Editorial
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What is This?
Editorial

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It is not so long ago that the literature on learning and teaching in higher education looked at whether or not we should use technology more, either in the actual classroom itself or to support the learning done outside the classroom, where far more of the learning is done given that learners spend a fairly small proportion of their time in the classroom. Over the last year or so, there is now no question of ‘should we, shouldn’t we’ when it comes to the use of any technology, but instead ‘technology is not only here to stay but it is a given, it is part and parcel of the learning experience, regardless of discipline or anything else and so we must harness its advantages to the best of our abilities to do so’. The days of studies describing whether or not students or educators would accept or like any technology have long gone. Also taken as a given, regardless of discipline or context, is that whatever learning is being done is supported in one way or another by a virtual learning environment (VLE) of some sort. Most institutions have invested in an ‘off-the-shelf’ VLE, that is, one available to buy from a company which produces such systems for the market. There are, as with everything, pluses and minuses of buying a system that we ourselves have not designed, or which has not been designed to our own specification, just as is the case when buying a pair of shoes or a suit from the high street. Designing and building our own VLE, in house, is akin to having a suit or a pair of shoes specially made for us, as a one off. It is, we hope, a perfect fit, but it comes at significant cost, not to mention a far longer time frame in terms of actually getting the product, and as a one off, we have to cross our fingers that our plans and hopes for it before we order it are realised in the final product that is delivered. As most universities are watching the pennies, whether or not they are funded mostly by the taxpayer/government, such as in the United Kingdom, or funded via other means, it is no surprise that most of the institutions in which we work opt for the ‘high-street’ version of a VLE, that is, one that is not specially designed for the individual institution in question. There is the possibility of asking the company who designed and sold the VLE to customise it somewhat, customisation for each individual institution, but this comes at a not inconsiderable additional cost, and also a fairly long timescale for the work to be done.

On the teaching side, most VLEs are used for the purpose of uploading material that is to be, or has been, used in the classroom, for students to upload their coursework to it and to be provided with feedback on it via the same means, and perhaps as a means to communication between students and their lecturer or between themselves. However, regardless of the sophistication of the VLE, whether designed in house or bought from the market, it is ‘clunky’ and not without its drawbacks, not least of which is that students, these days, expect to be communicating with us, their educators, and with their fellow students, in a very different way, just as they do in their non-university environment. To say that the use of technologies such as Twitter and Facebook dominates our social lives, and, increasingly, our working lives, is an understatement. Even the most ‘traditional’ of universities, while at first resisting any association with such ‘new fangled’ means
of communication and the association that they used to have with being concerned merely with gossip about celebrities and similar, now have Twitter feeds and similar as standard. No wonder, then, that both institutions and we, the educators who work within them, are turning our attention to technologies that are far more readily available and accessible to us, at the touch of a button, on our mobile phones. No longer do students want to, or expect to, rely on going through a VLE discussion board, often needing a lengthy log in process not to mention actually getting to the section that they need, which can take quite a bit of time. This is the generation that wants, and expects, things to be far more instantaneous, immediate and simple. Just as things are on their mobile phones, in fact. And, most educators, even if we are not as au fait with Twitter and the like as our students, we have realised that the use of technologies such as Twitter is something that we shall have to embrace, even if we do not either use them much ourselves or knowing what can and cannot be done using them. Many have embraced their use, both outside the classroom and within it. These ‘early adopters’ have rapidly been joined by a significant number of fellow educators, all keen, if lacking in experience, to harness the benefits afforded by such technologies.

A few years ago, the literature on learning and teaching in higher education was dominated by studies about the ‘new’ technology of the VLE, but the VLE is now ‘not new at all’. As the technology has now moved on, so studies are now looking at the use of Twitter and similar, as this is the new ‘new’. No wonder, then, that one of the articles comprising this issue, like all of the very recent issues, looks at the aspects of one of these new technologies. In the first article of this issue entitled ‘A Focus on Students’ Use of Twitter – Their Interactions with Each Other, Content and Interface’, its author, Sarah Prestridge, from Griffith University, Australia, provides the reader with a very good overview of Twitter, something that is a Web 2.0 technology, and how those using Twitter can post messages, called ‘tweets’, and how they can be forwarded to others as ‘re-tweets’. It is not just something for short and simple messages, however, as links to photos or videos or anything else can be included, which, for educators, is clearly something of great interest, as the author notes. However, while many of us use Twitter both within and outside the educational context, as described in the article, there are inevitably downsides which, in the case of such technologies, means feelings of isolation and a lack of engagement as a result if it is used as a means of communication that takes place outside the classroom. Referring to a discussion board on a learning management system such as that which we all have in our institutions, the article looks at the differences between communication via a learning management system and via Twitter, and that, in essence, the former is far more teacher-centred given that it is us, the educators, who initiate the interaction. In some ways, it is more akin to a ‘question-and-answer’ session in the normal classroom, but online. It is also us, the educators, who upload material to a learning management system; it is rare to find students being encouraged to, or being given permission to, have an input into the content side of what they are learning about. With Twitter or similar, it is a very different thing, as the article details; there is the possibility of the user, the student, to generate that content. Interaction, too, is different; interaction is not just a ‘ask and answer a question’ but instead that interaction is, itself, central. It is a technology that is not teacher-centred but instead more learner-centred, more student-directed. This, as the article tells us, is not without its downsides, not least of which is the loss of control that we, educators, have and also that the institution that we work for has over what is transmitted via Twitter.

In the very early days, there was a great deal of fear that Twitter, when used in or outside the classroom to support learning and teaching, would result in many cases of inappropriate behaviours, either by students or staff or anyone else, some of which might even lead to legal repercussions of some sort which would damage the reputation of the institution or that of someone within it. Since then, while there are always a very small minority of people who behave inappropriately, whether in a more minor way or otherwise, that all institutions are now using Twitter tells us that
those fears were unfounded and that, while we should naturally continue to monitor what is posted on Twitter and take action if necessary, Twitter is, for the most part, ‘a good thing’, despite the blurring of the boundaries between the personal and professional lives of both ourselves and of our students, as the article tells us. One key benefit of using Twitter is its ability to help to foster a sense of community, as outlined in this article, which goes on to say that this is all the more important if students do not meet face to face, do so rarely or do so only in very large classes. We all need a ‘presence’ and, the article tells us, in contrast to the lack of presence in a learning management system, Twitter allows students to develop a social presence that is needed for experiences, ‘participatory practices’ among them, which are essential for learning. The article goes on to detail how the use of Twitter and other such tools fit well within the current pedagogy of constructivist theories, which, even if we claim that our practices are underpinned by this, are often far from it, in reality (the idea of ‘disseminating knowledge’ still underpins much of what we do in higher education). The article tells us that there are some who say that learning with Web 2.0 tools is so different that it should be called ‘Learning 2.0’. However, as the author rightly says, while much has been made of the potential benefit of the use of such technologies for our learners (and for us, the educators), these are new, and so, there are few studies that have been carried out which helps us to better understand how (or if) we might Twitter to support our students’ learning, whether within or outside the classroom. The study described in the article looks at how students make course content active using Twitter and how, if at all, do they use it to help them to learn and to do something specific, such as undertaking an item of coursework and what types of interactions are there between students and their lecturer. The results tell us that the students struggled not only with the functionality of Twitter but also in recognising that what the lecturer had posted was of direct benefit to their learning. There are important implications for practice here, and the article tells us what these are, including which interactions best support the learning process and the role that assessment should, or should not, play in its use. Because, as we all are aware, if assessment is part of anything, this necessarily means that engagement and everything else is different. Whether you yourself use Twitter in your own classroom or not, this article is thought provoking, which can be only a good thing.

Our attitudes to Twitter or to anything else impact our teaching practices, naturally enough, and like Twitter, the use of Facebook is currently generating much debate and is also becoming more widely used to support learners in higher education. Entitled ‘Teaching Style and Attitudes towards Facebook as an Educational Tool’, the second article comprising this issue looks at how our teaching style either informs or impacts our use of Facebook. In this, its author, Julie Prescott, tells us that, just like Twitter, as so many of us now use such technologies in our home lives, so too are we using it in our work ones. Not only do our students hope that, like in their own social lives, we, in universities, will use it too, but they are somewhat taken aback when they discover that we do not. They expect, if not demand, that we do. As in the first article, this one also raises the matter of ‘presence’, identity, our personas, and that in the online environment, it is no easy matter to develop this despite how important it is to our professional life, and in that of our students who will, all too shortly, also be working as professionals. As with Twitter, the use of social networking sites (SNSs) is not without its difficulties, not least of which are around ethics, privacy and appropriate behaviour when it comes to ‘professionalism’ when using such technologies. However, the literature on this newer technology is, like Twitter, still in its infancy, hence the need for studies such as those in this issue. ‘Active learning’, as the term suggests, means that students have to actively engage in some way, whether with another human being, be that a fellow student or their lecturer or someone else, or on their own, with the subject matter, either within or outside the classroom, virtual or otherwise. As the focus is naturally on learners and learning, there are fewer studies which look at teachers and teaching, naturally enough. However, if we, educators, are to
use technology such as Facebook for teaching at all, or to use in different or better ways than we currently do, then, this study sheds light on how our own beliefs shape our thinking and our practices. As the article tells us, we are unlikely to use any technology at all if we do not know much or anything about it or if we have little or no experience of using it. There is also the issue of our preferred teaching style, however, that is, whether we adopt a more teacher-centred or a more learner-centred one. While many of us claim that we adopt the latter, what we do or design often demonstrates that, in practice, we are more teacher-centric than we would wish to be. That aside, this article looks at both, that is, the views that we, educators, have when it comes to using SNSs such as Facebook and the relationship of the use of this to a particular teaching style.

In common with Twitter, the use of Facebook is bound up with issues concerning our online presence, our identity, our persona and, for those of us teaching in higher education and also for our learners, there are boundaries between what is ‘work’ and what is ‘personal or home life’. However, as Twitter or Facebook or similar are mostly used in the ‘personal or home life’ arena and their use has only recently been seen in the ‘work’ environment, it is not unsurprising that potential dangers lurk when it comes to setting, and keeping, the appropriate boundaries between the ‘personal’ and the ‘work’ if we are to maintain suitable professionalism. This article looks at the possible blurring of these identities and the implications that this has for both educators, whether we consider our teaching style to be learner-centred or otherwise, and for learners. The article also sheds light on any gender differences here, that is, whether or not male faculty/educators find or see the boundary between ‘work’ and ‘personal’ to be more distinct and/or easier to maintain than their female counterparts. As, these days, many institutions ask us to put up our profile on one online site or another in an attempt to either foster collaboration with those outside the institution or for variety of other purposes, it is clear that issues associated with what we put up, online, about ourselves is an important aspect of what we do. At the moment, and as the article tells us, the proportion of faculty/educators actually using Facebook within their teaching is very small indeed, but it is certain to increase, not least because our learners expect it. The more we know about these technologies the better, even if we choose not to use them or use them only sparingly. When considering our presence, our identity, our profile, whether online or not, we consider who we are, as a professional, and take into account our achievements and also those which we are planning in the near and the not-so-near future. As academics, one such opportunity to reflect on our career comes by way of undertaking regular appraisal. This is usually fairly formal, with a report being written and kept on file, although there is often the opportunity for more informal engagement between appraiser and appraisee. For our students, our future graduates, we embed what is often called ‘personal development planning’ (PDP) into our degree programmes and also via other mechanisms offered in the university more widely, such as via a careers and work placement office. However, much of our efforts in this regard are usually targeted at undergraduate, rather than postgraduate, students, for one reason or another. As the authors of the third article rightly say, little if any attention has been focused on postgraduate students and even less on postgraduate students who are from overseas, that is, they have chosen to study outside of their home country. Entitled ‘International Students and their Experiences of Personal Development Planning’, this article, by Kate L Baker, Joy Perkins and Darren PM Comber, looks at the views of this particular group of students, arguing that they may well have different views of this than their ‘home’ counterparts. As the article says, PDP has become a feature of the higher education landscape of late, as degree programmes become more closely aligned with what future employers are asking for in their employees, our graduates.

While universities are not providing ‘training courses’ for the workplace we are nonetheless helping to ensure that our graduates, whatever they do after graduation, have the personal skills and abilities that they need, both for the workplace and for anywhere else, including in their personal
lives. The article describes the three ‘ideal types’ of such development, namely, professional, employment and academic, and that we should support our students to identify, develop and evidence their learning in some way. In the early days of PDP, there was a view that students should keep a ‘learning journal’ or ‘diary’ or some other written means of recording their experiences, practices and reflection upon these, and some institutions asked learners to upload these to a central repository of some sort, and often made these items that contributed in some way to their degree programme by being awarded a mark/grade. Given that making public something which is supposed to be private (a diary is a private thing), there has, since that time, been less of an emphasis placed on the production of such journals or diaries although, rightly and properly, the activities associated with helping students to develop their skills and to reflect on them remains. Whatever the activity, we should all be concerned with helping our students to achieve their potential, a point made in the article. However, for those students who have chosen to undertake their postgraduate studies in a country other than their home one, the challenges that they face are arguably both different from, and more difficult than, those faced by students who are studying in their home countries in the main, and these are detailed in the article. As so little is known about PDP when it comes to postgraduate students, whether they are studying in their home country or not, this article sheds light on this little explored area. The findings from the study have implications for careers advisers and other employability practitioners, say the authors, but also for us, those who teach postgraduate students, whether those from their home countries or not. It is not only postgraduate students who have chosen to study outside of their home country who face challenges, of course. So, too, do a number of students, and probably far more than we know about given that only a relatively small proportion of students bring to our attention anything which is significantly affecting their studies in some way. Fortunately, some of the problems that our students, and colleagues, face are short term and more minor in nature, such as a rotten bout of flu or a broken wrist. Yes, they affect performance in some way and, in the case of students, they may necessitate some extra time being given to complete items of coursework or an examination. However, some are far more major, and may result in them giving up their course for good.

Much of the literature on attrition focuses on the reason(s) why students drop out of their studies, and the reasons are diverse and sometimes complex, as the article, the fourth in this issue, attests. However, as the title ‘Why Students Consider Terminating Their Studies and What Convinces Them to Stay’ tells us, this is an article not about why they choose to, or have to, leave but instead what makes them change their mind. Its author, Sharon Xuereb, tells us that more students than we believe is the case consider whether or not they should continue with their course and that of those a not insignificant number will withdraw. For some, it is entirely the right decision that they withdraw from their studies, naturally enough. If they discover, early on, that they would much rather be studying psychology rather than sociology, say, then we would be only happy for them to leave in order to pursue their goal of studying something that they have a real passion for, or feel is more suitable for them. Or, they move home, or face family or other problems of such a serious nature that, at that point in time, being elsewhere must take priority. However, the author of this article argues that there is likely to be a proportion of students who, although they might be doubting whether or not to continue with their studies, would do so if given suitable support; hence, the need for a study looking not at why students leave but instead at why they doubt and also at why they continue. The article therefore looks at the literature on persistence and how this is linked to social and academic integration, and also how the various factors interact when students decide to withdraw and tells us the characteristics of those students who are more likely to persist than others. While the article makes the point that academic success is more than simply about persistence, it nonetheless says that there is a whole host of factors related to it which predict that success, yet another reason why it is important to further explore the issue of doubting. Looking at
both ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional students’, the study sheds light on the most common reasons given by students for their doubting. The article raises the question of whether or not we should embed such support into the curriculum in some way given that there are those who, for various reasons, are reluctant to ask us for help and support although this, too, has its downsides, as detailed in the article. When it comes to decision-making about our practices, either within or outside the classroom, our fellow colleagues, our peers, are sources which are available to us. Their experiences, their views, their practices, all help to shape our own.

As academics, we are well used to peer review, for example, when referees look at articles which we submit to journals or when we put in applications for funding for research. Whether our work is accepted or rejected, peer review offers an opportunity for us to learn from our peers, even though we may neither know who they are, given that most referees remain anonymous or we do not meet them in person. While such feedback is doubtless useful, when it comes to asking our learners to peer review the coursework of their fellow students, this is a far more complex matter, not least because, while no one would disagree that feedback from anyone, whether a fellow student or anyone else, provides for a learning opportunity and the possibility of improving the work, unless the coursework does not attract a mark, there are implications for us, the institution, who must ultimately make the award, whether that is an undergraduate degree or any other. It is the institution, the awarding body, which must ensure that the marks/grades awarded to those who graduate from it have been subjected to suitably rigorous quality assurance processes and that these are open to scrutiny from those outside the institution, too, given that external scrutiny is usually involved. No wonder, then, that authors Raoul A Mulder, Jon M Pearce and Chi Baik, all at the University of Melbourne, Australia, in the fifth article that comprises this issue, report that it is unusual for faculty/educators to allow students to peer review the coursework of their fellow students before they submit this for us, the markers, to mark and to provide a mark/grade; a mark/grade that, in all likelihood, is one which contributes towards their award. Entitled ‘Peer Review in Higher Education: Student Perceptions before and after Participation’, its authors rightly say that there is a tension, in that we are on the one hand tasked with helping our learners to develop self-regulation skills, something which is fostered by students peer reviewing the coursework of their fellow students, but, on the other hand, we, faculty/educators, consider that formative feedback on their coursework is something that we consider to be a responsibility that rests with us, alone; thus, it is something that we feel must be within our control, not within that of our students. However, while no one could or would disagree that self-regulation is indeed something that we need to help our students to develop as this is something that they need not only while at university but also in the workplace after graduation, the question is whether or not this should be fostered through asking students to peer review the coursework of their fellow students prior to it being submitted for a mark/grade to be awarded to it. There are many opportunities for students to develop the skills associated with self-regulation, and this does not necessarily have to be done via assessed work. That said, the article also says that our students often have assessment ‘done to them’ rather than being actively involved in it, and this is undoubtedly the case. So often, even though we describe the processes around assessment in great detail, it is, by the nature of the task, undertaken out of sight.

The article lists the very many benefits for our learners when they review the work of their fellow students, including aspects such as critical thinking, higher order cognitive skills, negotiation and diplomacy skills and giving and accepting criticism but also that it makes for a more collaborative and participatory learning environment. For those of us, teaching large classes of over 300, it is argued that it is more difficult to foster such an environment given the constraints, and so peer review may assist in this regard. And, regardless of institution or country, as the article confirms, students tell us that we, faculty/educators, do not provide enough helpful feedback to them, whether
on formative or summative assessment, so peer review is something that we could use in order to
do so. That said, while there might well be many faculty/educators who are wary of asking students
to peer review the coursework of their fellow students, the article says that students are themselves
equally wary or reluctant, the (many) reasons for which are listed, not least of which are those
around the crucial aspects which concern us, too, that is, institutions which must make awards, that
is, validity, reliability, bias and fairness. However, as the authors of this article tell us, much of the
work done and described in this area has been around summative, rather than formative, assess-
ment, and so the study described in their article tells us about the expectations and perceptions of
students when it comes to formative rather than summative assessment. Whether the students’ high
expectations at the start were the same at the end is described, as are some valuable pointers as to
what we, faculty/educators, need to design in if we are to implement this time-intensive practice
because, if we are going to spend a great deal of time on something, it has to have sufficient pay
off for our students and so must work as well as it can. The article raises some very interesting
questions about the whole subject matter of peer review, and it is a most worthwhile read as a
result. Peer review, like everything else that is regarded as valuable and important, is not without
opportunities for those who, for whatever reason, seek an unfair advantage. As markers, and as part
of an institution, we are always on the look out for instances of possible plagiarism, collusion or
any other aspect of dishonesty which may, if someone is found guilty of it, be the subject of disci-
plinary proceedings that may result in a variety of penalties, the worst of which may be expulsion
without any award. While expulsion is rare, what is not so rare is dishonest of one sort or another.
It is not surprising that it exists in higher education given that there is no reason to suppose that it
would not mirror society more generally.

As lecturers, teachers, we are well used to students asking us for extra time to complete an item
of coursework, that is, asking us for an extension, a revised deadline, and it is often no easy matter,
not least because we must be furnished with evidence that gives us confidence in our decision-
making when it comes to granting an extension of, say, a week or whatever is being asked for. Not
only do we, faculty, need to have confidence that the appropriate decision has been made, but the
institution more generally needs to be assured not only that each decision is appropriate but that
consistency applies. If left to each individual faculty member, this is no easy task given both the
experience and other factors of the individual member of staff but also of their perhaps limited
experience of dealing with what are, thankfully, rare events such as a student being diagnosed with
a life-limiting disease or perhaps suffering a violent assault or similar. While no one would disa-
gree that suffering a traumatic event warrants an extension being given, different members of staff
may make very different decisions in the light of them, with one member of staff considering that
an extra 6 weeks is justified and another member of staff considering that, for the very same situa-
tion, only 3 weeks is reasonable. Many institutions leave such decision-making in the hands of the
individual faculty member, the member of staff who is responsible for the marking on the module
in question. Some institutions instead have a centralised system, where decisions are made not by
the individual faculty member, the member of staff who is responsible for the marking on the mod-
ule in question, but instead by a school or university-level panel who meet to look at such requests
and who make decisions which are then fed back to the marker, the individual member of staff.
Whoever makes the decision, whether an individual faculty member or instead a panel, there is the
need to look closely at the claims made by the student who is asking for extra time or for some
other reasonable adjustment to be made. The issue of claims, fraudulent ones, is the subject of the
sixth and final article in this issue. Authors Lacy E Krueger, from Texas A and M University, the
United States, and Anna M Carmichael, from Brandeis University, the United States, examined this
vital aspect, looking at the factors involved, the attitudes of students towards the reasons or excuses
given and how the consequences do or do not affect their reporting of claims. Entitled ‘An
Examination of Factors and Attitudes that Influence Reporting Fraudulent Claims in an Academic Environment’, the article looks not at genuine reasons which allow us to grant extra time or whatever and for which we are only too happy to do so, given the nature of the mitigating circumstances that we have been made aware of and for which we have evidence but instead at deception, that is, where a reason has been fabricated with the sole intent to obtain something, such as an extension, that is not warranted, thus giving them a potential unfair advantage over their peers.

As the authors rightly say, we often think of cheating in the examination room or plagiarism in coursework when we think of academic dishonesty, but such behaviour is by no means limited to this narrow range of activity. The article tells us why students might choose to deceive and cites a study which tells us that not only is making fraudulent claims at least as frequent as cases of cheating and plagiarism but that making fraudulent claims might be being made by as much as 70% of the student population and many believing it to be a ‘victimless crime’, that is, not as much of a crime as others. No wonder, then, that it is deserving of our attention, and the study described in this article. Looking at issues such as the law of effect, the article discusses literature that suggests that rather than it having purely negative connotations, deceptive behaviour may be viewed as a form of problem solving, something that is a positive thing. Whatever the case, there is also the issue of the medium, say the authors. Unsurprisingly, if we choose to fabricate a claim, it is different if we have to meet, face to face, the person that we are attempting to deceive, so literature in this area, say the authors, has looked at different theories given the two different mediums involved, that is, face to face and via email, telephone or some other technology-enabled mechanism. The study described in the article looks at the nature or type of reasons that students give when making claims, but, as is obvious, if we ask students to self-report, they are far less likely to report on their own ‘bad’ behaviour given that their ‘crime’ might be revealed to either us, the markers, or to the institution more widely, the authors chose to instead use vignettes in a hypothetical scenario, a means of gathering data that has been demonstrated to be as reliable than any other. The study tells us what types of claims are viewed as ‘compelling’ ones, that is, those which we will more easily ‘buy’ and which, by extension, students will get the advantage, extra time perhaps, that they believe that they should get and also whether it makes a difference as to whether they are more confident in making a claim if they do so via email or some other non face to face means. Aspects such as the age or experience of the lecturer/instructor impact decision-making as to whether or not to make a claim in the first place or the nature of the claim if made, as does the level of the course and other factors. There are also some quite worrying, unsettling findings; those who tell the truth say that they are less confident that we will grant them an extension. The findings from this study make for fascinating reading, not least because some of them are entirely contrary to what we would expect.