

## Editorial

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In working with ARPCE over the last 6 years, the conference held in Oxford has become a biannual highlight of my working cycle. Having attended all three conferences, (the first as a lecturer of engineering in further education, the second as a department manager in further education and the third as a lecturer in a university), each has afforded me opportunities to explore and engage with areas of interest. Despite my rapidly changing roles, each conference was relevant, meaningful, challenging and importantly, I took away far more from each than I brought (that is allowed at conferences!). My encounters with the conference and the colleagues and friends in attendance, have enriched my working life enormously and I now find myself in several privileged positions. Most relevant to the task of writing this piece is the privilege extended to me by Professor Geoffrey Elliot in inviting me to partner with him to guest edit this special conference issue of the *Journal of Research in Post Compulsory Education*. My initial work leading to this invitation was in helping to support the organisation of the conference, a task undertaken by committee members to whom I am very grateful for their efforts and dedication. The conference was attended by over a 100 colleagues across three days and amidst the beautiful setting of Oxford University's Harris Manchester College, 60 presentations were given and attended. Several key themes emerged at the conference which are reflected in these published papers, to which I will attend shortly, but before I do, it would be remiss of me not to explore the point at which these themes emerged.

It was clear upon receiving 80+ abstracts for the conference that there would be few problems in constructing an interesting and relevant programme. ARPCE holds at the centre of its constitution the aim and desire to promote and support research from all areas of post compulsory education. This includes both further and higher education, adult and community education, 3<sup>rd</sup> sector and private providers. For the first time this year ARPCE partnered with sponsors for the event which enabled a more varied and broader aspect of post compulsory education to be represented and participate. Funding from the ETF and Edge Foundation meant that places at the conference could be filled by colleagues working in FE colleges who had no readily available access to funding for conferences. Furthermore, partnerships with the Times Educational Supplement and Central Bedfordshire College gave us access to a broader and more diverse community and once again enabled a greater participation from colleagues in further education. This increased engagement greatly enhanced the conference and added to the friendly and supportive environment. All levels of experience were treated with respect, voices were heard across sectors and the network connections were buzzing over the whole weekend.

An advantage of the fairly wide post compulsory focus is the distinctive yet broad perspectives of the papers and authors which in turn, lead to a diverse and colourful array of presentations. A great number of research methodologies were discussed and as broad an aspect of professionals represented as I have ever seen in any conference. Practice based research was considered alongside ethnographic works which in turn shared spaces with quantitative approaches and grounded theory, and indeed, many more paradigms and scholarly approaches. There were a great many combinations of work, all of which added to the layering and construction of knowledge presented over the weekend. This brings me back to the themes that emerged from the conference and the papers presented, a selection of which are given here.

The articles published here come from authors working from various perspectives and contextual backgrounds. Authors are variously working as lecturers in further education, leadership roles in colleges and universities, lecturers and researchers in universities, nomadic educators and independent researchers. You would be forgiven for perhaps entertaining the idea that this would lead to a wildly diverse set of interests, problematics, hypotheses and perspectives, and in some

ways it does (with respect to focus). Perhaps a little surprisingly though, this seemingly disparate set of papers collectively talks to key themes that emerge from their pages. Threads of hope, empowerment, resistance, creativity, real innovation, equality and fairness, stitch together these pages and collectively tell a story greater than the sum of their parts. Combined voices speaking through the whole and offering, in many ways, a chance to see how the many different parts of post compulsory education can feed into a narrative that speaks to the collective as a whole.

As we consider work such as Tarling's developmental model of curriculum design in FE or Leach's research examining factors affecting student motivation in HE; we begin to see parallels emerge shining a light on empowerment in learning across both sectors. These parallels extend further while considering issues such as trust or indeed purposeful mistrust as explored by Donovan which has direct and important implications related to Brown and Everson's work on compliance in enacting teaching roles supplanting the values of educators. We have been encouraged in the past to dichotomise between 'academic' and 'vocational' and distinguish between sectors, where in truth much can be learned from educational cousins and creative approaches to both learning and teaching can be shared. Willingly crossing bridges and embracing creative approaches to research impacting all areas of post compulsory education, the work presented here by Terry reveals the power of innovative techniques to empower research participants. Mycroft continues this narrative as she explores the idea of the bower bird as a metaphor speaking to empowerment through humanising research and education.

The ARPCE conference has become a valuable staging ground for the development of key collaborations and ideas all pointing towards making a positive and significant shift in the perceptions of work in post compulsory education. Reviewing and editing these papers alongside the work undertaken in curating the conference, I have become surer in my thinking surrounding the problematic dichotomy drawn between 'academic' and 'vocational' work and sectors. I don't believe that we should argue for a parity of recognition and esteem between the two halves of the dichotomy, I believe simply that the delineation is misleading and founded in a systemic, historical, cultural and political misconception that is no longer relevant or useful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Arguably, neither vocational nor academic work can exist independently of the other, they are in fact both inextricably intertwined parts of the same thing, which is learning. We should argue then that we recognise equally, and celebrate the successes of all sectors involved in providing post compulsory learning. This conference is testament to that ethos and the papers presented here, represent that thinking and sit side by side in these pages most comfortably indeed.

Some of the work published here highlights significant issues, problems and policy related approaches to education that are at best, deserving of challenge. The rigor and care represented in the work offers a thoughtful and progressive approach to research that not only challenges much of the current prevailing discourse but also offers carefully and empirically constructed suggestions to bring about positive change. At the heart of the work is the focus on learning, the people and their requirements of post compulsory education in its many guises. The cross cutting themes that weave through this special issue serve to act as points of focus for the convergence of ideas and offer, as several of the contributors highlight, opportunities for hope and empowerment.

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