

## Editor's Introduction

A warm welcome to Compass Winter 2025! We hope you enjoy this edition. Here we provide a short summary of each paper.

Illustrative supportive anecdotes support a sensitive and thoughtful argument by **Aura Lehtonen** and **Renginee Pillay (University of Greenwich)** for overcoming quite common student and staff resistance to attempts to develop inclusive pedagogies, address the awarding gap and decolonise the curriculum. Such efforts to challenge established hegemonic norms within higher education inevitably cause feelings of discomfort, with the perhaps inevitable consequences of disengagement, disillusionment and division. The authors consider and recommend 1) the deliberate co-creation of classroom 'safe spaces', where difficult conversations may be managed supportively and involve active listening and the sharing of lived experiences and 2) institutional forums where staff may discuss race, racism and coloniality separately from their daily academic work. Accepting the realities of discomfort felt within the institution may allow for positive progress towards radical change and help those trying to achieve it to feel they are getting somewhere.

A systematic study by **Poppy Gibson (The Open University)** into the lived experiences of first-generation and non-traditional students on a Primary Education Studies degree course is designed to alert institutions and their staff to some very particular needs and to take steps to implement a range of recommendations that may improve a sense of belonging and personal wellbeing. The overall message of this very empathetic case study is that knowledge of students as individuals with specific circumstances and needs is fundamental to nurturing them and guiding them to success in their courses and beyond. The author focuses on significant barriers, both within students themselves, such as impostor syndrome, and those deriving from external challenges, such as unfamiliarity with university systems, practices and expectations and the pressures of managing multiple roles alongside their studies. This paper not only gives illustrative insights into the students' own perceptions; it also highlights what institutions must, from the moment of induction and consistently thereafter, identify in all students individually so that understanding of needs leads to tailored support and more appropriate teaching methodologies. Precise recommendations for intervention strategies leave no doubt about what must be put in place.

How to narrow the degree awarding gap (DAG) continues to challenge higher education institutions, whose cohorts year on year include significant numbers of students in disadvantaged circumstances. **Triona Fitton** discusses interesting findings from her study of two initiatives at the **University of Kent** that sought to counter the intersectional attainment barriers facing students from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds and those entering university with vocational rather than academic qualifications. She describes 1) 'WriteRight' weekly workshops to build academic literacy, relevant skills and understanding and harnessing peer activities in the process; 2) 'TripleD\*' individual supervision meetings to 'direct' students to what would help them to improve their current skill levels, 'develop' what they already did quite successfully and 'demystify' those aspects of higher education terminology, marking and feedback which seemed unfathomable. This combination of interventions, available to all students, proved to be quite effective in narrowing the studied cohort's DAG; the combination of close, empathetic tutoring and targeted academic advice were particularly valued by the students themselves.

The School of Medicine at **Keele University** employed a new academic tutor to boost students' interaction with their work, offering them personalised feedback to enhance their

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understanding and encourage higher-level critical skills. The tutor, called 'GenAI' (generative artificial intelligence), took up this supportive tutorial role, as described in a case study by **Nazim Ali and Sarah Aynsley**, who were keen to deploy this intelligent virtual being both 1) to enable students themselves to create customised learning content and 2) to generate multiple-choice questions demanding critical thinking; thus the students could self-assess, gain immediate feedback and so learn actively. The small-scale study may have had its limitations, of which the authors are fully aware, but the extremely positive responses of the students to the activity and the clear evidence that it significantly transcended mere rote learning encouraged the authors to outline here their plans for further exploration and provide valuable recommendations for others to consider in implementing GenAI methodology. The students, who appreciated that GenAI could offer help when the teacher wasn't available and could see how useful it was to their revision, had no doubt as to its efficacy.

Research-led v. authentic activity principles for higher education learning design are starkly contrasted in **Jonathan Weinel's** cogent argument in favour of the latter in the case of a video games development programme, where students, determined on a career in what they enjoy, believe that what they study must be relevant to the employment opportunities they seek. The author, based at the **University of Greenwich**, acknowledges that academic research can sometimes be of recognisable value to the digital games industry but says that games businesses are where the significant innovation occurs, usually in secret. He therefore offers insights into how to make the academic context authentic for learners by means of five strategies from his own programme: upskilling staff; investing in industry-standard tools and technologies; overcoming the understandable shortage of placement opportunities by bringing in games business guest speakers; creating live industry briefs involving real companies; mapping final-year activities to real-world job roles. Student satisfaction and employability are the goal.

**Julie Mundair and Jenny Spinks** (Academic and Digital Skills Team, **University of Greenwich**) address the well-documented period of transition to higher education – challenging for some students and especially so for those who commute, study part time or are mature – when effective social integration and acclimatisation to university systems are so critical to a sense of well-being, engagement and continuing success. These authors argue that Moodle's 'NextLevel' is particularly effective in building relationships, rapport, respect and trust and describe how a series of online live sessions over the ten weeks from arrival establishes an informal and inclusive community in which students may overcome their fears and gain confidence, supporting each other as they learn from the Skills Team what they need to know. This medium, originally intended to counter an identified skills gap and so prevent under-achievement, has, the authors aver, done far more, by fostering a feeling of belonging and, consequently, building constructive social and academic involvement; its support continues to be available throughout students' time at university.

**Emma Connor and Jingyang Ai**, of the **University of Greenwich**, strongly recommend a particular combination of teaching strategies to engage higher education students: 'technology-enhanced active learning' (TEAL), the authors believe, with its digital tools, flexible classroom layouts and group work, goes very well with drama methods – such as role play, improvisation and simulation – to serve many valuable purposes. This piece relates to two separate cohorts of advertising and marketing students eager for more stimulating and employability-relevant learning experiences, but the integration seems readily transferable to

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other disciplines. When teachers are open to acquiring the skills to apply drama techniques with TEAL, they can transform learning by increasing students' participation, communication and collaboration in a context that replicates the roles and challenges of the workplace, resulting in improved knowledge, understanding, critical thinking, creativity and reflection. The students in this case were very positive about having been able, with all the advantages of screen-sharing, to place themselves in workplace environments and respond there to authentic demands and pressures.

Authentic experiential learning features in a case study by **Colin McClure** and **Laura Michael** of **Queen's University, Belfast**, who report on a cross-school initiative to enhance students' understanding and awareness (as well as potential real-world application) beyond their own discipline of the United Nations 'sustainable development goals'. Peer-focused collaboration in the form of a poster presentation/assessment activity proved very effective in its aim, broadening perspectives of sustainability but simultaneously improving reflection, communication, empathy and the sense of belonging. The authors summarise the very interesting before-and-after student survey data, which underline the participants' clear recognition of their learning and its present and future value to them. That some students chose to organise between themselves and take part in environmentalism-related activities indicates the reflective power of shared experiential learning and the eventual benefits to the workplace and to the world of sustainability-conscious employees.

Limitations of funding in Zimbabwean state universities, as elsewhere, hinder the delivery of inclusive learning. The authors (**Regis Muchowe** at the **Zimbabwe Open University** and colleagues), of this interesting qualitative study sought to develop a framework that would nurture inclusivity even under such constrained circumstances. Inadequate infrastructure, training and resources do not serve well the huge diversity of learner backgrounds and needs, as the literature cited here emphasises. The lecturers surveyed identified external factors beyond institutional control (e.g. the economic crisis and power cuts) as well as 1) inappropriate internal infrastructure to cater to all learners and 2) staff shortages and capabilities. Lack of leadership support and insufficient recognition of lecturers also contribute to the huge barriers to creating a learning environment that welcomes, values and empowers *all* students. However, lecturer resourcefulness and creativity were evident in staff knowledge of students' backgrounds and individual needs, diversified strategies for teaching (e.g. sitting arrangements and inclusive language), production of cost-effective resources and assessment methods, both via cheaper online platforms and social media. It is apparent that some staff are doing their best to achieve much better inclusive learning; they need much more institutional backing and involvement.

**Alex Bruno** of the **University of Greenwich** considers measures to address the inadvertent marginalisation of student sex workers in a higher education setting. By surveying both staff and students, the author has been able to detect that, for this group, the safety of the classroom is still compromised by the 'persistence of institutional biases', evident in matters of disclosure and confidentiality. This study explores, by means of detailed observation of participants in the activities of four sex-work-related seminars and subsequent intersectional analysis, how classrooms may be more inclusive if apparent 'complex dynamics of identity and power' are tackled. The findings of this academically rigorous study deserve careful consideration. The author makes four recommendations arising from this research, in order to make classrooms 'safer' for student sex workers than they currently are: to advocate the

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decriminalisation of sex work; to train staff comprehensively (by creating specialised programmes co-designed by sex-worker-led organisations) to understand the unique challenges facing student sex workers; to establish forums to hear the voice of these students; to adopt the concept of 'safer' – rather than 'safe' – spaces by taking practical steps towards minimising harm and fostering inclusivity.

Many thanks to all authors and reviewers,

Best wishes from the Compass team,

Rachel George, Alex Cheung, Angeliki Voskou

Academic and Learning Enhancement, University of Greenwich