

Transitions, curriculum, and employability

Presentation for the
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***Paradigm Shifts in Tertiary Education: Improved Governance and
Quality for Competitiveness and Employability***

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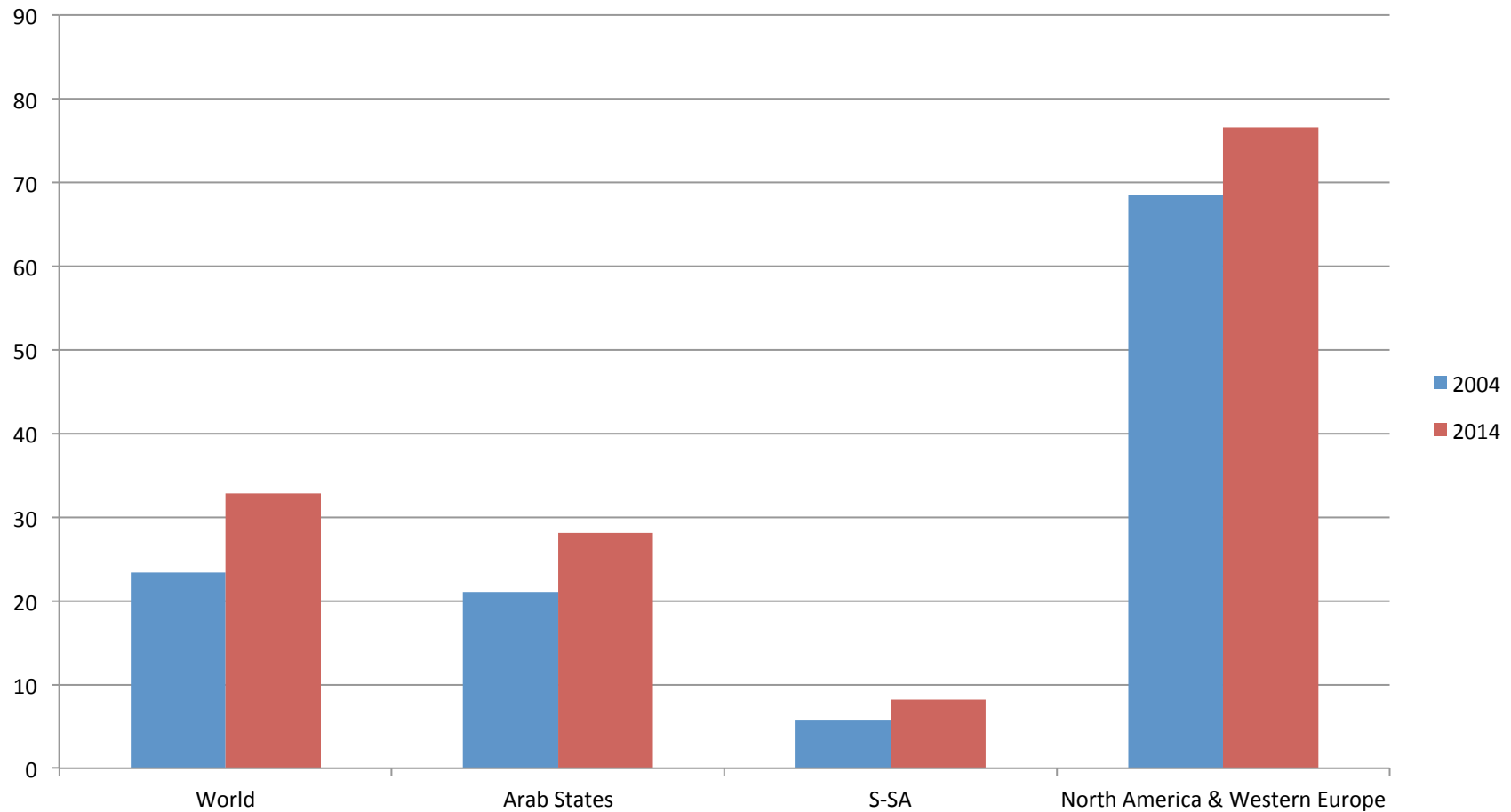


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**Some major challenges facing higher education
in respect of the
Sustainable Development Goals [expansion, quality, affordability]**

- Quality and Quality Assurance/Development
- Numbers of appropriately qualified academic staff
- Effective governance and leadership
- Access and equity considerations
- Funding
- The student experience & effective learning for national & individual growth
- Online and blended learning
- Relevance and links, internationalisation
- Research capacity
- Data analytics for effective planning, monitoring & evaluation

Gross enrolment rates (%)



What can research tell us about curriculum and employability and what can be done to strengthen this area?

Case Study: Universities, Employability & Inclusive Development Project - (2012 – 2016)

Aim – to identify the changes that need to be made in universities to make them more effective in enhancing the employability of their graduates.

Research scope and approach

- 14 universities in 4 countries in SSA (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa)
- Focus on learning & teaching environments

Participants reported on

- the poor quality of regular degree courses (eg teaching to exams, lack of intellectual challenge, lack of focus on critical thinking, and lack of opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practice)
- the limited relevance of curricula, and the use of out-of-date materials
- inadequate knowledge about careers and curriculum choices (students and staff)
- poor linkages between institutions/academics /curricula and the world of work
- the fact that the prestige and reputation of the university often seemed to matter more than the quality of the degree (and social/family networks)

Main recommendations emerging from the research

- Maintain a broad conception of employability that encompasses ‘soft skills’ (ethics, social responsiveness, innovative thinking etc) as well as vocationally-specific knowledge and skills
- **Transform the higher education experience through an integrated approach to student learning & the learning environment**
- Strengthen meaningful links with the world of work, and provide opportunities for students to participate in these links
- Ensure an equitable distribution of opportunities
- Develop comprehensive data and research to inform policy and future directions

An integrated approach to student learning and the learning environment

How do students learn?

- Through resources (staff – academic and support, online, peer learning)
- Through assessment and timely feedback
- Through interest and motivation (including relevant curricula and good teaching)
- Through work placements, socially responsive activities
- Through provision of adequate support (financial, health, housing, safe environments)

Where do students learn?

- In lecture/seminar rooms
- In campus spaces (physical infrastructure) and cyberspace
- In student housing and/or at home
- Through student societies, in the 'field'

What are the main barriers to learning?

- Poor teaching, outdated curricula
- Inadequate prior learning opportunities (eg poor schooling)
- Lack of knowledge of institutional environments and processes
- Lack of knowledge of future opportunities (career information/development), appropriate curriculum choices & long-term consequences
- Inflexible curricular structures and options (eg rigid progression rules)

High-impact practices in higher education

(George Kuh et al)

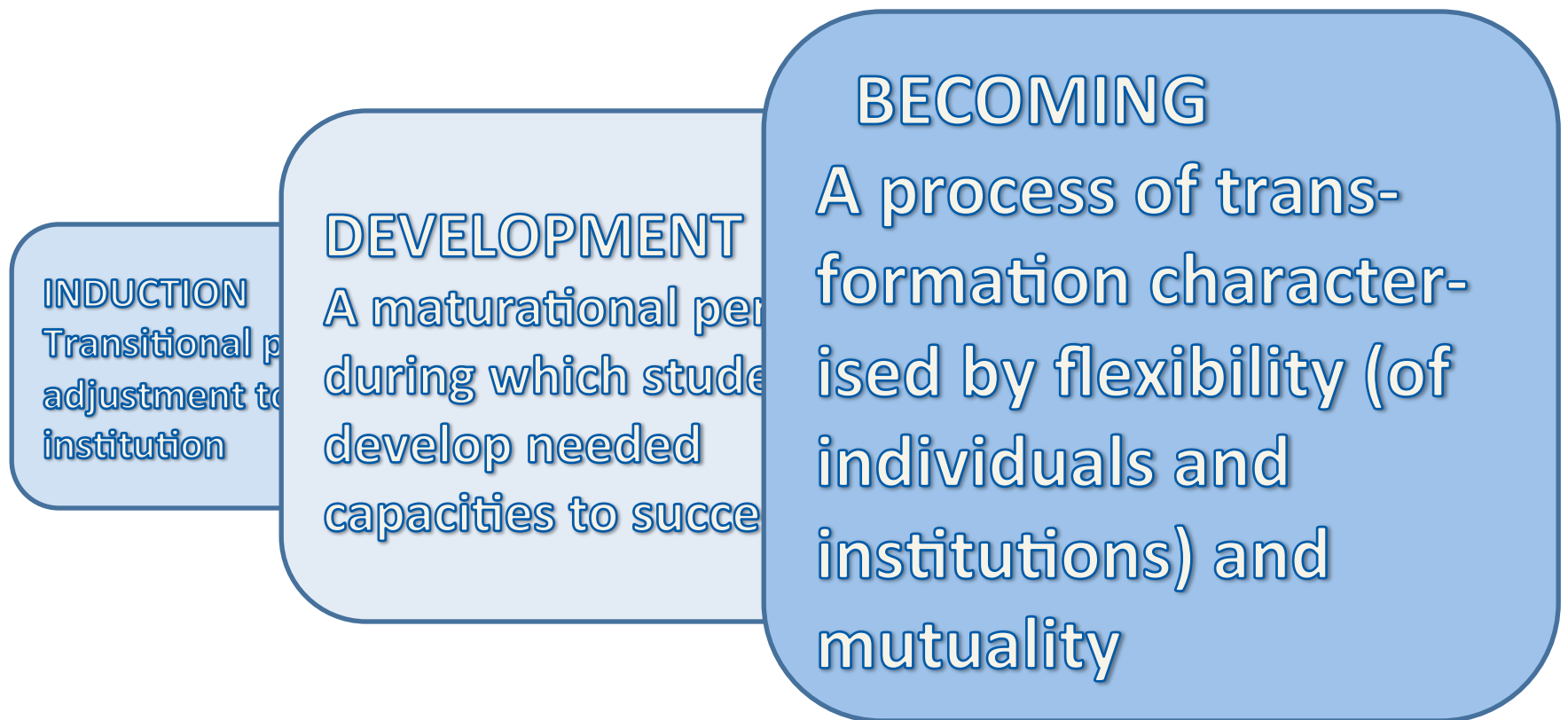
The term 'high impact practices' is usually used to refer to sets of activities/ interventions aimed at building resilience, enhancing persistence, and improving retention and the quality of graduates.

High impact practices:

1. view student learning as impacted by the **WHOLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT** , and seek to align all factors
2. tend to focus on key 'transition' times in higher education [however, 'transition' is itself a contested term]
3. take a metacognitive and 'mindfulness' approach to student learning: students need to be consciously aware of * why they're engaging in particular learning activities, * how these integrate with their other experiences, and * what information is needed and when
4. take a highly structured and planned approach to curriculum
5. stress the importance of early and accurate information on student learning progress and the meeting of their needs, and
6. deliberately include learning outside the classroom, in real-life contexts.

Student 'transitions' in higher education

[student capabilities to navigate change and challenge]



A typology of student transition in higher education

Adapted from: Gale, T & Parker, S 2014. Navigating Change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education* Vol. 39, No. 5, 734-753.

	Transition metaphors	Examples of transition activities/systems
Transition as induction	Pathway; Journey; Milestones; Beginning/end	Orientation programmes; First-Year Experience' (FYE) initiatives; 'Just in Time' Information/Hot seats; Careers Fairs
Transition as development	Trajectory; Life stage	Mentoring programmes; Service learning/field placements; Career development initiatives; Writing Centres; 'Skills-based' courses
Transition as becoming	Whole of life; Decolonisation; Transformation, Student-centredness	Flexibility re study modes and pathways; Inclusive curriculum renewal/transformation initiatives

Transitions, challenges, and an integrated learning environment – a set of enabling priorities at the **undergraduate** level

The First Year Experience (FYE) initiative – joining the dots!

Current research on persistence to graduation points to the first year as a critical foundation for students' long-term academic success and satisfaction

1. Establish appropriate governance and implementation **structures** to manage and monitor the FYE.
2. Appoint **mentors** for each first year student (these could include senior undergraduate or postgraduate students, professional support staff (who usually welcome being included in this way))
3. Establish **extended Orientation Programmes** that build networks and support over the whole first year, carefully sequenced to align with known pressure points in the academic year.
4. Mount 'just in time' **hot desks**: eg staffed desks one morning a week at the entrance to large buildings: "ask Dr John" facilities
5. Develop an **academic focus in the residences** in order to ensure that the residences develop a greater focus on learning. All students (including day-students) should be allocated to a 'residence' and invited to events
6. Build student performance monitoring systems (**early warning systems**) that allow early identification of academic difficulties (over the whole curriculum of a student, not as isolated courses)
7. Establish a '**Writing Centre/Language Centre**' to provide support for early assignments - (writing centre tutors need to work with academics)

Transitions, challenges, & an integrated learning environment: a set of enabling priorities at the senior undergraduate and postgraduate levels

1. Establish some form of work experience-related opportunities for students

- Knowledge cooperative : acts as a broker, linking communities & students, provides project management support
- Entrepreneurship education: stand-alone courses or capping courses
- Work-study and work-placement opportunities
- Fund brief work placements for lecturing staff (eg once every three years)

2. The Postgraduate Studies Centre – joining the dots beyond undergraduate study

- Appoint or re-deploy a senior staff member as “**Director of Postgraduate Studies**” to manage and monitor the ‘postgraduate student experience’. The primary responsibility of the Centre is to integrate and **align** matters involving recruitment, admissions, funding, Memoranda of Agreement with supervisors, monitors progress, examiners etc.

1. The Director will work in close cooperation with

- The Careers Services
- The Research Office
- The Financial Aid Office
- Student Services: Housing and Wellness
- Units/departments responsible for providing skills-courses (eg introduction to research methodology, writing a dissertation, applying for grants, writing proposals)
- Writing/Language Centres
- Faculty offices and HR (particularly in respect of mentors, tutorships etc)

2. Undertake graduate destination surveys – they

- provide essential information for future planning, marketing, recruiting
- provide assistance with building relationships with employers
- help to build relationships with alumni

Concluding remarks

The presentation highlights several feasible, non-invasive, high level initiatives that research and experience suggest will make a real difference to the quality, relevance and efficiency of higher education systems in contexts of rapid growth and increasing inclusivity.

The recommendations set out a case for:

- adopting a holistic, integrated view of university learning environments, and of students as learners
- establishing enabling structures to bring together / align existing (and sometimes new) services and stakeholders
- focusing on key 'transition' areas as sites of focus
- the need for a high degree of structure and planning (for institutions as well as students)
- firmly embedding both learning and institutional relationships within local, national and international communities/businesses, and for including these in learning and teaching processes.