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## **Practitioner Research in Higher Education**

### **Special Assessment Issue**

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### **Editorial**

This special edition of Practitioner Research in Higher Education emanates from papers presented at the *5th International Assessment in Higher Education Conference* (<https://aheconference.com/ahe-conference-2015>) held in Birmingham, England, during June 2015. The biennial conference brought together practitioners and researchers to share their work and discuss current issues; aiding our understanding and the development of practice of assessment in higher education. The wide range of assessment areas explored at the conference included institutional change, diversity and inclusion, programme level assessment, students' experiences of and responses to assessment and the assessment literacy of students and tutors. Master classes and keynote presentations by acknowledged experts in the field were complemented by papers and interactive posters from delegates. This provided a wealth of evidence that explored issues at national, institutional and grass-roots levels across many disciplines and phases. Presenters challenged current practices while offering developments to assessment policy and practice that would benefit higher education learners, leaders and teachers. International commonalities and variations in assessment were brought to the fore through the work of colleagues from Ireland, USA, Italy, Canada, Mexico, Australia, The Netherlands, Hong Kong, South Africa, Denmark, Vietnam, Spain, Sweden, Croatia, Norway, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Japan, Austria, New Zealand, Belgium and England. The range and diversity of the conference's discussion continues within the 17 articles presented here.

Papers 1-4 critique the value of assessment and its research data. Paul Sutton begins by reflecting on his experience of teaching sociology to theorise students' strategic approaches to study that value assessment for the grade awarded rather than the learning it offers. He explores the role of extrinsic forces, using Marxist Humanistic theory to gain insights that might be applied to practice. Coming from numerate and scientific backgrounds, Tim Hunt and Sally Jordon highlight the some of the difficulties inherent in assessment research, particularly when undertaken by those who are secondary educational researchers familiar with methods used within their own disciplines. Through the critique of three randomly selected papers they expose the importance of employing research methods that are robust and reliable and propose practical steps to improve matters. Robert Prince examines the South African context. Through a longitudinal study, he considers whether the complementary use of criterion and norm-referenced assessments is advantageous in determining students' later success in higher education. Looking specifically at feedback, Mark Carver acknowledges that the UK's large-scale National Student Survey provides a robust measurement of satisfaction as it is in broad agreement with other survey outcomes that emphasise the students' desire for feedback that is prompt, specific, understandable and regular. He raises concern with simple measures leading to strategic approaches, advocating research that recognises feedback as complex and nuanced.

Research into tutors' and students' perceptions and experiences of feedback and assessment are common to papers 5-9 of this special edition. It starts with Michael Parker and Naomi Winstone's study into students' perceptions of ten feedback interventions. Their findings highlight issues that influence the strength of students' engagement with feedback. Victor Guillen Solano focuses upon the disadvantages faced by international students when faced with feedback, through their lack of

familiarity with cultural, academic, disciplinary or professional conventions. Stuart Hepplestone, Ian Glover, Brian Irwin and Helen Parkin consider whether students are able to deconstruct tutors' comments and make connections between the feedback they receive from one assignment and how to use it in the next. Monika Pazio reports on the tensions between staff perceptions of their practice and students' perceptions of their assessment experiences, as evidenced by the Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) project's cross-discipline research across one UK university. Within the Italian higher education system, Serafina Pastore and Monica Pentassuglia find a lack of knowledge of formative assessment and the persistence of traditional views of assessment that curtail improvements to teaching practice and promote instrumental approaches to learning.

The use of technology to aid feedback is central to papers 10 and 11. Within the discipline of pharmacy, Steve Ellis and Jill Barber share two novel forms of feedback that have been developed from the use of online assessments and have led to improved student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Similarly, Stephen Nutbrown, Colin Higgins and Su Beesley's research into the use of instant feedback through an automated feedback system within computer science has had a positive impact upon students' learning.

Papers 12-14 offer novel approaches to assessment. Nicky Hirst's small-scale study of the use of Pecha Kucha as a methodology for formative assessment, uncovers tutor-student disparity regarding the purpose of formative assessment. Jane Hooker and Jayne Whistance consider how traditional assessments may be complemented by those that embed the key transferable employability skills of international students. Heather Connolly and Dorothy Spiller's report on learning and assessment methods within a management course reveals how concept maps can support the integration of ideas and enable the enhancement of teaching.

The final three papers, 15-17, use research to address issues of assessment design and the consistency of assessment practice. The academic engagement of Higher Education students within a Further Education context provides the focus of Jane Southall and Hilary Wason's discussion of synoptic assessment design to engage students and enable learning. From the discipline of economics, Richard McManus examines students' preferences, engagement and outcomes when given the choice of when to take their assessments. Finally, Mats Lundström, Maria Åström, Karin Stolpe and Lasse Björklund tackle the problematic nature of cross-boundary assessment within the teacher education context in Sweden. Their research across six universities on examiners' uses of generic assessment criteria when assessing theses, shows only minor differences between individuals from different academic disciplines.

Pivotal to all the papers within this special edition is the centrality of assessment and feedback within higher education. Practitioners in the arts, humanities and sciences all have their stories to tell. Colleagues in different countries face similar issues, albeit within varied contexts. It is the cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences through practitioner research and dialogue that will continue to enable growth and enhance provision. This special edition reflects the high quality of presentations and discussion at the *5th International Assessment in Higher Education Conference* and demonstrates the determination of colleagues to enhance provision at all levels through critical research and evaluation.

**Guest editors: Rita Headington and Amanda Chapman**

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