

### Welcome to Volume 14, Issue 3, of Compass, Journal of Learning and Teaching

This edition of Compass is a special issue which brings together contributions from SHIFT2021, the conference of Learning and Teaching at the University of Greenwich. Needless to say, this was an exciting time to organise a conference in learning and teaching. In only a few weeks, Higher Education Institutions, in the UK and globally, pivoted their approach to teaching, experimenting with distance learning and different approaches to blended delivery.

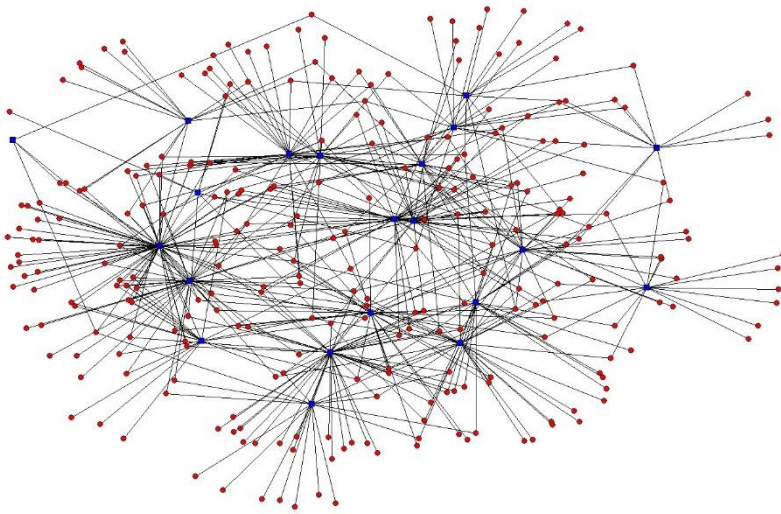
SHIFT2021 became a timely opportunity to engage with colleagues across the sector to share experiences and take stock of lessons learnt, challenges faced and to reflect on the unprecedented times which led to the conference. However, SHIFT2021 needed to be more than a retrospective exercise and instead become an opportunity to start designing the future of higher education. Under the umbrella title *'Radically reimagining Higher Education for a new era: working together for a just and sustainable future'*, SHIFT2021 welcomed contributions in four domains: Reclaiming educational commons; Intersectional curricula; Working together; Post-pandemic pedagogy.

The title and themes highlight the inspirational and ambitious nature of the conference, which expected presenters and attendees to engage in thought provoking discussions to shape the future of higher education. The idea of 'working together' was also reflected in a radical decision: for the first time since its creation, SHIFT would be open to attendees and presenters outside the University of Greenwich. Such a decision added to the inclusive nature of SHIFT and provided a wider platform to exchange ideas, views, and practices across different professional communities.

SHIFT2021 was a very successful event. 56 submissions were received, 14 of which from staff external to the University. The proposals submitted reflected the appeal of the event to many groups within the sector, with 10 submissions from professional services members of staff and a third of the submissions being authored, collaboratively or independently, by students. Almost 400 delegates took part in the online event, with more than 35% of them being external to the University of Greenwich.

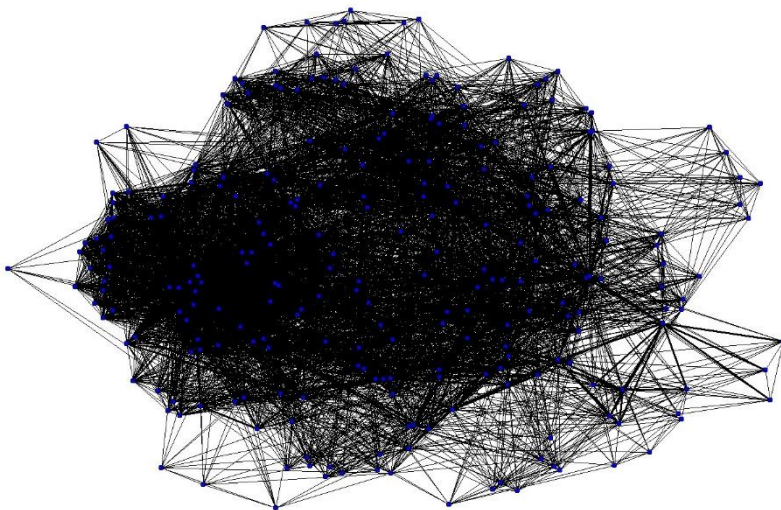
Figure 1 represents the network linking delegates to the different sessions they attended. It is interesting to observe how some attendees (red circles) were very selective and attended only one or two sessions (blue squares), while others attended more events throughout the day. The figure also confirms however how all the different sessions have been well received and attended.

**Figure 1. Attendance to SHIFT2021 tracks**



By attending the same sessions, attendees could engage with each other, also thanks to the use of online facilities and a dedicated MS Teams site. The co-attendance of different events established a potential platform for the exchange of ideas and practices. The network resulting by co-participation at SHIFT2021 tracks is captured in Figure 2. The attendance of different tracks generated a very cohesive and dense network, confirming the potential of the conference to be a channel to foster debate and collaboration.

**Figure 2. Co-participation at SHIFT2021 tracks**



The main themes and ideas discussed in the different tracks can be visualised in Figure 3. The word cloud captures the prevailing words in SHIFT2021 abstracts. The figure clearly suggests the online experience of students during the past year was a predominant focus, driven by the changes imposed by the pandemic. Presentations covered different aspects of learning and teaching, including assessment, feedback, engagement, employability, together with issues associated with sense of belonging and identity. Interestingly, the event was an opportunity to discuss macro trends and broader social issues, as evidenced by words such as *sustainability* and *environment*.



learner, the facilitator and the technology. Such factors need to be considered in their interaction and in light of the specific context of learning and teaching activities.

The work of Chipfuwamiti et al also builds on qualitative data collected interviewing students but integrates them with a staff perspective on the move towards online teaching and learning. Similarly, to the other studies included in this special issue, both groups mention advantages and disadvantages associated with online delivery. The paper raises the critical issue of the deterioration of the social aspect of learning, with implications for sense of belonging and ultimately engagement. Recommendations about the planning of future blended learning initiatives are put forward based on the findings of the study.

A second group of contributions included in this special issue focuses indeed on the topic of engagement, often with an emphasis on the role of technology. The article by Whyley-Smith specifically places the discussion about the challenges of promoting online engagement within the context of uncertainty surrounding expectations about online behaviour and etiquette. The paper focuses on the use of cameras as a way to establish a rapport with students, but also remarks how other tools remain available to educators. Also, this article highlights opportunities for and the value of co-creation with students, for example in relation to guidelines about expected behaviours associated with online learning.

Co-creation lies also at the heart of the paper by Owen et al. Based on a case study about the University of Manchester Master of Public Health, the authors portray technology as an enabler of social cohesion. The paper describes how to promote engagement via the design of an open collaborative assessment in the form of a reflective blog, well integrated with other online initiatives. The content of such blogs is expected to become a learning resource for future students, also generating continuity across different cohorts. The article concludes encouraging practitioners to experiment with a similar approach in different programmes and contexts.

The objective of promoting a sense of belonging to an online learning community also underpins the paper by Gao. The author specifically explores the integrated use of different technologies for the delivery of teaching to students based in China and joining the final year of their study via an articulation agreement. The case is particularly interesting, as it discusses the experience of learners who are new to the UK, the university and its systems, adding to the complexity of online engagement. The objective of the study is to explore how different tools can be used to promote both cognitive as well as affective engagement. While focused on partnership delivery, findings from the study can be useful to design activities in a wider range of situations.

The work by Hewitt and Owusu-Kwarteng, instead, highlights how specific projects and co-curricular activities can be at the base of an increased sense of belonging. The paper builds on autobiographical accounts of the students involved in the Innocence Project London (IPL). Taking part in the IPL created '*a sense of community amongst the students who work on it – one that remains beyond graduation*'. Furthermore, the opportunity for students to present their reflections at SHIFT2021 was a way to develop employment-relevant skills, such as public speaking and creative communication.

In addition to deeper considerations of the role of technology and co-curricular activities in fostering engagement, sense of belonging and cohesion, the special issue also provides

timely and relevant examples about the importance of new roles to promote student retention and success through two specific articles. Hughes et al present the experience of Academic Coaches at the University of Wolverhampton. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of the role of these third space professionals as part of a broader set of hybrid roles introduced by the university and their success in supporting transition into university for level three and four students.

The work of Farrant et al is another example of a paper written by a team of academics and students and describes the experience of a student peer mentoring scheme piloted within the Greenwich Business School. The qualitative evidence collected by the authors suggests the scheme has been very effective to support first year students, but also for the mentors themselves. The authors plan to extend the pilot so that to involve a larger group of students and create a community of practice for mentors; at the same time, the importance of guidance and training for both mentors and mentees emerged as a priority when scaling up the project.

Finally, two papers discussing broader societal trends conclude the special issue. Kofler's contribution summarises the topics discussed in a workshop attended by employers and recent graduates from the University of Greenwich. The paper reviews relevant trends in the current job market and their implications in terms of the relevance of different skills. Several examples of different initiatives are presented in the paper, which ends with a clear call for action for educators to plan activities embedding the skills more in demand within learning and teaching.

The content of another workshop is behind the paper concluding the special issue. The work by Cross and Congreve discusses the challenges and best practices associated with embedding sustainability and climate change issues in teaching, especially in subjects traditionally not covering these topics. Three key themes emerged from the workshop, linking teaching climate change to career prospects, the importance of the framing of the issue in a multidisciplinary perspective, and the need to provide additional guidance to educators to embed materials and activities discussing climate change.

The contributions in this special issue raise fundamental questions for future reflection. We hope this collection of papers will be a stimulating and exciting reading, and the beginning of a conversation within and across our professional communities to *'radically reimagine Higher Education for a new era'*.

With best wishes to all Compass readers and contributors,

Riccardo De Vita and Tania Struetzel

Guest Editors of Volume 14, No 3.