Editor's introduction

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We greet 2016 with a new issue of *LTHE*, to begin our 13th year of publication. We continue to offer *LTHE* as an authoritative forum for research and reflection on higher teaching and learning in the Gulf region for professionals working in any subject area. We hope you find the articles in this issue both interesting and useful.

We welcome comments on papers in *LTHE*. Readers will notice an ADD COMMENT link on the abstract page for each article, and below the PDF window when you view the full article. We hope that you will use this to contribute to ongoing discussion of issues and findings in the papers you read. When sharing this new issue with your colleagues, please also encourage them to comment on the papers and enter a professional debate on learning and teaching in the Gulf.

The first paper in this issue, by Freimuth, examines ways in which data description tasks in the commonly used IELTS exam may not be a cultural fit with students in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf countries. The article reviews ways in which test questions may make assumptions about content as well as about students' educational background and skills; and presents data from a sample of IELTS writing tasks to investigate how compatible these are with Emirati students' background. It seems that cultural references such as place names and the demands of the test in terms of critical thinking skills may present a greater challenge for students from the UAE as compared with other cultural backgrounds. The next paper, by Zare-ee et al., focuses on the issue of student evaluation of teaching, and specifically the role of gender in this process. They review the apparently contradictory findings of previous research on this topic, and present findings from the Iranian context to show that the gender of both students and teachers seems to influence ratings in different ways. Following this, Thomas et al. discuss the issue of employability, a key issue in modern higher education, focusing on the English communication skills which employers in Bahrain are looking for when recruiting graduates. They emphasize the ways in which communication skills are involved in presenting and sustaining a professional identity during recruitment and employment, and how communication is entwined with other skills such as critical thinking.

The following two papers in this issue present reflections by practitioners in education in different subject areas. Schoepp and Danaher (as in Thomas's paper) focus on generic professional skills required of graduates; they present a pilot study for an approach to assessing skills such as teamwork, with students who aspire to work in IT/Engineering related fields. They find that an assessment approach based on student interaction around professional scenarios, which has been used elsewhere, seems to hold promise for assessing these 'real world' skills in a Gulf university context. Engin and Donanci's paper reflects on another pilot project: using pre-lesson tutorial videos to 'flip' teachers' explanation and input out of the classroom in order to allow more time for interaction and student activity in class. They found that this approach was generally well received by students, but that students still felt a need for consolidation of the pre-lesson input in lesson time. The findings suggest that teacher-researchers should consider a range of options to take students from teacher input, to understanding and feeling confident with that input, to applying it in a range of situations.

Recent books on learning and teaching in higher education are reviewed for the Gulf context by Mark Causapin and Shashidhar Belbase. The first book, *Student writing in the quantitative disciplines*, resonates with Freimuth's discussion of how language can be involved in the understanding and analysis of quantitative data, suggesting that student writing can contribute to learning in mathematics-based courses – an idea which connects also with Thomas's findings about language and critical thinking in post-graduation employment. The other book reviewed, *The scholarship of teaching and learning in and across the disciplines*, examines how the fast-growing field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has developed through a range of subject areas from History to Mathematics, looking at how approaches such as collaboration and reflection have been taken up in ways which both build upon and challenge distinctions between disciplines.

We would like to thank the peer reviewers who help to maintain the standard of work published in *LTHE*. Reviewers for this issue include Christine Coombe, Fatima Azmi, James Piecowye, Katherine Hall, Lavious Daniels, Melanie Gobert, Michelle McLean, Mick King, Nadia Amin and Tess Goodliffe.

We continue to receive many submissions to *LTHE* from various Gulf countries and various disciplinary/interdisciplinary fields. Those wishing to contribute to the journal should review the information in the ABOUT section of our website <http://lthe.zu.ac.ae> to understand the scope and policies of the journal, then register as an author, log in and select *New submission*. We also welcome and can circulate information about conferences and other events related to the scope of the journal; please contact us using the email link on our website or via Twitter ([@LTHEgulf](https://twitter.com/LTHEgulf)).