What works?

David Law


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In the Perspectives ‘Notes for Contributors’, to be found on the inside back cover of each issue, we begin by stating that our aim is to be of use to practitioners: ‘practicality is, to a large extent, what distinguishes us from other journals in the higher education field’. Not every piece we publish will meet this objective, but we would hope that professional services colleagues in the UK, and in some other countries, will see the journal as a ‘go to’ location for insight and understanding about the practical issues higher education faces.

In this edition we launch a new section that aims to foreground this objective. Our first piece under our new ‘What Works?’ heading, ‘The case for personal development’, is by a member of our Association. Jordan Kirkwood is an Apprentice Higher Education Manager at Aston University. He argues that the optimisation of opportunities, and the identification of positive steps, requires ‘strategies to understand and reflect on who we are, where we want to go, and why’.

Jordan approached his subject with personal reflection and a strong desire to communicate to colleagues. I hope he has set an example that others will follow. His paper endeavours to take a somewhat abstract issue ‘into a space that is more practical and tangible, both conceptually and in practice’. This is exactly what we want to see in contributions to this section. Perhaps you can follow his example?

Your editorial colleagues are convinced that readers of this journal, collectively, have much to contribute to discourse within the professional services community. We want you to consider how your experience of finding practical solutions might be of interest to others. We invite you to write briefly (2,500 words, more or less) about your experience of solving a problem in your professional life. If you would like to ask about the potential interest in your topic, or about anything else connected with this section, then please send an email to perspectives@aua.ac.uk. One of your editors will respond with advice.

Some years ago, as part of its commitment to encouraging practitioners to write for the journal, Perspectives established an annual prize. We received generous support from the John Smith group of companies, a service provider to higher education with a broad offer that includes bookshops and ‘stored value’ cards for use in bursary provision. Now the sponsorship for the writing prize has moved to Invisible Grail, a company that provides consultancy and courses for colleagues who care about the power of the written word and narrative. As I write this editorial we are considering several ‘thought pieces’ for prizes. The best pieces will be published in future editions and a new competition will be announced in the next issue of Perspectives.

In our 2018 competition we invited essays and articles about the challenges and rewards of managing change in higher education. The response was the strongest ever in our experience with this competition. We publish the five short-listed pieces in this edition.

Karen MacFarlane, the author of the winning piece, argues in ‘How can universities contribute to the common good?’ that although higher education has become increasingly competitive and stratified there is also a counteracting trend of opinion that wants to reclaim the civic role of universities. Karen, a Research Fellow at Glasgow Caledonian University, researches on widening participation and higher education. Her paper suggests that, if higher education is to reclaim its civic function, civic engagement needs to move beyond being a separate strand of activity for universities and become a guiding principle. The judges unanimously agreed that this essay deserved the first prize and Karen received it at the Association’s annual conference dinner in April 2019.

Kathryn Telling, University of Sussex, in ‘Different universities, different temporalities: placing the acceleration of academic life in context’ presents part of a work in progress and draws on interview data that she has collected. Many Perspectives readers work in professional services and not as teachers or researchers. For them, the option of ‘slowing down’ is generally not available although questions about the pace of change are clearly relevant. Perhaps those readers who have management responsibilities might like to reflect on Kathryn’s article and ask whether frenetic change is in the best interests of their institutions. Is there something here for you to write on under the ‘What Works?’ heading?

There is a point of contact between Kathryn Telling’s essay and the article we publish by Sarah Roberts-Bowman & Catherine Smith, ‘The death of a course: a case study of degree closure’. Their article is based on an exploratory qualitative study conducted with students in the final year of their closing programme. The authors suggest there has been a lot of work on quality assurance and validation processes, but
insufficient attention paid to course closure. Their paper contributes fresh conceptual insight to a little-researched subject.

Esther Bray’s piece discusses a case study at Brunel University London, where she works as a Projects Officer in the College of Health and Life Sciences. She considers how the Department of Life Sciences successfully managed a significant increase in its student numbers (the Life Sciences Expansion project). One defining feature was that the project team of volunteers involved a mix of staff from different teams. Academic and professional services staff alike wanted to participate and were encouraged to do so by a Head of Department who welcomed input from all colleagues.

Finally, in the pieces short-listed for the 2019 AUA Writing Prize, we have an essay by Nicholas Rogers, Director of Change Strategy at Aberystwyth University: ‘Why change? A practitioner’s perspective on why and how universities tackle organisational change (or don’t)’. This article is explicitly of a somewhat different character. It is not based on empirical research. The author draws on his experience of five different universities in different countries. He concludes that ‘the most critical factors affecting successful and substantive change are visible and engaging leadership; a joined-up senior team with a consistent message and support; and being authentic by answering any question no matter the difficulty.’

Our last piece in this issue is a lecture text by Nicola Dandridge the chief executive of the Office for Students (OfS), the public body which regulates the higher education sector on behalf of students. The OfS started work in September 2017 but until last August was working in a transitional mode. The lecture was given in November 2018 as the AUA’s Annual Lecture. Only a small minority of the Association’s members could hear the lecture live but through publication we can make the content available to a much bigger audience.

Michelle Gander in ‘Managing Human Resources’, our last issue, said farewell to readers and to our Editorial Board. We will miss her enthusiasm and sustained commitment for the ten years that she was first a member of the Board and then a Principal Editor. We wish her every success at Flinders University in Australia. My colleagues and I would also like to pay tribute to Dr John Hogan, Registrar at Newcastle University, who successfully chaired the journal’s Editorial Advisory Board (EAB) for nearly a decade and has now retired from this role.

In the summer of 2019, we welcomed some new members to our Board, appointed a new Principal Editor to replace Michelle, and the Association’s Board of Trustees confirmed the appointment of Dr Matthew Andrews, University Secretary and Registrar at Gloucestershire, as the new Chair of EAB.

Our new Principal Editor, C Bland Tomkinson, has been a member of AUA for over 40 years. He has published in Perspectives and is a Mentor for the PgCert. His career began as Assistant Registrar for Special Projects at UMIST (now part of the enlarged University of Manchester) almost exactly 40 years ago. Bland has valuable editorial experience as a Board member of an Australian journal published by Taylor and Francis, Higher Education Research and Development. He will strengthen our journal through his experience. He is very committed to listen to what AUA members want from the journal so please email your suggestions to him at bland.tomkinson@manchester.ac.uk.

Notes on contributor

David Law, formerly PVC (pro vice-chancellor) (Students and External), retired from full-time employment at Edge Hill University in 2012 and then was Director of the Edge Hill Confucius Institute for two years. He has been Principal Editor of Perspectives since 2012. Currently, Dr Law is an Honorary Professor at Keele University and the Managing Director of a Consultancy: IETC Ltd.

David Law
davidlaw.academic@gmail.com