

## **Teaching, learning and student engagement: an overview of the thematic section**

*Manja Klemenčič (University of Harvard – US and University of Ljubljana – Slovenia),  
Paul Ashwin (Lancaster University, UK)*

Higher education institutions today operate in a rapidly changing environment and this undoubtedly reflects in their core functions of teaching and learning and the activities that students undertake during studentship. Among the widely cited global trends, changing demography of student population and high participation of non-traditional students, growing global interconnectedness, proliferation of digital media, and increasing market orientation in higher education not only affect what is taught at higher education institutions, but also how students learn, what they aspire and what activities they engage in while studying. Other more controversial debates in contemporary higher education revolve around the question of standardization of assessment of institutional performance, including standardized evidence to demonstrate how much students are actually learning. STEM subjects are hailed for their service to innovative knowledge economies, leaving ambiguous the question of how to balance resources between the different disciplines and the relative prestige of different fields of study. There is concern among some educators that students are becoming too overtly careerist desiring vocational and professional training over non-vocational offerings. The cost of higher education is rising everywhere and most of the countries and institutions are pondering over the sustainability of higher education financing; many indeed are exploring on-line learning as possible way to cut costs (of teaching) or create revenue or both.

It is within this environment that we examine one of higher education's core functions: teaching and learning, in order to explore what we know and how to move forward. There appears to be unevenness in policy initiatives in this area among European governments. For example, there are only a few countries that have funded a national body devoted to advancement of basic and applied research related to teaching and learning (the Higher Education Authority in the UK, the new Higher Education Authority in Sweden are among the few such examples). There are ample of countries which have no national strategy whatsoever on modernisation of teaching and learning, and advancements in this area are left to the individual institutions to formulate and fund. Some institutions have centers for advancement of teaching and learning. Such centers support inter-institutional collaboration in development and assessment of innovative pedagogies, educational technologies, and curricula, and in research in the learning processes. In many institutions, teachers in higher education tend to be evaluated by their students, but are then left to their own devices to self-improve (or not). Moreover, the European cooperation to advance teaching and learning have so far been minimal, fragmented and in absence of an overarching strategy.

In her Chapter, *Sin* examines the policy initiatives on teaching and learning that have been developed within the European Higher Education Area. Based on an analysis of Bologna Process policy documents and key reports from supra-national actors, *Sin* reports that as policy objectives have teaching and learning moved from the margins to the core of the Bologna Process. *Sin* attributes this development to the explicit emphasis made in the policies on the higher education sector meeting its economic mission through the production of employable and entrepreneurial graduates. *Sin* charts the changing focus on teaching and learning within the Bologna Process from a concern with the structure of programmes, to a focus on the importance of student-centred learning to a focus on curricular reform and finally to a

focus on the importance of having university teachers who have been trained as teachers. What is obvious from Sin's chapter is that an overarching policy on modernisation of teaching and learning has not yet been developed, but that initial expert reports have been released by the European Union and OECD which point to such development and restate the need for international collaboration in this area. Furthermore, the predominant frame in the existing policies remains student-centred learning, which is not fully congruent with the growing scholarship on student engagement which advocates for more comprehensive approaches to student learning and development in higher education.

In several European countries, student engagement has already been introduced as a policy objective, and many other countries and institutions consider its use. Student engagement has tended to be embraced by a variety of stakeholders as unquestionably positive, which highlights the ways in which their meaning can shift according to who uses them and the contexts in which they are used. In their chapter, *Ashwin and McVitty* argue that student engagement indeed has many meanings. They suggest that by analyzing the focus and level of student engagement, it is possible to address the problems associated with the apparent vagueness of the concept. By examining both what students are being engaged in forming and the level of engagement that is being sought, we can come to a better understanding about what is intended and what are the likely effects of student engagement. Their approach brings a much needed clarity in the use of the concept both in scholarship and especially in policy; as it highlight both: that more engagement is not necessarily better and that higher education is fundamentally about knowledge. They conclude by arguing that it is students and academics collective engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge that is the basis on which students develop understanding, on which curricula are formed and on which higher education communities are developed.

Levels of student engagement have been increasingly examined through the use of student surveys. In their chapter *Klemenčič and Chirikov* examine the ways in which student surveys have been use as a primary data source for assessing the quality of learning and teaching in higher education. They examine the policy contexts in which student survey research has proliferated and offer an overview of the most influential student survey designs and their limitations. They argue that student surveys can serve as a helpful screening instrument to assess institutional practice, but there a number of limitations which call for caution in their use. They argue that technological advances and student use of social media offer the opportunity to adapt qualitative methods of data collection to digital use, which will in turn yield more contextualized data on students in large volumes and at high velocity. Such approaches, they suggest, would help to directly meet the needs of institutional decision makers and policy makers.

As well as offering new ways of eliciting student feedback, new technologies have the potential to have an even more fundamental effect on teaching and learning interactions in higher education. In their chapter, *Charlier, Cosnefroy, Jézégou and Lameul* examine the factors that shape the quality of learning in digital learning environments and the further research that is needed in order to further develop our understanding of the ways in which students engage with these environments. They argue that in order to understand the quality of learning environments, we need to examine the individual characteristics of the students who are learning within them, how these relate to the characteristics of the digital learning environment, the ways in which the students and the digital environments interact with each other, and the learning outcomes that students achieve through their engagement with the environment.

The assessment of learning outcomes is the focus of the chapter by *Coates*. He argues that, despite the importance of assessment outcomes in providing essential information about what people have gained through their engagement with higher education, assessment practices have remained largely changed for a very long time. As such, *Coates* argues that assessment is the final frontier in higher education and examines the barriers to the transformation of assessment practices. These include the lack of training of academic staff in assessment and the lack of a professional assessment community. In order to transform assessment, *Coates* argues that there is a need to embrace new technologies and for changes to institutional management. He also argues that it is likely to require external intervention, either through policy instruments or the involvement of commercial enterprises in assessment practices. These are clearly radical and controversial proposals, which would fundamentally alter assessment's relationship with teaching and learning processes in higher education. Where one stands on these issues will be informed by one's position on the purposes of higher education, and the relative importance of the development of student understanding versus the certification of this understanding. Assessment of student learning is certainly an area where no easy solution exists and further research and policy discussions into the matter are needed.

An important purpose of higher education is the inclusion of non-traditional students in a university education. In their chapter, *Stănescu, Iorga, González Monteagudo and Freda* examine an approach to involving non-traditional students in higher education. They carefully define non-traditional students and argue that an approach focusing on the Narrative Mediation Path (NMP) can support these students in making their transition to higher education. They present an evaluative study of the NMP that, they argue, suggests that it supports students in developing their reflexive competence during a formative experience which enables them to better adjust to their university context. They argue that the changes in the meanings that students attached to their university life involved a closer sense of social connectedness and a reduced sense of alienation, isolation and vulnerability in the face of the academic challenges.

As a whole these chapters highlight the rich complexity of teaching and learning interactions in higher education. The different chapters are based on differing views of the purposes of higher education and about what is central to offering students a high quality higher education. Whilst developing evidence-informed policies in relation to teaching and learning are of crucial importance, these differences show how evidence cannot remove the need for judgment that is based on particular values and priorities. This is the case whether it involves the judgment of policy makers in thinking about how to support national systems of higher education, university managers in developing institutional approaches to teaching and learning, university teachers in thinking about how to make particular forms of knowledge and practices accessible to particular groups of students, or students in examining how to make best use of the opportunities they are offered through their engagement in higher education. While the chapters here depict the advances in research into teaching and learning in higher education, they also are a powerful reminder of the potential, indeed a need, for further discoveries in research into higher education.