

Introduction to the Issue

Ronan Bree, Sylvia Huntley Moore, Moira Maguire and Morag Munro

We are very pleased to welcome you to this significant issue of AISHE-J: Part 1 of our Special Issues on the impact of COVID-19 on Irish Higher Education. On March 12th 2020, in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic and as part of a National lockdown, the physical doors of Irish Higher Education Institutions were ordered to close. The lights were switched off, the doors locked. As a national community, we entered an uncertain and testing time on many levels. In the words of U2's Bono, we were "*not all in the same boat*" but were "*going through the same storm*". It was life changing.

The impact on Higher Education was, and continues to be, significant. In April of this year, we issued a call for contributions for a Special Issue of AISHE-J to explore this. We received an unprecedented response, in terms of the range of academic disciplines represented and number of submissions. While some of the early contributions were published in the Summer issue of Volume 12, the response to the call has been so great that the Special Issue has become two Special Issues; we will publish additional papers as Part 2 in February 2021.

This issue, the last of Volume 12, presents 19 articles, research pieces and rapid responses from the perspective of many stakeholders, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, lecturers, professional and support staff. These contributions provide a 'snapshot' of Irish Higher Education at an unprecedented time and represent ways of making sense of the tremendous changes. They evidence innovative and caring practices as well as the many challenges faced and the various impacts of these and identify opportunities.

Pedagogical and learner support challenges and responses are explored by many contributors. Unsurprisingly, many discuss the challenge of moving face-to-face learning, teaching and support activities online, providing useful insights into what works and why.

David Hamill, Trinity College Dublin, discusses the implementation of a VLE-based, teaching practice support module developed to support the needs of a broad academic community as the transition to online learning began. Mary Delaney and colleagues present the experience of

eight Irish academic libraries from the Technological Higher Education Association as traditional library services were replaced with online communication technologies and Library staff worked to ensure student and staff access to collections and resources. The experience of moving an academic writing workshop with library staff to a virtual format is outlined by Helen Fallon and Laura Connaughton from Maynooth University. Here, the authors present the new task-oriented format of their virtual workshop, combined with an evaluation in addition to learnings from engaging with the Zoom platform.

For Deirdre Casey of Cork Institute of Technology, COVID-19 “*presented huge obstacles but also opportunities for change*”. In her rapid response article, she details how, due to the abrupt closure of the physical campus, their academic learning centre went through a fundamental rethinking of how academic support was being provided and how online platforms could make their service more robust and able to respond to the growing needs of students for academic support, human connection and reassurance. In their article, ‘*Engaging Students through Extracurricular Programmes: A Virtual Platform in the COVID-19 Era*’, Lorraine Tansey and colleagues at NUI Galway focus on the extracurricular activities, a very important aspect of student life. They explain how they have used a virtual platform to ensure that extracurricular activities can ‘*thrive*’ online.

Some papers offer discipline-specific perspectives and insights. Chanel Watson and RCSI colleagues note that in 2019 the WHO announced that 2020 was due to be designated the year of the nurse and midwife. In recent times, the contribution nurses and midwives make to the wellbeing of other has indeed never been so visible. Their article discusses the recent impact on nurse educators and their practice while it reiterates the need for a planned approach, with robust evaluation needed to determine the effectiveness of new ways of supporting students

In their paper ‘*Impact of COVID-19 on Teaching and Undergraduate Children’s Nursing Module*’, Katie Hill and colleagues the methods they used to deliver a Nursing module completely online, identifying challenges and enablers.,

Effective communication for student group projects in a perennial challenge. A study by Trinity College’s Michela Valente and Michelle MacMahon examines the impact and additional complexities that can arise when this communication occurs virtually, ultimately how this could potentially even compromise the performance of the group.

Several papers offer insights into the experiences of staff and students from a range of perspectives during the early stages of the pandemic as the Higher Education community pivoted to the online environment with unprecedented speed.

Individual perspectives are offered by Bernard Drumm, a newly appointed lecturer and Angelina Jong, a third-year international undergraduate student in the Department of Life & Health Science, Dundalk Institute of Technology. They reflect on the ways their teaching and learning approaches and practices were affected by the closure of their College and how they rose to the subsequent pedagogic, social and technological challenges. Like Jong, O'Shea writes from her perspective as an undergraduate student. As a first-year student in the process of transitioning to college who contracted COVID-19, Grace O'Shea provides first-hand insights into the physical and mental effects of the virus and the impact on student learning. Beth McKeague, who had just completed her third year at Maynooth University also highlights the challenges faced by students and making a call for *'...understanding and compassion if we are all to get through this together and in one piece'*.

Susan Flynn and Gina Noonan provide an Institution-wide perspective through their discussion of the qualitative results of a survey of academic staff at the Institute of Technology, Carlow conducted to ascertain their experiences of the 'online pivot'. Their findings were *'...overwhelmingly positive in terms of the willingness of lecturers to overcome professionally engrained habits and practices, to find ways to engage and support our students and to develop their own style and ownership of remote teaching'*, however they point to the need to prioritise the ongoing support of teaching staff. Linda Yang and colleagues' paper highlights the way in which an academic department within an Irish research-intensive University addressed the challenge of upskilling academic staff through a virtual community of practice to provide peer support and share best practice in digital teaching and learning.

Our final set of papers consider the legacy of COVID-19 on Irish HE. The response to the pandemic has highlighted the importance of student engagement in decision making. In their invited article, Oisín Hassan and colleagues from the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on student engagement in decision

making, noting the '*... significant (and perhaps, unexpected) influence on dialogue on the role of student partnership in Institutional decision-making, and particularly on teaching, learning and assessment*'. This offers opportunities in a time of challenge but needs to be supported by capacity building. They conclude '*The new narrative of co-creation is one that staff and students across Irish Higher Education must nurture, if an inclusive and democratic learning community is to be realised*'. Complementing this, in *Students as Partners: A model to promote student engagement in post-COVID-19 teaching and learning*, Dale Whelehan, Education Officer of the Students Union at Trinity College Dublin, proposes some ways in which we might foster a culture of student partnership as we move into a post-COVID-19 Higher Education system.

For many of those identified as part of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (NAP), the pandemic brought both educational challenges and opportunities. In *COVID-19 'Targets' the National Access Plan*, Linda Cardiff and Michele Kehoe from Trinity College Dublin argue that the next iteration of the plan should reflect the immediate and longer-term impact of the changes that have been experienced in education, while giving voice to a wider target group. Using '*...PhotoVoice research, journaling, Design Thinking workshops and semi structured interviews.*' Threase Finnegan-Kessie and colleagues explored the experiences of staff and students. Their findings highlight the emphasis on functional delivery and they argue that '*... for Higher Education to remain relevant and to provide graduates with the skills they need to tackle the challenges they will face as a result of COVID-19, we must readjust the system so there is equal emphasis placed on making social, emotional and functional progress*'.

Executive functioning skills "*are the set of cognitive processes required to enable higher order thinking and are associated with self-regulation and academic success.*" In *The Role of Executive Functioning Skills in Achieving Academic Success and Navigating Current Pandemic Uncertainties: Introducing ExS*, Kavanagh *et al.* from NUI Galway discuss how the ExS online programme, a recently launched autonomous online learning tool designed to help students become more aware of their executive functioning skills, can provide support to students who may be feeling overwhelmed by the changes to their learning environment as well as their social and personal lives. Finally, in *The Potential of Design Thinking to Enable Change in Higher Education*, Vaughn *et al.* from Maynooth University argue that a design thinking-based approach could empower Higher Education staff with the tools, attitudes and abilities required to identify and deal with future challenges and uncertainty, while fostering

innovation organisational change.

This issue offers an insight into the challenges faced by the higher education sector and the people who are part of it while also highlighting creativity, care, resilience and the need for ongoing support. We hope you will enjoy reading it. We would like to express our very sincere gratitude to all those who made this issue possible. We would like to thank our reviewers for their generosity and thoroughness at a particularly challenging time and our contributors who have taken the time to share their ideas and experiences. Stay safe everyone.