A snapshot of Higher Education Conferences: mid-year roundup

For many staff interested in higher education research and practice, the June-July period is filled with a dazzling array of choices about conferences to attend, which ones to pay attention to, and which twitter hashtag to follow. For those unable to participate, below is a round-up, summary, set of insights, from a number of Sydney staff who attended five conferences:

- Hosted by the School of Education, University of Newcastle in early June, the Psy-Interrupted: critical interrogations of the psy-disciplines in education took its inspiration and politics from historian Michel Foucault. The symposium featured a range of scholars whose education context ranged from pre-school and early childhood to teacher education in universities. If ever you wanted a taste of how the 'psy-disciplines' continue to dominate contemporary understandings of learning, education and subject formation, this is definitely the gathering to look out for again in the future.

- International Consortium of Educational Development (ICED) Conference, held in Stockholm this year, brought together educational and academic developers from around the globe concerned with learning, teaching and research development in higher education. The conference attracts a diverse crowd: everyone from Deputy Vice-Chancellors, and Heads of School, to professional staff in instructional design roles. The presentations often reflect that diversity too - large scale evaluations, institutional case studies, individual practices, and conceptual pieces too. If you’ve never been before, this is the conference that will help grow your understanding about what’s happening in educational development space in both the developed and developing worlds. It's an open and friendly conference. The website contains the proceedings, keynotes, and you can get a feel for the conference at #iced2014

- With a conference theme ‘Screaming in a 20-mile zone’: the fourth Academic Identities conference in Durham surveyed the changing nature of academic work, as well as the debates surrounding those changes. Keynotes Pat Thompson (@patter) – drew attention to her work in galleries/museums as a creative counternarrative to managerialism, and Mike Neary (@mikeneary) made the case for alternative social forms of the university via revolutionary social science and academic non-identity. The conference tends to be small, intimate and boutique -- and great for long chats in between presentations. The twitter feed at #ACIDC2014 gives a good account of the feel and scale.

- The First Year Experience conference held in Darwin this year included keynotes, masterclasses,
practice reports, parallel sessions and a yarning circle. Several presentations were made by academic and professional staff from the University of Sydney. Keynotes drew attention to the inherent racism of our education system and called for awareness and change in a positive and proactive way from all higher education staff, both academic and professional. Also addressed was the disconnect between the marketing of the University experience and the reality facing first years once they arrive. And a big announcement was made regarding the future direction of the conference. After 17 highly successful years, the conference will be expanded to include the whole university experience from pre-enrolment to alumni (STARS – Students Transition, Achievement, Retention & Success). This will allow for a much greater scope for research and sharing of best practice. Hopefully it will retain the friendly, sharing, community vibe that has continued to be present at this conference each year.

- Hong Kong hosted this year’s Higher Education Research and Development Society Australasia (HERDSA) Conference. Its theme was higher education in a globalised world, and keynote presenters challenged attendees to consider the impact of technology, international students and university ranking systems on the direction of higher education and the learning that can be facilitated in the classroom. A plenary session on defining and supporting “Chinese learners” presented student and executive perspectives on the assumptions that are made about students of an Asian heritage. Take a look at the twitter hashtag #HERDSA2014 for insider perspectives.