Introduction to the Special Issue

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In this special issue of *LTHE* we are pleased to present plenary papers from the symposium hosted at Zayed University in March 2010, entitled *Higher Education in the Gulf: Research Insights in Learning and Teaching*. This symposium, organized in collaboration with UAE University, welcomed over seventy educators from institutions in the UAE, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and the UK. The seminar included plenary talks by researchers in tertiary learning and teaching based in the UAE and the UK, as well as opportunities to interact with these presenters in small-group workshops, and with other researchers in poster presentation sessions. The three articles in this issue of *LTHE* are based on the plenary talks at the symposium, enriched with insights from the authors' interactive workshop sessions.

McLean's paper examines the issue of what our graduates should learn from their time in higher education. As well as learning about their chosen subject (e.g. IT, Business or Medicine), all graduates are increasingly expected also to have developed skills such as critical thinking, use of technology and working in a team. These skills, variously referred to as 'generic skills', 'university learning outcomes', or 'graduate attributes' form a basis for students' future lives, and there has been an increasing focus in many countries on ensuring

that the university/college provides active support for developing them. McLean reviews these developments and their rationale, and presents her research with students at UAE University, which investigates the levels of ability and confidence with these skills among incoming students, and their development in the first year of university study.

Rahal's paper builds on an article published previously in *LTHE* (Rahal and Palfreyman, 2009), which examined data about the preferred learning styles of students at Zayed University. In this paper, Rahal reviews broader issues related to the use of the learning styles concept in higher education. He discusses some alternative models of learning styles and their bases in research, and relates data from the earlier Zayed University study with learning styles data from pre-university (grades 10-12) students in a less urban UAE setting, as well as with data from an action research study of different teaching methods at the University. He also discusses possible criticisms of learning styles research, and the value which such research has for our educational practice.

Carmichael's paper brings an international and a disciplinary perspective to the collection, reviewing work which has developed in recent years around the idea of "threshold concepts". Threshold concepts are key ideas in a subject area, which tend to be difficult for students to internalize but which, when mastered, 'unlock' that subject area and enable the student to become more part of the academic/professional community of that discipline. Carmichael reviews research on threshold concepts and student learning in a wide range of disciplines including economics, computer science, business, law, healthcare, biology, sociology, music and history. He then presents his research, which involved professors in various disciplines discussing, identifying and presenting threshold concepts in their own discipline, and collaborating to develop insights into the role these concepts play both in students' learning and in the academic/professional identity of those teaching these disciplines. Drawing on workshop sessions with educators in Gulf institutions, Carmichael considers the implications of these ideas for higher education in the Gulf, and in particular the transition which students are expected to make from secondary to tertiary educational cultures.

As in other issues of this journal, we also present other types of contribution: in this case a comparative book review, in which Janet Martin draws together ideas from two recent key books about the phenomenon of the 'Net Generation': the generation of students you are probably working with, who have grown up in an increasingly digitized society.

 If you are interested in reviewing a book, website or other resource for learning and teaching in Gulf universities/colleges, please contact our Reviews Editor, Valerie.Goby@zu.ac.ae .

References

Rahal, T. & Palfreyman, D. (2009). Assessing learning styles of students at Zayed University. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf perspectives,* 6(2). http://www.zu.ac.ae/lthe/lthe06_02_01_rahal.htm