

Introduction to the Issue

Moira Maguire & Ronan Bree

We are delighted to welcome you to this first issue of AISHE-J for 2021 that includes Part 2 of our Special Issues on the impact of COVID-19 on Irish Higher Education. When we issued the original call for contributions to a COVID-19 Special Issue, in April 2020, we could not have foreseen that we would be engaged in emergency remote learning and teaching almost a year later. There was an overwhelming response to our call, from staff and students across many disciplines and areas of higher education. Some of the earliest papers were published as part of our Summer 2020 issue (Volume 12 (2)) and 19 papers were published in Part 1 of the Special Issue in October 2020 (Volume 12(3)). Since then, Ireland has endured further lockdowns. It hasn't been easy, with many going through extremely difficult and trying personal times. Our mental health, wellbeing and the need for caring and understanding are more important now than ever, as the majority of our means of interaction and communication with each other remain virtual.

In the Higher Education system, educators nationally have had to embrace innovation and creativity and move most of their teaching online, even practical classes this term in many cases, while students have shown their strength and resilience, while also contributing to, informing and supporting the transition. Our daily conversations have taken on new vernacular; '*Sorry, you're on mute*', '*I'm just going to share my screen*' and '*We lost you for a minute there*'. Even meeting etiquette has changed – for example we wait in lobbies to be admitted, we raise our hands to speak, while we are often “conscious there's only X minutes left” towards the end of a meeting - and of course the popular wave as we leave.

It is important to share and learn from our collective experiences. To do this, we need collaborative partnerships and evidence-based examples, openly shared amongst the HE community to learn from each other and illuminate the path ahead. In this issue, we are pleased to present 7 further articles, that comprise part 2 of our COVID-19 Special Issue. We are also delighted to present two further articles that that are concerned with assessment and lifelong learning, and a book review.

In a paper that is likely to strike a chord with many readers, Daithí Kearney and Adèle Commins, Dundalk Institute of Technology, consider the impact of the pandemic on participation in Erasmus and other international mobility programmes. While internationalisation is broader than these, these initiatives play an important role in personal development, developing cultural awareness and employability. The authors discuss the many educational and wider benefits of international experiences and argue that. ‘... *we should not ignore the value of international experiences for staff and students when the opportunities for travel return*’ (p. 13) In ‘Teaching Maths in the Time of COVID: The Good, the Bad and Missing Factors,’ Maryna Lishchynska and Catherine Palmer, Munster Technological University, compare emergency remote delivery (ERD) and traditional face-to-face delivery of mathematics. They report that the learning process was the aspect most affected by ERD, with students taking a more passive approach. They discuss a range of strategies to enhance lecturer-student interaction in the online context and these are likely to be of interest in mathematics and beyond.

The next two papers focus on the student perspective. In ‘Conference 2020 and beyond- Space Oddity or Space Odyssey?’, Mags Amond, Maeve Gallagher, Emily Emer Neenan, Jane O’Connell and Tanya Zubrzycki, Trinity College Dublin, discuss the challenges of suddenly ‘pivoting’ a well-established student research conference online. They draw on their experience to make a number of very useful recommendations that will be of interest to AISHE-J readers. Shriya Varghese, a Trinity College Dublin medical graduate, provides a student perspective on the impact of the pandemic on the final medical examinations. The article provides a valuable insight into what this was like for the students who were affected. She argues for an increased role of online learning and simulations in the medical curriculum and looks forward to ‘... *seeing the innovative ways in which students and educators progress in a post pandemic world*’ (p.3).

University College Dublin’s Linda Yang presents the findings of research with business postgraduate students which examined both the positive and negative aspects of their online learning experience. This timely study provided an opportunity to identify elements of teaching practice that can be effectively delivered at distance, while at the same time recognise those that benefit most from face-to-face interaction. Linda’s findings suggest ‘...*the foundation for an effective online experience is engagement*’. A very interesting and important study to reflect on, as we all begin to navigate the future landscape of HE in Ireland with our students.

Marie Finnegan of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology examines the impact of the emergency shift online on both student performance and the student experience in an Economics module. She reports that, while performance was marginally better pre-COVID, student perceptions of their achievement of the learning outcomes was less favourable. For some students, access to learning was negatively impacted and rates of social interaction were low. She suggests '*... In addition, lecturers need to be trained in explicitly facilitating and measuring social interaction in their modules. Such social interaction takes on more importance in the context of a pandemic when students are forced online to continue with their studies*' (p.19).

We also hear from Julia Priess-Buchheit of Coburg University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Germany, and her fellow team members who participated in the #EUvsVirus hackathon. In their rapid response, the authors detail their hackathon project entitled 'Trust in Science' where they developed an output aiming to assist public understanding and support for evidence-based information. As can be seen in the article, the authors outline the design of the online learning environment they developed that '*promises to support sustainable, beneficial learning by not only informing learners, but also encouraging them to construct and articulate their own views*'. Its focus is to encourage undergraduates and secondary school students in transition to '*...recognise, understand and appreciate research*'.

The final contribution to the second part of the Special Issue is from Carina Ginty of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology who discusses factors that enabled the transition to online learning and teaching at the institute level. The ongoing digital transformation was enabled by the capacity building of the Learning and Teaching Office and enhancement initiatives including the iNOTE professional development pathway and the DigitalEd Knowledge platform. She pays tribute to '*... the enormity of what was achieved in higher education, in a short space of time through dedication, collaboration, and innovation in moving teaching, learning and assessment online*' (p. 15).

The other papers also speak to priorities in learning and teaching. Suzanne Fergus, Ektaa Hirani, Nawal Parkar and Stewart Brian Kirton of the University of Hertfordshire in the UK present research on student behaviour in relation to summative and formative assessment on 1st Chemistry modules. The research focused on the use of a free online tool, PeerWise, that

allows students to generate their own multiple-choice questions. This was selected as the '*...variety and number of requirements within PeerWise presents a useful platform to analyse in detail any differences in student contributions between a formative and summative task*' (p.6), this enabled analysis of the level and quality of student engagement. They found that '*The quality of engagement across a formative and summative online assignment is consistent in relation to the questions created however, the formative cohorts adopt short cuts in some respects such as explanations, number of answer options and providing constructive comments. Summative assignment criteria will directly influence strategic engagement as evidenced by the quality of student comments and explanations.*' (p.19-20).

Independent scholar Liz Doherty's paper deals with lifelong learning for Irish traditional musicians. She proposes a new framework, TradLABB, that captures learning in two dimensions. The horizontal dimension (Beginner-Competent-Advanced-Expert) captures progression and milestones, while the vertical focuses on '*...the deeper, experiential learning and living aspect of becoming a traditional musician*' (p.8). This framework '*...presents an opportunity for teachers and learners to clearly and strategically consider the individual's learning journey and furnishes them with practical tools to prompt reflection and encourage discourse about the hitherto tacit process of learning*' (p. 12).

Our final contribution is a book review. Breda Brennan, Dundalk Institute of Technology, reviews the 'Handbook of Quality Assurance for University Teaching', edited by Roger Ellis and Elaine Hogard. This is a significant tome that includes 36 chapters by 48 contributors. It represents an '*...authoritative repository of a very large volume of research and case studies carried out over an extensive time period*' and '*...explores not only the current knowledge and practices in higher education QA but how we got here and why*'. This is a very thorough and useful review of a book that is likely to be an essential reference for anyone engaged in quality assurance.

All of us at AISHE-J would like to thank everyone who made this issue possible, at a very challenging time for many: the authors for taking time to document and share their work for publication at AISHE-J, our reviewers for their time, expertise and constructive input and our readers for their support and encouragement.

Finally, we are delighted to announce that the February 2022 issue will be another Special Issue,

in partnership with NStEP (National Student Engagement Programme): 'Student Engagement and Partnership in Ireland'. The call for papers has been announced and full details are available on our website, or by [clicking here](#).

We really hope you enjoy reading the current issue; stay safe everyone.