

Harrington, I. (2021). Message from the Editor-in-Chief: IJHE June 2021. *Journal of Higher Education*, 10,(7). **SPECIAL ISSUE**

As the COVID pandemic continues to disrupt our daily lives in the form of lockdowns, curfews and other constraints on liberty now being extended in time and place, there can be little doubt that we are all struggling with the deep challenge of combatting nature at its aggressive, biologically-engineered best. Differences in opinion are firmly drawn around access to and participation in vaccination programmes, and the cultural shift to a model of societal engagement that preserves health and safety for everyone. Thus, we are all reminded about how complex the democratic processes are in real life practice, and what responsibility we carry for preserving freedom of speech.

Educators and academics alike continue to meet their obligations at higher education institutions, by adapting their teaching to remote and online teaching modes. Numerous challenges face each global tertiary provider, and the dedication and commitment of its educators that strive to deliver innovative, effective and engaging pedagogies to meet the complex needs of the many students in their virtual classrooms is admirable. We are proud to present this Special issue with a focus on sharing strategies that may assist in improving student retention rates, reducing attrition levels, and improving the overall tertiary student experience, through contributions from Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand, Australia, South Africa and Canada.

The first article by Wibawanto and colleagues explored the implementation of Indonesian batik art practices that involved online learning and digital technology. Their findings confirmed that the artistic practice of making batik motifs can be successfully taught online, and participants can effectively make these designs by employing the Dbatik application. The next article by Dembereldorj assessed Mongolian student engagement during the COVID lockdowns, specifically, the differences of student engagement across gender, the tools students chose when studying, and their level and field of study. The study also determined the associations between variables, and his findings confirmed that internet access was highly correlated with the performance variable. Beauchamp, Newton and Monk's research assessed the effectiveness of small online learning groups as the active engagement strategy replacing in-person breakout groups, to promote scientific literacy skill development in fourth year undergraduate nutritional science students in an online learning environment. The data demonstrated that the adaptations of an in-person course to an online learning environment using small online learning groups, can similarly promote the development of scientific literacy in undergraduate nutrition education.

The fourth article by Puntularb, et.al's study examines the characteristic variables of motivation, belief in language, anxiety, and self-regulation in online English learning classes, as well as investigating the relationship between the characteristic variables and self-regulation of undergraduate students at a private university in Thailand. The results showed that students were highly motivated, exhibited positive beliefs, moderate anxiety, and high self-regulation toward online English learning. The fifth article by Harrington and Mellors explored implementing the many proponents of gamification in tertiary units, promoting its usefulness for improving the university student experience by increasing progression and lowering attrition, particularly among first year students. This discussion and instructional

paper undertook a review of the gamification literature within the Australian higher education context, concurrently exploring what it means and how to use gamification to enhance student learning.

The next article by Kim, et al. suggests how a Peer-Tutoring Online Discussion (POD) class model can be used to increase student engagement in online courses among undergraduate students with diverse sociocultural backgrounds and college majors. The study also examines the impact of the POD approach by exploring the experiences of undergraduate students who took online liberal arts courses that employed the POD model. Their findings indicate that the POD class model includes characteristics that can be especially significant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as opportunities for relationship-building, self-directed learning based on establishing a rapport, and discussion management that considers time limits. The seventh article in this issue is from Tiernan, O’Kelly and Rami’s research that investigated the nature of teacher training for students completing their Initial Teacher Education (ITE), whose preparatory tertiary programmes of study did not include online teaching components. The objective of their study was to develop and evaluate a module for teaching in online and blended learning environments for 244 post-primary teachers in ITE. Their findings suggested that the implementation of the developed module was successful in preparing student teachers to teach online, providing them with the tools and confidence necessary for success. Improvements suggested the development of differentiated pathways for student teachers who are more experienced with online teaching. Mafugu’s research considered the impact of coursework-only assessment as made necessary at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in a mathematics course in a South African university. His findings suggest that a variety of assessment methods and a diversity of tasks may be used to ensure the reliability of the assessment outcomes. The second last article from Jacobs and her team in Canada, explored the positive impact of an ‘IdeasCongress’ approach upon student retention and engagement, to increase students’ feelings of connectedness to both the campus and the local community, due to the shift to remote learning. The paper highlights key lessons learned while teaching and learning during challenging times, and describe the teaching approaches used to support students. The final article in this Special issue is from Robertson and associates, also from Canada, and they explored the critical need to provide an equitable, accessible, engaging, and motivating learning experience for students that maintained the learning outcomes and objectives of the course in a fully virtual and digitized format. Their findings challenge our thinking and asks us to reflect whether a course must be delivered in-person for it to be engaging, stimulating, and motivating.

I sincerely hope that the broad range of topics and information shared are of benefit to our readers. Importantly, I would like to thank all contributors and reviewers who continue to make the timely publication of the current issue possible. I look forward to receiving more contributions from researchers and practitioners for our future issues. Wishing all readers all the very best with their research studies.

Warm regards,
Dr Ingrid Harrington
Editor-in-Chief
International Journal of Higher Education