

Editorial

From its humble beginnings in Carlisle more than ten years ago, the biennial international *Assessment in Higher Education (AHE) Conference* has grown to become the key forum in its field for colleagues across the globe. While its keynote presentations and master classes are led by internationally acclaimed experts, colleagues who are just beginning to engage with assessment and feedback issues provide us with fresh insights, stretching across higher education disciplines and levels of study. The diversity of international experiences serve to enrich our understanding and, in 2019, we were delighted to meet delegates from 27 countries who used the conference to network, share innovative practices, critically debate research and explore policy issues in this vital area of higher education. All are welcome: we learn from each other.

The *Practitioner Research in Higher Education: Assessment Special Edition* helps to provide a bridge between the conferences and gives delegates the opportunity to disseminate their research to a larger audience. As the journal's title suggests, its focus is on practitioners who, across a wide range of experience and expertise, are keen to contribute to enhancing our understanding and developing assessment and feedback in higher education by contributing their ideas and research findings to enhance policy and practice.

The articles included in this edition offer a glimpse into some of the issues discussed at the 7th international AHE Conference held in Manchester on 26-27 June 2019, and focus on the use of exemplars, student and staff use of peer assessment and, in the final paper, an exploration of a portfolio based methodology for assessing the professional doctorate in education. Together, they cut across the conference themes of the challenges of institutional change and assessment practice in a hugely expanded higher education sector. They highlight the power of practitioner or action-oriented scholarship as a springboard for staff to lead change projects systemically and across programmes. They showcase the variety of conceptual and practical tools required to think sensitively about assessment to meet a diversity of student needs in a mass higher education context.

The issue opens with two papers exploring the use of exemplars. The first is Sambell and Graham's reflection on two cycles of action research by teaching practitioners, over two academic years, in a first year Childhood Studies module. These cycles involved the collection of data on student responses to exemplar design that aimed to improve their students' evaluative capacities to monitor the quality of their own work during its actual production. The authors describe how they changed their design of exemplar pedagogy as a response to their findings from the first cycle of action research. This had involved a workshop during which students ranked and generated commentary on three exemplars. However, results disturbed the teaching team's assumptions about the value of exemplars, despite a highly structured and careful methodology that arose from deep engagement in recent exemplar scholarship. Developing David Nicol's proposal that it is weaker students' 'inner feedback' that needs improving, the second action cycle involved a new emphasis on students first producing their own response to the task, and fully integrating it into a peer review sequence. This harnessed a deeper reflective process whereby students compare their own work with the work they are reviewing to produce significantly better alignment between teacher and student rankings of exemplars. Sambell and Graham's paper is true to the reflexive turn of pedagogical action research in describing their own transformational journey and the fresh understandings gathered.

The second paper, by Headley and Pittson, moves the focus to institution-level change in the practice of exemplars. It reflects on the formation of a cross-disciplinary university community of practice to share experience and expertise in exemplars to meet its aspiration for greater use of formative feedback. The authors discuss the results from two surveys undertaken by this Community of Practice for Exemplars (CoPfe): one on staff use of exemplars and the other on their value to students. Whilst

the former was able to capture the range of reasons staff were using exemplars, the latter indicated a wide range of ways in which students benefited, most significantly by achieving a 'better understanding of assignment requirements'. Some interesting critical comments on international and disabled students as well as the issue of limiting 'creativity' in student work were surfaced.

Two papers from the Republic of Ireland focus on the role of peer assessment: the first explores the student perspective while the second examines the understanding and use made of the approach by staff. Both question whether students and tutors understand the value of the peer assessment process or simply engage with such exercises at a superficial level.

Quirke-Bolt's study of undergraduate student teachers, questions whether peer review could be used to reduce tutor workload and supplement student feedback. In his study, student reflections and questionnaire responses demonstrated that the majority of the students not only trusted their peers' comments but recognised the peer review process as useful to their professional development as teachers. Becoming both givers and recipients of feedback aided their self-evaluation skills. However, the students recognised themselves as novices and pointed to their lack of experience in comparison with tutors.

In contrast, McGrath, Scott and Logue's research centres on tutors' experience and understanding of peer assessment. Their survey across medical/biomedical tutors in three institutions focuses on the tutors' understanding of assessment terminology as well as their practice. It looks towards the structured inclusion of peer assessment to develop students' formative assessment experiences and so enhance learning. While the study found that more staff have an understanding of assessment through their engagement with qualifications in teaching and learning, it also identifies that, for peer assessment to be applied in a beneficial manner, stakeholders need to have an investment.

The final paper, by Holgate and Sambell, returns us to the precepts of reflexive process in pedagogical research. It presents the evidence for a model for the Professional Doctorate by Portfolio that, they argue, provides a feasible route for academic and support staff to achieve an authentic and suitable doctoral award. In contrast to traditional pathways to PhD by research, or even by publication, this advanced practitioner-led doctoral pathway is situated within the undervalued and misunderstood domain of 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning' (SoTL). The concern of this paper is the challenges involved during the first author's negotiation of his auto-ethnographic reflective evaluation of assessment in a Department of Architecture for a Professional Doctorate in Education (Ed D). Holgate and Sambell champion a 'pragmatist' and creative approach to underpin the portfolio route as one that is of equivalent rigour but authentically integrated into the intellectual preoccupations of the teaching-and-learning focused academic. The 'negotiated' assessment methodology explored in the paper includes the innovation of collaborative practices, co-produced with colleagues and students, contextually situated by Holgate's accompanying theoretical commentary.

A key theme of the papers in this issue is the insights they afford into the distinctiveness of practitioner research founded broadly in action research methods. Grounded in the experiential understanding of the professional role of the researcher as teacher, they provide participatively embedded evidence that feeds into a careful, more sustainable and continuous improvement of assessment practices. As the papers in this special issue show, making *and* observing changes in naturalistic settings simultaneously allows the practitioner-participant researcher to pay closer attention to unintended outcomes and generate fresh insights.

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