



Mythbusting the modern academy

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So much of our work in higher education focuses on what has always been done and what must be done, with very little attention paid to why things are done in a particular way, or what could be done differently: from the ways we manage academic writing support to the policies and processes that surround grading and marking practices. In keeping with the special issue theme of liberating learning, the papers in this section advocate for alternative perspectives on the academy's practices and structures, or *Myth-busting the modern academy*. We have sub-divided the papers in this section into two broad themes: one focused on pedagogy and another on assessment.

The first four papers represent a progression from a critique of the 'care-less' academy to examples of alternative or 'care-full' pedagogies in a variety of contexts. In their opinion piece, grounded in a wealth of critical literature, Michael Priestley and Sarah Crook ask us to reconsider and challenge some of the less caring discourses and practices of the neoliberal academy. Through this, we might avoid internalising 'competitive individualism' as the status quo and move toward a more humane and cooperative environment 'where "failure" is normalised, learning is collective and collaborative, and diverse individual experiences are celebrated through and beyond assessment tasks' (p.5). An example of this in practice can be found in the research study by Claire Saunders and Carolyn Cooke, which focuses on the power of imagining and appreciative inquiry and draws on their

experience of working with associate lecturers to develop ‘antenarratives’. These are unstructured and speculative framings that challenge dominant institutional narratives around what universities are, could be, or even should be.

A complementary research paper about academic writing as a ‘radical act of deliberate experimentation’ is co-authored by Carolyn Cooke with colleagues from four different European universities: Petra Vackova, Emily Dowdeswell, Lucy Caton and Donata Puntil. Their project, a synchronous in-person and online writing event as part of an academic conference, sought to interrogate the ways that a collaborative writing process, led by a ‘storying otherwise’ methodology (Haraway, 2016), might mitigate barriers to inclusion and belonging in increasingly precarious higher education climates. The final paper in this theme is a brief communication by Leigh Graves Wolf and Jacob Colby Bunch, which captures another perspective on challenging academic norms. Here, the co-authors – in their roles as doctoral supervisor and doctoral researcher – transcribe their short conversation about the potential for dissertation mentoring as an emancipatory, inclusive, and joyful experience. The paper, itself an important contribution to critical disability studies, reflects not only on the design of a dissertation that challenged ‘conventional methods of qualitative inquiry’ (p.2) to be more inclusive of disability, but on a supervisory relationship that centred disability experience, built trust, and pushed intellectual, methodological, and technological boundaries.

The second set of papers focus on assessment, often a bastion of tradition and fraught with tension in being acknowledged as a key driver of learning (Sambell et al., 2012), as well as a declaration to society that our graduates are equipped with the skills and knowledge they require. The papers in this section tackle this tension head on by considering ways of doing assessment differently in the modern academy.

The brief communication by Joanne Berry, Rhian Ellis and Patricia Xavier summarises the experience of asking colleagues and students to reflect on their assumptions surrounding assessment practices. They highlight that these assumptions, about students’ engagement and understanding of expectations, can undermine trust, and they close their brief communication with practical ‘top tips’ for university-wide discussions about assessment. The following two opinion pieces, both from colleagues at Edinburgh Napier University, offer complementary perspectives about the potential of ungrading, specifically, as a challenge to routine thinking about assessment and marking. John Cowan draws on his

substantial career in higher education to remind us of past versions of debates about the benefits of ungrading and ‘the freedom to learn’; he advocates strongly for self-evaluation as the final stage of ungraded assessment, offering grounded encouragement and scaffolding suggestions for this practice. Katrina Swanton’s nuanced opinion piece, inspired by similar provocations from ungrading advocates, examines the tensions between growing calls to explore ungrading in higher education and the quality assurance policies and regulations of our institutions. While these policies are designed to uphold academic standards and enhance the student learning experience, Katrina questions whether they always achieve these aims, or whether they sometimes constrain meaningful assessment reform. Alongside John Cowan’s historical perspective, this analysis focuses on structural barriers within universities, particularly in the UK context, and echoes the call for a more open, research-informed approach to rethinking assessment practices.

The next four papers present practical examples of ungrading and relational assessment practices in local contexts. Cathy Elliott’s review of the literature calls into question the myth that anonymised marking helps address the awarding gaps in HE. Instead of relying on a product focus that compounds issues of trust between system and teachers, Cathy advocates for ‘relational marking’, with emphasis on the process of self-assessment and questioning assessment structures themselves. Gwenda Mynott explores the different ways in which undergraduate business students in post-1992 universities of North-West England have measured the success of their own learning. The paper highlights how lecturers and students might be defining and measuring success in opposing ways and argues for the crucial role that the emotional aspects of success could have in ‘what is becoming a progressively more metrics-driven HE system’ (p.13).

In the first of two practical examples of this approach, Kirsty Miller, Hannah Merdian, William Burkitt and Liz Mossop, describe their ‘Feedback First’ initiative in clinical courses, which moved to pass/fail grading and focused on process and feedback. This empirical case study engages with the need for staff and student ‘buy-in’ within a theory of change framework and shows the importance of working from a position of psychological safety to enable risk-taking in educational assessment so as to realise its benefits. Following this, Chris Whiting describes how and why he and his colleagues refreshed the Generic Assessment Descriptors (GAD) for marking and feedback at York St John University with the aim of using them as a tool for learning and decreasing student and staff anxiety, and celebrating the achievements of students rather than focusing on the expectations of

assessors. Student feedback in this case study indicates improvement in clarity of expectations and perceived fairness of assessment, as well as more positive engagement with feedback. Finally, Jennie Blake, Alisa Crum and Peter Hartley remind us in their book review of David Meecham's (2024) *Generative AI for students: the essential guide to using artificial intelligence for study at university* that recent developments in AI may catalyse some of the changes advocated in this section. The explosive growth of generative AI, both in its technical capabilities and user numbers, means we must support our students to use it responsibly and ethically, especially given claims that it will 'revolutionise education'.

Each paper in its own way declares 'it does not have to be done this way'. The challenges might be limits to institutional imagination, structural conservatism, or a lack of will to change, knowing, as many of us do, the stories of how long it can take to change things in a university. Above all, though, we can see through these papers, and many of the others in the rest of the special issue, that the biggest barriers to change can be the myths that provide a foundation for the reasons why we *cannot* do things differently rather than why we *should not* change.

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