





Introduction to the issue.

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We are delighted to welcome you to this varied and thought-provoking second issue of Volume 12. When we published issue 1, at the end of February this year, concern about the COVID-19 virus was mounting, however few could have foreseen what a significant impact it would have on our lives and societies. The physical closure of all Irish educational establishments in March 2020 forced a shift to ‘emergency remote teaching’ that has been very challenging. Colleagues across higher education have responded to this with innovation, flexibility and care. In April 2020, AISHE-J issued a call for papers for a Special Issue on COVID-19 and Irish Higher Education. This will be published in October 2020, however the current issue includes 7 ‘Rapid Responses’ that share practices, experiences or discuss issues in relation to impact of the COVID-19 emergency over the past 3 months.

In our first paper, ‘Student perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on learning’, Katie Hill and Rebecca Fitzgerald use Gibbs’ reflective cycle to explore their experiences as students and as novice teachers on a postgraduate diploma in nurse education during the COVID emergency. They conclude that ‘...*the experience posed many challenges, resulting in reduced engagement and disrupted learning opportunities. However, there were also some positives with online learning including flexibility of learning such as completing activities at the students’ pace and being able to learn in a location convenient for the student.*’ and suggest that ‘*a hybrid approach for future learning opportunities could be beneficial with increased staff and student engagement through interactive activities*’ (p.6).

Many readers will be familiar with 'Gasta', a 5-minute presentation format characterised by audience engagement and lots of fun. Chaired by Tom Farrelly (Institute of Technology, Tralee), it is a very popular feature of the Irish Learning Technology Association's annual EdTech Conference. In 'Gasta Goes Global as a rapid community response to COVID-19', Tom and colleagues Gearoid Ó Suilleabhán (Cork Institute of Technology) and Ken McCarthy (Waterford Institute of Technology), discuss how they successfully adapted this face-to-face format as a high-profile online event. Seven well-known learning technology experts participated in 'GastaGoesGlobal' as 'Gastateers', discussing the future of Higher Education post-COVID-19 in front of an international audience. The authors conclude: *'If the Gasta online event and the general 'pivot to online' has taught us anything it is that online conferences can be both meaningful and engaging. Indeed, online makes possible events that would be difficult, if not impossible to achieve in the face-to-face world.'* (p.8).

In April 2020, a 3-day, large-scale event organised by the European Commission, termed the 'EUvsVirus Hackathon project' took place online. It was conceived as a pan-European rapid response to the unprecedented challenges and negative effects which COVID-19 restrictions were having in European society. In her Rapid Response 'EUvsVirus Hackathon project: A case study from a mentor's perspective', Bernadette Brereton (Dundalk Institute of Technology) provides a personal insight to her mentoring experience on this European project's 'Remote Working and Education Challenge', where she also supported teams participating in both the 'E-learning methods and tools' and 'University-specific challenges' categories.

A key challenge generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has been the imperative to rapidly shift to provision of remote assessments and exams. In 'Rewriting the (exam) script? Assessing student learning in an unusual end-of-year context', Jonny Johnston and Ciara O'Farrell discuss the approach taken by the Centre for Academic Practice, Trinity College Dublin, in their development of a reference resource outlining potential methods for repurposing exam questions for novel use in open-book contexts. Jonny and Ciara note that *'as a development team, our role within the institution is that of change agent, provoking and enabling academics to reflect on how they might enhance their own practices in teaching, learning, and assessment, rather than cleaving to a directive role'* (p.3). In developing the resource, they thus *'needed to find a way to encourage reflection and insight into the need to re-design and reframe questions without being either prescriptive or risking being perceived as directive in our advice to*

disciplinary academics' (pp.5-6). They achieved this by providing questions prompting direct engagement with specific exam style questions and also by providing multiple potential modifications for better use. The resulting open-source resource provides colleagues across the sector with an excellent reference for similar redevelopment of remote exams and assessments.

For a number of years, Brendan O'Connell, a lecturer in medieval literature at Trinity College Dublin, has utilised the poem 'Cleanness', an anonymous text which has been interpreted as a response to the fourteenth century Black Death, as the focus for his 'Surviving Trauma in the Middle Ages' class. In 'Teaching Literary Responses to the Black Death during the COVID-19 Pandemic', Brendan provides a fascinating case study of the challenges and opportunities he experienced in teaching the poem in the immediate aftermath of the closure of Irish universities in March 2020. In order to support his students to adapt to the sudden closure, and cognisant of the pressures facing them due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Brendan's approach was to provide a framework for students to explore the text and associated resources in their own time, along with online discussion boards for class discussions. He notes that his students *'responded strongly to the unexpected relevance of the text, and drew useful comparisons and contrasts between medieval and modern responses to pandemics and contagious illness'*. He found that utilising discussion boards *'allowed all students to engage, and helped a number of quiet students find their voice in the classroom'* (p.4). He concludes that *the experience 'has changed the way I will teach the text in future, even when we return to our classrooms'*. (p.4).

The rapid response paper *'Learning at a distance but not a distance learner: meeting the needs of a diverse body of students post COVID-19'* from Maeve O'Regan (Trinity College Dublin) is based on questionnaire responses from five universities considering the sources of doctoral programme information, training and support that the participants had accessed from the academic institution (face-to-face and online) during candidature. The preliminary results illustrate how dynamic interaction and the availability of information and support that is timely and meets the learner's personal circumstances was key to academic progression and satisfaction for participants.

The final COVID-19 response in the Letters and Announcements, is a poem, 'The Silk Road To Online Teaching During COVID'. Ashamole Clive (Trinity College Dublin) has written a poem about the challenges of facilitating online learning during the pandemic. Her insights are likely to resonate with many readers.

The issue also includes a very interesting selection of papers that deal with specific aspects of learning, teaching and assessment.

In their paper, 'The student experience of final year in an undergraduate degree programme in Education Studies', Roisin Donnelly (Technological University Dublin), Julie Uí Choistealbha (Marino Institute of Education) and Marian Fitzmaurice (Marino Institute of Education) examine the impact of curriculum design on final-year student experience on an Education Studies programme. It '*... explores the key elements of dissertation, ePortfolio and internship from a student and staff (programme team) perspective*' (p.3). The authors surveyed and interviewed graduates and conducted a focus group with the programme team. Students '*...identified the development of skills, knowledge and competencies for the workplace through the internship, and highlighted the value in undertaking the dissertation process as it enabled them to research a topic of personal interest, and develop research skills, but was also a challenging and intense experience*' (p.29). The authors draw on the findings to present a model for student support across 3 contexts: pedagogic, workplace and research and this is likely to be of considerable interest to colleagues who teach, or provide support for, professionally-orientated programmes.

The TEAM Project: Insights from developing a national project focused on enhancing assessment in science and health practical sessions with digital technologies' by Ronan Bree, Olya Antropova (both Dundalk Institute of Technology) and colleagues from Dundalk Institute of Technology, Athlone Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Carlow and Institute of Technology Sligo reports on a multi-institution enhancement project: Technology Enhanced Assessment Methods (TEAM). The TEAM project was funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and '*...represented a 2-year, multi-institutional approach that aimed to incorporate digital technologies to enhance the manner in which assessment takes place in science and health practical settings*' (p.4). The project focused on the design, assessment and feedback of practical and clinical skills sessions in Science and Health programmes in 42 pilot projects across the 4 partner institutions. Working with 1,600 students, the project incorporated the use of a variety of technological tools to enhance student learning and success and the work is likely to be of interest to anyone involved with teaching and assessing laboratory or other practical learning.

Finally, in 'Approaching assignments: A recipe for reflection', Trish Ganly of the Irish Management Institute, draws on her own experiences as a student and educator, to support

postgraduate students to develop their voices as academic writers. She presents and explains a 10-step process that provides a structured approach to assignments. The paper also includes a useful pre-submissions checklist. As Ganly notes, '*Developing as a critical writer requires commitment, time, effort, practice and actively listening to feedback to enhance these skills and, for me, is a lifelong journey.*' (p.8) and this paper is likely to be a useful resource to support that journey.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank all of the authors and reviewers who have contributed to this issue. We would also like to remind you that we will be accepting submissions for consideration for the Special Issue 'COVID-19 and Irish Higher Education' until the 1st of September 2020. Full details are available here <https://www.aishe-j.org/2020/04/30/special-issue-covid-19-and-irish-higher-education-call-for-contributions/> If you have an idea for a contribution that you would like to discuss, please contact any member of the editorial team and we will be delighted to help. We would also like to hear from potential reviewers.

Finally, we hope that you enjoy the issue and stay safe and well over the coming months.