Editorial

An Overview of Trends and Challenges in Higher Education on the Worldwide Research Agenda

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Being a crucial part of the JLE scope, higher education is witnessing an era of supra-national, national, and institutional changes, including massification via massive online open courses (MOOC), politically launched or influenced trends like the Bologna process, increasing academic mobility spurred by globalisation and continued development of internationalised education, interculturality and multiligualism, worldwide innovations in higher education and teaching approaches (deep active learning, blended learning methods, gamification, storytelling, alignments of higher education and work, translanguaging in higher education instruction). Further, the JLE editors dwell upon other relevant issues, including transformation of universities, student-teacher relationship, social equity and access to higher education, students' engagement and commitment to learning, university excellence factors.
The editorial entails some guidelines for potential authors regarding priority themes JLE is going to promote within its scope.

Keywords: higher education, educational reforms, blended learning, learner autonomy, quality of higher education, active learning, flipped classroom, innovations in education, translanguaging

Present-day transformation of higher education systems, emerging pressures of dramatic limitation of public funding and issues related to the massification of higher education round the globe lead to a transfigured research agenda. With a few eternal themes staying in place, a new swathe of topics are coming to the fore.

Most countries are currently involved in all kinds of higher education reforms. A lot of studies are focused on different aspects of those reforms: starting from neo-liberal foundation and approaches to higher education (Gerrard, 2015; Zepke, 2018), universities' striving for excellence and competitiveness (Mok, 2015; Hostings, 2015; Song, 2018), country-related reform specialities (Coome, 2015; Noyes & Adkins, 2016) to quality revolution in tertiary education (Minina, 2017), re-defining quality of higher education and its factors (Little, 2015; Cheng, 2017; Scharager, Goldenberg, 2018), and pitfalls it faces (Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker, 2016). Another popular research niche embraces world university rankings encouraging university transformation into cost-centres with destroyed or distorted primary missions of universities in the society (Brankovic et al., 2018; McCoy et al., 2018; Milian & Rizk, 2018) or, quite on the opposite, into institutions of excellence.

University rankings form an integral part of knowledge economy as a tool of quantitative quality assessment in higher education. They aim to single out the advantages and strengths of the leading world or regional universities and reshape enrolment processes at universities. Some researchers show that

students do not tend to consult ranking publications, relying often 'on reputational information available through their informal networks' (Milian & Rizk, 2018). Rankings influence both educational policy and higher education reforms. With much constructive or blunt criticism and concerns around, university rankings, their methodology, and negative institutional outcomes need further research.

Reforms in higher education ought to be studied within the contexts of globalisation and internationalisation. The former have led to massification in tertiary education via MOOCs, distance learning, and e-learning. It is widely articulated in the literature that massification transforms higher education institutions (Literat, 2015; Akalu, 2016). New challenges and pitfalls relating to massification in higher education cover a paucity of resources for MOOCs, increased workload for the academia at large, partial loss of autonomy for the professoriate, declining quality of education by various criteria (Akalu, 2016). More studies of MOOCs as a social framework enabling a lifelong learning context are beginning to appear.

There is a growing gap between academic and student understandings of education quality (Strielkowski, Kiseleva & Popova, 2018). Moreover, employers tend to expect other sets of skills their future hires to acquire, with social skills being at the top of their wish lists. Social skills, communication skills, employability skills, soft skills and other sets are under academic and research scrutiny worldwide. This direction seems very promising in the light of fierce competition on world and national labour markets.

The inverted or so-called 'flipped' classroom approach has been thoroughly parsed for about a decade. The concept of 'self-studies via technology-based resources (called 'flips')' (Lundin et al., 2018) followed by comprehensive in-class activities has gained popularity at all levels of education. Higher education curricula massively introduce this approach into both bachelor and master programmes. More papers address some chasms in research on flipped classroom method by reporting advantages and weaknesses, techniques, approaches, motivation assessment (Nikitina, Don, & Cheong, 2016) and results (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018; Lundin et al., 2018; Zainuddin & Perera, 2019).

Higher education policy throughout the world is influenced by political and economic considerations. Some trends in education may be defined as mainly policy-related, e.g. the Bologne process. In Europe, the phenomenon is under a new re-thinking (Leisyte, Zelvys, & Zenkiene, 2015; Ala-Vähälä, 2016), with more research on quality of higher education within increasing academic mobility environment (Baker, 2018; Morley et al., 2018; Siekierski et al., 2018). As the historic developments prove, the process initially aimed to support regional (mainly Eastern European) and small-scale universities in their aligning with the best European universities. Intense academic mobility in EU universities enhances university cooperation and unification of curricula, but poses challenges to quality and traditional approaches and teaching methods.

Though active learning emerged as a research domain in the early 1990s, at present, quite a lot of studies raise issues of case study method, role-playing, gamification, and simulation in higher education (Aparicio et al., 2019; Gatt et al., 2019). Gamification and other active learning methods are widely considered in research to be algorithms associated with 'learner interaction … and positive experience of MOOCs' (Aparicio et al., 2019). In addition, research on deep learning and deep active learning (Engel, Pallas, & Lambert, 2017; Hermes & Rimaniroczy, 2018) come out regularly. Researchers in the neighbouring social fields (education, psychology, applied linguistics, sociology, philosophy) approach social phenomena via a mix of stances and methods, often interdisciplinary at heart. Future research focus is certain to lie within the social science domain, but new interdisciplinary shifts and complex intradisciplinary accents may turn up. Gaps in understanding of the new higher education landscape and its phenomena cannot but arise as a part of the impending research agenda.

Higher education and progressive learning methods have much overlapping with the concept of learner autonomy and self-regulation (Hartley et al., 2016; Hawe & Dixon, 2017). The latter lay foundation for research on lifelong learning and professional or academic development.

Learner autonomy is traditionally attached to language learning. Though it is widely discussed, autonomy is still studied as an educational goal in the contexts of learning styles and learner's personal traits, attitudes, and motivation (Schneider, 2018; Lan, 2018). More papers may be brought out with accents on autonomy of all academic players in various settings.

To end it up, one more priority area of research for JLE cannot be missed out. It is languages as a means of both instruction in higher education and communication in science and research. Often denominated lingua franca or interlingua in both science and education, English gave birth to new promising lines for researchers. Though, translanguaging dates back to the 1980s with its roots in Welsh bilingual education (Conteh, 2018), it is updated through the ways migration and mobility influence pedagogy and education in the globalised world. Scientific and academic literature published mainly in English essentially factors in the process. Some studies on translanguaging in higher education have come out recently to be followed by more focused on language policies, student – teacher relationship,

curricula, and assessment issues (Caruso, 2018; Conteh, 2018).

In research, authors have recently turned to scientific imperialism (Popova & Beavitt, 2017), English as lingua franca in science, English for publication or research purposes (Li, Flowerdew, & Cargill, 2018), English as an intercultural language (Lee, 2018), English vs multilingualism, and other brand-new or revised themes.

Academics worldwide pursue heavy research agendas in the afore-mentioned directions, with JLE being no exception. We hope that the outlined themes may prompt our potential authors to plunge into comprehensive research and share their results with our readers.

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