as such we were convinced of their important contribution for the proposed CoP.

### *Phase 2: Establishing the CommUniTI*

Using the surveys as our point of reference, we approached the community organisations mentioned to participate in the CommUniTI. We also asked campus staff to identify key community stakeholders who shared an interest in the success of FY students, such as principals and other senior staff of the region's schools. Furthermore, we asked the focus group participants to nominate potential members from within their social networks, such as family members, friends, and employers. Additionally, we searched local newspapers and websites to ascertain active community groups who may be interested in supporting FY students. We approached these people via email and phone calls. Finally, we invited university personnel to join the CommUniTI who had either specialised knowledge in the First Year Experience (FYE), an identified interest in supporting students in the FY, or who interacted with FY students on a regular basis.

As a consequence, members of the CommUniTI included: a city councillor (also a Rotary member); an aboriginal elder; a deputy high school principal; a mature-age FY nursing

student; a FY education student; the university's Academic Skills Advisor; the campus's First Year Advisor (FYA); campus administrator; Education program leader and members of the project team. Unfortunately, no student's family member, friend or associate volunteered to be a member of the CommUniTI. We discuss possible reasons for this further in the paper.

### *Phase 3: Actioning the CommUniTI*

The members of the CommUniTI met three times in the latter part of 2015. The meetings were held in the early evening and were informal. Membership and attendance was flexible, as is indicative of a CoP. In the initial meeting, the research team explained the 4th Generation Approach and the process that had been undertaken to arrive at the CommUniTI. They led a discussion on current best practice in the FYHE framed by key known emphases such as fostering academic, social, professional and institutional connectedness (Lizzio, 2006) and psychosocial wellbeing (Donnison, Opescu, & Penn-Edwards, 2013).

During the following two meetings, the CommUniTI generated several ideas for supporting FY students such as: a common meeting space on campus; child care facilities; mentors for students who are the FIF; professional mentors; FY student barbeques and social events. Because of project resourcing and timeline limitations, only a limited number of ideas could be explored, developed and implemented. Discussion focused on developing a network of community-based professional mentors and building a *FY student on campus* community particularly for mature-age students who could potentially benefit from strategies and resources not already offered by the institution. Not only did the mature-age students have the same concerns regarding entering university as school leavers, but most had dependent families, many were single parents and the majority relied on external employment. This group is identified in the

research literature as particularly vulnerable to attrition (Sanders, Mair & James, 2016).

In terms of professional mentors, the CommUniTI suggested that retired professionals within the community could be matched with FY students studying within their discipline, for example, retired nurses with nursing FY students to provide emotional and psychological support via email and telephone. The project team considered this proposal and approached a local Graduate Women's group to be involved. At the time of writing, discussions with the Graduate Women's group about how to facilitate this professional mentoring strategy are ongoing.

In terms of developing a FY campus *community*, the CommUniTI advocated for a physical space on campus where mature-age students could "drop in" to connect with other students. This multi-purpose space was envisioned as a safe space for students to relax, connect, and assist each other with parenting matters and babysitting (a major area of concern for many of the students). However, the campus was severely limited in terms of available physical space and this proposed drop in area became a virtual space named the Drop Zone which was set up via the university's learning management system. It included a discussion board, information pages, helpful tips and links to FY resources, a market place to buy and sell items and a linked Facebook Group page. A forthcoming paper details the students' perceptions of and engagement with the Drop Zone.

### *Phase 4: Evaluating and refining the process*

In Phase 4 of the project, we undertook a process of evaluation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach paying particular attention to its CoP foundations.

## *Evaluating the CommUniTI*

To evaluate the effectiveness of the CoP for supporting FY students, a research assistant interviewed six of the CommUniTI members. The interviews were conducted over the phone or through email. Interview questions focused on the effectiveness, challenges and strengths of the approach. The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. The data indicated that the CommUniTI members thought that the CoP approach was, potentially, effective as a FY strategy, “it was good as one of the strategies in achieving that goal [to support FY students]” (Respondent 5). However, its effectiveness was hampered by a lack of broader community engagement, in particular, students’ family and friends, which was attributed to factors related to time, the availability of suitable CoP members, differing understandings of the FYE and the isolated/secluded nature of small regional campuses.

CommUniTI members mentioned that this approach to the FYHE was challenged by time factors, particularly, the time required to source and contact appropriate members for the CoP, establish and facilitate the CoP and time required to attend and contribute to meeting, “we needed more time, more meetings, more ground work...” (Respondent 6). Time factors are also emphasized by Respondent 3 in the following quote which additionally highlights a further challenge, the potential pool of CoP members:

There is a limited number of people willing to engage in a Community of Practice like this and so often it is the same people and they are time poor. (Respondent 3)

Furthermore, CommUniTI members highlighted the challenge of differing understandings about the FYE. According to Respondent 6, some CommUniTI members did not appreciate the importance of the FYE for

successful transition and this perspective on the FYE affected the effectiveness of the strategy:

The problem is that we got people from outside the university community who didn’t fully understand the importance of higher education and the first year experience. (Respondent 6)

A further challenge concerned the nature of small regional campuses. Several respondents noted that the regional campus already provided a range of student supports which were readily accessed by FY students. They believed that any proposed strategy would, potentially, be surplus to need:

There is enough already, so much available to support students that it’s a hard task to go beyond what is already available. (Respondent 3)

In terms of strengths, the CommUniTI spoke favorably about the strategy for bringing community members into the university to work with university personnel. They also thought that including FY students in the CoP in the formulation of FY strategies was a positive and inclusive approach.

In the following we discuss what these findings and the initial survey, focus groups and interviews tell us about the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach to the FYHE. Our discussion draws upon the social capital foundations of the approach and makes links to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Approach (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010).

## **Discussion**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Approach to the FYHE advocated for a coordinated, whole of institution approach (Nelson, Kift & Clark, 2010). Our approach to the FYHE nuanced the 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Approach by proposing that issues of social capital were integral to holistic support. Our trial of the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach showed that student’s social capital could, potentially, be leveraged to support the

FY student. In this respect, we argue that the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach addresses a gap not previously addressed by the previous approach. However, our 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach requires further refinement.

Our approach to the FYHE draws upon the student's social capital in the formation of a CoP tasked with conceptualising transition strategies. The CommUniTI was our initial implementation and trial of the approach and the data collected prior to and during its implementation has helped us to reconsider critical aspects of it. The data supported our belief that students from smaller regional campuses have wide-ranging social networks and draw extensively on their families and friends to support them in their quest for a higher education degree (Budgen et al., 2014; Terton & Greenaway, 2015). Many of the students in this study are the first in their family to attend university and from LSES backgrounds. This predisposes them to possess limited reserves of the forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) valued by higher education, but their reserves of social capital appear to be high and utilised by them as a resource.

However, it is noteworthy that family and friends were reticent to join the CommUniTI, an integral aspect of our approach. Their unwillingness or inability to do so warrants some consideration. Our initial assumptions were that family members and friends would have an inherent interest in supporting the FY student in their university journey and would be keen to be involved. While the first assumption is likely true, the second proved difficult to implement and caused us to critically consider our own understanding of the nature of FIF families and students.

Universities can be psychologically intimidating places particularly for those who do not have a history of interacting with the institution. This is something, that we, as academics, who have worked and studied in academia and with associated external professionals for many

decades, may have lost sight of. Higher education discourses can challenge and threaten family and friends and being asked to join in an enterprise where one is potentially emotionally and psychologically underprepared and vulnerable (i.e. lacking the appropriate cultural capital) is daunting (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Refinements to the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach need to consider how to better support and include students' family and friends.

A first step to achieving this, would be reduce the psychological risks that FIF families take by being involved. It was mentioned by the CommUniTI members that more time was needed to establish the CommUniTI and to generate ideas. Time is also critical for reducing risk. More time must be spent, prior to establishing a CoP, to build relationships with the students, their families and friends; to provide opportunities for them to visit and familiarise themselves with the campus and to provide time for communication about higher education and especially the FYHE. Unfortunately, time is a commodity in short supply in academia.

Families and friends are one aspect of social capital, community members are another. To coopt community members for the CommUniTI, we approached various schools, local organisations, and cultural groups. It was evident from the initial meeting and from the CommUniTI member's interviews that external community members were not as invested in the project as the team would have expected. Time is again the potential culprit. It takes time to develop a CoP, to be invested in the project, to form a focus and to generate ideas (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Given that time is such a limited resource, a possible solution to this problem, is to start with university personnel and leverage their existing social networks to reach out to the community. For instance, a FY course coordinator or FYA who might also be a Rotary member, sporting coach or school committee member and who could



draw upon their social connections in the formulation of FYHE strategies.

We argue that the 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach to the FYHE has merit. However, for it to be successful, careful planning and allocating significant time to build personal and institutional relationships with the students and their families, coopt other community members for the CoP, to develop the CoP, and to generate ideas and strategies is critical.

## Conclusion

The development of our 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach focused on the students' social capital and extended the remit beyond the institution to inform its membership. The members collaboratively developed strategies to support the development of students' important cultural capital for higher education. In trialling this approach some important considerations were raised and avenues for improvement identified. Being mindful of the cultural capital of family, friends and community members and drawing on the social, business and community networks of existing university personnel would strengthen this 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Approach.

This satellite campus was an ideal place to develop a unique approach to addressing support issues because of its relatively compact size and its location (a Higher Education targeted priority - regional campus). It is believed that the CoP approach to developing FYHE strategies and resources provides a useful model for other regional universities in their efforts to support and ultimately retain students.

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