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Moving Beyond Teaching Excellence: developing a different narrative for England's higher education sector

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Abstract

Purpose: Teaching excellence remains a contested term in English higher education. This paper begins by reflecting on its complex and sometimes blurred meaning, charting the divergence between academic interests in the complexity and contextual questions relating to practice development and organisational and sectoral shifts which have been driven by managerialism, accountability and 'top-down' ideas of change. We argue that this divergence, epitomised in the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), has led to a confused, if ubiquitous, use of excellence to identify organisational and sector-led ideas of what it means to deliver quality teaching. However, these frameworks have become progressively detached from the complexity of practice investigated by those interested in pedagogy.

Design/methodology/approach: This is a conceptual paper which brings together literature from teaching excellence, organisational science, time and higher education to develop an alternative approach to pedagogic development.

Findings: Based on a critique of the current, confused conceptualisation of teaching excellence, we offer a different narrative which demonstrates how a reconsideration of the factors important in developing critical and challenging teaching opportunities. Based on a 'bottom-up' system focusing on dialogue, sustainability and 'unhasty' time, we argue for a re-establishing of a holistic approach in HE providers based on emergent pedagogies as opposed to teaching excellence.

Originality and value: This paper demonstrates why teaching excellence has become conceptually fractured in an English context, and why a new approach to pedagogic development needs to be considered to establish a more positive and critical approach at both institutional and sectoral levels. This paper outlines a possible approach to developing such renewal.

Keywords: Teaching Excellence, Teaching Excellence Framework, Sustainability, Pedagogic practice, Higher Education, Dialogic change

This is a conceptual paper

Introduction

The higher education (HE) system in England has seen a great deal of change in recent years, most notably with the introduction of student tuition fees, the ongoing development of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and more recently the creation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). It is the latter of these developments that we are concerned with in this paper, as the TEF is already having a growing influence on organisational strategy and policy making across HE providers in the two years since its introduction in 2016. Conceptions of teaching excellence in the HE system in England have been in constant flux over the last three decades as a result of policy reform and the TEF arguably represents another reincarnation. But what underlies these shifts? What is the meaning of teaching excellence? And does it still remain a concept with pedagogic focus and validity or has it been appropriated as an accountability imperative?

Our paper begins by tracking some of the evolving meanings of 'teaching excellence', from its early uses attempting to capture the breadth of practice developed by academics interested in pedagogy, through its translation into a framework for external validation, to its present reinvention as both an organisational and national accountability tool. We contend that these shifts reveal how the original academic utility of the notion of 'teaching excellence' has been compromised and colonised by an accountability agenda, which in turn has had disempowering consequences for those interested in understanding and improving HE teaching further. With this in mind, the second part of the paper puts forward the case for moving beyond current accountability orientated characterisations of teaching excellence in order to recapture some of the features of earlier attempts to promote and develop pedagogic practice as a basis for creating new ways of conceptualising and leading the development of teaching practice in HE. We do so by outlining a different imaginary of the university's role in supporting the pedagogic values and practices that can best support students in developing critical and creative approaches to their chosen disciplines; whereas the trend over the past 30 years has been a divergence between practice-research and managerial understandings of teaching excellence, we argue for a holistic perspective which attempts to find a unifying basis on which to close the practice-research/managerial gap.

Considering the changing conceptualisation of teaching excellence in England's Higher Education sector

In England, teaching has long been an established and important element of academic life. In the 1850s, Newman suggested that research was best carried out beyond the university, the main role of HE being to help students pursue knowledge for its own sake through discussion and reading, a view of academic and pedagogic work which remained central to university life until well into the 20th century. By the 1960s, research had been re-established as a core element of HE work and on which teaching should be based in the pursuit of truth through a bringing together of research insights and pedagogy as set out by the Robbins Committee in 1963 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 7).

> But the search for truth is an essential function of institutions of higher education and the process of education is itself most vital when it partakes of the nature of discovery.

The close link suggested by the quote above with teaching being reliant on and exploring advances in research meant that some of the new universities, which were built in the 1960s to increase the number of places available in HE, were as well known for their innovative teaching as they were for research (Anderson 2010). The development of new and innovative approaches to teaching developed within a relatively diffuse field of interest in the sense that there was no explicit field of research for pedagogic practice (such as the later Scholarship of Teaching outlined below), with academics and pedagogic researchers carrying out innovative projects and developing new practices in the absence of a unifying worldview. Early journals of higher education research, such as *Studies in Higher Education* included a teaching focus. For example, Morgan (1976, 68) in the first issue of the journal discusses the various and potential uses of projects in architecture teaching, reflecting,

> The richer and more complex the project becomes, the wider will be the range of possible student response and the greater the need for flexibility in the supportive teaching, both in structure and content.

This is illustrative of a long and deep interest in developing teaching approaches in the English HE sector; an architectural academic taking interest in developing and sharing practice to help others develop new teaching approaches in their own contexts. However, this disparate field focused on developing practice came centre stage in 1990 when Boyer published *Scholarship Reconsidered.*

The 1990s saw a rapid rise in the volume of interest in teaching in the HE sector at an international scale. This was partly in response to the work of Boyer who laid out a set of four foci for scholarship, one of which was the Scholarship of Teaching (SoT) which focused on the need for deep understanding of disciplinary knowledge together with equally deep pedagogic knowledge brought together to critically inform teaching practices, reminiscent of Shulman's concept of pedagogic content knowledge (1986). Approaches such as these began to popularise scholarship into teaching and provided frameworks which acted as an initial move towards the idea of excellence. The English context was also ripe for an explosion of interest in the SoT as major HE reforms such as the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 had led to the creation of a new wave of universities (the 'post-92's'), which had formally been polytechnics run by local authorities. Newly recast as universities, one of their main selling points was their quality of teaching. The breadth of HE providers subsequently grew even more as further education colleges were allowed to offer HE programmes. Within this expanded sector, scholarship and expertise in teaching became an important characteristic of HE providers.

It was also during the 1990s that new quality measures started to take hold in HE. The introduction of student evaluation of teaching and the beginnings of systems, both internal and national, to recognise the quality of teaching led to the development of 'teaching excellence' as a recognised and fully-fledged concept in the sector. For example, one way in which teaching excellence was defined and rewarded in the early 2000s was through the creation of Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). This initiative was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as part of a broader move to enhance the status of learning and teaching in HE, recognising that pre-existing esteem and reward systems within HE providers were often more likely to recognise excellence in research than teaching. Thus, the CETLs were introduced as 'a major initiative designed both to reward and promote excellence in teaching and learning across the higher education curriculum.' (Gosling and Hannan 2007, 634). Funds were awarded to a selection of HE providers following an open bidding process. The CETL initiative remains the largest single funding initiative in learning and teaching to date, with a total of £315 million made available from 2005 to 2010. At the same time as this organisational scheme of teaching excellence was created, HEFCE also developed the first National Teaching Fellowship awards to identify individuals who could

demonstrate their impact and innovation in teaching. This process was subsequently made the responsibility of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2003 and was also slowly expanded to create a suite of fellowships based on teaching innovation and excellence which continues to remain active to the present. The HEA was established to provide an accreditation scheme for university teachers in the UK and in doing so it created its United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), a set of standards and national benchmarking tool designed to outline the main dimensions of the teaching and learning support roles that exist within HE. Since its creation, the HEA has extended its scope internationally, with over 100,000 individual fellows registered worldwide as of March 2018 (HEA 2018). HEA fellowships have thus increasingly come to be seen by some as an important proxy for recognition of teaching excellence and effectiveness. Indeed, within the HE sector, the possession of a fellowship is increasingly seen as a prerequisite when applying for academic posts and promotions.

While the concept of teaching excellence was starting to become embedded as a mainstream idea in English HE, it generated a lot of debate among academics, as to what the term 'teaching excellence' actually means, a debate which continues to the present. Elton (1998, 3) reflected that 'the lack of precision is due essentially to the multidimensionality of the concept, which leads to serious confusion in any attempt to reduce its dimensions to a single one.' Elton shows that at an early stage, teaching was being characterised as complex in nature, whilst at the same time there were organisational pressures to take a more managerial approach to teaching excellence. Hence, as early as the 1990s there were signs of the divergence of focus between academics and organisations as to how teaching excellence could be utilised. For those interested in practice development and research, a number of perspectives began to emerge. For example, Skelton (2004) identified teaching excellence as being based on reflective practice, whilst Kreber (2002) emphasised the importance of performance, neither of which foregrounded the necessity for primary research. In both cases, whatever the contrast in focus, there was already an interest in the complexity and contextualised nature of teaching. Subsequently, others, such as Su and Wood (2012) have emphasised the ethical and affective attributes of teaching excellence. O'Leary (2017, 85) maintains that there is still a great deal of debate concerning the nature and qualities of teaching excellence, perhaps due to the fact that 'whatever particular focus we choose to adopt when discussing teaching, it is clear that we are dealing with a process that is incredibly complex.' The range of foci for practice development suggests a multi-faceted and complex set of processes (Wood 2016; 2017a). For those interested in understanding the processes and contexts of teaching practice, pedagogic development is seen as an ongoing emergent and the result of understanding the complexity of teaching and learning environments. However, organisational and sector-level uses of the concept of 'excellence' diverged from this more complex characterisation from the early 2000s onwards as performative cultures began to mature. Skelton (2005, 7) highlights the tension between managerial imperatives and a counter-cultural attempt by academics to see teaching excellence as having a more positive, practice-based utility,

> The question emerges as to whether teaching excellence can be appropriated by teachers and students in higher education. Can it become a valuable and meaningful concept rather than a technical and bureaucratic concern? (Skelton 2005, 7).

As the HE sector in England has become ever more commercialised and marketized, so too has it become increasingly reliant on accountability systems and the use of metrics for both research and teaching. Stevenson (2017, 538) pithily captures the dominance of metrics-based approaches to understanding and improving educational provision and the current climate of education policy making when he comments that 'the measurement of everything is central to the modern educational experience'. Teaching excellence, and excellence more widely, has ostensibly been co-

opted into these emerging narratives to serve a purpose to help universities sell their 'products' and to differentiate themselves from competitors. As Moore et al (2016, 3) state,

> Because it lacks content, "excellence" serves in the broadest sense solely as an (aspirational) claim of comparative success: that some thing, person, activity, or institution can be asserted in a hopefully convincing fashion to be better or "more important" than some other.

Similarly, other researchers have highlighted that there is no such thing as 'excellence' in the abstract and it is a vacuous and meaningless term when used in the context of policy debates about raising standards and improving quality (e.g. Readings 1996; Collini 2012).

This vagueness has been useful in branding various activities as 'excellent' within the English HE system. Many institutions now have 'centres for/of excellence', including work across the spectrum from teaching and learning to various disciplinary and research-focused areas of interest. These have become important branding mechanisms for marketing institutional provision and services, as a means of communicating to prospective students and academics the esteem associated with such centres. It echoes Reading's (1996) contention that excellence has become both amorphous and ubiquitous as a concept, rendering it largely meaningless.

Just as the wider notion of 'excellence' has become embedded in the discourse of institutional narratives, so too has it been adopted as a gauge for categorising and valorising the quality of teaching. For example, the vast majority of HE providers in England now have annual teaching awards, the underlying purpose of which is commonly articulated as recognising and rewarding teaching excellence. In a similar vein, external validation schemes such as the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) fellowship (now part of Advance HE) seek to recognise and accredit effectiveness in professional practice and leadership in learning and teaching in HE. By focusing on effectiveness these awards can be argued to be more formative than performative in nature,yet arguably one of the consequences of such schemes, unintended or not, is that they invariably end up codifying and benchmarking effectiveness according to a prescribed set of indicative descriptors and/or assessment criteria, thus creating the conditions for constraining normalisation (Foucault 1977) . Because many HE providers see the fellowships as offering prestige, there is the danger that they are linked to notions of 'teaching excellence' which then become increasingly institutionalised and colonised both conceptually and operationally by sectoral and institutional systems that are driven by wider performance management agendas and needs. While academics may still find dialogue about teaching excellence beneficial these processes of normalisation and colonisation undoubtedly have a circumscribed impact.

An additional aspect of the changing nature of excellence rarely considered in HE is that of time and the temporal impacts on practice, as outlined by Vostal (2015, 73). He argues that 'the currently ubiquitous doctrine of 'excellence' has specific temporal connotations.' He identifies the continual development of accountability structures, an increased number of imposed structures on academic work and the resultant feeling of a loss of control as being responsible for ever greater feelings of guilt and anxiety (Ylijoki and Mäntylä 2003). In the increasingly managerial context of the HE sector, there is ever greater time pressure and a loss of autonomy. Vostal (2015, 81-82) sees the 'excellence' narrative as fulfilling a role of insisting on ever better results, ever more pressure to improve,

> The omnipresent discourse of excellence, in turn, creates a highly competitive environment in which an increasing number of tasks and activities are subjected to keeping up with this hybrid criterion, as well as with surmounting existing thresholds and benchmarks

As a result, rarely does teaching excellence lead to creativity, reflection and experimentation, as these are seen as inefficient and risky. Instead, efficient use of time, increased bureaucracy and the need to perform to targets over specified time-scales become ever more central to demonstrating excellence. This shows that we cannot ignore the temporal and, in this case, accelerated nature of work relating to development in teaching practices at the organisational level.

The definition and character of teaching excellence has shifted rapidly over the past three decades, from an informal descriptor used by those interested in developing pedagogy and gaining useful insight into practice, to a concept that has been colonised by institutional imperatives as a tool to satisfy performance management needs. Indeed, it could be argued that this shift in the conceptualisation and application of teaching excellence has led to a mindset that activity not worthy of the 'excellence' title is in some way deficient, problematic and needs to be exposed to increasingly overbearing auditing and accountability systems.

The rise of the teaching excellence framework

HE in England has seen a continual development of accountability systems since the 1990s. This has happened as part of the continued marketisation of the sector, with institutions needing to compete across a range metrics to gain funding for research and income from teaching. The new Office for Students (OfS) has been created with the publicly stated aim of looking after the interests of students through four objectives: 1) the right to access HE where they have the ability; 2) to experience a high quality education whilst at university; 3) to progress to further study or high quality employment and 4) to ensure value for money (OfS, 2018). These objectives put teaching quality at the centre of university activity given that tuition fees are the largest income generator for universities. As French (2017, 6) explains in her account of the development of the TEF,

> The focus on teaching excellence in Higher Edcuation and Research Bill (HERB) is not entirely unexpected, political interest in the quality of teaching standards, as a way of helping parents and students to make informed 'choices' about which school to choose for their children, has after all, been a mainstay of governmental interventions in compulsory education for several decades.

The development of the TEF had a long gestation period, as part of the wider governmental ideology based on the increasing role of the market, regulation and accountability in public services. The OfS' current guide identifies the TEF as being concerned with measuring three areas in particular: 1) teaching quality; 2) learning environment and 3) student outcomes and learning gain (Office for Students 2018, 2). The evaluation of each HE provider in the TEF is based initially on the interpretation of quantitative data from three existing metrics: 1) Data on student entry and retention; 2) the National Student Survey (NSS) and 3) the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE). In addition to these metrics, institutions can present further evidence in the form of a written 'provider submission' of up to a maximum of fifteen pages to support their submission and to provide contextually specific information. By focusing primarily on metrics, teaching excellence has been narrowed to a reflection of sets of data which have little, if anything, to do with teaching, other than as possible, generalised proxies. As Canning (2017, 4) argues,

> … universities will not be rewarded on the quality of the teaching (let alone learning) which takes place, but upon the metrics (ghosts) of measurements which may or may not reflect the quality of teaching.

The TEF is currently being developed further, through the piloting of a subject-level element (DfE 2017) for which two different models are being trialled. Here, the same metrics as the first iteration of the TEF have been used but reported at subject as well as institutional level. There is also the addition of a 'teaching intensity' metric. This will measure the number of hours of teaching per week in subjects and how large teaching groups are. These are argued to be a good proxy for student views concerning 'value for money'. Hence, the focus appears to be economic as much as it is academic and centres on the degree to which students feel satisfied by provision rather than on the quality and challenge of the teaching.

The most recent development in teaching excellence in England therefore shows a system that has moved away from engagement with the situated meaning, process and complexity of teaching, towards a metrics-based system that relies on the use of questionable proxies that neither focus on the student (other than as consumer) nor the academic (other than as supplier) in a meaningful way. In this sense, government policy has arguably encouraged the sector to view teaching excellence through a detached, data-processing lens that is focused on the market and the satisfaction of its clients, disconnecting it from the complex acts that the key agents (i.e. academics and students) involved in learning and teaching undertake. Perversely however, whilst the student is publicly positioned at the centre of the narrative on the TEF, in reality, this is a way of micro-managing university activity to meet the needs of the market, as Heaney and Mackenzie state (2017, 8)

> The open-ended reputational economy which the TEF is presented as, for example, is an open mechanism of perpetual competition which is never completed. Teachers under the TEF, in this sense, will always be preparing for the next TEF and the next process of monitoring and are incentivised to adjust their behaviour according to these mechanisms of control.

Given the continued transition in the meaning of teaching excellence, from reflecting interests in pedagogical practice, innovation and research, to a framework for market activity and accountability, we argue that we need new ways of understanding the development of pedagogy to support well-evidenced and thoughtful approaches to teaching. To achieve this requires the reconceptualization and reconfiguration of teaching excellence. It is to this matter that the final part of this paper now turns its attention.

Moving beyond Teaching Excellence – developing a different organisational model as a basis for developing teaching

As the previous two sections have highlighted, the official meaning of teaching excellence within an English context has shifted over time. From its origins in interests concerning teaching approaches, it has been progressively appropriated by quality frameworks, accountability structures and national policies focusing on market development. At the same time, academics and students may continue to have views about teaching excellence which are more closely aligned to a process orientated approach, focused on teaching processes and learning environments. This makes the use of teaching excellence as a concept problematic and unclear. In this section, we consider how we might move beyond colonised frameworks of teaching excellence with a view to developing a different conceptualisation. In doing this, we suggest that we need to re-establish a link between the organisational level of pedagogic leadership and change, and that championed by academics focusing on developing their practice.

Our alternative model is based on critiquing the dominant model of change management in HE and argues that high quality pedagogy and pedagogic change come not from the imposition of formal

structures such as the TEF, nor the creation of excellence frameworks that identify individuals who have passed a self-referential threshold, but from a serious attempt to align organisational and academic processes to create academic communities in which pedagogic activity can thrive. We therefore begin by outlining the organisational environment we believe we need to aid the emergence of critical approaches to pedagogic practice.

Pedagogy and pedagogic development are major activities within any HE setting, and therefore need to be considered as an organisational strategic priority. This being the case, we need to consider the approach taken by the majority of English HE providers in developing strategic activity. Doyle and Brady (2018) characterise the HE sector as being driven by managerial processes in relation to organisational change. This is perhaps not surprising given that policy developments over the past 30 years have brought a managerial perspective to the sector. The most obvious examples are the REF and the TEF. The introduction of both frameworks has resulted in newly created roles and, in some cases, jobs at the institutional level. For example, in the case of the REF, there are those whose main responsibility it is to track research impact across an institution. In the case of the TEF, there are those tasked with analysing 'big data' around destination, retention and the national student survey, these analyses in turn leading to the generation of 'top-down' initiatives to bolster the data in these areas. Interfaces with pedagogic approaches tend to focus on what the student as consumer suggests they want in survey data, combined with the employment and retention imperatives. As Molesworth (2010, 197) states, 'satisfying student-customer demand may be as important to a university's success as robust pedagogy.' This need to satisfy students in this way can further drive organisational co-ordination from the centre, with large-scale interventions imposed on academics to fall in with the strategic view in the hope of creating ever more positive metrics.

Doyle and Brady (2018), in a similar fashion to Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016), characterise this view of change as being characterised by planned, rational activity. The organisation is seen as being controllable, with change being brought about by discrete projects which have a genesis at the top of the organisation in reaction to data analysis, cascaded through the system as a linear, predictable process. Such systems normally adopt a single, explicit model of change, such as systems thinking (Dunnion and O'Donovan 2014), or total quality control (Asif et al 2013). These frameworks in turn provide a clear set of aims and metrics by which success can be measured. Given the nature of the TEF, it is no surprise that responses in English HE providers have tended to follow this pattern of activity. Teaching excellence fits into this model quite comfortably, as the hierarchical structure can create threshold descriptors for the identification of excellent practitioners which fit this structure; it demonstrates clearly Reading's (1996) claim that excellence as a concept is meaningless, its meaning being contextually driven to suit the dominant narrative in a given system or organisation at a given time. This form of organisational leadership can also be linked to the dominant discourses within an organisation being of a diagnostic nature (Burke and Marshak 2009). Their research argues that organisational change driven by diagnostic narratives relies on planned and centrally managed change where valid data sets are used to diagnose problems, leading to episodic change projects focused on shifting behaviours. It is due to managerialist and market orientated policy approaches that the sector has developed to follow suit and formal characterisations of teaching excellence have become part of that shift accordingly.

In the recent past, there has however, been a reaction to these managerial, positivist ways of understanding change loosely based on more complexivist understandings of organisations (for example, Stacey 2001; McMillan 2004; Mowles 2015). Doyle and Brady (2018, 307) outline this alternative and identify it as an emergent model of organisational change, characterised as 'organisations as emergent entities in a continuous state of change arising from day-to-day

interactions between organisational members.' Unlike the dominant model of change in universities, this perspective characterises the organisation as being process driven and its activities non-linear and intertwined. As a result of this, no single model or framework is adopted to structure and develop change. Whereas the rational model favours hierarchies and leaders driving change directly, this alternative sees high quality change emerging from a more networked and flatter structure, with leaders facilitating deeper and more critical communication across the organisation and embracing paradox and contradiction (Streatfield 2001). This gives the basis of a new model for growth and change in teaching, as Doyle and Brady (2018, 309) make the observation that, 'instead of diagnosis followed by action planning, change leaders adopt a *dialogic* approach to strategic change and innovation.' (italics in original). This approach to organisational change is reflected once again in the work of Bushe and Marshak (2014) who characterise dialogic change as being based on the need for meaning making across the organisation, which then becomes self-organising with opportunities for new practices to emerge. Here, the aim is not to shift behaviours, but to engage with and change mindsets and beliefs.

In changing behaviours, imposition and hierarchy might work as the change can be enforced through policy and threats of disciplinary action. However, this tends to lead to 'zombie innovation' (Wood 2017b) which is the process by which senior leaders dictate change agendas from a distance. Academics in departments may have to deal with a number of initiatives at the same time or may simply disagree with the initiatives handed to them. In either case, academics have become adept at characterising positive change in documentation whilst not altering day-to-day practice as a way of making their work sustainable whilst giving the illusion of engaging with and advancing organisational change agendas. As a result, leaders believe the change has been instigated, academics ignore the change and the change itself exists, undead, in the twilight of the organisational landscape. Hence, if individuals are forced to amend their pedagogies due to central diktat, there is a tendency to subvert and minimise change as those involved are not engaged with the rationales involved, the aims and philosophies driving the change can appear too remote (Newton 2003). The rise of zombie innovation in organisations such as HE providers can also be linked to accelerated ways of working. Change is seen as a planned process with strict timelines and deadlines for 'deliverables'. This is the accelerated, constrained temporal environment described by Vostal (2015) earlier in his paper as being a feature of modern 'excellence'. Instead of 'fast' change from the centre, teaching development should involve what Vostal (2015) characterises as 'unhasty time' (explained further in the next section of the paper).

The above discussion outlines a different paradigm to pedagogic change in universities. A paradigm which not only engages with pedagogic dialogue at the micro-level but engages with meso-level organisational processes. This is one of the main weaknesses of the current use of teaching excellence as a concept, as it has splintered to have different meanings at different scales. At the micro-level it might still involve a formative, professional dialogue about great teaching, but at the meso and macro-levels, its nature is very different.

Thus, we need organisational approaches built on networks of individuals and groups who are involved in ongoing dialogues, encountering and engaging with different views and which shift pedagogic practice through often small-scale changes, which develop and expand out over time. As an overarching set of principles, an approach to teaching practice and development which works at both micro and meso levels needs to be emergent, dialogic and sustainable.

Creating a sustainable, emergent model for pedagogic practice and innovation

An emergent model for pedagogic practice and innovation uses dialogue as a core process for developing better teaching. Whilst dialogue has always been a feature of local practice development amongst practitioners, it has not become a common process at organisational level. However, there is an increasing interest in its organisational potential as stated by Wals and Schwarzin (2012, 16)

> Dialogue is seen as a catalyst for new understanding, insight and action (Martin, 2005), and for bringing about individual and collective shifts in mindset, behaviour and organisation.

Dialogue works through developing opportunities which bring individuals together to co-create new ideas and insights based on inquiry and reflection. Pilkington (2013: 254) uses the work of Bohm (1996) as a basis for stressing that,

> [Dialogue] is noted for its potential for exploration of practice and theorising around practical knowledge to generate new, shared or professional knowledge.'

In the case of teaching, such dialogues therefore need to be based on sharing ideas and issues found in classroom situations, before inquiring into some of these to begin to gain insights and build new or amended approaches. But as suggested above, these foci and insights need to be built over time and in a sustainable way or there is a real danger of a break down in organisational communication and the rise of zombie innovation. So in trying to build sustainable approaches to high quality teaching practices, what factors are important? Wals and Schwarzin (2012, 12) argue that there needs to be a shift in focus in organisations to develop sustainable activity. They state that 'a transition towards sustainability will not be the result so much of "doing things better" by optimising our current hegemonic systems but rather demands that we "do better things".' So, if we are to change the focus from teaching excellence to emergent pedagogic practice, sustainable approaches to change need to be central. Embellishing Peter and Wals' (2013) five factors supporting the development of organisational sustainability to consider sustainable pedagogic development:

1. Indeterminacy – we need to accept that we will not know the best solutions in advance. We need to engage in dialogue and inquiry to develop useable responses to pedagogic questions and problems.
2. Value-ladenness/normativity – we need to reflect on and enact our values as teachers and academics in the decisions we make about improving pedagogy.
3. Controversy – we need to accept that we will never reach consensus in developing pedagogic approaches. Different disciplines will see different approaches to teaching as being most appropriate to their needs. Likewise, some teachers will have personal preferences in the way they teach particular aspects of a curriculum. We must not strive to eradicate difference but should engage in dialogue to test and reflect on approaches to learn from each other. Any shifts in pedagogic approach then become based on genuine shifts in mindset.
4. Uncertainty – we cannot predict the exact impact of developments in pedagogic practice. This is one reason for defining such change as emergent in nature. It also suggests the need for ongoing change and iterative mindsets to pedagogic practice rather than planned notion of change popular in managerial models of innovation.
5. Complexity – in developing pedagogic change we need to accept that there are very many variables at play. They also act at different scales. Therefore, when inquiring into pedagogic problems, and developing changes to practice, we need to be aware of the different scales

and environments in which learning takes place (Wood and Warwick 2018) and to which teaching needs to be aligned.

Given that these different factors are important in considering how to bring sustainable change, we also have to accept that they cannot be systematised into a single model, nor can they be constrained into pre-determined timeframes beloved of those who see innovation and change as a carefully pre-planned process. Vostal (2015) argues that the 'accelerated' versus 'slow' debate on time in academia is unhelpful. There are times when individuals want activities to operate at a fast pace, for example when waiting to hear about the outcome of a submitted paper. At other times we might want to have time to reflect, to think and to act slowly. But to suggest that one or the other is preferable in all circumstances is unhelpful. In trying to find a way of harnessing the complexity of time to be more productive Vostal proposes the need to generate 'unhasty' time when considering research activity. This is certainly the case in developing opportunities for the continued focus on developing pedagogic approaches. He suggests four elements to creating unhasty timescapes in which to work,

1. The need for focused time, unbroken periods which allow for the generation, execution and reflection on academic work. There also needs to be opportunity to step outside of normal activity to reflect and think originally.
2. A number of variables will impact on time experience for any individual, including factors such as gender, commitments beyond the academy, disciplinary expectations, and in the case of teaching development, the variety of other responsibilities experienced by the individual.
3. The need for temporal autonomy for all academics for at least some of their time. This relates to the first point above. If individuals are to engage critically with pedagogic work and inquiry they need the autonomy and professional discretion to make time for pedagogic work.
4. Whilst much of the focus of inquiring into pedagogic work will tend to require slow, reflective work, there always has to be the possibility for accelerated activity where it occurs naturally, the sparks of invention, of rapid testing of ideas. Unhasty should not be mistaken for slow.

By bringing together sustainability and unhasty timescapes, we are redefining pedagogic work as focusing on collaborative work, driven from the bottom of the organisation, allowed to emerge in timeframes suitable to the activities themselves rather than to a pre-determined project timeline. Development of pedagogic practice will always be an uncertain process based on dialogue and inquiry, testing ideas and building discursive communities interested in bringing positive change to teaching.

This alternative view of change and pedagogic development puts the creative and critical work of academics back at the centre of processes relating to teaching in HE. But in an English context, it would be a major culture shift for HE providers, due to the systemic acceptance of the reductive managerial and accountability systems outlined above in this paper. By creating a more sustainable, practice-driven approach at the institutional level, criticism may follow posing questions such as, how can quality be tracked and assured if a system is not metrics-based? How can we be sure that academics will engage with pedagogic activity if they are not being monitored? How can institutions set strategic directions if senior leaders are not in control?

All too often alternatives which are not based on widespread use of metrics, outcome measures and strict frameworks are positioned as being deficient, characterised as a 'laissez-faire' retreat which

allows academics to act without accountability. The consequence of this is then argued to be a fall in standards and ultimately to a poor investment by students. Here, we will briefly reposition this argument, firstly by arguing that it is the current hierarchical and metrics-driven system which leads to a counter-productive accountability system, and then by suggesting that it is an alternative model such as the one we propose here which leads to a more critical and ultimately more positive system for defining and engendering responsibility in pedagogic work.

HE providers have increasingly created accountability systems driven by targets, monitoring systems, evaluations and numerically driven strategic plans. Shore and Wright (2000, 77) argue that such a conceptualisation of accountability causes individuals to become complicit, 'caught in a disciplinary system whose negative characteristics they are actively reproducing and yet over which they feel increasingly powerless'. Whilst individuals become complicit in these approaches to ensure their continued employment, it restricts their opportunities to work outside of the frameworks imposed. This means that there is less time for authentic reflection, experimentation and emergence of new practice, indeed some practice may become peripheral if it does not align with strategic aims. As a consequence, there is a real danger that innovative practice becomes stymied. As the institution decides on the main areas for development, there is also the added possibility that innovation is seen to be occurring whilst it is actually stalling (see the comments on zombie innovation above, (Wood 2017b), leading to a dangerous situation where perceptions at the centre of the institution begin to diverge from the practice in the subjects. This recasts the problem with accountability actually arising from a centrally-driven, reductive approach which is so often argued to be an organisational imperative within the HE sector.

Instead of focusing on accountability, we instead need to focus on responsibility. Vetterlein (2018, 1) adopts an understanding of responsibility that transcends accountability,

> Adopting a broader understanding of responsibility as going beyond accountability will shift our focus from rights and regulations, enforcement and compliance to the study of the processes of negotiating these rules and regulations and their normative underpinnings.

Here, responsibility is underpinned by ethical practice. It becomes an accepted part of the institutional culture that academics will be involved in critical pedagogic activity. Where this does not occur, there is still the opportunity for censure, but it is a censure which comes from colleagues and subject-leaders rather than from the centre of the institution. The other main advantage of a responsibility-led system are the vertical relationships within the organisation. Accountability is an essentially 'top-down' system which holds those lower down the power structure to account. Targets are set, and progress is monitored, but there is little accountability operating in the opposite direction. If an academic is unable to meet a target due to a lack of funding or training, then rarely are senior leaders held to account for not providing the required resources; at best the target is just recorded as not being fulfilled before moving on. In contrast, responsibility-led systems require everyone to be responsible for their role within the system, as the direction of change is negotiated and normative in nature. In the event that resources are not made available for agreed work, the more senior colleague at fault can be identified as not having fulfilled their responsibilities to those with whom they work.

Responsibility-led systems, being normative in nature, align with the more dialogic approach we are advocating here. Hence, it is through consistent engagement with pedagogic practice and change that responsibilities can be assigned, and pedagogic communities can develop. Leaders no longer play an 'overseeing' role, but become engaged with the pedagogic dialogues, facilitating instead of

directing, learning to work with the paradox of being in control and not being in control at the same time (Streatfield 2001). Wood (2017b, 34) characterises Streatfield's notion of the paradox of control within an educational context as meaning,

> … leaders are in the paradoxical position of being in control and not being in control at the same time. In such situations, to bring about real and sustained organisational change, leaders need to be willing to overcome many of the barriers set out above by including teachers in ongoing dialogue and activities which allow them to play a central role not only in implementing but forming the change agenda, as well as providing concomitant resources and time.

The final reflection on a responsibility-led approach to pedagogic practice and change is that it is an emergent process. This means that there are no top-down strategic plans which characterise pedagogic development as occurring in discrete, time-limited projects. Because accountability systems rely on target-setting, artificial timeframes are imposed on developmental work. As discussed earlier, Vostal (2105) sees the language of excellence as being associated with accelerated processes; leaders need to show how 'ahead of the curve' they are. But a responsibility-led system can position pedagogic change as complex and ongoing, and in need of 'unhasty' time to create the dialogic and sustainable features expressed by Wals and Schwarzin (2012) as discussed earlier in this section.

The creation of more emergent systems also requires a fundamental realignment of macro-level involvement in pedagogic development, i.e. the national policy level. There should not be direct management and direction from a macro-level as this will stall and constrain work at the meso and micro level. Instead those working at the macro-level need to trust the work of those below, only interjecting where there is obvious and clear evidence of malpractice or incompetence.

How we begin to make the shift from the present reductive, performative system to one which embraces our sustainable, emergent model has no easy answer. As with any emergent model, there is no '5 steps to success' style framework which all can follow to bring sure success. There needs to be a simultaneous shift in organisational sensibilities, with lecturers deciding that it is through dialogue that they can connect with each other to effect change which makes their own local contexts more critical and positive, which leaders accept that they need to facilitate such a shift. This requires both groups to take risks, even if this is through the use of small-scale piloting to aid in building prototypes and eventually more robust change. But ultimately, it is the acceptance by those with power that dialogue facilitates change and innovation which is central. If dialogue is seen as undermining and subverting those above, then it will not be allowed to emerge as a force for change. However, if dialogue begins to be embraced, it will allow opportunities for those across the organisation to begin to explore and find novel solutions to local problems, allowing both micro and meso-level change processes to work together.

Final thoughts

The above discussion is an attempt to consider how we can re-establish a strong symbiosis between institution and practitioner-level processes for generating critical, challenging and contextually-relevant pedagogies. Such an approach needs to be sustainable, allowing for continued dialogue as a basis for constructing change, being driven from the bottom-up rather than top-down. But we also need to accept that due to the complexity of the contexts in which pedagogies are generated and developed, there can be no single, 'correct' approach which can be introduced and replicated across an organisation or the sector. Flexibility is required, driven by the particular needs of academics and

students in localised contexts. At a broader level, however, there are core requirements if the organisation is to move forward. There need to be regular fora for sharing of practice insights gained through both professional work and research, there needs to be internal funding for pedagogic work to drive change and there needs to be a recognition of the parity between pedagogic work and research work carried out in academic disciplines. Dialogic change of this form could then lead to emergent institutional foci and plans so that the organisation as a whole has an understanding of some of the major strands of development. These ideas take account of the fact that teaching and learning are socially situated, intellectual activities (Lave 1993). How we understand them in a HE context requires the creation of knowledge and meaning to be grounded in these complex contexts. Lave's work (Lave, 1988; Lave and Chaiklin, 1993) demonstrates that meaning has a relational character, and thus in the context of teaching and so-called 'excellence', new practice is generated in dialogic interactions between peers i.e. academics and their students, in the context of the courses they are teaching/studying. Such situated activities might naturally lead to the emergence of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger, 1998) occurring both within and across disciplines, informed not only by pedagogic research, but also from cognitive science, computer science, and anthropology to name but a few. The academic practice and e-learning units which currently exist in most HE providers would have an important part to play in this model of pedagogic development. But rather than being accountable for disseminating central plans, they would instead help to build networks, support research and practitioner inquiry and help establish institution-wide networks, all in an environment of unhasty exploration and development. In a complex system of pedagogic development, they would help ensure that there is constant opportunity to move beyond local networks, thereby minimising the danger of 'group-think'. Here, the focus would not be on teaching excellence, identified in externally sanctioned centres, or individuals capable of proving they have moved beyond a set of self-referential threshold statements. Instead the focus would be to align the organisational structures of the institution to the complex, sometimes contradictory, views and expertise of those in the organisation. In this sense, we would not be advocating a return to 'teaching excellence' so much as encouraging 'emergent pedagogies' to support the ongoing communal drive towards providing students with a critical and challenging experience worthy of studying at HE level.

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