Empowering Student Learning in Higher Education: Pathways to Possibility

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Date received: 24 December 2021; accepted: 27 December 2021

With the increasing emphasis on accountability in the public sector, the concept of quality of higher education has been one of the most globally dominating and influential “meta-ideas” over the past three decades (Stensaker, 2007). Facilitating student learning and development is one of the core missions of higher education. Hence, universities around the world have attached considerable importance to monitoring the presages, processes, and products of student learning.

The past 20 years have witnessed three trends in higher education that profoundly influence student learning in higher education. First, the educational technology applications have deeply transformed the ecology of learning and teaching in higher education (Cabaleiro-Cerviño & Vera, 2020), which is especially manifested in the global pandemic of COVID-19. Instructors and students need to be accustomed to online learning, hybrid learning, and the adoption of various learning management systems, which have become more and more popular in universities. It is imperative for researchers and university educators to figure out ways to improve the quality of student learning in a technology-enhanced environment (Bond et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2017).

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Second, with the unprecedentedly stressed internationalization of higher education, the international student mobility in higher education has been evidently intensified and diversified (Teichler, 2017). As Choudaha (2017) observed, three waves of international student mobility can be identified between 1999 and 2020, which has intensified the competition among new and traditional destinations to attract international students. Therefore, how to cater for the learning needs of international students has become a commonly shared problem for university educators across countries.

Third, research on learning and teaching in higher education has been obviously featured by the prevalence of large-scale international assessment programs on student learning, such as National Survey of Student Engagement and Student Experience in the Research University. These surveys have acquired remarkable achievements and international reputation (e.g., Coates & McCormick, 2014; Kwon et al., 2020). However, the dominance of international surveys on student learning has also stimulated extensive reflections on the nature of student engagement and broad debates on methodological issues in student learning research (e.g., Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Yin, 2018; Zepke, 2017). These reflections and debates require researchers to take a more balanced and comprehensive mindset when conceptualizing and investigating student learning in higher education.

This special issue, “Empowering student learning in higher education: Pathways to possibility,” is a response to the international call for particular emphasis on the quality of student learning in the changing context. The authors of the six articles included in this special issue are from five geographically or culturally diverse countries, namely, China, Chile, Finland, New Zealand, and the UK. They shared the same vision to initiate international discussions on how to cope with the identified challenges and further empower student learning in higher education.

The first two articles discuss the characteristics, strategies, and outcomes of university student learning in technology-enhanced environments. Yin and Shi (2022) explore how Chinese college students engaged in face-to-face synchronous and online asynchronous interactions and how these interaction types were associated with students’ satisfaction, perceptions of learning environments, and outcomes of academic learning. With a sample of 3,999 undergraduate students from a research university in China, they found that four types of learners can be differentiated among these students, namely, active interactors, digital interactors, realistic interactors, and passive interactors. Most of these students were classified into digital interactors (36.16%) or passive interactors (32.71%). In general, although the face-to-face synchronous interaction generated more desirable academic learning outcomes and perceptions of learning environments, and higher satisfaction than the online asynchronous interaction, the latter performed better in fostering student autonomy and ensuring the completion of an in-depth thesis. González et al. (2022) examined Chilean
university students’ patterns of digital learning technology usage and their relations to students’ approaches to learning. They first performed a k-mean cluster analysis to 18,042 students in one research university in Chile and then conducted group interviews with 41 students from the emerging clusters. González et al. (2022) classified three types of learners with different features in using the learning management system and digital library resources, and these patterns of digital learning technology usage were associated with various levels of academic achievements and approaches to learning. Specifically, digital library users were usually high performers who tended to adopt deep approach to learning; learning management system and physical library users usually had middle levels of academic achievements and tended to adopt strategic approach to learning; lower users of digital learning technologies (i.e., the learning management system and digital library resources) usually had middle to low levels of academic achievements and inclined to adopt surface approach to learning. Unfortunately, 59% of the participants were classified into the third type, that is, lower users of digital learning technologies. These two studies provide cases for comparative understanding in two developing countries, China and Chile, whose higher education systems have experienced rapid expansion in the past two decades (Yin et al., 2018).

The second two articles are related to the issue of international students’ learning experiences. Under the context of a salient increase of international students in Chinese universities, Tian et al. (2022) investigated the perceptions of 1,428 international undergraduate students at 34 universities in China. Their results indicated that although these international students had obtained academic development in a range of skills and abilities, such as research skills, global abilities, and Chinese proficiency, their learning experiences at the Chinese universities were largely unsatisfactory. Specifically, they only held moderate-to-low levels of evaluation of the perceived classroom learning environment and reported low levels of academic engagement. From a different angle, Mendoza et al. (2022) investigated lecturers’ perspectives on the educational (mis-)encounters of international students in a Finnish university. Using a thematic social network analysis of the interview with 11 lecturers, they identified the privileges, limits, and (missed) opportunities of encounters for international students in the Finnish university. They also found a hierarchical way of description in these lecturers’ sharing of the encounters between different kinds of students (e.g., international students, exchange students, and local students). The findings of Tian et al. (2022) and Mendoza et al. (2022) should be supplementary to each other and valuable references to educators who are concerned about enhancing the quality of international students in universities.

The last two articles attempt to extend the breadth and depth of research on student learning in higher education by suggesting somewhat neglected methodological issues or revealing and correcting the distorted understanding about student learning. Student assessment is an integrated part of university teaching. However, compared with the research on student learning in K-12 education, student assessment receives far from enough attention from the researchers.
Brown (2022) conducted a narrative literature review of 22 studies on university students’ conceptions of assessment. He summarized that apart from the Student Conceptions of Assessment Scale, 11 different research inventories have been developed or adapted in the existing studies. There is broad interest in assessing university students’ conceptions of assessment. However, little consistency exists in the research methods, and even the Student Conceptions of Assessment Scale has little consistency in factor structure across countries or areas. Self-report questionnaire survey is a dominantly adopted method of research, and only one study offered an objective behavioral measure to validate the self-report data. These findings provide some clues for guiding the future development of research on university student assessment.

In the sixth article, Macfarlane (2022) conducted a critical conceptual analysis of the risk of “fake learning” in universities due to the legitimization of measures that promote student performativity rewarding their academic non-achievements. He illustrated how this can happen via the writing of methodology chapters in dissertations and theses by postgraduate students. The pressure on students to comply with the requirements of emotional performativity in respect to ideology and method in close-up, qualitative research can lead to fake learning, which is exemplified by a number of practices such as phony positionality, methodolatry, ethical cleansing, etc. This article provides an excellent and illuminating critical analysis of student learning in higher education.

With this special issue, we would like to invite more researchers to discuss and analyze student learning from different angles and through different methods because student learning is always of great importance for the quality of higher education in this ever-changing global circumstance. The diverse issues and methods covered in this special issue remind researchers, who strive to empower and enhance student learning in higher education, to take various viewpoints and pathways into consideration and be open to new possibilities.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Research Grant Council in Hong Kong SAR, China (grant number CUHK14618118).

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