

## **Aren't students the point? Praxis in ever-changing higher education**

Editorial by Michael Shaughnessy, Zachary Taylor and Sally Windsor

Often discussions about the future of higher education focus on technology, funding, research visibility or institutional rankings, but the central issue remains the student. Today's students are more diverse than ever in their backgrounds, preparation, expectations, and learning needs. As is well known, higher education continues to evolve (whether by choice or by accident or by circumstance). Therefore, in an increasingly complex environment characterized by technological innovation, financial constraints, accountability mandates, political pressures, and changing student demographics, it is imperative that we return to the fundamental purpose of the university - the student.

To be clear, discussions regarding technology, artificial intelligence, assessment, governance, budgets, strategic plans, and institutional rankings are important for higher education institutions. We are not suggesting otherwise. Yet, these discussions should never overshadow the central mission of educating and supporting students. Praxis in higher education must be grounded in this reality. The student body is no longer homogeneous. Rather, it is diverse in terms of background, preparation, socioeconomic status, learning preferences, and personal experiences. Some students arrive academically prepared, while others require substantial support and remediation. Many are balancing employment, family responsibilities, financial insecurity, housing concerns, and mental health challenges while simultaneously pursuing their educational goals. Others are navigating a rapidly changing technological landscape in which Artificial Intelligence and digital tools are increasingly integrated into the learning process.

In this environment, educators and administrators must resist the temptation to become consumed by systems, structures, and bureaucratic processes at the expense of the individuals they serve. Bureaucracy is the reason higher education can exist but also the reason it is struggling, and educators must confront that reality. The challenge is not merely to manage institutions efficiently but to create and sustain conditions in which students can learn, develop, and thrive. Effective pedagogy, meaningful mentoring, accessible support services, and genuine human connection remain as important today as they have ever been. While institutions must continue to innovate and adapt, they must also remember that the ultimate

measure of success is not found solely in reports, metrics, or strategic initiatives, but in the growth, achievement, and well-being of students. If higher education is to remain relevant and impactful in the decades ahead, it must continually return to these foundational principles and keep the student at the center of its mission and practice.

As a result, this issue of *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education* focuses on what should ultimately be the focus of higher education everywhere: the student.

*Petersson and Fredriksson* delve into the interpersonal collaboration that occurs within the realms of social work and welfare, examining how training in Communities of Practice evolves and how interprofessional collaboration and communication function on behalf of students in need. This is a challenging piece, but underlying the discussion is an attempt to evaluate the pedagogy provided to students and the interventions needed to foster a more sustainable, just, and democratic society for all. Programs provide fidelity of instruction for students, but there is discussion regarding the most appropriate timing for instruction in the interpersonal and collaborative skills that are needed. Here, IPL (Interprofessional Learning) and COP (Communities of Practice) constructs are reviewed as integral to the instructional process. In planning for future student success, these two constructs are imperative to both instruction and the delivery of services to students. Professional identity, communication, and autonomy are reviewed as central components of the instructional process.

*Magnusson, Landgren and Lindoth* address a perennial challenge in higher education administration - the balance between managerial oversight, financial stewardship, and the autonomy of academic staff. Universities are continually confronted with demands for accountability, regulatory compliance, fiscal responsibility, and productivity, while simultaneously seeking to foster creativity, innovation, and excellence among faculty and staff. In recent years, there has been increasing reliance on managerial models and work-allocation systems that attempt to quantify academic labor. While these approaches may provide efficiency and accountability, they can also contribute to a sense of de-professionalization among faculty. Through a longitudinal case study conducted at a Swedish university, Magnusson and colleagues examine an alternative approach that utilizes “slack resources” to provide staff with greater flexibility, autonomy, and opportunities for professional growth. The results are intriguing. Not only did the institution report improvements in operational quality and workplace climate, but it also encountered new managerial challenges associated with sustaining this model. Underlying this discussion is a fundamental question that all universities must confront: How much structure is necessary, and how much freedom should be afforded to those charged with educating students and advancing knowledge? The authors suggest that

excellence is often fostered not through tighter controls, but through thoughtful investments in people, trust, and professional autonomy. Their findings provide important insights for university leaders seeking to balance efficiency, accountability, and institutional excellence in an increasingly complex educational environment, keeping students at the forefront of the work.

*Stolpe and Hedrén* examine a crucial realm in higher education – the involvement of artificial intelligence in the thesis process. The tools are there: the internet, Artificial Intelligence, and ChatGPT. How extensively these tools should be used is a matter of concern. In the past, the dictionary was used for spelling accuracy; now “spell check” performs this function. In the past, a professor’s keen eye and acumen were used to detect plagiarism; now we have Turnitin and other tools to discern plagiarism. This empirical study delves into the self-reflections of students regarding the skills and abilities they need and what technology can provide and supplement. In terms of research and statistical analysis, it is almost *de rigueur* to employ statistical packages for data analysis for the sake of expediency. In truth, technology is pervasive and is facilitating a more efficient learning process.

*Genge and Osgood*, in their article, delve into the dual issues of accountability and shared governance, as well as the attempt to involve students in leadership and encourage them to accept a certain amount of accountability for leadership within the university. The university cannot rely entirely on student leaders for guidance, particularly in these increasingly complex and intricate times. In this day and age, with growing concern about student mental health and stress, students are in a perplexing situation in which they are only minimally involved within the time frame of a university (typically four years), while the university continues on for decades. There is a disconnect between institutional recognition and sustained personal support for student leaders. This disconnect can be fiscal or personal in nature. Utilizing Sanford’s theoretical perspective, Genge and Osgood cogently examine this realm and suggest greater institutional accountability and sustainable collaboration to enhance the collaborative process and recognize the shortcomings of relying solely on student participation and the construct of saviorism.

Finally, *Luukinen, Uusiautti and Kyrö-Ämmälä* address the topic of “bullying” in all its myriad forms. At first, it is almost inconceivable that in this day and age, after literally decades of interventions at the elementary and high school levels, bullying still occurs. Often, it has been renamed as “microaggressions,” where subtle comments are perceived as negative and derogatory. Luukinen and colleagues have provided contemporary data regarding how students cope with this phenomenon. As adults and academicians, we are concerned with students and their well-being, making this article highly relevant and appropriate. Since we are

concerned with the mental health of students, we should also be concerned about the instances and types of bullying that occur and how students cope with the physical or verbal bullying events they encounter. The authors argue for community acknowledgment and intervention on behalf of students who may have experienced this negative phenomenon.

Ultimately, the provision of instruction to students, the mentoring of students, the development of students' thinking skills, and the creation of institutional environments that foster both learning and professional excellence are all exemplified in the various articles contained within this issue. Collectively, these authors remind us that higher education is fundamentally about people – students, faculty, staff, and communities – and the continual effort to create conditions in which learning, collaboration, well-being, and excellence can flourish.