

Editors' introduction

This second issue of *Compass* appears as the higher education sector responds to the Browne review and the Government's proposals for meeting the shortfall of £1.3 billion funding through an increase in student fees. PA Consulting Group's UK survey, (2010) reported that the 43 university vice-chancellors who responded, expect funding cuts and competitive pressures not only to lead to substantial reductions in the range and scale of teaching and research, but also to precipitate institutional mergers and even some failures. Although the vice-chancellors surveyed thought that their own institution would not disappear, it being well governed, led and managed, they doubted the competence and commitment of their staff to respond to this new situation. In light of this apparently precarious climate, it is a sign of confidence in our own university community that we can openly discuss the challenges confronting us. Furthermore the confidence of our community of students, teachers and researchers is shown, not only by the capital projects to which we are committed and which the financial reserves the university has accumulated through previous effort allow it to afford, but by the pedagogical changes the university is prepared to undertake.

This year the university introduced the concept of the 'Greenwich Graduate' which characterises the intended distinctiveness of our students. Our Greenwich Graduate Initiative commits the university to reviewing its programmes and courses over the next five years thereby making a distinctive difference to the experience of its undergraduate students. The new HEFCE mandate requires all universities to produce and publish an 'employability statement' – a short summary of what they offer to students to support their employability and their transition to employment and beyond –, the Greenwich Graduate Initiative asks programme teams, and the professional services staff who support them, to work with their students, to build upon existing good practice and develop new approaches to develop attributes in addition to the subject knowledge that will help them to find employment even in recession.

Universities face an uncertain future. How can we, at Greenwich, prepare to meet the global threats and challenges to which we are all exposed through meaningful engagement in our local, national and international communities whilst maintaining the traditions of a past, represented by the magnificence of Maritime and our other campuses? How should we use emerging technologies together with new thinking and research to prepare our graduates for a sustainable future? These are questions which are universally shared and for which a university should be a focus. *Compass* provides a forum for such discussion and reflection on our purpose.

In this issue we see staff confronting such questions to share their experiences and invite response. Jane Speare reflects on employer demand, in her case for trained further education teachers. The language of competence in which these demands are framed is very different, she points out, from the language of poetry which opens up rather than closes down possibilities. Her contribution shows that imagination continues to flourish at the University of Greenwich.

Melanie Thorley supports students in the university through mentoring. In a brief article she indicates some of its benefits. These are similar to those described by Janice Larkin and Fiona Taylor in their article on the Open Book drop-in sessions at the university. As well as informing readers about another facility that exists to support students, Fiona and Janice, like Melanie, raise questions not only about teaching but about learning that learners may pass on to others as teachers themselves.

Sarah Crofts approaches the question of the validity of sources of information in the welter of opinions mingled with facts and figures presented from a variety of perspectives that now seemingly overwhelm us by their virtual reality. "Where is the knowledge to be found amongst this information?", as T.S. Eliot asked.

Sarah asks the same of law students who are used to 'googling' answers to the questions they are asked and ask themselves. They may be amongst the generations that have grown up with such self-reflexive facilities at their finger tips but the new databases are transforming the nature of case law in ways which we and they are only beginning to comprehend. There are also practical and theoretical questions to consider that students may not have thought about, as Sarah makes clear. As she says, "Our students may appear to be confident and sophisticated in their use of the web, but their searching is often limited to a small range of free resources." Her article suggests ways that library and other staff can help students go beyond this in a contribution that is relevant across disciplines and practices.

Following these short descriptive 'thought-pieces', a case study by Verna Rhodes describes how students are encouraged to develop the 'presentational skills' that seem in universal demand for employment but which many of us – even seasoned lecturers – find so hard to perfect. Perhaps, Verna suggests, this is not due to innate inability but because of lack of planning and evaluation. So these are the activities that need to be practised by 'presentation-phobic' applicants to university and jobs. Rita Headington and Alison Hales examine learning through the lens of social constructivism so as to 'practise what we preach'. Through their critique and subsequent course redesign they discover the rewards of creating a community of learners by re-conceptualising feedback and assessment and restructuring the learning journey.

Andy Gould, Dai Hall and Mike Nicholls teach on a very different programme of Applied Professional Studies (APS) that takes the learners' own experience as the foundation of its design. While conforming to the 'student-centric', 'market-led' and 'flexible' mantras of the day, APS offers a radical approach that allows students to negotiate their own learning through learning contracts with their tutors to decide 'what needs to be learned, how it is to be learned and how proof of learning is to be presented'. It would not be possible to implement such an approach on all courses on all programmes in higher education but elements of the method of independent study can be incorporated at all levels of learning. The article provides examples that invite others to consider how this might be done.

Maggie Gravelle outlines a development project on which she has been engaged in teacher training in the very different situation in Cambodia, which shows the range and variety of work on which Greenwich staff are engaged, internationally as well as locally.

Lastly, Patrick Ainley proposes a way to induct students into the nature of knowledge, as constituted by their discipline or professional practice, by a process of dissertations 'scaffolding' earlier on in year 1 or 2.

That there are so many contributions in this issue from the School of Education is perhaps inevitable given its focus on pedagogy but future issues should privilege contributions from other Schools and departments that apply pedagogic reflection to their own areas of expertise. Indeed establishing a pedagogical research cluster in the School of Science is a courageous example of how research into teaching in this most research-driven subject discipline is valued. Sharing our disparate and common experiences can contribute to debate across disciplines in their shared commitment to higher education and inform the Greenwich Graduate Initiative so as to set a standard for quality that may be maintained in whatever circumstances the university finds itself in the future.

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References

PA Consulting. (2010). *A passing storm or permanent climate change? Vice-chancellors' views on the outlook for universities*. [Online]. Available at: www.paconsulting.com (accessed 18 August 2010).