

Editor's Introduction

Welcome to the 2023 summer edition of Compass!

We hope you enjoy our collection of papers in the edition, which include two papers on our invited theme, Decolonisation of the Curriculum. Here we provide brief introductions.

The author of 'Open scholarship and decolonisation in higher education' turns a critical eye on current progress towards genuinely egalitarian, representative and accessible research and knowledge within higher education infrastructure. Thomas Evans, University of Greenwich, London, argues that the two communities of the title might achieve a much greater degree of social justice were they to collaborate more effectively. With the same moral motivation – though there is little consensus about central values – and common priorities and goals, these two movements together might drive transformative change, dismantling the entrenched ideological hegemony of university systems and so enabling transparency and the proper recognition and reward of a comprehensive range of contributions to research and the generation of knowledge. That the two communities face the same challenges (in terms of established systems and processes and the staunch resistance of the traditionally privileged) should, says the author, encourage their collaboration to overcome the inevitable physical, emotional and psychological pressures involved.

Mya Imadojemun, University of Greenwich, is the author of a piece of research – into how the legacy of the British Empire has affected the University of Greenwich – that used semi-structured interviews with some of this institution's staff and students. This paper pulls no punches: a summary of the catastrophic effects of British colonial rule globally upon peoples and cultures is accompanied by a critique of universities' decolonising measures, which fail either to decentralise established white supremacy or to deal successfully with the clear evidence of enduring racism and a continuing and significant achievement gap. The author turns to the historical iconography of the University of Greenwich, all of it still celebrating those closely linked to mercantile wealth, slavery and colonialism, which in turn enriched this institution. Alongside this powerful and personal argument comes the combination of research participant voice and a precise and wide-ranging delineation of what the University of Greenwich is recommended to do to free itself from its fundamental adherence to white centrism and become one institution in which those from poor backgrounds and minority groups may feel truly safe and included.

A case study by Hendrik van der Sluis and Lasse Tausch-Nebel of Flensburg University of Applied Sciences, Germany, on the influence of 'immersive scheduling' or block teaching evaluates impact upon students' academic achievement, learning, understanding, engagement, motivation and satisfaction at the Flensburg University of Applied Sciences. The authors explain the delivery of 'short-fat' blocks of teaching (in other words, a semester-long module would be compressed, while still containing the same contact and learning time) to enable intensive study. In this lucid and well-referenced research, the authors compare the effects of layering traditional-length scheduling and a short block sequence (in the context of a first-year undergraduate business administration programme) with previous cohorts' 'long-thin' parallel modules. Student respondents to an anonymous questionnaire reported benefits, as did their qualitative comments, supportive of further such scheduling. The paper ends with carefully considered discussions of the limitations of the study and some expressed student concerns of significance to implementation elsewhere.

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Another interesting means (this one from the United States) of improving students' performance is the 'mid-term wrapper', an online, self-reflective analysis of prior personal academic and study habits – viz. what led to the individual scores making up the mid-term grade – against a list of possible proven effective strategies, to enhance subsequent achievement. At the University of Missouri, Christie Cathey, Lydia Needy and Charles Hoogland carried out a quasi-experimental comparison of students who did and those who did not complete the wrapper and found that, post midterm, the former had higher scores, did more homework assignments and gained better final grades than the latter. Such self-managed formative intervention has clear positive implications for students' morale and ownership, better academic performance and therefore improved retention rates, because it guides them to prepare well for final exams and, more importantly, to shift their focus from merely getting a grade to boosting their learning, with all the long-term benefits of that. This scholarly paper argues that this approach has the potential to be more effective than one-to-one staff/student mid-term intervention meetings.

On a different note, a very entertaining opinion piece gives humour its rightful – but usually ignored – place in the panoply of skills for academic development. Sheng-Hsiang Lance Peng of the University of Cambridge offers a reflective analysis of the doctoral experience, drawing on three theories in humour research. This author engages with the challenges facing doctoral candidates, calling upon personal experience and three illustrative vignettes to offer such Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) students and their supervisors a constructive way forward. The implicit and explicit messages of this piece should give university staff much food for thought and enable them to improve the lot of PhD students who may flounder unless they have clear expectations of what is expected; they themselves need confidence and self-belief, a supportive environment, good advice (especially from, say, time-management workshops) and open channels of communication, all of which obviously lie in the hands of empathetic staff. Finally, it is argued that, despite the challenges, humour *will* work its magic if given the chance to do so.

The welfare of neurodivergent staff (with, therefore, understandable relevance to students in their care) concerns Mike Scott of Bournemouth University and Poppy Gibson of Anglia Ruskin University, the authors of 'Designing institutional systems that support neurodivergent educators', who fully recognise the particular strengths and perspectives such professionals bring to the classroom; key words which leap from the page are 'accept', 'include' and 'value' and the paper emphasises the measures institutions must embrace to achieve them. Empowerment and support in role begin with full institutional awareness and avoidance of stigmatising language, the need for inclusive hiring processes, relevant accommodations at interview and in the workplace, excellent professional development and mentoring, regular opportunities for self-disclosure, well-promoted policies across the organisation, flexible working arrangements and systems that unfailingly provide support. Yes, there are cost implications, but an institution committed to the wellbeing of all, staff and students, will be the continuing beneficiary of policy and practice that are both welcoming and fully supportive.

In their article '(Re)defining learning design: a framework fit for the twenty-first century', Katie Stripe and Erin Simpson-Bergel of Imperial College London offer an authoritative critical reappraisal of the existing pedagogical and learning design theories that have failed to keep pace with change. They advocate a re-evaluation of learning design to place pedagogy at the forefront, for such design is primarily about the delivery of education and not about technology,

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which may provide the tools for learning but should not drive it. The authors argue that educational design should be founded upon learning theory and combine a transparent process and clear roles, for current methodologies and theories fail, in spite of their respective merits, to meet the demands of a changed higher education environment – especially after the COVID pandemic – with, now, diverse locations, time zones, tools and learners. So, as this paper avers, a holistic scrutiny that places students and educators at the centre is long overdue; learning design methodology must work across the levels of a course, as well as be practical enough to work for a multi-disciplinary team.

John Parkin's very enjoyable paper 'Enhancing student understanding through playful learning using Playmobil pro' demonstrates that learning through play does allow students to master concepts, show by means of visual representations what they have learned and express their thoughts creatively. The author, of Anglia Ruskin University, offers a body of evidence of the value of 'playful learning' before outlining his study of this technique with final-year Primary Education Studies undergraduates. Very positive results reveal that Playmobil pro may well have application to a range of topics, support learning and team-building, encourage engagement and stimulate reflection. It may be of particular interest to such people-focused subjects as education, social work, nursing and sociology, though the author points out that its relevance to the acquisition of conceptual understanding in courses such as those in the natural sciences is likely to be more limited. What is clear from this study is that learning through play does allow students to explore ideas and face challenge in a safe environment, so building their confidence and resilience.

An opinion piece by Ewomazino Caulker of the University of Greenwich argues that lecturers have the means of reducing disruptive noise during their sessions; after all, the cumulative impact of unwanted noise (from student conversations with each other or their use of mobile devices) militates against learning, to the detriment of all, including the institution and can, in addition, have a deleterious effect on the wellbeing of the teacher. The author suggests that the proactive creation of the lecture room as a safe space, by establishing at the outset of a course common rules for behaviour and using methods that enable constructive interaction and engagement will reduce noise disruption and create a shared sense of belonging. In addition, the author says, the integration of social and emotional competencies into higher education programmes and lecturers' modelling of positive language and behaviour, using students' names, listening well and being encouraging and fair all contribute to a constructive atmosphere. (Some things, however, such as poor room acoustics and fixed seating may be outside a lecturer's control.) Finally, the author indicates that staff do need appropriate training and support.

A relatively unsung element of higher education provision is the formal training for regulatory roles in the private rented housing sector (PRS), now much larger and more complex than ever and – given the current shortfall in relevantly skilled environmental health officers and other local authority personnel – inadequately protective of tenants living in unsuitable, unhealthy and even life-threatening conditions. The University of Greenwich, say the authors, Jill Stewart, Charlotte Jeavons, of this succinct opinion piece, is well-placed to lead on research into needs (numbers of trainees annually, the required nature of training, co-creation of courses to skill students with the range of competencies, skills and dynamic knowledge to regulate the PRS properly, knowledge-exchange collaboration by universities and local authorities). Since academic curricula have not kept pace with current employment demands,

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candidates for regulatory roles must have comprehensive knowledge of the relationship between housing, health and safety, building construction and deficiencies and the PRS regulatory framework and its appropriate enforcement.

The science of human nutrition turns its critical eye upon a matter of contemporary concern: food insecurity (FI) in students. Kanthan Ravel, Rhea Jayaram and Hilda Mulrooney of Kingston University, the authors of this cogent and urgent opinion piece offer higher education institutions and their local communities some healthy advice about addressing the ever-mounting cost-of-living burdens which students themselves see as a major concern. If they cannot afford to eat properly and rely, as one in ten does, on food banks, there is an inevitable deterioration in their physical and mental health, their sense of belonging and their ability to fulfil their academic potential. The paper offers the options, none of which will be without institutional cost, but, to balance the increased social responsibility they would shoulder, universities should (and this is the authors' preference) consider a mutually beneficial collaboration with their communities, offering expertise, research, knowledge-exchange and practical help to local community groups as well as a pool of student volunteers (of particular value to students themselves) in exchange for student access to community cafés, social supermarkets and community meals. Such constructive relationships would create powerful bonds and go a long way towards countering FI.

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Best wishes from the Compass team,

Rachel George, Alex Cheung, Angeliki Voskou

Academic and Learning Enhancement, University of Greenwich