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Reimagining teaching excellence: why collaboration, rather than competition, holds the key to improving teaching and learning in higher education

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Abstract

The Global Education Reform Movement’s (GERM) interest in the quality of teaching and teacher effectiveness has focused largely on schools and children’s attainment to date, with higher education (HE) remaining an outlier. Yet the neoliberal agenda that has dominated HE policy globally over the last two decades closely reflects the focus and ideology of the GERM. A recent example of this is the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 in the UK, which places explicit focus on the assessment of the quality of HE teaching, with human capital as a key driver. Drawing on the TEF as an ideological extension of the GERM, this paper challenges the policy’s purported aims and underpinning ethos. It argues that the current metrics-based model embodied in the TEF serves as a reductive instrument of normalising judgement that seeks to exercise control over HE teachers’ work. Contrary to policy claims that the TEF will act as a ‘key lever in driving up standards’ (BIS 2016), we maintain that its reliance on crude performance indicators as ‘evidence’ of excellence hinders creativity and pedagogic inquiry, ultimately dissuading the creation of new knowledge about learning and teaching. Contrary to what we perceive as the TEF’s narrow conceptualisation of teaching excellence, this paper proposes an alternative vision that seeks to reimagine excellence by integrating the complex, context-specific and collaborative characteristics of HE teaching into an approach that has authentic and meaningful improvement at its core, along with an ethos of professional responsibility.

Keywords: higher education, teaching excellence, learning and teaching, collaboration

Introduction

The rhetoric of market competition has had far-reaching impact on the focus and direction of education policy worldwide in recent years. What Sahlberg (2011) acronymises appositely as the ‘GERM’, the Global Education Reform Movement has proliferated the principles and practices of a business model of education across diverse areas from the curriculum and pedagogy to governance and management. While much of the focus of the GERM has been on the schools’ sector and particularly the attainment of school children in core skills such as literacy and numeracy to date, its ideology has undoubtedly had a pervasive impact on policy and practice across all education sectors, with higher education (HE) no exception.

In the UK HE sector, for example, policy debates about ‘quality’ have focused mainly on research with teaching traditionally ‘regarded as a poor cousin to academic research’ (BIS 2015, 8). High quality research and the prestige associated with it has thus long been regarded as the gold standard for recognising and rewarding academic excellence, as well as having an influential impact on the recruitment of staff and students internationally (e.g. Blackmore, Blackwell and Edmondson 2016). Yet recently the quality of teaching has increasingly become the subject of intense scrutiny by politicians and policy makers.

The latest example of this is the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK in 2016, which assesses and ranks the quality of undergraduate teaching in HE providers according to a three-tiered medal system of gold, silver and bronze. While the TEF is compulsory for all HE providers in England, it remains optional for those in the other countries of the UK, with limited participation from institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to date. It is this particular policy of the TEF that we have chosen as the focus of

our discussion of education reform in the UK HE sector in this paper, as we argue that it is indicative of the ideology and key drivers of the GERM.

This paper is concerned with examining and questioning the focus and rationale of recent HE policy in the UK in relation to teaching excellence. It seeks to challenge and resist some of the dominant conceptualisations and practices associated with improving teaching and learning enshrined in current policy and to offer a reimagined, alternative perspective driven by professional responsibility rather than managerialist accountability. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part situates the spread of the GERM in HE through the lens of the TEF and discusses what this reveals about the underpinning ethos of present policy and its key drivers. It proceeds through a critical analysis of the 2016 White Paper (BIS 2016) and the TEF discourse regarding equality and raising standards. The second part critiques the current evidence base used in the TEF to evaluate the quality of teaching in HE providers, calling into question the validity, reliability and credibility of that evidence. Having established the shortcomings of present policy, the third and final part proposes an alternative vision that seeks to reimagine excellence by integrating the complex, context-specific and collaborative characteristics of HE teaching into an approach that has authentic and meaningful improvement at its core, along with an ethos of professional responsibility.

The spread of GERM in higher education: The Teaching Excellence Framework

Improving education systems has become a priority of governments worldwide over the last two decades (e.g. Meyer and Benavot 2013). Viewed through an ongoing policy lens of the economisation and marketisation of education, which explicitly seeks to make connections between a country's economic competitiveness and its levels of educational achievement, politicians and policy makers have become increasingly influenced by and reliant on

comparative performance data from international assessment systems such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the case of schools and the global university rankings in the case of HE. The importance of teachers and the quality of teaching in student achievement have figured prominently in policy discussions, with particular interest in research exploring teacher effectiveness in the hope of pinpointing the skills and qualities displayed by the 'effective teacher'. As Sellar and Lingard (2014) have suggested, the 'Holy Grail' for the OECD would be to align performance data from programmes such as PISA with other performance metrics used to measure teacher impact and effectiveness such as the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). This exemplifies the powerful influence and stronghold of metrics on education policy making globally.

Stevenson (2017, 538) concisely captures the current climate of education policy making and the dominance of metrics-based approaches to understanding and improving educational provision when he comments that 'the measurement of everything is central to the modern educational experience'. Though as Biesta (2017, 316) remarks:

While the performance of many aspects of the education system is measured in much detail and with much precision and statistical sophistication, the question that remains is whether this brings us any closer to an understanding of the value of the processes and practices that are being measured.

Central to the ideology and methodology of the GERM is the need to standardise and control education systems. Operationally this is typically achieved through the implementation of monitoring and inspection systems that seek to measure the 'quality' of the work of individuals and institutions by benchmarking that work against prescribed standards and

performance criteria. This gives rise to a process of what Foucault (1977, 184) refers to as ‘normalisation’, which can be seen as the adjustment of behaviour to fall into line with prescribed standards. Thus, in the case of HE, the UK government decided that for teaching to be considered of equal value to research, then an equivalent system to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) needed to be established to enable the monitoring and measurement of the quality of teaching across HE providers by means of a standardised framework. As further justification, the government argued that the TEF would help to identify, encourage and reward excellence in teaching and as such become a key lever in driving up standards across the sector (BIS 2016), especially given that teaching had been criticised as ‘by far the weakest aspect of English higher education’ by the former Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts (Gill 2015). Thus the TEF emerged as a purported policy cousin of the REF for HE teaching. Undoubtedly there are similarities between the two. For example, both attempt to capture and measure complex and multifaceted phenomena, relying heavily on a series of proxies. Both also involve academic peers in the assessment process, though it is important to acknowledge that the peer review of teaching is historically less developed or systematic than the peer review of research, which is a well-established, familiar process to academics internationally. For example, in Wingrove et al’s study (2017), one of the participants refers to academics being used to their performance in research being measured but less so when it comes to teaching.

Political interest in the quality of teaching is not a new phenomenon in the UK but has been a longstanding element of the education policy of successive governments since the 1980s. It was the Thatcher government of the 1980s that spearheaded the introduction of the market ideology of choice and competition as key drivers for raising standards and the quality of provision across education sectors. It is worth highlighting though that historically HE has

enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy and been the subject of less policy interventions in relation to teaching and the monitoring of its quality compared to schools and colleges. This is arguably because HE providers have enjoyed greater academic freedom, keeping them at arm's length from the control of the state. This has made it more difficult for the state to intervene in its business and drive through reform relating to curriculum and pedagogy as it has done so readily in schools and colleges. That said, the recent introduction of the TEF represents a turning point for the sector as it places the quality of HE teaching firmly in the policy spotlight with the government promising to 'reward excellent teaching with reputational and financial incentives' (BIS 2015, 8), which could potentially threaten that longstanding autonomy, albeit through reform at a distance. In many ways the TEF can be seen to embody a continuing policy shift away from a civic to a market-driven agenda. Given that the state cannot easily intervene more directly in HE, its strategy of control has thus become increasingly driven by the market. As a recent European report entitled *The Concept of Excellence in Higher Education* (2014) maintains,

There is a perceptible shift in thinking away from utilitarian notions of equity and the view of higher education as a 'social good' towards the promotion of a more competitive market for institutions in the belief that competition will improve standards and quality (Brusoni et al 2014, 19).

This 'shift' has manifested itself in the continued commercialisation of HE, with providers competing against each other to establish market position and their distinctive brands. In turn this has led to the creation and expansion of institutional and sectoral systems of performativity and accountability, ostensibly driven by managerialist structures designed to service the ever-increasing marketisation of the sector (Ball 2003). These systems are closely

connected and invariably underpinned by an emphasis on measuring the performance of individuals and institutions alike (Roberts 2007). Whilst HE providers have previously been judged predominantly on the quality and impact of their research outputs, recent policy developments like the TEF mean that teaching quality is now increasingly becoming more formally scrutinised and in turn subjected to a range of performance metrics similar to those that have become firmly embedded in schools and colleges as a result of the GERM (e.g. French and O’Leary 2017; Wood and Su 2016). But is this a trend that is prevalent in HE internationally? Is the UK TEF an international outlier or does it represent the vanguard of wider developments around teaching quality?

Quality assurance systems for teaching have undoubtedly become established internationally, though much of the focus in HE has been on programmes of certification and/or prestige schemes that seek to valorise differing levels of competence and/or expertise in the scholarship of teaching and learning; the UK Higher Education Academy’s fellowship scheme is a case in point. But just as the GERM has focused largely on schools rather than HE, so too have systems of teacher evaluation and attempts to measure the quality of teaching and/or teacher effectiveness. Three large-scale projects that exemplify this are the international comparative study of McKinsey and Company (2007), the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project in the USA (MET Project 2013) and the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD 2014). When it comes to assessing teaching quality, most countries tend to rely on activities such as licensing and certification via initial teacher education/preparation programmes, observations of teaching, student attainment and student evaluations.

What the GERM and current UK government policy on HE have in common is the way in which they are both underpinned by a neoliberal, market-driven ideology of competition. Promoting a climate of overt competition in which educational institutions and their students are compelled to compete with one another has resulted in increasing pressure on both students and their teachers to perform in an ongoing race for ‘excellence’, where inevitably there are winners and losers. As Wood (2017, 47) argues, ‘if excellence is not claimed then a project or programme must be falling short in some way.’ This Darwinian-like philosophy of the survival of the fittest is starkly embodied in the TEF’s rankings, which are based on a medal system of gold, silver and bronze. That its assessment rankings should be associated with elite competitive sporting events such as the Olympics is no coincidence but indicative of neoliberal policy making that valorises competition as the fundamental driver for organisational improvement (BIS 2015, 2016). Such policy making engenders a market in which competition between HE providers is not only encouraged but actively rewarded through a hierarchical medal system that categorises institutional performance.

In the 2016 White Paper ‘*Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*’ that set out the government’s proposals for reform, one of the original aims of the TEF was ‘to provide assurance for students and establish a level playing field’ (BIS 2016, 8). While the emphasis on establishing ‘a level playing field’ is no longer articulated as a current government priority of the TEF (see, for example, current guidance on the Office for Students website), the contention still remains that the core metrics of the TEF have been shown to favour those HE providers that already occupy a privileged position in terms of the socio-economic status of their student populations and their own standing in (inter)national league tables, particularly in relation to the data from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE). By introducing a sorting scale based on the

allocation of a tiered system of medals, the government claims that this will produce a ‘comprehensive register’. Yet there is evidence to suggest that the creation of a tiered HE system, through the imposition of TEF rankings, may simply exacerbate existing inequalities around the status and currency of qualifications and is unlikely to benefit the very students from disadvantaged backgrounds that the government maintains it intends to support (e.g. Bathmaker et al 2016).

‘Widening participation’ no longer features as a priority of the TEF as it did when it was introduced in 2016. Its two main aims are now ‘to assess HE providers’ levels of excellence in teaching’ and ‘ensuring students get good outcomes, whether graduate level employment or further study’, as articulated in a recent guide from the newly formed Office for Students (Office for Students 2018, 1). This shift in focus is justified on the premise that ‘students invest significant amounts of time and money in their higher education’ and thus ‘they rightly expect a high-quality academic experience’ (ibid). Current government policy encourages students to mediate their HE experiences as consumers, with everything evaluated on the basis of whether or not it can be considered *value for money*. The notion of *value for money* is largely built on the premise that HE increases individuals’ employability and earning potential, further reinforcing the idea of the HE sector as a tiered marketplace with students located as consumers of a commodified product. However, current research reveals that graduate earnings are significantly less for students from low income families when compared to students from more affluent backgrounds, even when they have completed the same degrees from the same universities (e.g. Britton, Dearden, Shephard and Vignoles 2016). The conceptualisation and categorisation of students as consumers is also problematic and disempowering as they find themselves thrust into the role of passive recipients of their

educational experience as a product rather than active co-constructors of that experience in collaboration with their peers and the academic staff that teach them.

Conceptualising the work of HE teachers through an economic lens, with the need for efficiency and key performance indicators, measurement and accountability agendas become increasingly more influential in shaping the nature and focus of their work. But such indicators eschew the contested nature of 'teaching excellence', instead capturing it as a reductive outcome rather than as an emergent, formative process as Kreber (2002) argues. It is here that a central concern of how teaching excellence is perceived through a neoliberal lens can be found, that a narrative publicly claimed to focus on the development of teaching and learning is actually focused on ease of measurement and increasing control of the teaching process in HE (O'Neill 2002). Furthermore, the idea that HE teachers simply exist to serve the needs of their students as consumers is a misrepresentation of the professional relationships between them and their students, how both parties perceive such relationships and the value they attach to them. HE teachers play a central role in defining and determining their students' needs through ongoing reciprocal dialogue, with both making an important contribution to such dialogue.

Erroneous evidence? Examining the validity and reliability of evidence in the TEF

The Office for Students' current guide identifies the TEF as being concerned with measuring three areas: 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. The extent to which the data from these sources can be considered valid and reliable evidence of teaching excellence is highly contestable, along with what this reveals about the underpinning agenda driving the TEF as discussed above.

Although the dominance of metrics has an established history in education, that organisations and individuals continue to rely on them so heavily to shape policy thinking and decision making is a source of bewilderment for some researchers (e.g. Biesta 2017). Though there are familiar reasons for not wanting to let go of such practice. Numbers tend to have a captivating allure about them that is wrapped up in a series of interrelated factors. Firstly, popular belief suggests that they carry with them an implied sense of scientific validity and objectivity. As Taubman (2009) suggests, the assumed objective reality that is often attached to numbers is largely beyond question. Secondly, there is a universal understanding of the significance of numbers that transcends cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies, which naturally widens their appeal and application. For instance, 100% means the same in any language and any country. Thirdly, there is an ease and efficiency about numbers that means they lend themselves easily to capturing complex phenomena in an accessible language. Besides, numbers have become so engrained throughout education now that institutions and individuals alike have become extremely reliant on them to measure performance.

An influential performance metric for establishing perceived levels of teaching quality and student satisfaction is the NSS, which is completed annually by final year undergraduate students in the UK. The NSS was commissioned in 2005 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and is designed to assess students' opinions of the quality of their degree

programmes. The rationale for its creation was to make HE providers more accountable for the educational experience of their undergraduates, along with providing a national data set to inform future students of the strengths and weaknesses of all HE providers.

In its discussion of the Higher Education and Research Bill in 2017, the House of Lords raised questions about the ability of the NSS to provide useful information about teaching quality and student satisfaction across different institutions. Some of these comments were taken on board and certainly Professor Chris Husbands, the chair of the TEF assessment panel has sought to reduce the weighting of the NSS results in the overall assessment process, expressing his reservations about the value of the NSS as a data set even before the 2017 TEF submissions were returned (Grove 2017).

A criticism of the NSS is that it can stifle and even penalise innovative and challenging teaching, with some studies suggesting that students report greater satisfaction rates on courses where they are less likely to be taken out of their comfort zone and exposed to teaching and assessments that challenge them or get them to take risks (e.g. Poropat 2014). In an increasingly competitive market and given the financial commitment associated with university study nowadays, it is perhaps unsurprising that students may seek to minimise risk to the outcome of what has undoubtedly become a high-stakes assessment i.e. their final degree classification. However, when it comes to teaching excellence, innovation and experimentation are commonly acknowledged as key features (e.g. Gunn and Fisk 2013). As Barnett (1990, 155) reminds us, being challenged and unsettled in one's thinking has traditionally been a distinctive quality of university education.

The DLHE is also a national survey that charts student destinations and incomes six months after leaving their HE studies. Students themselves remain sceptical about the inclusion of the

DLHE data in the TEF on the basis that ‘graduate employability is not a measure of teaching quality’ (Greatbatch and Holland 2016, 6). As with the NSS, there are a number of other variables outside of teaching quality that affect students’ chances of employment and their subsequent earning power. These include the perceived standing of their chosen HE provider, which in turn reflects engrained socio-economic differences between student cohorts in pre and post 1992 providers, irrespective of the quality of the teaching students receive there (Bell and Brooks 2016). Different degrees are also potentially always going to provide a better chance of employment on graduation, for example teaching and nursing, whereas others are more likely to provide access to high paying jobs such as law and medicine.

In the case of student recruitment and retention, institutions that are highly selective clearly have a distinct advantage over those that recruit from a wider community. The main reasons why students withdraw from courses are invariably related to matters other than the quality of teaching or other academic issues. Moreover, students from working class backgrounds tend to be more affected by such matters than their counterparts from more affluent backgrounds, often because they have to contend with a multitude of extracurricular commitments, pressures and the challenges of cultural assimilation as well as their studies (e.g. Quinn 2004). Thus, when it comes to these data being used for comparative statistical analyses across HEIs for the purpose of exercises like the TEF, as Holmwood et al (2016, 29) assert, ‘universities with a strong widening participation track record will inevitably suffer ... [as they] face being blamed for forces beyond their control.’

Two interrelated questions about the TEF that need to be addressed in order to uncover its fundamental value and legitimacy as an assessment exercise thus relate to the evidence currently used to capture the quality of teaching in HE providers and the validity and

reliability of that evidence. Though as Biesta (2017, 316) has argued in the wider context of the use of measurement in education, these are not just questions of technical validity in terms of whether these metrics are actually measuring what they purport to measure but also what he refers to as ‘normative validity’ i.e. whether what is being measured represents what we value in education. Such questions of normative validity are often ignored by politicians and policy makers or dismissed as being too ideological and that what educators need to concentrate on is ‘what works’ in terms of identifying the core principles of ‘effective teaching’.

There has been a considerable growth and emphasis on evidence-based policy internationally over the last two decades, which itself has given rise to a narrowing in the type of research that policy makers prefer or are willing to accept as evidence for what works in educational contexts. Biesta (2017, 322) contends that evidence-based practice has increasingly begun to displace and/or even attempt to replace professional judgement. According to Biesta, proponents of evidence-based practice argue that in order for teaching to be considered a true ‘profession’, it needs to be based upon ‘scientific knowledge about “what works”’ and rely less on ‘singular insights’ about the effectiveness of particular approaches and methods. What constitutes ‘scientific knowledge’ is heavily linked to positivist paradigms, often emphasising the importance of methods such as randomised controlled trials as a guarantee of validity and reliability. But as Biesta (2017, 323) argues, ‘scientific evidence can neither replace judgements about how to act, nor can it replace judgements about the aims and ends of professional action.’ Biesta maintains that,

The call for an evidence-based approach is not a deepening of the knowledge and judgement of professionals, but rather an attempt to overrule such knowledge and

judgement. In precisely this sense, the evidence-based approach is another erosion of the democratic dimension of professionalism (ibid).

What Biesta's analysis reveals is that with the reliance on reductive and misguided metrics, developments such as the TEF may actually hinder rather than help efforts to further understanding of learning and teaching in HE.

As with many quality assurance interventions like the TEF, there is always the guardedness that the key driver is one of accountability rather than a genuine commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning in the sector. The TEF and related government policy around teaching excellence has arguably reduced it to an exercise in hyper-accountability and contrived certification. What is clear about the TEF to date is that the 'evidence' driving the assessment process relates more to an employment or employability agenda than the quality of teaching. There is an incongruence between the policy rhetoric of raising the standards of teaching across the sector and the metrics chosen to evaluate the evidence as part of the TEF. The TEF performance metrics are clearly of limited relevance and use in what they can reveal about the quality of teaching. They have been chosen because they allow the state to remain in control of the tools of measurement and the key drivers of this reform. In this sense the TEF is only the latest development in a long line of reductive, metrics-driven approaches attempting to capture the complexity of educational processes in an over-simplified framework, which in turn mean that the true nature of teaching is not identified. As such it is a summative rather than a diagnostic tool with questionable value. How then might teaching excellence be reimagined as a meaningful notion? Let us move our attention to discussing what an alternative system of teaching excellence may look like and how we might achieve it.

Teaching excellence reimagined: a counter narrative

As the critique developed above argues, the TEF centres on a reductive notion of accountability, reductive in the sense that it relies heavily on a narrow set of metrics and a particular notion of how ‘excellence’ should be measured. It also offers little in the way of considering how to develop or improve the quality of teaching, which is ironic given how this formed part of the original rationale for its creation. The tying of accountability to metrics has been an important part of a shift towards centralised planning at organisational level and increasing political mistrust in academics and universities (Woelert and Yates, 2015). As Biesta (2010, 50) states, ‘the idea of accountability has been transformed from a notion with real democratic potential to a set of procedures that have stifled educational practice and that have reduced normative questions to questions of mere procedure.’

Accountability can include characteristics such as the responsibility for working with others to ensure that positive outcomes can be fostered through reasoned action. Such a notion of accountability would be based on democratic engagement and reflection to build consensus and change across stakeholder groups. However, the increasing imperative of metrics and the associated centralisation of decision-making has a tendency to lead to a ‘technical-managerial’ form of accountability. This tendency is identified by Green (2011, 45) who argues that,

... even though the rhetoric tells us that autonomy of decisional power and responsibility will reside in the local, ‘self-management’ of organisational institutions, the reality is that contracts, targets, performance indicators and monitoring and evaluation systems act as new forms of control.

Green identifies an association between the concepts of responsibility and accountability but this distinction is often lost in metrics-based systems. One of the consequences of managerial views of accountability is that they can easily lead to hierarchy and standardisation of practice. 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’. In our counter narrative of teaching excellence, we focus on how we can move away from a hierarchically divisive metrics-driven system by re-establishing and advancing the role of responsibility in teaching development.

Acknowledging that responsibility and accountability are interconnecting concepts, Vetterlein (2018, 1) encourages us to adopt a ‘broader understanding’ of the former 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.

Likewise, Fielding (2001) characterises responsibility as relying on a moral foundation rather than the technical-managerialism which accountability has become, in turn offering much greater potential for professional work. Thus, responsibility is a concept related to accountability but stresses the need for ethical, professional behaviour with democratic approaches to working with others. In this manner, responsibility is concerned with academics using their professional expertise to make decisions concerning practice and

practice development. When they realise there is a need for improvement but are unsure of how to affect change, they have a responsibility to work with others to consider how new practice can be developed and embedded. Such realisation might come from, amongst others, module evaluations, from reflection on assessment and feedback or from informal dialogue with students concerning their learning experiences.

By positioning responsibility as the basis for pedagogic development, academics become answerable to others through continued dialogue and partnership. This makes responsibility a contextualised process more than it is one based on generic metrics. One example of the potential of this approach to working is co-inquiry between academic staff and students, where the latter are not identified as ‘participants’ but instead take on the role of co-researchers (Weller et al 2013).

If responsibility is to supersede accountability as a basis for professional work, whilst retaining the ability and imperative for continual improvement in teaching quality, it follows that there needs to be a focus on change at the organisational level, as larger structures need to align with new ways of thinking and doing. The TEF is arguably an attempt to create a ‘better’ teaching and learning offer, however reductive it might be perceived by some, thus providing a focus that can be understood and embedded at an organisational level. But organisations can face serious challenges in bringing about change that is imposed from the outside due to the fact that such agendas can emerge from those who know little of the local contexts for pedagogic practice and change (Wood 2017). Our alternative narrative offers a way of bringing together the potential of responsibility at the individual and group level, based on local answerability and partnership with others, with a wider framework for organisational change.

Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016) argue that many perspectives on organisational change identify it as a linear, plannable process, whilst in reality it is more often complex, highly contextual and messy. They distinguish a number of different conceptual understandings of change, the opposite end points along a spectrum being those of planned and emergent change (see Table 1). The first assumes change to be intentional, managed from the top of the organisation, with a series of identifiable, progressive steps that culminate in an identifiable endpoint. This is the view of organisational change inherent in institutional strategic and improvement plans. The second, however, sees change as ongoing and constant, as a process that occurs from within the organisation and which drives change from beneath. It is also, as the table suggests, a process of ‘ceaseless modification’ with no endpoint.

	Planned	Emergent
Rhythm, pattern and frequency of change	Change is intentional, infrequent and discontinuous	Change is constant, evolving and cumulative
Type of intervention	Generally, top-down	Generally, bottom-up
Change trajectory	Linear and progressive from one state to another, predefined target state	Continuous, processual and cyclical trajectory, looking for equilibrium through cyclic activity
View of change and inertia	Change is an occasional disruption from a steady state and driven by external management	Change comes from ceaseless modification and alteration in processes and practices

Table 1. Characteristics of planned and emergent change in organisations (simplified from Iveroth and Hallencreutz, 2016, 24)

This planned approach to change can become a series of individual, co-ordinated projects, passed down with the seal of approval from senior leaders who sponsor particular innovations, or what Doyle and Brady (2018) identify as a ‘rational paradigm’ of organisational change. Whilst not all universities have moved very far along this trajectory,

many have and continue to do so. This is why the TEF sits so easily within the managerial frameworks of many HE providers as it relies on the manipulation of metrics as highlighted by Neary (2016). Doyle and Brady (2018) instead support the adoption of an ‘emergent’ model which fits better with the philosophical and cultural foundations of HE. This alternative sits more comfortably within a community-led, collaborative endeavour, with the potential not only for academics to work together, but for them to work with students as co-producers of new practice. Change here is seen as a constant striving for better pedagogies, for better ways of working with students to create vibrant academic communities. And as the emergent model of Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016) suggests, this is a ceaseless process, not one of reaching some pre-arranged endpoint of ‘excellence’.

It is crucial to stress here that this alternative philosophy is not a way of helping individuals shirk their responsibilities. It actually makes the work of academics more accountable. As Green argues (2011, 91), ‘the more someone is tied down by specific instructions, or the more someone has to provide explicit reasons why they are going to do something, the less they can be held responsible to see to it that things go well generally within their sphere of responsibility.’ If metrics are the impetus for change, once pre-defined targets have been met, then in turn so too has the full extent of individual responsibility. Where an emergent model of change is accepted, the wider ethical and democratic nature of responsibility over accountability leads to an imperative to continue to question and improve. Here, everyone is responsible for bringing about sustainable change that leads to better practice for the organisation from below, rather than relying on targets and accountability from above.

The model we offer below is best considered a re-imagined alternative of how a more emergent, complexity-driven system might work. It is crucial to emphasise that there is no

single best way of achieving the emergent, responsibility-led model we are suggesting, as we acknowledge that context is central to what emerges in any particular circumstance. We are not advocating an approach that, like the GERM, insists on consistent structures at a system or global level. What is crucial is the quality of pedagogy within a given local and organisational context and what follows is meant as an illustrative possibility in keeping with a philosophy rather than a definitive framework to be applied in all situations.

Here we develop an example using a teaching and learning unit as a vehicle for a possible emergent process, however, it would work in any context where there is an interest in innovating pedagogic practice amongst a group (formal or informal) of pedagogic practitioners and/or researchers. Many HE providers in the UK have established units that are responsible for developing academic and teaching practice. In some institutions, these units fulfil a support role, helping academics with course development, running postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching for newly employed lecturers, taking responsibility for study skills and language support for students etc. In other institutions, staff undertake research as a strand of their work. The framework we suggest would be a development and extension of the latter.

A pedagogic research unit could be established, employing staff who have experience in carrying out a wide range of quantitative and qualitative inquiry into practice. The unit's work would then be driven by two levels of activity. The first would be dictated by the needs and questions of academic staff and student unions, resulting in small-scale research projects. The second would focus on synthesising project insights to drive larger-scale, more complex and institutional development. Here, the unit would be responsible for making sense of academic need, offering consistent support to investigate and solve issues brought to them,

while at the same time synthesising findings to identify larger-scale organisational issues. Many academic practice units already operate in this way to a limited degree, but are often beholden to external pressures, priorities and demands from organisational strategic plans from above. This model would propose to re-orientate the focus to work wholly with practitioner and student-driven needs, thereby creating a more democratic, emergent model of change and development (Iveroth and Hallencreutz 2016; Doyle and Brady 2016).

The focus for small-scale projects would be dictated by the practical questions and issues generated by academic staff and student representatives. The unit would publish a nominal annual capacity for small-scale projects and attempt to distribute activity over the course of an academic year. It might also emphasise particular areas of practice identified by the wider organisation as being of particular importance or interest. Each query brought to the team would first be handled through a 'diagnostic dialogue' involving teaching staff and unit staff, with a view to understanding the nature of the issue and gaining a deeper insight into the context-specific factors and what the member of teaching staff hopes to achieve. This last point is key, as the dialogue would try to establish the role of the member of teaching staff in any subsequent work. For example, would they be a co-researcher, participant or both?

Having gained a set of 'case-notes', the researcher would then consult with other members of the unit, as part of a continuous professional dialogue. Case-notes for new potential projects would be discussed to decide whether they would be taken forward, or where if not, other support might be offered, such as mentoring and coaching, or the development of some links to materials which might support the work of academic staff.

Having identified viable projects, the lead researcher would then proceed to complete a brief literature search on the issue/topic and would use this as a way of informing the next main stage in the process and project design. This would be a bespoke process, taking into consideration the size of project, whether the focus is explanatory (helping academic colleagues understand an issue and context) or exploratory (helping them to develop new practice). Such a bespoke approach would also enable the researcher to decide if other colleagues might contribute to the project, even to call on expertise from elsewhere in the university as a form of ‘internal consultancy’. Once a research project design had been developed, the researcher would then have a second dialogue with the member of teaching staff to agree the suitability of the design. Assuming this to be the case, the bespoke research project would then be undertaken.

Towards the end of the research process, the researcher would consult with the staff involved and other members of the unit to develop a dissemination strategy so as to share the insights gained in the most appropriate and useful ways possible. This is crucial, as there would need to be an explicit responsibility for those in a project to disseminate and support others who believe the insights gained might translate into their own contexts. Part of this final phase would also lead all parties to reflect on the potential to develop the work further, either within the unit at a larger scale or by the individual and others as ‘continuation research’. In the event that a project proves unsuccessful, the insights and reflection would still be undertaken in the hope of learning both substantive and methods-based lessons from it.

By undertaking a number of small-scale research projects each year, there would be huge scope for the publication of research both internally and externally, leading to a rich bank of organisational knowledge based on issues concerning teaching and the student experience. It

is this aspect of the process that would specifically help drive organisational learning. However, small-scale research may remain particularly relevant to only small groups of academics and this might result in a lack of wider applicability over time. To combat this, the unit would have a second focus to its work. Here, discussions would focus on reflecting on the main patterns in the unit's work and the potential of any emergent themes or issues that might be worthy of larger-scale investigation. This may also include institutional-level priorities. However, there would need to be a careful balance established to ensure that institutional priorities do not dominate at the expense of localised needs. Thus there would need to be a mixture of top-down and bottom-up, emergent foci for larger projects. By developing a small number of such projects each year, initial insights from small projects could be investigated at scale and as such could begin to drive institutional-level processes and structures. This would lead to a system where leaders embrace ideas and policies from below, not merely dictate from above. As such, the unit becomes a critical pivot for dialogue at different levels within the institution.

A potential flaw of this model might be the failure of individuals to engage with pedagogic change. This is in part resolved by earlier comment on module evaluations, informal dialogue and assessment feedback acting as the drivers for change. This would still involve leaders in the process, but as co-workers rather than remote managers. The strategic and operational role of leaders would thus become one based on dialogue and partnership. Leaders would be expected to be involved in regular dialogue and shared responsibility in the change process (Gilpin-Jackson, 2015) to support the embedding of dialogic development across the organisation, to discuss need for resources and to help ensure that the quality and extent of change is maintained. Admittedly this is a crucial, but difficult brief to fulfil as it is based on the leaders' paradox of control (Streatfield 2001). It would require leaders to be in control of

the infrastructure of the process and to challenge the quality of the process, yet to devolve control of the specific focus of the pedagogic practices to be developed.

Another potential objection to this alternative model is the cost, as it would require a group of research experienced individuals with enough flexibility to work in different disciplinary contexts and at a large enough scale to have a significant impact on teaching across the organisation. Having said this, many HE providers already have centres for teaching and learning and a degree of repurposing of existing resources would provide the basis for such a model. Examples of this include the work of Matthews et al (2018), which focuses on student-staff partnerships as a vehicle for developing learning communities, and the development of communities of inquiry through blended learning as developed by Vaughan et al (2013). Arguably if this resource was instead diverted to research-led groups focused on developing high quality practice, then costs could largely be offset.

As suggested earlier, this is a hypothetical example of how the primary principles of an emergent change process might be realised. It is not an attempt to create a single approach for use in all contexts, though it has the potential to be embedded into present infrastructures. It focuses on building rich narratives of how practice can be developed and improved by responding to local and organisational needs. At the same time, it still offers the opportunity to capture quantitative data that may contribute to understanding and improving practice. We would argue that for those who need to assess teaching quality, such a system could offer richer opportunities to critically engage with and understand the work of HE providers than the current TEF framework allows. It also ensures that all those involved i.e. academics, students and managers have both professional and moral duties to ensure they are engaged in the ceaseless pursuit of better pedagogies.

Conclusion

The ongoing marketisation and accompanying spread of managerialism in HE has given rise to a gamut of normalising policies and practices that have infected the core work of HE providers and their staff. In the case of teaching, the TEF is the latest example of a sector-wide policy that is purportedly aimed at improving the quality of teaching and increasing student choice in HE, yet in reality is ill equipped to do either. At best, the TEF is only likely to engender a culture of contrived competition amongst providers. Rather than acting as a ‘key lever in driving up standards’ (BIS 2016) and encouraging excellence in teaching, we maintain that the TEF’s reliance on crude performance indicators as ‘evidence’ of excellence acts as a barrier to creativity and pedagogical inquiry, ultimately dissuading the development of new knowledge about learning and teaching. As Wood (2017, 48) argues, ‘excellence, therefore in the context of TEF, is not a framework to aid growth and discussion, but a measurement of public legitimacy.’

Our approach to improving pedagogy accentuates the importance of focusing less on public exercises in showcasing manufactured manifestations of excellence and more on collaborative and collegial activity. This alternative approach focuses on unearthing the iterative relationships that exist in the teaching-learning interface with a view to understanding and developing effective and authentic practice that is meaningful and sustainable. We openly acknowledge that this is borne out of an ongoing moral commitment as educators to want to increase our knowledge and understanding of the complex interrelationship between teaching and learning per se with a view to this informing and enhancing our students’ learning experiences rather than simply responding to the latest priorities of policy makers, though of course one is not necessarily separate from the other.

At a time when there is an increasing reliance on the use of simplified proxies of teaching quality globally, there is a danger that HE leaders may retreat behind the reductive accounts of performance data sets. To move beyond these limitations and to ensure meaningful and sustainable improvement requires us to think differently. Those organisations that are willing to see their development as emerging from dialogue, investigation and discussion will be the organisations that continue to see positive and dynamic change. For those merely relying on data and its gaming, stagnation and failure are not unlikely outcomes. HE finds itself in a state of transition, part of this transitional narrative therefore has to be concerned with building more intelligent systems for development. Our alternative approach places emphasis on empowering HE teachers to take ownership of their own practice by placing authentic experiences of teaching and learning at the centre of this activity and acknowledging that professional learning is the foundation stone of meaningful and sustainable improvement.

The idea of emergent pedagogies as a platform for the growth of effective teaching in HE is based on academics and students working together to create and develop academic experiences that are authentic, meaningful and transformative to both. It is a philosophy that consciously rejects a reductive, utilitarian view of teaching, instead replacing it with a community-driven, contextually rich mix of processes fundamental to the emergence of high quality learning as well as personal and communal growth.

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