

# The First Year Experience: support for HEIs



**Karen Fitzgibbon** offers us an insight into the way HE ACADEMY Wales has engaged with HEIs to develop research strategies which have delivered solutions and suggestions for practice designed to address one of the most important issues in the HE student experience: the first year.

The Higher Education Academy in Wales regularly meets with several consultative groups from the Welsh Higher Education Institutions. At one such group<sup>1</sup> the desire to share current initiatives and practice designed to support the student first year experience was voiced. The University of Glamorgan volunteered to coordinate a special interest group and each institution nominated a member of staff to join the project team. The project became known as the First Year Experience Action Set and over the last academic year participants have worked together to bring a collection of initiatives forward for wider dissemination.

The group has also established a wiki (<http://firstyearexperience.wales.wetpaint.com>) which will shortly become an open access resource for those interested in the first year experience to add their own initiatives and build up a network of contacts across HE .

### **Overview of the project**

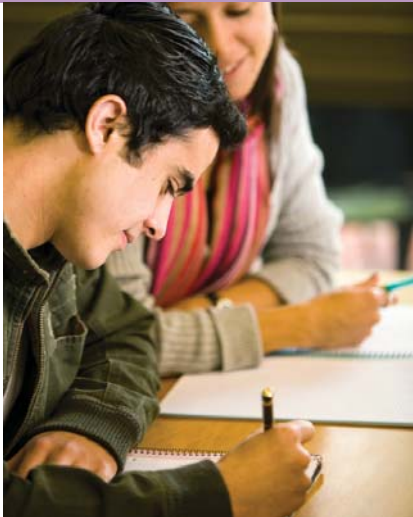
The group's overall aim was to share experiences of developing initiatives designed to support and enhance the first year student experience in Wales and we benefited immensely from the very positive approach that all group members took in willingly sharing the good, the bad (and the

sometimes ugly) experiences along the way.

It rapidly became clear that the group would need to narrow the focus of its work in order to set achievable outcomes. After some discussion concerning the many facets of student retention and the volume of work being carried out in HEIs throughout Wales to strengthen the first year experience, the group decided to focus on collecting examples of practice which could be related to either of two themes – communities of practice and student academic engagement.

The literature concerning student retention in higher ►

<sup>1</sup> The Welsh Institutional Group (WIG), comprising the HE Academy's nominated senior contact responsible for learning and teaching from each Welsh HEI



► education has for many years acknowledged the importance of academic and social integration in student success. Those interested in the literature concerning student retention and in the themes of communities of practice and student engagement may find the following a useful starting point (Beder, 1997; Tinto, 1997; Rhodes and Nevill, 2004; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Crosling, Thomas and Heagney, 2008). A useful overview of the first year experience in the UK is provided by Yorke and Longden (2007).

It was evident that there were examples of good, innovative and perhaps most importantly, evidence-based practices that were bringing about improvements to the first year experience amongst the participating institutions. Many of those practices involved initiatives designed to make students feel settled and part of the learning community they were joining. Others were focused on improving student academic engagement.

At the end of the first year of the project, the group had produced approximately 80 mini case studies of initiatives which have been pared down into a forthcoming practice guide to be published by the Higher Education Academy. It is hoped

that this publication will provide a useful contribution to evidence of how to enhance the First Year Experience in UK higher education.

The publication does not aim to cover every first year experience initiative currently underway in Higher Education Institutions in Wales, but to provide a taster of a wide range of initiatives within the institutions – from module level right through to institution-wide initiatives. Of course each of the initiatives could be up (or down) scaled depending on how they are used. The authors of the initiatives are happy to be contacted, as are the project representatives from each institution and the group hopes to establish a network of shared views about the first year experience throughout Wales and beyond.

Due to necessary resource constraints the group had to be selective about which case studies to include in the publication and it should not be assumed that because we have highlighted an initiative in one institution similar work is not underway in others. It is also true that the initiatives in place to support the first year experience are always growing and it is perhaps inevitable that HEIs are developing their work in this area at different rates. The aim of the publication is to offer something for everyone to consider in enhancing the first year experience in higher education.

The success of the group has led to a decision to continue with our work on the first year experience and we will be meeting again shortly to discuss our themes for the forthcoming year.

## References

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- Rhodes, C. and Nevill, A. (2004). "Academic and Social Integration in Higher Education: a survey of satisfaction and dissatisfaction within a first-year education studies cohort at a new university." *Journal of Further & Higher Education* **28**(2): 179-193.
- Tinto, V. (1997). "Classrooms as Communities." *Journal of Higher Education* **68**(6): 599-623.
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S. and Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). "'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education." *Studies in Higher Education* **30**(6): 707-722.
- Yorke, M. and B. Longden (2007). *The first-year experience in higher education in the UK*. York, Higher Education Academy.
- There is much more on this than we have space to include here; see <http://escalate.ac.uk/6340> for more.



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Karen's research interests are the student experience, student retention, on-line learning, and reflective practice. She currently leads the HEA First Year Experience Wales Action Set.