

EDITORIAL

Connecting the Dots: Nurturing Students for a Future-ready Global Workforce

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COVID-19 has changed and hardened the world. Just on the “Future of Jobs”, in its 2020 Report, the World Economic Forum estimates that 85 million jobs may be taken over by machines by 2025, while 97 million new ones may emerge, but requiring adaption between humans, machines and algorithms (World Economic Forum, 2020). Furthermore, while the usual 21st century skills of critical-thinking, analysis, problem-solving, technology use and development are still in high demand, the Report highlights added emphasis in self-management skills (active learning, resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility) and working with people abilities (leadership and social influence). In essence, the pandemic is challenging education worldwide to nurture students into future-ready graduates who can function well, physically and virtually, in a globally connected world where material contact may not be always possible, and the switch to working virtually with peoples of different cultures can be sudden and prolonged.

The concept of connectedness resonates with what John Chambers, former CEO of Cisco, tries to bring through in his book *Connecting The Dots: Lessons For Leadership In A Startup World* (2018). Akin to many effective leaders, the nine lessons he shares in his book are about attributes, values, and the importance of learning. Chambers may be referring to the business and corporate world, but the message that he is conveying is not too dissimilar to what we want our students to grasp and internalise. As educators, we want to enable our students to connect the dots through programmes, experiences, interactions; and we want to reflect on how we have facilitated this for our students.

The collection of papers in this Issue does just that—they discuss practices and insights that support students in connecting the dots through internationalisation of higher education (HE), remote learning, active learning, and integration of disciplinary topics. The Issue rounds up with reflections on how we make sense of connecting the dots in our journey as educators.

As far back as 1998, when Mestenhauser argued for internationalisation of the HE curriculum, he was already advocating that programme redesign should be based on the notion that “all graduates would be working in a global setting as professionals”, or in today’s wordings, “all graduates would become part of the future-ready global workforce”. In this regard, Bellam’s paper reinforces Mestenhauser’s argument in our currently pandemic-ravaged world by arguing that the educational goals of internationalisation require rethinking of the curricular and pedagogical strategies to engage students in global learning. His study provides useful perspectives and insights for universities to revisit and re-imagine the rationale and goals of internationalisation, curriculum internationalisation, and pedagogical approaches for global learning for a better global society. From a focused perspective, Mukhopadhyay et al.’s study on the impact of overseas experiential learning programmes on student learning shows some interesting results. Coupled with pedagogical intervention before and after the overseas trips, their analysis suggested that the scaffolded learning facilitated students in developing intercultural understanding, self-awareness and awareness of others, and skills to collaborate with diverse communities. They have further shared their reflections on reconfiguring pedagogical models to sustain/facilitate such internationalisation learning programmes in uncertain and unpredictable times.

With technology use and development as an essential 21st century skills, the two articles and one reflection paper sharing various aspects of the virtual teaching and learning (VTL) experiences during COVID-19 are helpful. Viewing from the students’ perspectives, Tan et al. highlight the difficulties in switching studio/laboratory/practice-based classes to totally online mode. Their study showed that while students perceived tangible benefits of time and cost savings as there were no travelling for physical classes, students faced key challenges in communicating and presenting their ideas online. Their students expressed that online design learning could not adequately emulate face-to-face studio culture as they valued the spontaneous feedback from

instructors and the collaborative environment of sharing peers' works. Moving forward despite these difficulties, the paper also outlines the deployment of blended learning in the new normal. Sabapathy discussed the same difficult situation using phenomenology as a research design to examine how professional communication academics responded to and enacted on pandemic measures. Her findings revealed mixed responses to the measures and how the teachers enacted them differently, raising awareness on what it was like for teachers who were at the receiving end of pandemic measures.

Despite being a Reflection piece, Lam et al.'s study on the awareness and practices of their fellow academics in Biological Sciences wraps up the discussion on VTL deployment nicely. While active learning strategies have proven to be effective in enhancing student learning in "pre-COVID" physical settings, deploying those strategies that are amenable to technology-enhanced learning can be challenging. Their paper shares possible approaches to support and promote technology-assisted active learning strategies to maintain/enhance the quality of learning experiences and to meet the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

The final two reflections in this Issue further underscore the importance of facilitating students' and teachers' appreciation for how concepts and ideas that seemingly unconnected are integrated for enhanced clarity. While analysing the effect of teaching health advocacy via integration of topics to students in their Bachelor of Pharmacy programme, Koh et al. noted positivity after one year of study in the programme, such as a greater consolidation of health advocacy concepts, with students understanding the responsibility of pharmacists. But students also voiced concerns on the role of pharmacists to influence greater societal good. Their findings led to the suggestion of incorporating more explicit examples of professional pharmacists promoting health advocacy to enhance the curriculum to train better "professionals for the workforce". Finally, Toh shares his sojourn from specialist to teacher-scholar through increasing engagement in SoTL. Apart from providing comfort and support to fellow educators, helping them to navigate the teaching-learning-research nexus, this is an example of leadership skills with societal influence.

The skills required of our graduates to excel in the 21st century can take them well beyond their jobs, or even careers, as some of the jobs/careers are still to be invented. Yet from the sharing by the various authors, we are encouraged that as educators, we are working to effect better learning experiences for our students, challenge them to "connect the dots", and prepare them for the emerging post-pandemic environment.

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