https://studentsuccessjournal.org/
Volume 15 (2) 2024 https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.3434

# Making the Student Experience Everybody's Business: Cultivating Collaboration in the Exosphere

**Christopher Bridge**
La Trobe University; University of New England, Australia
**Dell Horey**
La Trobe University, Australia
**Brianna Julien**
La Trobe University, Australia
**Belinda Thompson**
La Trobe University, Australia
**Birgit Loch**
Federation University; University of New England, Australia

## Abstract

It has long been recognised that a key element in improving student transition, retention and success in higher education is cross-institutional consistency and unity of action among disparate academic, policy and support units. However, transferring this principle into practice often requires overcoming departmental silos, negotiating shared understandings of key concepts, and establishing patterns of cross-institutional collaboration in spaces where this may have been lacking. This study examines the effect of a program of supported communities of practice among teaching academics that sought to improve the culture of learning and teaching in a large science, health and engineering faculty in an Australian university. We found indications that these communities of practice promoted collaboration by functioning as loci of cross-institutional consultation and coordination, providing the basis for an enhanced student experience. We interpret this finding through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development, and propose an approach based on academic communities of practice as a way of building cross-institutional unity of action and making the student experience everybody's business.

***Keywords:*** Community of practice; cross-institutional collaboration; policy implementation.

## Introduction

In 2008 Kift called for the first year experience to be made "everybody's business", asking:

> how might all the institutional players integrate and coordinate their various excellent, but often quite disparate, first year initiatives and work together towards more sustainable, institution-wide, approaches that transcend the silos of academic, administrative and support areas? (p.2)

Nelson et al. (2012) concurred that the need for a holistic, institution-wide approach to student transition "is almost an incontestable truism" (p. 187). A great deal of progress has been made since Kift's question was posed. Transition pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010), incorporating an institution-wide approach to the first year experience, brought about a "quantum leap"

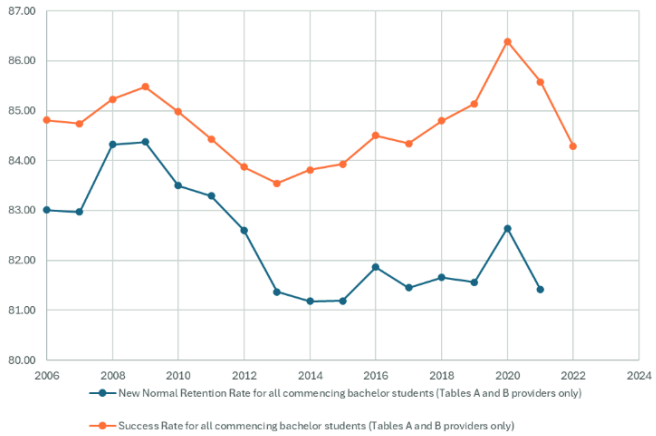
(Kift, 2015) in understanding the student experience of transition to, and through, higher education studies, and has been increasingly adopted in Australian universities (p. 51).

Yet, in terms of national retention and success rates and while movement, both up and down has occurred, the most recent government figures are below 2008 levels, and the post-pandemic trend looks to be downwards (Figure 1). While these data aggregate many complex factors, including institutional and regional differences and longitudinal trends, such results are nevertheless sobering. Despite areas of progress, it appears that student transition, success and retention may not yet be everybody's business.

In this article we focus on one particular element of transition pedagogy affecting academic and professional units, namely the need for "cross-institutional partnerships with shared language, understanding and focus" (Kift, 2021, p. 72). We observed from a detailed evaluation of a novel, faculty-level learning and teaching strategy, the implementation of which fortuitously coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, that a series of supported communities of practice aimed at developing skills and leadership amongst teaching academics also functioned effectively as loci of collaboration and negotiation between disparate academic and professional units across the university. We turned to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (1994) to shed light on this phenomenon.

**Figure 1**

*Australian Undergraduate Retention and Success Rates (%), 2006-2022*




*Note.* From Australian Government Department of Education, 2023, *2022 Section 15: Attrition, success and retention*. https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2022-section-15-attrition-success-and-retention

Bronfenbrenner (1994) conceived human development as taking place within complex social settings, envisaged as concentric systems. In his schema, described in more detail below, the exosystem can be viewed as encompassing collaboration between academics in departmental and classroom environments with staff involved in policy implementation initiatives in centralised administration and support units. We hypothesise that the geometry of this exosystem is crucial to the policy implementation landscape in higher education and is often overlooked. Our research question is: can academic communities of practice focused on learning and teaching themes or roles enhance exosystemic collaboration at the institutional level and contribute to achieving an institution-wide approach to the student experience?

## Literature Review

An institution-wide approach is a key element of transition pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010), reflecting recognition of the often "piecemeal" nature of most university's first-year experience programs (Krause et al., 2005, p. 89). Approaches for moving towards greater cross-institutional consistency have included creation of a high-level first-year experience committee bringing together senior managers of academic and professional units (Nelson et al., 2012); co-development of an institutional retention and success strategy in consultation with key academic stakeholders and with the explicit aim of "whole of institution responsibility" (Skalicky et al., 2018, p. 5); and intentional transition interventions implemented at the program rather than unit level, to build collaborative relationships between support units and cohorts of academic and professional staff, replacing isolated partnerships with individual academics (Cox & Naylor, 2018). More recent studies have linked improvements in cross-institutional collaboration to the development of unified digital interfaces bringing together the many disparate systems that support students throughout their study experience (Dale et al., 2021; Power et al., 2020); to purposeful, institution-wide consultative processes with diverse stakeholders agreeing on common actions (Canty et al., 2020; Stroh, 2023); and even to the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic requiring academics to work closely with support and design staff to deliver programs online (Kift, 2021). The extent to which such initiatives have achieved the goal of institution-wide uniformity is less clear. A recent systematic review of retention and other student experience-oriented programs based on published quantitative data found no studies on cross-institutional collaboration (Eather et al., 2022). One of the above-cited studies of integrated student service hubs (Power et al., 2020) found cross-institutional collaboration occurred mostly in the form of referrals between student services, and recommended more formal and informal communication between different units as a way of improving collaboration and shared understanding of service roles.

Given the apparent lack of clarity that exists, a systems theory approach may be informative. Indeed, while it has been observed that "[s]ystems theory is one way to anticipate key issues regarding bridging the gap between policy and implementation, idea and reality" (Downes, 2014, p. 29), there is relatively little research applying systems-based approaches to improving the student experience through cross-institutional collaboration.

Bronfenbrenner's seminal ecological model of human development (1994) foregrounds the impact of the environmental context on individual growth. Specifically, interactions between five concentric subsystems characterise the process of an individual's development. The macrosystem provides the "belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, life-styles, opportunity structures, hazards, and life course options" in Bronfenbrenner's schema (p. 40) and as such, it is the source of policy development.

Policy implementation can be seen as occurring across both the exosystem and mesosystems. The exosystem includes those branches of the university with no direct involvement in the classroom experience. In our case, we envisage the exosystem as encompassing both those academic staff concerned with policy implementation associated with improvements in learning and teaching practice (including governance and quality processes requiring academic oversight), and those professional staff, including centralised support units, concerned with implementation of institutional policy priorities. Unfortunately, our observations are that these academic and professional groups can often be siloed. We argue that a collaborative exosystem is critical to effective policy implementation, and that weak or dysfunctional exosystemic connections can defer or delay making improvement in the student experience everybody's business.

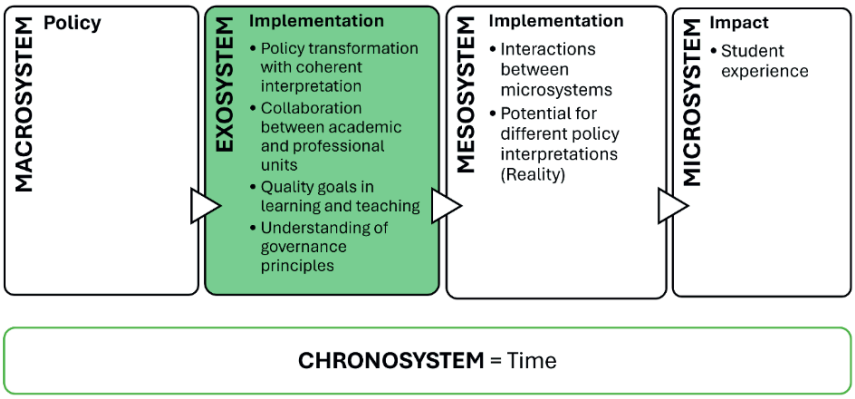
Mesosystems consists of "linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person", and as such are concerned with the practical implementation of policy (p. 40). Mesosystems can be envisaged as interactions between different units of study and between relevant academic disciplines or departments.

Ultimately the focus of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the developing individual, is found in the microsystem, which in the higher education context we identify with the classroom, in the broad sense of all in-person and online learning interactions for each subunit of study. This is where student experience occurs.

The remaining system in Bronfenbrenner's model is the chronosystem which adds a longitudinal dimension, reflecting both change and constancy, to incorporate dynamic elements such as the ongoing broadening of access to higher education, and the rapidly developing technological environment. Issues in the macro, meso and chronosystems undoubtedly influence student experience but are outside the scope of this study. See Figure 2 for a representation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model applied to the student experience in higher education.

**Figure 2**

*Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Aligned to Student Experience Policy, Implementation and Impact in Higher Education*




Bronfenbrenner's model of the ecology, or environment, affecting student experience allows for a striking visualisation of a key element of transition pedagogy, that is the centrality of the curriculum as the locus for implementation of the curriculum principles and key strategies that comprise transition pedagogy (Kift et al., 2010).

In higher education, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model has perhaps been most extensively applied in inclusivity and accessibility policy research. For example, confronted with poor uptake of universal design for learning (UDL) in the Canadian higher education context, Fovet (2021) found that bringing academics, learning designers and accessibility experts together to reform curriculum was challenging, and that even the relationships between the various administrative units such as student support and disability services were often characterised more by competition than collaboration. Fovet argues in favour of the application of Bronenbrenner's ecological model for overcoming "the territoriality and silo mentality which would otherwise plague such efforts" (p. 33).

In a UK study of inclusivity in higher education for students with visual impairment, Hewett et al. (2017) described a situation in which disability officers found academics unwilling to engage with them, and academics perceived disability services staff to have unrealistic expectations concerning the adjustments they were required to make. Hewett and colleagues identify the cause of this disengagement as lying in the absence of "mutual accommodation" between Bronfenbrenner's different systemic levels (p. 105).

Bronfenbrenner's model has also been applied to other areas of learning and teaching policy, for example understanding difficulties associated with aligning curriculum with institutional graduate qualities. In one study looking at embedding global citizenship in the curriculum, Fortune et al. (2022) found that a lack of consensus over the meaning of key terms hindered institution-wide consistency:

> As no a priori definitions of global citizenship were used, participants were free to talk about global citizenship in their own terms. This revealed a broad range of positions, flavoured with political, philosophical, and moral views, melding textbook understandings with both personal and disciplinary viewpoints. (p. 1096)

They argue that this lack of consensual meaning-making highlights the need for better processes for negotiating agreed understandings of key terms at the exosystemic level (Fortune et al., 2022).

Similarly, when attempting to implement a standardised template for embedding graduate attributes in unit outlines, Harvey and Kamvounias (2008) observed a lack of shared understanding between academics and academic developers concerning

what the descriptors constituting the graduate attributes meant, and how they could be incorporated in the curriculum. Attempts to standardise definitions centrally, far from overcoming this issue, led instead to a culture of resistance, underlining the need for a more negotiated approach to meaning-making in the exosystem.

Experiences such as these are consistent with our hypothesis that addressing exosystemic considerations has potential to improve the implementation of policy in the curriculum, so lies at the heart of coherence in the student experience. Given academic control over curriculum, and transition pedagogy's agenda of embedding institution-wide principles into the curriculum, many of which involve links with disparate units across the university, the character of the exosystem may be key to improving cross-institutional collaboration and the student experience.

Our community of practice model, while designed to address general learning and teaching improvement goals, provides a pathway for overcoming exosystemic barriers to well-intentioned interventions aimed at improving the student experience. Communities of practice (CoP) are by now a common feature in the higher education sector, and fulfill a range of functions (McDonald, 2014). The concept derives from the foundational work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who conceived of learning within organisations as social in nature and characterised by a series of more or less interconnected communities of practice, whereby brokers who are able to cross boundaries between communities, and the artefacts they employ in doing so, are of particular importance for institution-wide consistency (Wenger, 2000). According to this understanding, the many and diverse organisational units across a university form their own communities of practice, with the quality of connections between them another way of conceptualising the exosystemic space described above. The intentional creation of communities of practice which span existing departmental silos and, to some extent, the divide between academic, policy, administrative and support units, therefore holds promise in facilitating cross-institutional understanding and collaboration. A significant feature of a successful CoP, from our point of view, is the need for leadership to derive from within the academic group, though the various leadership functions can be distributed amongst more than one member (Wenger et al., 2002).

## The Intervention

Our observation of improvements in the institutional exosystem followed the implementation of a program of supported CoPs designed to improve the culture of learning and teaching practice and innovation in a large science, health and engineering faculty (referred to as a college) of an Australian university. The CoP program was initiated due to reports of dissatisfaction with existing, traditional, workshop-based approaches to professional development, that focused on individuals in isolation from teaching and collegial contexts, and struggled to engage teaching academics. In response, a small team of professional and academic staff reporting to the college's associate provost learning and teaching implemented a series of innovations aimed at invigorating interest and creativity in learning and teaching practice and supporting academics in specific learning and teaching roles.

A major feature of this new approach was the stepwise introduction of focused and supported CoPs among teaching academics and leaders. The provision of administrative support reduced workload burdens on CoP academic leaders to ensure regular meetings and consistent follow-up on issues raised, as well as to facilitate the sharing of ideas, information, and artefacts. Efforts were made to maintain a sense of academic ownership of these CoPs, for example by limiting the number of permanent delegates from central units of the university. Maintaining academic ownership of the CoPs ensured that agendas were driven by members' perceived interests and concerns, guaranteeing that the CoPs remained relevant and a worthwhile time investment for participants. Each CoP focused on either learning and teaching skills development, in particular regarding best practice in the application of educational technologies, or on specific academic roles (see Table 1).

In addition to improving the culture and practice of learning and teaching in the college, and indeed often as a means for achieving this, we found the CoPs increased connectivity through improved collaboration, both between academic departments and with centralised policy and support units, and created spaces in which shared understandings of key concepts and policy details could be negotiated. This model's ability to address possible deficiencies in the institutional exosystem provides a potentially fruitful avenue for improving transition, retention and success, through nurturing cross-institutional engagement, unity of purpose, and collaboration. Crucially, the CoPs consisted mostly of teaching academics, resulting in those responsible for curriculum design and delivery engaging directly in the process of negotiating meaning and common purpose.

**Table 1**

*Communities of Practice Initiated and Supported by the College Learning and Teaching Unit*

| | CoP | Rationale for initiating CoP | Exosphere collaboration | Publications |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Role-oriented | Program coordinators | Capacity-building, facilitated by academic coordinators within the college learning and teaching unit. | Better understanding and more consistent implementation of university policies. | |
| | Teaching-focused academics* | Introduction of teaching-focused positions in 2019 led to formation of CoP for mutual support and identity-building. | Recognition and leadership of teaching-focused academics, improved teaching outcomes, more consistent implementation of university policies. | Loch et al., 2024 |
| | Directors of Learning and Teaching (DLTs)* | Capacity-building, facilitated by associate provost learning and teaching and academic coordinators. | Increased understanding of quality standards and requirements; increased representation of learning and teaching issues in high-level decision-making. | |
| Skills development focus | Technology in Teaching Innovators* | Facilitated by associate provost learning and teaching to encourage innovators and early adopters of educational technologies. | Institutional adoption and roll-out of educational technology tools; improvement of learning environment. | Bridge et al., 2023; Loch et al., 2021 |
| | Tablet Teaching* | Purchase of equipment to create educational hardware library for long-term loans to teaching staff (including 80 Surface Pros and Gos). Microbiology academic motivated to lead CoP. | Improvements to teaching space audiovisual technologies. Know-how and equipment invaluable support during emergency remote teaching in the COVID-19 pandemic. | Bridge et al., 2022 |
| | Teaching with MS Teams | Availability of Microsoft Teams to all students and staff from April 2020. Computer science academic motivated to form CoP for early adopters. | Improvements to university's online teaching and learning environment. | |
| | AR/VR/360-camera | Purchase of 10 GoPro Fusion 360-cameras and goggles added to technology library. Innovators in teaching with AR/VR applications led CoP. | Development of innovative virtual teaching resources. | |
| | Online Teaching | Shift to fully online teaching with pandemic lockdowns. Prior to this staff teaching in a small number of degree programs lobbied for practice-sharing, support and policy changes. Physiology academic led CoP. | Active leadership during period of emergency remote teaching. Policy changes to accommodate online learning and associated teaching arrangements. | |
| | SRES (Student Relationship Engagement System) | Trial of learning analytics tool supporting semi-automation of personalised teacher-student communication, marking and feedback processes, and group-work self and peer evaluation. | Decision in favour of institutional adoption of SRES tool. Later rescinded after university restructure and changes to senior staff. | |

## Methodology

Between April and July 2021 an evaluation was undertaken to assess the experience of the college's academics teaching during the pandemic, which included feedback on the college learning and teaching team's support program, including the supported CoPs. This evaluation made use of an initial survey of teaching academics (n=138), not used in the current study, and subsequent focus groups with members of three CoPs (innovators group [n=18], teaching focused CoP [n=10], directors of learning and teaching CoP [n=5]), and a survey (n=18), also not used in the current study, and semi-structured interviews (n=6) with members of the tablet teaching CoP. All data were gathered with the approval of the university's human research ethics committee (reference HEC20487), which allowed these data to be used for subsequent research projects.

Initially, a detailed study of one of the CoPs, the innovators group (Bridge et al., 2023), analysed focus group transcripts using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and direct content analysis applied to the manifest content as set forth by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). In this analysis two features of the CoP's successful functioning clearly emerged: the extent of interdepartmental collaboration amongst academics, and the experience of negotiation with central units over shared understandings and detailed implementations of strategic initiatives. The apparent value, and comparative rarity, of these kinds of exosystemic interactions aroused our interest, and led us to search other CoP focus group and semi-structured interview transcripts for similar examples, and to seek a framework for analysis, for which Bronfenbrenner's ecological model appeared particularly well-suited.

It is these examples of the CoPs facilitating improved exosystemic collaboration, and the descriptions of how academics perceived this as contributing to improving the student experience, drawn from the transcripts of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews involving CoP members, that comprise the data which we use to address our research question, which asks whether academic communities of practice focused on learning and teaching themes or roles can enhance exosystemic collaboration and contribute to achieving an institution-wide approach to the student experience.

## Results

CoPs were either skills or roles focused. Examples of collaboration were present across all CoPs (see Table 1). Findings from selected CoPs are reported below.

### *Program Coordinators CoP*

The initial CoP session for program coordinators sought to identify the pain points they experienced in implementing institutional policies and requirements at the program level. Subsequent CoP sessions fielded guest presentations from representatives of a wide range of university units, including senior leaders, to discuss the specific issues the first session raised. All CoP meetings were recorded, facilitating access to information by non-attendees, and also forming a resource for those later appointed to program coordinator roles. In addition to improving collegial connections between academics within the college's disciplines and departments, the CoP also facilitated improved connectivity with diverse administrative and policy units, whose representatives in the past had typically struggled for the attention of time-poor academics, and a greater understanding on the part of professional staff of the practical issues faced by program coordinators at the implementation level of policies and strategies. This CoP was thus effective in connecting academics with direct influence over the curriculum, and hence over the student experience, with a broad array of policy and support units, at the exosystemic level, that had previously only exhibited a low level of interaction.

### *Teaching-Focused CoP*

Similar processes were observable with the teaching-focused CoP. Members' testimony demonstrated that connectivity between academics extended beyond the CoP, with focus group participants reporting that they were able to share what they learnt through the CoP about wider university networks with their departmental colleagues, so that "the whole department grows" (a teaching-focused CoP member). This information included "all these sort of things that have become central to engaging students and having effective classrooms" (another teaching-focused CoP member), indicating the impact on the student experience. This CoP in particular demonstrated the multiplicative effect of a healthy level of collaboration in the exosphere: common understandings and practices could then be disseminated within the meso-system of departmental groupings, with the ultimate aim being the micro-system, or curriculum level.

### *Directors of Learning and Teaching (DLTs) CoP*

The CoP for DLTs also facilitated exosystemic improvements. Examples included effective group lobbying for the resolution of course administration issues, and more effective consultation with central units. As one DLT reflected:

> I think we come together as a really good team to problem solve some real big pain points that are in the university. And I think we're being consulted more and more … I think in that way we're really working as a collective in the teaching and learning leadership across the university.

The testimony of other DLT CoP members indicated how collaboration improved at the exosystemic level leading to better and more consistent implementation of institutional directives, with one focus group participant reporting "I'm really glad we're at the table". Another DLT commented explicitly on being able to improve consistency in teaching quality across the college.

Improved exosystemic collaboration through the CoP also enabled establishment of a key locus for consultation with other university stakeholders, and the inclusion of representatives of different central units (limited, so as to maintain academic ownership of the CoP). The DLTs CoP illustrates the multi-directional nature of effective exosystemic collaboration: that implementation of policy at the meso and micro level requires joint negotiation of the detail of implementation which may not be apparent at the macro-level of university policy formulation.

### *Technology in Teaching Innovators Group*

One of the earliest skills-focused CoPs, the innovators group proved a popular forum for practice-sharing and problem-solving amongst innovators and early adopters of educational technologies. The CoP included a small number of non-academic representatives including one representative from the central learning and teaching unit and another from the ICT unit.

As well as sharing innovative practice and championing the latest applications in the university's learning technology toolkit, the group was effective in lobbying. Successes included adoption of educational technologies, including the interactive content tool H5P (later incorporated into the LMS), the polling software Mentimeter, and the University of Sydney's Student Relationship Engagement System (SRES) (although this decision was later rescinded after a university restructure and senior staff changes). Lobbying by the group also led to the establishment of lightboard and green-screen studios at the university's two largest campuses. An important development was the incorporation of this CoP by the university's ICT service in consultation related to decision-making on learning environment projects, including an update of audio-visual standards for teaching spaces, and implementation of an LMS upgrade.

One member reflected on how the CoP's existence and activities led to better institutional outcomes for educational technologies, both in terms of the details of implementation, and the breadth of dissemination:

> Through the community of practice … through communicating about what the university high level is doing with technology, they are starting to then get the feedback, listen to it, and I'm finding that there's better outcomes with technology … I think now we're seeing much better solutions coming through because of that, and I think that's a massive achievement.

Being more involved in educational technology decision-making was a common theme in innovators group testimony, with one focus group participant asking "where else in the university, I would love to know, do you actually get to sit with those arms of the university together?" The benefits of doing so included a better understanding of institutional and financial constraints amongst academics, and a stronger commitment to finding practical solutions at the implementation level, and greater buy-in from teaching academics, resulting in an improved student experience. The innovators group CoP was perhaps the most active at the exosystemic level, leading to two-way negotiation between an empowered community of teaching academics and units responsible for the university's educational technology environment, which members testified led to better implementations, and greater uptake of educational technologies amongst their departmental colleagues in the mesosystemic level, and by implication a more consistent and higher quality student experience.

### *Tablet Teaching CoP*

The tablet teaching CoP quickly identified problems with wireless screensharing in many of the university's teaching spaces, which were taken up by the university's ICT service and then resolved (coincidentally just as teaching shifted online with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic). Interview testimony demonstrated how the CoP nurtured innovation in learning and teaching, in line with institutional goals to improve the student experience. Tablet teaching know-how, and a large library of devices which had been acquired by the college, proved invaluable for lockdown teaching, and facilitated consistency in best-practice implementation. The experience of the tablet teaching CoP provides an example of how a general institutional strategic

goal can be brought to fulfilment with demonstrable effect on the student experience through collaboration in the exosystem, which enabled unforeseen hurdles at the level of practical implementation to be overcome.

## Discussion

While initially established with the aim of improving the culture of learning and teaching in the college through information provision, practice-sharing and collaboration amongst members, the CoPs quickly became points of connection across a wide range of university units, particularly those with centralised policy implementation and procedural functions. This connectivity resulted in improved communication and collaboration institution-wide, and was linked to an improved student experience. While in hindsight such progression is a logical outcome, the extent to which dysfunction at the exosystemic level became recognised, and was overcome, was unanticipated. Building the exosphere as a key pathway for improving many aspects of learning and teaching offers much to enhancing the student experience. Critical to success appears to be providing an effective way of addressing the difficulty, identified by Fovet (2021), in getting academics and central policy unit staff together "around a table to proactively discuss change in pedagogy" (p. 32).

The CoPs raised awareness of those institutional services and activities aimed at improving the student experience, as well as reinforcing internal and external quality and regulatory requirements. Opportunities for reaching shared understandings of key aims across the institution were possible, thus overcoming one of the major challenges to university-wide policy initiatives identified in the literature: divergent interpretations of key terminology (Fortune et al., 2022; Harvey & Kamvounias, 2008). The CoPs created forums for consultation between academic and central units that facilitated fine-tuning and optimisation of policy implementation initiatives and technology updates with improved outcomes for all.

Academic ownership of the CoPs, with the ability to set agendas according to perceived interests and needs, ensured faculty engagement. Consultation, and regular discussion with members of central policy, administration and support units at the same table helped to overcome perceptions of centrally imposed policy, a precursor to academic resistance (Hewett et al., 2017). CoP members also disseminated best practices, information and their shared understandings of key concepts with colleagues in their academic schools, departments and disciplines, further contributing to institution-wide consistency and unity of purpose. Finally, a negotiated and consultative approach between the many disparate arms of the university helped to forge a stronger sense of identification with the institution, a key element in nurturing engagement in strategic initiatives and building an integrated approach to their implementation (Stensaker, 2015).

While the CoPs were not established specifically with transition pedagogy in mind, rather to address more general learning and teaching goals, although still with improving student experience as the ultimate aim, the discovery of their role in cultivating collaboration between academics and diverse professional central units cross-institutionally is relevant to transition pedagogy, where the need to embed institution-wide principles and strategies in widely divergent curricular contexts is recognised. While this discovery was unexpected, on reflection it is logical, as this kind of exospheric collaboration is a necessary component for improving the student experience institution-wide, which was a shared goal of the CoPs.

Viewed from an exosystemic perspective, CoPs may provide the missing link for direct engagement among those charged with curriculum design and delivery, including in the context of top-down models such as high-level first-year experience committees (Nelson et al., 2012), retention and success strategies (Skalicky et al., 2018), and one-off consultation processes (Canty et al., 2020; Stroh, 2023).

## Conclusion

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1994) has been used to show how ongoing collaboration between disparate academic units and central professional units creates an effective exosphere that enables a coherent and improved student experience. The complex functioning of higher education institutions necessitates the need for active intervention to support collaboration between different areas concerned with student experience policy implementation as without it, implementation can be ineffective and suboptimal.

Our experience showed that a series of administratively supported communities of practice for teaching academics quickly enabled the facilitation of cross-institutional communication, collaboration and negotiation of shared understandings. This experience provides a model for improving exosystemic connectivity, which would be worthy of further research as a mechanism for more effectively making student transition, success and retention everybody's business.

## References


Australian Government Department of Education. (2023). *2022 Section 15: Attrition, success and retention*. https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2022-section-15-attrition-success-and-retention

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bridge, C., Horey, D., Loch, B., Julien, B., & Thompson, B. (2023). The impact of an innovators group on the development of a culture of innovation in the use of educational technologies. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 39*(6), 17-32. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.8575

Bridge, C., Loch, B., Bell, C., Thompson, B., Horey, D., Julien, B., & Agolli, J. (2022, December 3-6). "There's a pandemic coming, get yourselves some tablets": Lessons from the pandemic on a community of practice approach to learning technology diffusion. In S. Wilson, N. Arthars, D. Wardak, P. Yeoman, E. Kalman, & D.Y.T. Liu (Eds.), *Reconnecting relationships through technology—Proceedings of the 39th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education* (e22100). ASCILITE. https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2022.100

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *International Encyclopedia of Education* (2nd. ed.), 1643-1647, Elsevier. https://www.ncj.nl/wp-content/uploads/media-import/docs/6a45c1a4-82ad-4f69-957e-1c76966678e2.pdf

Canty, A. J., Chase, J., Hingston, M., Greenwood, M., Mainsbridge, C. P., & Skalicky, J. (2020). Addressing student attrition within higher education online programs through a collaborative community of practice. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching 3*(1), 140-152. https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.s1.3

Cox, S., & Naylor, R. (2018). Intra-university partnerships improve student success in a first-year success and retention outreach initiative. *Student Success, 9*(3), 51-64. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v9i3.467

Dale, N. F., Loh, J., Poretti L., Nichols, S., & Pearsall, S. (2021). A digital student journey: Supporting students in an age of super complexity. In H. Huijser, M. Y. C. A. Kek, & F. F. Padró (Eds.), *Student support services* (pp. 241-256). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3364-4_20-2

Downes, P. (2014). *Access to education in Europe: A framework and agenda for system change*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8795-6

Eather, N., Mavilidi, M. F., Sharp, H., & Parkes, R. (2022). Programmes targeting student retention/success and satisfaction/experience in higher education: A systematic review, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 44*(3), 223-239. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.2021600

Fortune, T., Nicolacopoulos, T., & Horey, D. (2022). Conceptualising and educating for global citizenship: The experiences of academics in an Australian university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *41*(4), 1089-1103. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1882960

Fovet, F. (2021). Developing an ecological approach to the strategic implementation of UDL in higher education. *Journal of Education and Learning*, *10*(4), 27-39. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v10n4p27

Harvey, A., & Kamvounias, P. (2008). Bridging the implementation gap: A teacher-as-learner approach to teaching and learning policy. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *27*(1), 31-41. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360701658716

Hewett, R., Douglas, G., McLinden, M., & Keil, S. (2017). Developing an inclusive learning environment for students with visual impairment in higher education: Progressive mutual accommodation and learning experiences in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 32*(1), 89-109. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2016.1254971

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277–1288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Kift, S. (2008, June 30-July 2). The next, great first year challenge: Sustaining, coordinating and embedding coherent institution-wide approaches to enact the FYE as "everybody's business". In *An Apple for the Learner: Celebrating the First Year Experience – Proceedings of the 11th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference*. Hobart, Australia. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/14401/1/14401.pdf

Kift, S. (2015). A decade of transition pedagogy: A quantum leap in conceptualising the first year experience. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, *2*(1), 51-86. https://www.herdsa.org.au/herdsa-review-higher-education-vol-2

Kift, S. (2021). Whole-of-institution transformation for first year learning and success. In H. Huijser, M. Y. C. A. Kek, & F. F. Padró (Eds.), *Student support services* (pp. 71-92). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3364-4_34-1

Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, *1*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v1i1.13

Krause, K-L., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Australian Department of Education, Science and Training. https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A11049

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Loch, B., Horey, D., Julien, B., Bridge, C., & Thompson, B. (2024). Building the status of teaching-focused positions as prestigious roles to improve teaching quality. *Advancing Scholarship and Research in Higher Education, 5*(1). https://doi.org/10.59197/asrhe.v5i1.8145

Loch, B., Thompson, B., Bridge, C., Horey, D., Julien, B., & Agolli, J. (2021, November 29-December 1). Building a culture of innovation in learning and teaching technologies through an innovators group. In S. Gregory, S. Warburton, & M. Schier (Eds.), *Back to the future—Proceedings of the 38th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education* (pp. 161–165). ASCILITE. Armidale, Australia https://doi.org/10.14742/ascilite2021.0122

McDonald, J. (2014). *Community, domain, practice: Facilitator catch cry for revitalising learning and teaching through communities of practice.* Australia Learning and Teaching Council. https://ltr.edu.au/vufind/Record/364851

Nelson, K. J., Smith, J. E., & Clarke, J. A. (2012). Enhancing the transition of commencing students into university: An institution-wide approach. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *31*(2), 185-199. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.556108

Power, E., Partridge, H., O'Sullivan, C., & Kek, M. Y. C. A. (2020). Integrated 'one-stop' support for student success: Recommendations from a regional university case study. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *39*(3), 561-576. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1676703

Skalicky, J., Hingston, M., Speed, H., & Crouch, C. (2018, July 8-11). Progressing a whole of institution retention and success strategy. In K. Nelson & R. Field (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success Conference*. Auckland, New Zealand. https://unistars.org/papers/STARS2018/03D.pdf

Stensaker, B. (2015). Organizational identity as a concept for understanding university dynamics. *Higher Education, 69*, 103-115. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9763-8

Stroh, R. A. (2023). *Defining student success from a holistic perspective* (The Organizational Improvement Plan at Western University). Western University, Canada. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/oip/341

Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization, 7*(2), 225-246. https://doi.org/10.1177/135050840072002

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business Press.

***Please cite this article as:***
Bridge, C., Horey, D., Julien, B., Thompson, B., & Loch, B. (2024). Making the student experience everybody's business: Cultivating collaboration in the exosphere. *Student Success*, *15*(2), 34-44. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.3434

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

**Student Success:** ***A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.***