Editor's Introduction

A warm welcome to the Spring 2024 edition of Compass!

Here we provide a short summary of the papers. We hope you will find them enjoyable and stimulating to read.

In the final paper on our invited theme of decolonisation of the curriculum, qualitative research by **Jeavons, C., Moreno-Leguizamon,C. and Cole, L.** into the complex reasons for the academic performance of, primarily, non-white women studying public health at the University of Greenwich – focuses on participants' lived experiences as undergraduates, providing a nuanced interpretation of why a large range of individual inequalities variously hinders learning and belonging. Within three broad themes arising from the data and in the context of COVID-19 (when much teaching and learning moved online) and also from (understandably) a completely female response perspective, the authors present a cogent challenge to higher education institutions: if universities are to address the learning gap, they must take into account students' personal and unique lived experiences, requiring thorough critical research to develop a hugely relevant intercultural and intersectional view of their students as individuals; only then will they be equipped to diminish and ultimately eradicate the gap. Attainment data alone cannot reveal *why* students underperform.

An informative study of students' expectations of university allows its authors, **Dolecka, M., Khan, N.U., Sivagurunathan, V., Kelly, A.F. and Mulrooney, H.M.** (at Kingston University) to explore through questionnaires the views of students and staff at this large English widening participation institution. Conducted at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic had not only changed much of the teaching and learning from in-person, on-site venues to an online setting but had also led to a significant rise in the cost of living, the findings of this pilot exercise bring to the fore important matters for the higher education sector to consider. If student academic, social and personal expectations are not met, satisfaction, attainment, progression and retention may all suffer. The sample in this survey was diverse, but student responses were often very similar, regardless of demographic characteristics. There were also some striking differences; for example: the attitudes of those in paid work in contrast to the views of those who were not working to support themselves; first-in-family to university were more likely to identify support needs in academic skills and careers guidance; black students were less likely than white to make class notes. Staff, meanwhile, appeared to value classroom attendance more than students did. In consequence, the authors identify a need for further research – such as how paid work and ethnicity relate to academic skills – and emphasise the importance of student support.

Wepener, T., Mpisi, T., Botes, W., Felix, A., du Plessi, O. and Hanekom, G. of Sol Plaatje University, explore the application of the Mursion® simulation program to teacher training. With its artificial-intelligence-powered individual adolescent learner avatars – replicating the diverse cultures, ethnicities and languages of South African classrooms – trainee teachers can present part of a lesson and develop teaching strategies and class management skills. In offering realistic immersive experience, the software proved particularly useful during pandemic restrictions. This research explored the reactions to this methodology of teacher trainers (who were aware of such virtual simulations, but for the most part had never used them), for they had to learn to be facilitators of it. The qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews with them is fascinating to read. Initially lacking in confidence in handling it, they were very impressed – and, in some cases, excited – by its realistic creation of the

classroom and its capacity for preparing new teachers. They did report problems with both connectivity in the South African setting and some difficulties of understanding American English, which differed from the English of local dialects. The paper confirms that technological support and training are a must for facilitators.

Quan, L. and Reilly, D. explain that Chinese direct entry (CDE) students, joining the School of Accounting, Finance and Economics (AFE) at the University of Greenwich for just the final year of the undergraduate programme, are in greater need of induction support than other international students there. Critical thinking and independent learning as practised in the United Kingdom (UK) are foreign to their experience, as are teaching methods, cultural norms and societal expectations. AFE's CDE induction explains UK teaching, learning and assessment, introduces library resources and sets up small-group collaboration to analyse case studies and give a presentation, so enabling student-centred learning, communication in English, independence and peer friendships. Student comments are very positive, for such a thoughtful, carefully planned, three-day programme goes a long way towards overcoming academic culture shock and its inevitable detrimental effects on success.

Many of us, as eager consumers of information, are now reading digitally, a practice which takes its subtle toll in the form of sensory stress. A well-considered review, by **Keshishi, N.** of the University of Surrey, of a 'mindful reading' strategy (both to counter this stress and improve the experience of reading on screens) offers better concentration, readability and comprehension. Technology, with its screen brightness, visual clutter, regular notifications, blue light emissions and unremitting information stream, may ironically also have the wherewithal to help the reader: the author introduces the available tools and applications to declutter web pages, adjust fonts and colour and annotate and organise text, by which means the reader may be more focused on clear and attentive/retentive reading. Educators have a key role to play in provision of tailored resources to help students navigate both digital and print formats, engage with various forms of digital text and advise on appropriate reading and note-taking skills; they must also foster student acquisition of mindful and reflective reading strategies. The paper advocates further relevant research.

Research conducted by **Day, M**. of the University of Greenwich, explores a conundrum facing higher education (HE) in China and, indeed, in the rest of the world: in a society now dependent on instant access to a mighty global body of digital resources, how do traditional HE libraries adapt? Drawing on the views of Chinese students in a Sino-British private university, the author finds learners ineluctably led towards 'shadow libraries', such as the former Z-library, which, being free and offering instant access to vast array of copyrighted material, proved far more helpful than slow, state-limited and insufficient hard copies from physical university libraries. Those who grow up with the collaborative opportunities of the web are understandably affected by limitations and so drawn to digital piracy sites for their research needs. Z-library has been taken down, but, when other opportunities in what the author terms the 'post-digital' world arise, students will sidestep legality. Carrying heavy books across the distances of China, the prohibitive cost (to many) of printed texts, the inadequacy of libraries to meet demand quickly and the prevention of established online practices of sharing and distribution are just some of the reasons why universities need to transform themselves into '*multi-functional post-digital libraries, fit for future purposes.*' In other words, they should be communal digital resource access hubs, but still repositories of some physical books. The

author recommends student-centred provision that only well-designed, well-resourced institutional libraries, underpinned by effective decision-making, can achieve.

Authors **Currant, N., Bunting, L., Hill, V. and Salines, E.,** of the University of the Arts London (UAL), demonstrate their concern for assessment that takes proper account of the emotions of learners, so that outcomes properly reflect their learning. Their research into undergraduate views of 1) the effects of the pandemic-driven change from letter grades to the 'no-detriment' pass/fail and 2) of grading in general suggests that higher education institutions, now that COVID-19 restrictions are over, should not merely restore graded assessment for quality, standards and validity, but also consider the affective dimension: assessment for well-being, too. At stake are student stress, anxiety, learner identity, motivation, self-expression, creativity and peer relationships, not to mention retention and academic outcomes. The article is thorough and detailed; a striking aspect of it is students' realisation that the absence of grades enables experimentation and stimulates self-belief. The authors are realistic in not advocating 'ungrading'; rather, they are keen for institutions to find ways to mitigate the emotionally detrimental effects of grading, for the ***quality*** of learning should be the goal.

MSc Public Health students at York St John University (London Campus) enjoyed a learning experience like no other when, on World Aids Day 2023, they collaborated to advertise, perform and record an on-campus 'street play' (the idea of teaching staff on their programme, to harness the learning benefits of role play in a community setting). Of the arts, drama in particular is a potent means of experiential learning and social interaction for participants, whose confidence and commitment grow as they share in group activity. When health student players are in training for real roles in public health and involving the community around them, they are not only developing the core competencies of their intended professional careers, but also promoting community awareness and personal understanding of important health matters. The authors – **Tiwari, R. and Bolarinwa, O.A.** – of this stimulating study are convinced of the pedagogical value of street play, but offer possible solutions to perceived challenges in order to '*amplify* [its] *reach and impact*'. The paper, having recommended more engagement with local community organisations, health agencies and other educational institutions, concludes with suggestions for the advancement of institutional co-constructed learning of this kind.

Qualitative research underpins another interesting paper in this issue, by Lawson, A. (Ulster University), Stewart, J., (University of Greenwich), Turner, E. (University of the West of England) and Passmore, P. and Costly, C. of the University of Middlesex. The authors survey environmental health students' attitudes to the deployment of 360-degree interactive 'photospheres' to simulate real housing inspections for the regulation of properties in the private rental sector. A serious shortfall in professional inspectors for regulation and enforcement demands a powerful training response, but the dearth of opportunities to practise inspection in real properties makes this very difficult. The survey reveals that most student participants, with hardly any prior awareness of 360 technology, found it a helpful immersive method of gaining experience, consolidating their knowledge and increasing their understanding; some suggested valid improvements. The authors envisage its application to other disciplines beyond housing and its potential in new forms of training.

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We are very grateful to all authors, reviewers and the guest editor for the papers on decolonisation of the curriculum, Dr Denise Miller, University of Greenwich.

Best wishes from the Compass team,

Rachel George, Alex Cheung, Angeliki Voskou

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