

Special Issue following the Innovations in Built Environment Education (IBEE) Conference 2017: Learning Matters

Book

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Special Issue following the Innovations in Built Environment Education (*iBEE*) Conference 2017: Learning Matters

Welcome to this Special Issue of the Journal which results from the *iBEE* 2017 conference, the theme of which was ‘Learning Matters’. This could be argued, goes without saying: of course learning matters. After all, isn’t learning the whole ‘*raison d’être*’ of education? If it is not, just what is the purpose of Universities? Or put another way, are not educational establishments ‘seats of learning’? Or are they places of teaching? Or research?

UK funding for universities has traditionally favoured the research-intensive institutions. However, the 2017 conference took place shortly after UK government published the results of their (then) new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (Office for Students, 2017). This has been introduced to reward universities financially, and indirectly in reputational terms, on the assessed quality of teaching provision and thereby balance the emphasis on research. TEF placed the lens of attention firmly on student satisfaction and other metrics for the assessment of teaching quality; it produced some great ‘food for thought’ many aspects of which were debated in a lively fashion over the duration of the conference.

Some of the themes that were prevalent in the conference debate are represented in this Special Issue. Within both TEF and the long-established National Student Survey (NSS), which canvases the opinion of every final year undergraduate student as to their experience, assessment and feedback is a major category determining results- and league tables! But it is also the area that typically provides most adverse comments from students; indeed the satisfaction figures for built environment , are often lower than those achieved in other disciplines. Little wonder then, that several presentations concentrated on how feedback on assessment could be made more effective as a learning vehicle. Typically, students often complain about a lack of timeliness in receiving feedback and the inadequacy of constructive comments to support learning. For this reason, the Special Issue contains two very different but insightful papers on ways of improving feedback.

Bevan’s paper provides a comprehensive literature review and a small-scale empirical study of how some students understand and benefit from feedback. She concludes that feedback is complex but that, above all else, students value consistency, certainty in terms of when it will be received and a personalised, criteria driven approach which enables them to know how they can improve. Interestingly, her finding that knowing *when* to expect feedback matters more to students than how long the process takes, is interesting as it runs counter to the drive for short turnarounds that is the dictat in many universities.

Whilst her findings related to postgraduate students, the more extensive longitudinal study carried out by Bassindale with architecture undergraduates, explores other aspects of the feedback experience. In architectural education, the design ‘crit’ is often regarded, at least by the educationalists, as central to the educational philosophy. However, as he points out, to the student it can be a discouraging and negative experience and he argues, from the experience in the case study, that the time taken to collate ‘crit’ sheets meant delay to students as well as feedback that was at times inconsistent and incoherent. Having identified the issue, the paper details the development and testing of an i-Pad application of a digital tool which enabled detailed, multi-modal feedback to the students within 24 hours.

Although, Bassindale concludes that the pilot scheme still needs work, it has been met with very positive reactions from students and indeed from tutors, although there has been acknowledgement that behavioural shift to accommodate new ways of working through the ‘crit’ are required.

So, both papers point to the need to ensure that feedback is appropriate to the task, to student aspirations (and expectations) and seen as a two-way collaborative exercise in which the student feels that assessment is not just something ‘done to them’ but an integral tool in their learning journey.

The other two papers in the Issue explore aspects that, directly or indirectly, relate to the locus of learning. Wilson and Cotgrave’s paper on the design of learning spaces, provides a detailed account of extensive research into the needs and preferences of built environment students. Undertaken at a time of rapid expansion in the provision of university student numbers and consequential building programmes, they argue that, too often, the design of new teaching spaces does not accommodate the pedagogic requirements of the educational provision. Through their research they developed a framework of choices that matter to students in terms of facilitating learning, including the feeling that they need convenient, integrated spaces but importantly ones that, Wilson and Cotgrave conclude, can create an identifiable ‘home’ suited to their specific learning needs: spaces that help support discipline identify. This, however, is a real challenge for designers, given the inevitable requirement that spaces should be flexible in order to accommodate future changes in educational provision in terms of, *inter alia*, student numbers, pedagogic approaches and delivery mechanisms.

From the design of learning spaces to support students on campus, the last paper relates to changes in learning mode and place, namely the resurgence of a new form of part-time study, degree apprenticeships. These were introduced by the UK government in 2015, as a result of the Richards Review (2012) and which provide opportunities that integrates learning in the workplace with an academic degree (National Apprenticeship service, 2015). Traditionally, built environment has been an area in which part-time degrees have flourished, but numbers have fallen away during a time when overall participation in higher education has burgeoned, reaching an almost 50% participation rate (House of Commons, 2020) despite escalating tuition fees. From a government perspective, degree apprenticeships offer the development of ‘work ready’ graduates: people who have experienced the profession to which they aspire whilst simultaneously learning the underlying theories. Dawson and Osborn’s CHOBE sponsored research gave critical insights into the experiences of one early provider of such degree apprenticeship programmes. Despite the identification of a number of key challenges to the provision, including increased governance and complexity and the need for close collaboration between the workplace educator, they identified key benefits especially in the resultant opportunities for better and deeper cooperation or/and collaborations between practice and academe and, critically, an enhancement to student learning and the resultant commercially aware, highly motivated graduates.

Whilst still in their infancy, the development of degree apprenticeships may indeed help to change the face of UK higher education, enabling some students to avoid debt whilst gaining the dual rewards of a transferable award and industry experience.

However, even as we write this editorial, the world is grappling with the rapid spread of Covid19 which is bringing into question many of our accepted norms of how we run our lives – including how we educate our children and university students. As campuses around the world enter lockdown, and universities plan and implement sudden shifts to whole-scale distance learning modes, will it provide the catalyst for the acceleration of off-campus learning. Probably only time will tell.

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