

## ***Introduction to the Issue***

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Welcome to the Spring 2026 issue of AISHE-J. We are delighted to present an interesting selection of papers on a wide range of issues relevant to Irish higher education and beyond.

Our first paper by Bonnie Stewart, 'Belonging and Place: A Case Study of Digital Practices at the University of the Highlands and Islands' is a fascinating account of a strengths-focused case study on belonging, place and digital practices at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). UHI comprises 48 campuses with a wide geographical distribution and the paper highlights '...aspects of how UHI successfully integrates place-based commitment with human-centered learning approaches' (p.14) and '*...centres how belonging can be fostered by an institution being grounded in the place and people it serves, even amidst this challenging global era in further/higher education*' (p.1). This study will be of particular interest, given the emergence of geographically distributed, multi-campus technological universities in Ireland.

Monica O'Mullane reports on developing and applying a visual mapping technique designed to enhance participant engagement in research interviews. The technique was applied in a study of Athena SWAN implementation in three universities. The findings indicated that the technique encouraged deeper discussion of key themes and ideas, helping to clarify how Athena SWAN initiatives contribute to different kinds of institutional change. The study also noted that one participant did not engage fully with the visual mapping activity during the interview, pointing to the need to adapt such approaches for both in-person and online research settings. The paper is particularly useful for those exploring innovative visual methods to facilitate reflection and dialogue in studies of institutional change and gender equality initiatives

In 'Navigating the leap: Understanding first-year computing students' journey into higher education' Aoife Hennessy and Kieran Murphy report on a qualitative study of computing students' transition experiences. Their findings '*...highlight the challenges faced by both traditional and non-traditional students and the importance of positive student-lecturer*

*relationships, with effective communication, clear explanations, and active engagement to create an environment that fosters student learning and overall satisfaction'* (p.18).

Our next paper also focuses on first-year students. Alison Merrotsy and Tom O'Mahony report on the impact of a physical activity and nutrition module on a number of wellbeing indicators in a sample of social care students. The paper demonstrates '*...the positive impact that a curriculum-embedded intervention can have on enhancing student well-being'* (p. 14).

Aidan Duane's timely paper 'The impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence on academic integrity' deals with an issue of great concern to all educators. In this study Gen AI tools were applied to past assessments with the goal of achieving a pass while undetected by an AI detection tool. Over twenty percent of these research tests were able to achieve a pass or higher without detection and the paper '*...provides further evidence that many forms of traditional assessments will become less viable as more sophisticated forms of Gen AI emerge'* (p.1.)

In 'A UDL approach to curriculum design and assessment using Fink's model of course design for significant learning', Christa de Brún focuses on the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to curriculum development. Her paper uses Fink's model and provides a useful example of how to integrate UDL principles with a particular focus on assessment and feedback.

The final paper, by Comfort Chima, is a reflection, by a nurse educator, on an Erasmus exchange. The paper '*...highlights the value of international academic exchange in fostering reflective teaching practice, cultural competence, and professional confidence'* and identifies '*...key lessons learned... actions to inform future teaching practice, thereby demonstrating the relevance of structured reflection in supporting continuous professional development for nurse educators within international contexts'* (p.1).

Taken together, the papers in this issue speak to many of the developments currently shaping higher education, nationally and internationally. The focus on belonging, inclusion, wellbeing, curriculum design, and academic integrity reflects ongoing conversations across the sector about how best to support students and staff in an evolving educational landscape. The

inclusion of work on generative AI, Universal Design for Learning, and innovative research approaches also highlights the creativity and adaptability of educators and researchers as they respond to new challenges and opportunities in teaching, learning, and institutional practice. As ever, we are very grateful to our authors for this varied, relevant and engaging collection of papers and to our reviewers who give so generously of their time and expertise.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Moira & Marie