

Editorial: Measuring the Immeasurable

How can we measure the value of knowledge? This is the sort of rhetorical question a politician might ask, knowing, of course, that we can't. But it is a pity that more politicians don't ask that question before deciding education policies which, in almost every 'advanced' country, are based on a presupposition that we can measure the value of knowledge taught in schools and universities.

The measures that are used are widely varied, but include examination pass-rates, levels of drop-out or truancy and the subsequent destination of leavers. There are league tables of 'success' and 'failure' based on economic measures which rarely acknowledge differences in type or purpose of provision. The curriculum available to students can depend upon perceptions of value which may be irrelevant to the needs and aspirations of the individuals or of the wider society.

How, for instance, can we measure the value of a knowledge of music? Curricular decisions based on economic constraints often presuppose an order of merit among subject provision in which music is rarely high on the list. Yet, to the participants, learning to make music brings invaluable social skills, dexterity and enthusiasm which can last a lifetime, as Lionel McCalman shows in his rewarding ethnographic study of the teaching of steel-band music in schools. The personal and social value of learning to play steel pan can be inferred from the lively photographic studies by Annette Hudemann which accompany Lionel's article and the cover of this issue of *New Era in Education*. Yet it would be considered rather eccentric if anyone were to suggest that music should be a compulsory element of the curriculum. Perhaps there is a mismatch between 'useful' knowledge and personally valuable knowledge.

This might explain the difficulties encountered by mature and distance learners in HE. Claudio Vasquez-Martinez set out to investigate the phenomenon of drop-out by following up a cohort of distance learners who had undertaken their studies in the 1980s. As his article shows, the figures alone are not enough. They can be misleading if used as a measure of curricular value.

The idea that some forms of knowledge are worth more than others does not survive much scrutiny. Not so long ago, applicants to certain UK universities had to have a pass in Latin at 16 in order to be considered. The value of Latin for an individual can be immense. It can help us to understand the origins of words in languages where Latin influence was

dominant. It can be empowering when confronted by residual Latin phrases in law and medicine. It can enable a historian to read important documents in the original. Some of us even found it great fun. But none of these values was being reflected in its use as an entry requirement. Perhaps the measures which we have to undergo are not concerned with the value of our actual knowledge but with our suitability to fit into a particular sort of society.

Measuring the value of research is a similar quagmire, only potentially even more treacherous. In a careful and systematic analysis of the results of three research assessment exercises (RAEs) in the UK, David Turner and David Kernahan show how the statistics can be adjusted by judicious awareness of the way the measures are taken. There are important insights in this paper for those who presuppose the value of knowledge, whether politicians or educators.

Finally, Aadu Ott and Lars-Göran Vedin report on the twenty-one year old World Wide Workshop project, drawing conclusions about the way in which museum collections and presentations can encourage and enhance knowledge of the way in which technology works and is used in our society. Some thoughtful conclusions on the value of knowledge have wider applicability than their ostensible subject-matter.

This issue of *New Era in Education* was intended to be a miscellany, to encompass articles on disparate topics which had not been able to be used in recent themed issues. But, through chance or serendipity, they seem to share an underlying common feature, namely the vanity of attempting to classify and measure the value of knowledge. This theme carries on into the reviews of three books, each quite different in focus and purpose, but all concerned with an underlying theme of the value and purpose of knowledge. Masiko Ejima reminds us of how easily we can be forced into a Western mental strait-jacket, while David Turner reviews Carol Dweck's fascinating and challenging exploration of learning theory.

In the end, good teachers are good communicators, who value knowledge and believe they can disseminate it to improve the awareness of others. The ranking of their institutions in terms of pass and drop-out rates or arbitrary measures of 'quality' makes no meaningful difference. As with the late Mr Tetsuo Nomura, whose story is briefly mentioned in the Forum, good teachers know intuitively that the value of knowledge is immeasurable.