

## **Editorial**

Many of you reading this might be thinking 'Oh assessment again.....' or something similar. It seems to us that the issue of assessment has been one that has vexed Higher education for a long time. Many years ago John Cowan wrote that 'assessment is the engine that drives student learning'. It would seem that this even more so these days. Phil Race, following and building on what John Cowan has written, said that much of the efforts that go into designing and implementing assessments are like 'fine tuning the engine of a vehicle which is actually off the road, facing the wrong direction, and has no wheels left upon it!'. It seems to us that this issue contains reports of work that is about getting the vehicle on the road, facing in the right direction with wheels refitted.

Wood reports on the use of Web 2.0 technology incorporated into an Inquiry based approach with first year students that is designed to enable students to engage with learning by being able to ask good questions. One of the surprising outcomes from this work was the author's comment that in his own reflective journal he noted that 'the role of assessment on student learning was most prevalent'. He developed a system of formative and summative assessments to support and nurture the skills and abilities he wanted students to develop. He noted that the students actually carried out the formative assessments, contrary to much common thinking. So the engine is important!

MacDonald's paper has a focus on self and peer assessment, in nursing modules. This paper clearly shows that despite the students having some concerns about the peer and self assessment process, feedback from peers was highly valued. Initially students often don't see any benefit, but we know that the skill of accurate assessment of one's own work is probably the single most important skill developed in higher education.

The two papers by Crawford and Hagyard, and Burke both deal with the topical issue of feedback and how student engage with feedback. In the paper by Crawford and Hagyard the students are studying social policy and social work. The students' comments stress that the emphasis should be on feed-forward rather than back using language that is understood by students. Thus the focus is on improving performance next time. They also stress the importance of the 'relationship' between staff and students in the feedback process, good rapport between the two being key in helping students 'discuss' the feedback they have obtained.

Burke also stresses the need for student engagement with feedback. Again the importance of staff using feedback language that is understood by students; (they suggest that tutors need to focus on seeing the feedback from the student perspective. This, they say will help tutors to unpack the complexities that face students in interpreting and acting on the feedback. Perhaps an obvious remark, but how many of us actually do this when we write feedback?

Akister and colleagues also focus on the issue of student engagement, this time in a post qualifying specialist award in Social Work. Their study compares students' perceptions of face to face versus blended delivery. They also noted that students (regardless of mode of delivery) would rather drop out than fail, perhaps a matter of

professional pride? However, the study found that students taking the face to face version had a higher completion rate and also showed higher achievement in the assessments. This prompts serious questions about the role of the learning environment on student engagement and its impact on assessment performance.

David Boud wrote in 1995, 'Whenever we learn, we question ourselves. How am I doing? Is this enough? Is this right? How can I tell? Should I go further? In the act of questioning we are judging ourselves and making decisions about the next step. This is self assessment. As we wrote earlier, this is probably the single most important skill developed in Higher Education. In this issue our contributors offer work on questioning, engagement with learning and engaging and responding to feedback so they (learners) become happy and capable self assessors.

We hope that you will enjoy reading this issue and agree with us that some vehicles are back on the road, facing in the right direction and have wheels.

Bob Matthew, Jane Pritchard & Jane Mackenzie

Editors PESTLHE

### **Foot note**

If you have a suggestion for a future special edition (that you might even be prepared to guest edit) then please get in touch with one of us.