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Editorial

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Editorial

This issue of Practitioner Research in Higher Education arises from papers presented at the Assessment in Higher Education international conference which was held in Birmingham, England, in June 2013. This biannual conference covers a wide range of assessment issues including, design, engaging students in assessment, assessment for learning, feedback, grading, academic standards, technology and quality assurance systems. Many of these areas of interest include a focus on learning for both students and academic staff. This includes learning of key concepts and skills within the relevant subject discipline but also includes an element of assessment literacy and academic literacy. Increasingly within higher education programme teams are focusing effort on developing the assessment literacy of their students and this of course also has an impact on the professional learning of the academics involved. At a wider level the growing body of international research on assessment in higher education provides a useful evidence base for policy makers, institutional leaders, heads of department, programme leaders and individual lecturers. A powerful method for engaging with this evidence base is for individual lecturers and especially programme teams to adopt practitioner research approaches. Many of the papers presented at the conference and in this issue of the journal are part of this drive for change in assessment practice through practitioner research.

The first three papers focus on the academic literacy of academics and the assessment systems in which they play their part. The initial paper by Rachel Sales focuses on new lecturers in higher education as they experience their first grading of student coursework. The analysis highlights the social and situated nature of their learning as they interpret the marking practices of colleagues in relation to their own approach. Based on a small scale qualitative study in the UK the paper argues for more training for academics. This call to increase the assessment literacy of academics is repeated in the second paper by Tunku Badariah Tunku Ahmad, Ainol Madziah Zubairi, Mohd Burhan Ibrahim, Joharry Othman, Nik Suryani Abd Rahman, Zainurin Abd Rahman, Mohamad Sahari Nordin and Zainab Mohd Nor in which a large scale quantitative study which identified gaps in the understanding of key concepts within 'assessment for learning' held by academics in Malaysia. Somewhat in contrast the third paper by Dawid Wosik argues that a systematic approach is required to ensure quality. This study focuses more on the quality of assessment procedures rather than engaging with the messy business of how tutors actually grade the work of students.

The next four papers analyse the nature of feedback and how students engage with and use it to improve their work. In the first of these, and fourth paper in this issue, by Stuart Hepplesone and Gladson Chikwa, the students are found to understand the nature and purpose of tutor feedback but still struggle to apply it to their future assignments. The fifth paper by Philip Long investigates the perspectives of tutors and students on the characteristics of effective written feedback, it finds some common ground but argues that a more dialogical approach is required to resolve continuing differences. Aligned with this finding the sixth paper by Charlotte Chalmers, Janis MacCallum, Elaine

Mowat and Norma Fulton makes a comparison of audio feedback and written feedback but finds in both cases only a low number of comments by tutors that are focused on suggesting approaches to future work. In this study the use of audio feedback increased the overall number of comments by the tutor but was not found to have improved student performance in future assignments. In a study of how students use feedback to inform their approach to future assignments the seventh paper by Martin Foo emphasises the value placed on dialogue by students.

The final two papers in this issue report on examples of innovative assessment. The eighth paper, by Jan Watson, investigates a module and its assignment that focus on creativity within an Education degree. The assignment includes production of an artwork as well as a more traditional essay. The author argues that assessment of creative process and product was enhanced by actively involving students in a challenging, open-ended, peer-reviewed task.

The ninth and final paper in this issue, by James Dermo and John Boyne, is an evaluation of an authentic assessment in Biomedical Science. The study engages with some key issues in assessment design including the value of authenticity in assignments and the potential of online multi-choice questions to assess higher level learning. The authors use analysis of test results and of a student evaluative survey to argue that their test is both authentic and reliable as well as being practicable for a large cohort.

These nine papers together both reflect the high quality of presentations at the Assessment in Higher Education Conference and the power of practitioner research to produce valuable evidence for the development of our understanding of professional work. They reinforce theoretical advances in higher education assessment such as the power of dialogue in creating learning from assessment and the importance of student and staff assessment literacy. The biggest future challenge in this field is to capitalise on the learning from practitioner research to envisage and create truly transformative assessment at the institutional and system level. This remains a significant challenge that academics should take forward in their programme teaching teams.

As a new development for our journal we are pleased to include in this issue a book review. Mark Carver provides an enticing review of The University in Dissent by Gary Rolfe and recommends it as a survival guide for academics.

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