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Editorial

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in higher education

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EDITORIAL

The culture of the institution, its values and practices, all shape, and are shaped by, those within it, both students and staff. This is, naturally enough, informed by the higher education sector as a whole, both nationally and internationally. Whether as a new student or a new member of staff, there is a great deal to learn about academic life, and how we deal with the experiences that we encounter, most of them involving people. Some of this interaction is within the classroom but much of it is beyond. In the first article, entitled ‘Student perceptions of active learning in a large cross-disciplinary classroom’, Patricia L. Machemer and Pat Crawford, from Michigan State University, recognize the current external pressures in higher education, in particular that class sizes are now very large and that cross-disciplinarity is touted as a worthwhile endeavour. Opportunities for active learning in such classrooms are, however, not without practical difficulties, some of which are practical and some of which concern our conceptions of learning and teaching. Even if these can be overcome, either entirely or in part, the authors argue that there is a lack of evidence as to how learners perceive or value active or cooperative learning and what might be termed the more ‘traditional’, teacher-centred approach in lectures. In their study, the authors gathered data from 343 learners on a variety of activities along the continuum from active to more ‘traditional’. Whether surprising or not, it seems that learners value, and want, not just one approach but instead value and benefit from a range of approaches. This study raises the central issue of activity in relation to assessment, and the authors say that learners appreciate not the activity itself but instead its perceived value in helping them to achieve their desired grade. Unsurprisingly, learners were of the view that working with other students significantly ‘devalued’ their efforts in this regard.

Given that it could be argued that, as a sector, higher education is overly assessment-led, it is perhaps not unexpected that our learners pick up on this in their interaction with us and, anxious to succeed, do what is necessary, that is, do whatever they can to pass with as high a mark as possible. If we instead want learners to focus on, and value, *learning*, rather than the results of that learning as measured by marks, then we, as educators, need to look more closely at the environment which we create for our learners (it is almost entirely within our own control to do so), and the role that we

allow assessment to play in this. Whilst assessment will always be on the agenda, in the modular system which we have created (it did not appear by magic) we have designed the student experience of higher education to be one of collecting marks along the way and then adding these up to come to a decision about what award to make. How much assessment varies, but it seems that we require a huge amount in order to make what is, it seems, a relatively simple decision about student performance in relation to award. As an example, the authors of the second article, entitled 'Assessing multiple choice question (MCQ) tests – a mathematical perspective', say that in the UK 'standard' undergraduate degrees are known as Honours degrees, and have four 'categories' of award: first, upper second (2.1), lower second (2.2) and third. Students must 'collect' 360 credits for such an award, and modules normally vary between 5 and 40 credits (10 or 20 credits is the norm). Assuming that each module has, say, two items of assessment, perhaps an examination and a piece of coursework, it seems that we require a large number of marks in order to make decisions regarding an award.

Such a marks-gathering exercise masks, however, what it is we might understand by 'graduateness' in these various categories or as a whole, as the focus is not on whether the students have met the learning outcomes at the *programme* level, but instead on whether they have collected the right number of 'points' at various stages along the way. Eric M. Scharf and Lynne P. Baldwin, authors of this article, posit that we spend far more time on assessment-related matters than we do on what learning and teaching actually *means*, that is, the value of learning for its own sake and not merely as a means to an end. Assessment is, however, necessary given that we need to make awards of one kind or another. In their article, the authors look at objective tests, one of which is multiple choice questions (MCQs). Although the numbers and equations might slow the reading of those without a mathematical background, the authors discuss how we deal with the 'penalty' we impose for wrong answers in such a test. Should we, perhaps, impose no penalty for a wrong answer, and what difference might this make? Or, should we penalize both wrong answers and/or lack of answers to questions? As marks contribute to the module and thus to the eventual award, our decision-making is in no way trivial.

Who assesses what, rather than how, is the subject of the third article. Entitled 'Peer, professor and self-evaluation of class participation', Gina J. Ryan et al., from Mercer University, Atlanta, examine peer evaluation, citing evidence that suggests that there is some debate about how valid and reliable this approach is. It seems that the better students tend to rate/grade themselves lower and that weaker students tend to believe that their performance is better and thus rate/grade their work more highly.

Using a large sample size, the authors looked at the similarity or otherwise between the evaluations of performance (measured by way of grades for various items of assessment) made by the students themselves, their peers and their lecturers. In addition, they wished to find out whether or not there was any correlation between the students' GPAs (grade point averages) and peer and lecturer evaluation. The grades awarded by lecturers tended to be higher than those awarded by their peers, and the grades awarded by the students themselves were higher than those awarded by lecturers. There was no correlation between the students' GPAs and self-assessment, peer assessment or the grades awarded by lecturers. An interesting point arising from this study relates to the factor of time.

Managing and doing academic work, among this learning how to write effectively (and reference the work of others appropriately) is but one of the many challenges that new students face. This is reinforced by evidence from the study described in the fourth article. Entitled 'Should I go or should I stay? A study of factors influencing students' decisions on early leaving', we are reminded by the authors Margaret Glogowska et al. that it is thus not surprising that if students leave university, they are most likely to do so during the first term/semester of their first year of study. Whilst we try to do much to help our students to adjust, the reasons for dropping out are well known. However, why students make the decision to leave is more complex than it appears on the surface. We all know students who, having faced a major trauma or a myriad of serious problems do not drop out, yet those who face a more minor one disappear, often without a word. In other words, as the authors say, different students, when faced with what appear to be exactly the same pressure(s), react differently. Arguing that we need to better understand why students make the decision to withdraw from university, a group of students who had at some point considered leaving their course were interviewed. Decisions as to whether to leave or to stay can, say the authors, be seen as a model of factors which lead them to go ('push' factors) and those which lead them to stay ('pull' factors). As the challenges of academic work came high on the list of factors causing students to question whether they were going to stay on their course or instead to leave it, the article concludes with a valuable set of strategies as to what we can do to improve the student experience.

It might be argued that the student experience of their time at university is in some part affected by the experience of their lecturers, that is, that there is a 'lecturer experience' to factor in here. After all, if lecturers are unhappy for whatever reason, this is felt by all in the institution, including the students. In the fifth, and final, article, entitled 'Strategies for the management of lecturer stress in feedback tutorials', we learn that stress is not automatic but instead that we 'appraise' the stress-inducing situation

over and over again and that how we do so affects how 'stressed-out' we perceive ourselves to be. The author, Elizabeth Hartney, reminds us that there are two very different types of stress – negative and positive – and that this article focuses on the physical and psychological response of a lecturer when reacting to perceived challenge or difficulty, that is, negative stress. Reported here is that for some lecturers a major stressor is work relationships, with the relationship between lecturer and student a potentially stressful one. With assessment so high on the agenda for both students and lecturers, it is perhaps not unexpected that there are some students (fortunately only a very small minority) who challenge the decisions of the markers of their work and whose behaviour is inappropriate in dealing with this when they engage with lecturers. There is a common belief that those who 'complain' about their feedback, believing the mark to be too low or the quality poor or whatever, do so because of the mark/the feedback. However, as the author reports, the reaction of students to either positive or negative feedback is related not to the marks/comments themselves but instead to the esteem of the students themselves. Those with high self-esteem value whatever mark/feedback we provide to them; those with low self-esteem interpret even a high mark/the most positive feedback as negative. Whatever the emotional response, being angry or upset, both may increase lecturer stress, reports the author, arguing that, although there has been much research into the wellbeing of students, there is far less on the wellbeing of those teaching them. The findings from the study lead to a very useful set of guidelines as to how we should deal with feedback to our students. The author concludes that, as lecturer stress is directly related to the strategies that we use to give both oral and written feedback to our learners, if we adopt/use the strategies outlined in the article then our own stress will be reduced. This will, in turn, improve the student experience, something that we should all see as paramount in our work in teaching in higher education.