Preface

The personal-professional continuum underpinning academic engagement

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Abstract

Andrew Middleton, Head of Academic Practice and Learning Innovation at Sheffield Hallam University, introduces this new issue.

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The papers in this edition remind us of the importance of looking closely at experience in higher education and understanding the relationship of experience to successful student and staff engagement at university. It is evident that universities as large organisations face a great challenge in caring for each and every student. This collection highlights how, ultimately, this comes down to the interest, engagement and empowerment of the individuals who make up the academic community. This is reinforced by one author who signals that familial support may unwittingly result in ostracisation. The importance of a caring “personal-professional” community becomes clear, whether this relates to a student’s engagement with learning or to their more general commitment to being at university.

Corker and Holland’s case study, from the history discipline, reveals that about half of their incoming students do not have a clear sense of the career they will choose on graduating, yet the authors know the importance of engaging them with employability and of developing their skills and reflective capability in their first year. In this study, the academic’s role is to foster engagement with dimensions of the course that must seem relatively abstract to a high proportion of their new history students. The challenge of engaging new students with the metaphysical matters of being at university is a common theme in SEEJ and one that shows professional academics to be navigators of the personal-professional continuum.

Knowles presents a small-scale, practitioner-led case study of distance learning in the higher education context. Situated in the UK Open University, Knowles considers the tensions between deep and surface learning amongst a geographically dispersed and diverse group of students in a pedagogically conservative discipline. The study reports that students who signalled their enjoyment of the discursive approach of incorporating small group work requested a more traditional teacher-centred 'effective' pedagogy when push came to shove.

The author, an online teacher, voices challenges recognisable to teachers in face-to-face environments about the odds that are often stacked against taking a more personable, 'vibrant' and engaging approach.

Edwards turns our attention to the experience of two Black trainee teachers. The paper considers a sensitive and challenging situation experienced by the trainees. It describes
how family and community support proved to be more effective in ameliorating the sense of alienation the student teachers felt as compared to the formal institutional support or support from their predominantly White-British peers. However, Edwards notes there are dangers of heterogeneous self-exclusion that can come from turning to familial support: the personal support in this case may be attractive, but not as effective as more challenging professional methods.

The meaning of ‘embedding’ is explored by Dickinson and Griffiths in their analysis of the different methods they have deployed for embedding both employability and personal development planning in alternative undergraduate core Law modules. Focusing on two alternative core modules, they examine how inter-professional collaboration can facilitate employability and PDP. The idea of inter-professionalism again hints at exploring the multiple identities amongst us.

Nortcliffe returns to the themes of audio feedback and the use of personal technologies by tutors. Her interest is in simplifying the means of producing rich and highly engaging feedback. She considers how a streamlined low threshold approach enhances the potential for feeding forward into the ongoing learning of students. Her determination to use voice, even if it is mediated by technology, provides a strong indication of the lengths to which many staff will go to ensure interpersonal communication in their practice.

Hussain, Higginson, Pickering and Percy examine the impact of caring on the experiences of their occupational therapy undergraduates and conclude that attainment was significantly lower for student carers. There are concerns of alienation in this demographic and education providers are heeded to recognise the needs of mature students and to review systems so that they are inclusive for students with caring roles.

This issue closes with a Viewpoint piece from O’Hara and Egan which reminds us that while a learner-centred view often informs our practice and approaches to innovation, key external directives from government can undermine our attempts to create a personal, inclusive and supportive learning environment. This piece responds to proposed changes to the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) as set out by the Minister of State for Universities and Science in the UK. While the piece is highly professional, the authors remind us that they represent members of an essentially caring
profession where defending the right of anyone to learn is part of our professional standard.

The papers in this issue, in their various ways, succeed in demonstrating the interdependent relationship between engagement and experience: experience affects engagement and *vice versa*. Similarly, for academic staff, there is a connection between our personal and professional roles which is important to successful student engagement and experience. It is evident that we are capable when we feel empowered and interested as people, and this enables us, as professionals, to engage our students as members of the academic community.