

### **Welcome to the thirteenth issue of *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching!***

This issue of *Compass* explores some potent themes including the philosophical and practical defence of some traditional features of higher education; issues of student and staff training and development in a Sino-English university context; and measures (especially with technological assistance) to overcome student underperformance and drive achievement. The papers here emphasise a commitment, enthusiasm and determination to create higher education learning environments that enhance individual progress, help with the development of readily transferable skills to the working world, and contribute significantly to personal development.

After a brief tour of the shift during recent years from higher education's earlier discrete academic identity to its current amalgamation with further education, forming what is globally termed 'tertiary education', one opinion piece by Patrick Ainley considers the present undervaluing of 'academic' pursuits against the trend, especially in business-related study, towards provision of pre-vocational training for a working world without secure employment or identifiable professions. Another opinion piece by Russell Crawford similarly defends the traditional, this time in the form of the lecture. The piece suggests that with skilled planning and delivery, the lecture provokes learners to engage mentally with ideas, information and analysis. Crawford is concerned that staff new to the profession may, because of the prevailing dismissive attitude of those with 'chuunibyou', be led to ignore, or avoid trying, this very potent teaching tool.

An investigation into the challenges and problems facing student representatives of the 'Learning Community Forum' (LCF) at The University of Nottingham Ningbo China by Claudia François, Filippo Gilardi, Dunant Halim, Thomas Hirzel, and K Cohen Tan considers two internal case studies. Since this university values student 'voice' very highly, the quality and relevance of feedback is crucial to achieving institutional and educational change; there are therefore implications for the training of student representatives. Empowerment of the representatives was enhanced by means of the Nottingham Advantage Award, which helped to overcome barriers to their involvement by recognising their contribution to teaching and learning and by providing training to develop such skills as leadership and communication, readily transferable to future employment.

A further insight into Sino-English institutions is provided in a case study by Henk Huijser, James Wilson, Dawn Johnson, and Jianmei Xie. To put much more emphasis upon the enhancement of learning and teaching and to enable a more organic, bottom-up approach to continuous professional development (CPD), a communities of practice (CoPs) model has been introduced and monitored. Having carefully clarified the rationale for this model, the paper considers such challenges as the scepticism of departmental heads and very varied staff perceptions of learning and teaching. The authors suggest that no two CoPs are ever the same and that therefore the model is ideal for adaptation to discrete contexts, though the essential aim of organisational and structural CPD may be common to all. The paper gives a fascinating account of the process followed at this university, with individual lead roles created in faculties ('clusters') to move each CoP forward; when institutional management creates the conditions for

CoPs to flourish, they may thrive, and though progress to date has been variable here, the expectation is that remaining barriers will be overcome.

The persistent failure of students to complete directed reading is the focus of a case study by Arron Phillips and Martin Compton, which reports on the seven-week trial of whole-class qualitative quiz questions to stimulate preparatory reading. The authors suggest that prevailing staff anticipation and acceptance of 'non-compliance' (with compensatory measures thus implemented in teaching sessions) as well as student undervaluation of set reading serve to compound the problem. The case study carefully surveys previous research and its findings, which provide a wealth of reasons for students' avoidance of preparatory reading; it also indicates the potential of quizzes to stimulate a more positive response. The trial conducted produced sufficient evidence to support the latter and the authors helpfully provides some thought-provoking points for academics when setting preparatory reading for their students.

Chris Little provides a balanced view of relevant research through a technological review of the student response system (SRS) Mentimeter. With its time-saving and convenient application via student mobile devices, the author's personal experience of student engagement when Mentimeter is deployed confirms reported evidence of SRS value. Provision of instant feedback about both learning and teaching, capacity for customisable features and versatile presentation of the data are Mentimeter's particular strengths, but the review includes an objective SWOT analysis to assess its weaknesses, too. Little provides a summary of its possible uses in student sessions and concludes with a very positive endorsement of its potential.

A second focus on technological development with assessment benefits is provided in an opinion piece by Ray Stoneham recommending such video recording and management systems, integrated with Virtual Learning Environments, as Panopto with Moodle. Stoneham regards the ability to create a screencast or video for assessment purposes as an essential digital literacy skill for all university students. The platform, they confirm, makes marking and feedback simple and effective; file size is no longer a barrier; recording is easy and uploading is automated. Furthermore, though normally a student can see only her/his own recording and feedback, visibility can be extended for peer assessment or group access. Usefully, students can also produce video CVs or online demonstrations for prospective employers to view. Lecturers already familiar with such systems for their own practice will be readily able to provide context-specific feedback and make both formative and summative assessments.

The technology theme continues in this issue with a case study by Frances Boylan on the '12 Apps of Christmas' online course, now run twice at the Dublin Institute of Technology, which aimed, via an app a day for twelve days, to encourage the use of students' mobile devices in the classroom for personalised learning. Research indicates that both teachers and learners need technical, logistical and pedagogical support to bring this about, even though all may be conversant with the technology elsewhere. The second of the courses attracted almost two thousand participants from around the globe, to take advantage of the twelve showcased apps by following links to information, watching video demonstrations and opting to do tasks encouraging personalised use of the apps. Twitter provided the means of sharing what participants achieved. Boylan outlines the course's design and intention of getting students and

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educators to understand the engagement benefits of personalised learning when they collaborate to tailor pedagogy, curriculum and the learning environment to cater for individual needs. All in all, the feedback confirms that the course has much to offer and so it will run again in December 2016.

With the intention of enhancing student digital literacy, the open source e-portfolio platform, Mahara, has been recently introduced into Newman University's 'Youth and Community Work' programme: students are asked to compile evidence of their self-reflections from study skills development activities and their work placements; this they may share with prospective employers through a 'secret URL'. A case study by Helen Bardy, Lorraine Loveland-Armour, and Sarah Parkes looks specifically at the barriers to success with Mahara for Newman students with dyslexia. The case study, with compelling detail, charts the quest of teachers and support staff to understand and to overcome these barriers by means of student partnership projects; it concludes with some very pertinent findings and a useful summary of interventions both made and to be carried out in Newman University in the best interests of those students accessing dyslexia support.

I hope that the kaleidoscope of topics raised and discussed in this issue will spur further critical discussion amongst colleagues working within Higher Education. With the HE climate in continuous change, we look forward to publishing more of your views in our future issues and special TEF edition of *Compass*.

Danielle Tran  
Editor