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Editorial

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It is fairly common to read studies in the academic literature dealing with the online delivery of educational resources, but it is less common to read about the issues of academic practice which are implemented across multiple campuses or between multiple institutions. Despite the increasing occurrence of multi-campus universities, including those with bases in other countries, there still appears to be a natural tendency to regard ‘the university’ as a single, heterogeneous cluster of buildings on a ‘home’ campus. This special edition of JPAAP focuses on learning and teaching in the distributed university in an attempt to begin to redress this balance.

It is not solely about learning and teaching, however, complex though this can be. In addition to geographically distributed education, we also consider educational resources distributed across a diversity of media, or ‘blended learning’ as it is known in the vernacular. This includes staff development, institutional policy and strategy, and potentially all forms of collaborative academic tasks that occur on a cross-institutional or inter-campus basis. This is an enormous scope of activity, and it can often become quite complex, in practice as well as theory, so consequently the practitioners are more frequently engaged in wrestling with daily realities than in writing about what we do. Additionally, this area of “distributed education” appears to merge seamlessly into another two huge areas of contemporary education, namely the digital literacy agenda and the increasing transparency of open education.

In this issue, Sheila MacNeill and Bill Johnston start us off with a position paper which questions the nature and the importance of the distribution of education in the digital age. They present us with a conceptual framework in an attempt to give some form and structure to our subsequent discussions over the next few years. Taking this forward, Gina Wall cites a number of European experiences to explore how the geographical distribution of the functions of a university offer us new ways of thinking about what ‘being a university’ actually means.

The collection of articles in this issue fall naturally, but not by pre-design, into three clear areas. Firstly, three papers look critically at the broad subject area in the context of the University of the Highlands and Islands. Helen Coker uses a case study to enquire into the nature of learning within the online learning environment and how different students and staff utilise this space. This is followed by an overview from Michael Smith and Donald MacDonald on the quality and effectiveness of online education, with a consideration of the challenges and benefits explicit in the medium, particularly for rural and scattered communities. We are then taken by Elsa Panciroli and her colleagues into a consideration of how current practices in blended learning are being assessed and used to help evolve effective policy and strategy across a distributed institution.

The second section comprises three studies on student perceptions and reactions to the distributed environment. Aaron MacRaghne and his co-workers discuss the advantages and disadvantages of peer-instruction in science education online, taking a cross-institutional perspective from Dublin and Glasgow. Simon Clarke, on the other hand, investigates the medium itself and explores student perceptions of the use of videoconferencing for learning and teaching. Also investigating student perceptions, Gareth Davies presents a case study on student anxiety relating to online assessment in a distributed environment. All three articles suggest differing responses and useful insights for staff seeking to engage with students simultaneously in different geographical locations.

The third section specifically discusses diverse aspects of continuous professional development opportunities for academic staff, particularly in relation to the use of online resources. Colin Gray presents a method for cross-institutional staff development for delivering online learning, and in a similar context, Chrissi Nerantzi explores collaboration through professional networks to share and strengthen collegial experiences. In another paper, Nerantzi and Sue Beckingham further develop the theme of cross-institutional CPD, and open course development more generally, with an eye to transnational and multi-cultural collaboration. Finally, Rachel Erskine and Eilidh MacPhail bring the needs of staff and students together in their study of staff development requirements in order to support students with mental health conditions who choose the distributed university for their engagement with higher education.

Like all good research, we leave this issue with a suggestion of further reading to analyse our relationship to the changing concept of openness in education with the book review by Marion MacDonald.

Hopefully, there is something to stimulate everyone and encourage continued challenges to the idea of a static, mono-locational university. The growing popularity of social media and the willingness for students to engage with non-traditional forms of academic and scholarly activities seems to indicate that there is an exciting future for the distributed university. I look forward to the contributions in this special issue being the springboard of many more animated and innovative interventions.

Frank Rennie

Guest Editor

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Biography

Frank Rennie is Professor of Sustainable Rural Development at the University of the Highlands and Islands and Assistant Principal (Research, Enterprise, and Development) at Lews Castle College UHI. His particular research interest is in online education and the use of ICT for rural areas.