Institutional contexts in supporting quality online postgraduate education

Institutional Contexts in Supporting Quality Online Postgraduate Education: Lessons Learned from Two Initiatives at The University of Edinburgh

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Abstract

While there are a range of practices and principles that underpin quality online postgraduate education, this work cannot all be done through course design and teaching. Good educational practice is also embedded in institutional policies, strategies, cultures and infrastructures. In this chapter, we examine two very different initiatives at the University of Edinburgh—the Distance Education Initiative (DEI) and the Near Future Teaching project (NFT)—to discuss the challenges of generating coherent institutional change towards supporting quality online postgraduate taught (PGT) education. In doing so, we highlight the importance of meaningful negotiation of central and local aims and values, through faculty development, communication between educational and leadership networks, and the embedding of educational practitioners within leadership constellations.

Keywords: institution, leadership, decision-making, change, educational culture

Introduction

While there are a range of practices and principles that underpin quality online postgraduate education, this work cannot all be done through course design and teaching. Good educational practice is also embedded in institutional policies, strategies, cultures and infrastructures. In this chapter, we consider the autonomous and interdependent institutional relations that shape, support and constrain online postgraduate taught (PGT) education. Comparing and contrasting two digital education initiatives at our institution, the University of Edinburgh, we examine the tensions and interfaces between centralised (i.e., institutional-level) and localised (i.e., programme level) activity, in order to understand the how policy and practice align and diverge across the institution, paying particular attention to the online postgraduate taught context.

For the purposes of our chapter, we define 'senior leadership' as University staff directly involved in centralised governance of teaching and learning, and 'programme staff' as educational designers, practitioners and administrators involved in localised education of students. We recognise the problematic nature of these definitions, as some individuals within centralised, senior leadership roles, with input into central university committees and institutional teaching and learning policy, also have localised, School- or programme-level roles. Thus, alongside what we will argue is considerable ambiguity between central and local aims, values, policy and practice, there is also ambiguity within the roles performed by those associated with these different categories. Further, we note that there are various elements in play that operate in the space between centralised and localised activity (e.g., department, School or College-level governance), and also externally (e.g., regulators and accreditors). While we should not overstate local and central roles as oppositional, we do find the terms useful in helping us to gain some purchase on the otherwise volatile and varied composition of higher education institutions.

While it is relatively easy to see how course or programme level adjustments influence the learning activity of students, as Fawns and Sinclair (2021) point out in their chapter of this book, these adjustments happen within a broader terrain. To start with, many of the resources

and infrastructure used within formal curricula, and by students outside of them, are established at University level. As Enriquez (2009) points out, with the installation of a central virtual learning environment (VLE), many of the design choices have already been made before teachers become involved. It is not possible within the configuration of our institution's installation of Blackboard Learn, for example, to allow students to contribute to the content or structure of pages without asking a teacher or administrator to make the changes for them.

In UK universities, the library is another key resource that is usually managed at institutional level, yet has a disproportionate impact at programme and course level. Where some books and journals are kept only in physical form, or are difficult to access through web-based interfaces, online students will be significantly disadvantaged. Services to digitise and manage easy access to online content are crucial to maintaining quality in online programmes (and will also shape the practices of on-campus students, since online content is made available to them too). Office space is another example of a resource that affects online teaching, and that is controlled at a level above that of the programme. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, during which most teachers were required to work from home, the physical space needed to teach online classes was not recognised within building architectures and room booking systems that gave preference to larger physical classes, leading to situations where teachers had to facilitate live online sessions from corridors or from shared offices with people talking and working in the background.

The governance of education will also shape practice, as well as the possibilities for practitioners to design their approaches and develop their expertise (Bannink et al. 2015). For example, in the discourse of managerialism, activity is streamlined, through top-down approaches, towards efficiency and effectiveness, at the expense of local discretion. As Biesta (2009) notes, though, effectiveness requires a direction, and different elements of the institution might be aiming in different directions. Institutional approaches to shaping teaching practice may be unsuccessful due to a disconnect between central decision-making and School and programme-level activity. This can manifest in unsuccessful attempts at 'competence control' (where centralised leadership decides what local expertise should look like), or excessive local discretion without sufficient support and structure (Bannink et al. 2015). There may also be a danger in assuming that there is a coherent entity that constitutes 'the institution' (or, indeed, a coherent centralised leadership group), that arranges and configures these different elements. In the next section, we ask 'who is the institution?' in order to examine how teaching and learning practices respond to institutional-level policy and initiatives.

Who Is the Institution?

A whole-of-University approach to online postgraduate education (as suggested in another chapter of this book by Stone and colleagues 2021), requires consideration of the complexity of who or what makes cultural and procedural change happen. Decades ago, Weick (1976) positioned universities as 'loosely coupled' systems, referring to a combination of autonomy (loose) and interdependence (coupling) between different elements of the institution (e.g., educational programmes, faculty development units, senior leadership). These elements are responsive to one another but retain evidence of separateness and identity (Orton and Weick 1990). However, it is important to note that the nature and complexity of these coupled systems differs across different kinds of institutions and over time.

The discussion taking place in this chapter centres on two initiatives (one launched in 2010, the other in 2017) within The University of Edinburgh, an ancient Scottish University, founded in 1583. It currently has around 40,000 students and 15,000 staff, organised into three Colleges – Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Medicine and Veterinary Medicine; and Science and Engineering. Schools comprising (more-or-less) aligned discipline areas sit within each of these Colleges, made up largely of academic departments and administrative centres.

While much of the most significant educational policy, strategy and infrastructure is centrally-organised, in loosely coupled institutions such as ours, financial planning and resources for teaching and local cultural change are not centrally-allocated but devolved to Schools (of which there are 21 across the three Colleges; see Haywood 2018 for more details of the governance of the University). In these Schools, attitudes towards teaching, and the extent to which it is valued in relation to research, knowledge exchange and other activities, are important in terms of how workload is allocated, how able teachers feel to undertake activities that help them develop, and how teachers are supported, recognised, valued and understood (Aitken and Hayes 2021, this book).

The University's collegial structures and administration have been largely predicated on academic freedom and autonomy for scholars, and a centralised administration (Kok et al. 2010). Such structures, common to ancient universities and despite some movements towards more managerialist approaches, contrast with those of newer institutions, particularly 'post-92 institutions' (named after the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992) where the administrative emphasis is on control, accountability, and performance, presenting a stricter and more scrutinised form of administration (Davies and Thomas 2002). In ancient universities, the extent to which centralised managerial governance impacts the work of online PGT programmes is muted, beyond merely gradually tightening the traditionally 'weak regulation and control mechanisms' (Sporn 1995: 72). In relation to the University of Edinburgh, our answer to the question 'Who is the institution' is broadly: it is a loosely coupled entity constituted by the negotiation of centralised and local policy and practice. Therefore, a whole-of-University approach requires not just clarity of centralised decision-making, but alignment with local aims and values, and the right kind of balance—as appropriate to our particular institution—of support, structure and discretion.

Recognising Educational Expertise

Meaningful institutional change in complex terrain such as online PGT education is likely to require some mutual negotiation of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Bannink and colleagues (2015) note that, where there is ambiguity (i.e., an absence of a clear set of shared aims), the use of incentives (e.g., reward and recognition) can be used within a managerialist approach as a form of control. However, this is not likely to be effective where there is also complexity (i.e., where knowing what constitutes educational quality is not simple). In part, that is because management cannot specify precisely enough what should be rewarded across a wide range of subjects and degree levels, and also because teachers recognise that centralised reward processes rarely take into account the more complex and localised aspects of value or quality.

The use of incentives and rewards as a mechanism for aligning local practices with centralised aims and values is more difficult where online PGT education is marginalised in relation to other, more traditional activities. At our institution, centralised educational policy has historically been aimed at, and informed by, on-campus, undergraduate (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020) and traditional, on-campus postgraduate programmes. Not only does online postgraduate taught education have different considerations in terms of how it is designed and enacted, but it involves student cohorts with different characteristics (e.g., a stronger representation of older, part-time students, Stone et al. 2021 this book). As Aitken and O'Carroll (2020) found, ambiguity between policy and programme-level context can inhibit creativity in design and innovation, and result in online postgraduate Programme Directors and their programme staff 'contorting' their practices to comply with regulations that are not fit-for-purpose. Such tensions reveal subtle misalignments of programme and teaching support, structures of faculty development, and centralised agendas of growth.

We would also argue that, particularly in ancient, research-led institutions like ours, education more generally has been marginalised in relation to research. Despite calls to see teaching and research practices as interconnected (Gravett and Kinchin 2020), and rhetorical moves like the encouragement of 'research-led teaching', these domains remain fragmented (Tight 2016). At the same time, the economics of teaching and learning are entangled with those of research, knowledge exchange and other activities. Some authors have argued that income from student fees (those paid by international students, in particular) subsidises research activity (Olive 2017), yet teaching in general, and online PGT teaching in particular, is still perceived as less valued in terms of promotions and institutional agendas (Aitken and Hayes 2021). At Edinburgh, attempts are being made to recognise and reward teaching, for example, through formal criteria for teaching-related promotions and a teaching awards scheme led by the student union. However, such changes need to be approached with care in order not to further marginalise online PGT teachers.

For example, in the guidance (University of Edinburgh 2015), the term 'front of house teaching' features prominently, carrying strong connotations of classroom lecturing and tutoring. Where online learning is mentioned, simply teaching online or creating online materials are taken to be examples of innovation, presumably because they are seen in relation to traditional, on-campus courses. Yet differentiation within online education practices, as demonstrated across the chapters of this book, is crucial to understanding quality within this modality. It will be interesting to see how processes of reward and recognition change in response to so much traditional 'front of house' teaching moving online during the Covid-19 pandemic (promotions are 'frozen' at the time of writing).

In both promotions and awards, there are a small number of winners and a larger number of losers, and we should be wary of promoting a culture of competition in teaching that undermines collaboration and innovation (Rogers 2019). Subtler forms of recognition are also needed, that can be threaded throughout University discourse and rhetoric (e.g., talking about teachers in strategy documents and websites, greater prominence in non-teaching-specific materials, involvement of teachers in decision-making processes, etc.; see Aitken and Hayes 2021 in this book). At the same time, discourse, policies and strategies are important in conveying what is valued and how teaching is understood at an institutional level. The institutional discourses that arise around digital technology can reinforce a neglect of teaching by emphasising efficiency, scalability and solutionism (Fawns 2019) at the expense of acknowledging the expertise and labour of teachers and programme staff (Hayes 2019).

The challenges faced by Programme Directors are illustrative of differences between what is valued by students and staff at the programme level and what is recognised in policy and discourse. Aitken and O'Carroll (2020: 1416) interviewed Programme Directors of online PGT programmes, finding 'a lack of institutional visibility' of this important role. The authors likened balancing local challenges with disconnected, centralised policies and systems to being a 'blind-folded tightrope walker'. This is further complicated by the pressure from external parties that individual programmes might operate under. PGT programmes, in particular, operate 'at the interface of academia, the professions and commercial pressures' (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020: 1411). In ancient, research-intensive universities, senior academic roles are often drawn from the academic base (e.g., Heads of School might become Heads of College or University Vice Principals). Such staff will have had long-term experience and involvement in teaching practice but, given the shortcomings noted above of recognising teaching within promotion process, are likely to have been primarily focused on research. Senior support service staff are usually not academic and often have a more managerial and commercial orientation.

However, applying a centralised, managerialist approach in this context is potentially problematic due to the ambiguity of goals and values between the various stakeholders. For

example, metrics for measuring 'contact time', workload allocation models and promotion criteria that fail to properly account for online teaching all contribute to the marginalisation of programme staff (Bussey 2021, this book) and, by extension, of online PGT students. At the same time, a lack of appropriate support and structure, in the form of resources, infrastructure and faculty development tailored to online education, means that online postgraduate teachers are left to develop themselves and are disconnected from getting help where it is needed. Too much ambiguity between policy and practice can have the knock-on effect of allowing insufficient focus on supporting programme staff, directly and indirectly. For example, it could lead to insufficient numbers and experience of programme staff, teachers not being appropriately recognised and rewarded, and inadequate structures for ongoing development.

To build expertise, educators need support and space to develop sound pedagogical values and principles, and practices that align with these. Fortunately, there are informal networks for teachers to draw on and informal ways of development (through dialogue around teaching practices, for example) (McCune 2018). However, without an awareness of the value of teachers rooted in the formal systems all the way through the institution, such endeavours may exclude those who are not connected into those networks of teaching expertise. Not only that, but institutions may then fail to adequately recognise the demands of good online teaching and the support and flexibility that may be needed for online teachers to be able to do their job well and maintain their physical and mental health (see Bussey 2021 in this book). Sector mechanisms for promoting teaching quality, including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and external accreditation such as Advance HE, alongside the institutional mechanisms designed to support uptake of these and other teaching development opportunities, potentially contribute to the building of wider networks, but do not address the fundamental issue of creating space to develop teaching practices.

In the next section, we consider two institutional initiatives aimed at shifting educational practice, which highlight important aspects of the cultural and structural make-up of decision-making, and the negotiation of educational values at our own University.

Comparing and Contrasting Two Institutional Initiatives Aimed at Shifting Educational Practice

The Distance Education Initiative (DEI)

In a strategic effort to boost online education at the University, both in terms of student numbers and programme staff expertise, the Distance Education Initiative (DEI) was launched in 2010. Five million pounds (a large sum for teaching and learning initiatives) was allocated for the generation of a suite of fully online postgraduate programmes across the University. The project had two strategic aims: to bring 10,000 fully online students into the University by 2020, and to establish at least one online PGT programme in every School across the University (University of Edinburgh 2016; see also Haywood 2018). These programmes went through the normal quality assurance and course approval processes, thus motivating related academic and administrative staff to learn about online education (though the extent to which this learning was informed by research or practitioners with prior experience of online PGT education remains unclear). Student fees were comparable to on-campus courses.

Teams could bid for up to £250K to support development of new programmes. Programme staff appointed to do this work could contribute to the design and development phase, with a two-year period to generate enough income to demonstrate sustainability. This was appealing in the constrained economic climate following the 2008 financial crisis, and 34 bids were submitted. While not all of these programmes survived, the DEI increased the breadth of online teaching and design experience, and raised the profile of online learning at the University. Overall, the DEI approach seems to have been broadly successful in relation to

its targets. According to the University's unofficial data, it resulted in well over 6,000 graduates of DEI-funded programmes from more than 150 countries since its formation.

Near Future Teaching: Values and Preferred Futures
In the years following the DEI, largely through initiatives in internationalisation within undergraduate programmes, the University has recruited an increasingly diverse and international student population, with just under half coming from non-UK countries. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, just under 4,000 of the current student body studied online (primarily at postgraduate level) in formal degree programmes. It was within this context that the Near Future Teaching project (NFT) was launched as a formal institutional project to generate a future vision for digital education which could inform University strategy. Between 2017-2019, the project team worked with over 400 students, staff, and other stakeholders in the co-production of institutional values to shape the preferred future for digital education at The University of Edinburgh. The NFT project was values-driven and participative and did not bring with it funding for the direct recruitment or development of teachers. Although embedded within a strategic push for the University to become a leader in digital education, the NFT was not intended as a direct mechanism for structural change.

The NFT project team employed futures methods (e.g., through speculation and discussion of possible futures, discussed in Facer and Sandford 2010) and articulated a vision for a preferred future for digital education based on the underpinning values of 'Experience over Assessment', 'Diversity and Justice', 'Relationships First' and 'Participation and Flexibility'[1]. The results of the project included indicative aims and actions that Schools might undertake to realise these values in their digital education offerings and within their own disciplinary context. These results, and the preferable future they advocated, were intended to be interpreted and adapted at programme level, with the onus of change largely placed on Schools, units and individuals. In not prescribing how the quality of teaching might be defined, assured or evaluated, the NFT project allowed for the ambiguity and complexity of higher educational activity, and the loose coupling between the project output and teaching practices.

Governance and Development
Beyond their material and strategic outputs, both projects were helpful in surfacing some interrelations of policy, strategy, governance structures and programme-level practices that influence the quality of online PGT programmes. Firstly, both DEI and NFT projects were embedded within institutional strategy. In the DEI, there was a clear strategic push by senior leadership to grow numbers of online students. In the NFT, the strategic context was to lead in developing a vision of digital and distance education at The University of Edinburgh.

Secondly, the two projects used different mechanisms that imply different underpinning values or ideologies. DEI was financially-driven and used top-down methods such as the designation of target numbers which sat alongside School and programme-level discretion. It was presented as a (primarily financial) mechanism with a clear set of underpinning values centred on growth, quality and increased revenue via the 'efficiencies' of online. Where growth and revenue were more precisely defined, it is not clear how quality was operationalised, beyond the premise that online PGT programmes should be 'at least as high a quality of education as our traditional, on-campus, education' (Haywood 2018).

While it was largely non-prescriptive about how teams ran their programmes, the DEI initiative was also a means to reinforce relevant policies, processes and strategies already in play. Programme and faculty development within this initiative largely centred around

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[1] . Full detail of all phases of the project and outputs are available for viewing and re-use on the project web site: www.nearfutureteaching.ed.ac.uk (accessed 29 March 2021).

normative models, such as training in centrally-supported platforms and programme governance. In contrast, the NFT, while there was oversight and sponsorship from the central Senate Education committee (a centralised senior academic group), was research-led and deliberately used co-design and participative methods to enact change. By the time this project ran, there was strong central support for academic and teaching development (via the Institute for Academic Development), which was not available at the time of the DEI. NFT was driven by a perceived need to establish a set of pedagogical values to underpin developments in digital education, as a means to support decision-making across different parts of the University and to create alignment, not in terms of practices, but in terms of institutional direction. It sought growth, not in numbers, but in alignment of educational values.

Thirdly, both initiatives can be seen as attempts to create space for creativity, adaptation, and new practices, by redefining some of the loose couplings of the institution. Both projects were non-prescriptive about implementation and devolved the execution of their outcomes to Schools and programmes. The DEI gave Schools the remit and resources to develop their programmes, and the initiative functioned primarily at programme level, with only quite loose structures to bind together different contributors to the initiative across programmes and Schools. In the NFT, a loosely structured vision was produced that would be interpreted at School, programme and practice level. Its origins can be traced to a perceived need to update the ways in which programmes and courses were designed and run, such that they could break out of the constraints of real and imagined policies and practices and orient themselves more to the future and all its uncertainty, complexity and dynamism. The NFT project embedded a call for space within its constitution ('open space for reflection and the application of collective agency to the question of the future of teaching and learning') and its aspirational outcomes ('Teaching should be designed to provide the time and space for proper relationships and meaningful human exchange') (Bayne and Gallagher 2019: 15).

Fourthly, both projects contributed, albeit in different ways, to the development of communities and networks of online educators. In the DEI, although a number of programmes eventually ceased to operate for a variety of reasons, a set of commercially successful and well-evaluated programmes are still standing, and, alongside some online programmes established before DEI (e.g., in Law, Digital Education, Clinical Education), many of their staff are active contributors to teaching networks across the University. However, there is a potentially important distinction between those teachers whose core function was to work on new online programmes, and those who had a smaller role added to their core work. Being stretched across multiple programmes, or having only a limited amount of time structured into one's workload to invest in online teaching can lead to *ad hoc*, fragmented approaches to online learning and a greater challenge to developing practices and strategies (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020). The requirement for more time and new understandings of teaching was not addressed through central structures, instead falling to Schools which, having bid for additional funding, may not have had the capacity or knowledge to reconfigure working practices and structures to allow for these additional requirements.

The emphasis of both DEI and NFT initiatives on the creation of new approaches to development suggests tensions within the institutional dynamic: that the ambiguity of the existing loose couplings was necessary but not, by itself, sufficient to generate coherent advances in online PGT and other forms of digital education. Our interpretation is that to better support rapid acceleration of development or structural change in online education, established governance and quality assurance mechanisms (e.g., exam boards, School postgraduate teaching committees, and the University-level learning and teaching committee) required more input from programme staff with sufficient knowledge and experience of online PGT, who were motivated to make changes.

The DEI used economic capital as a way of circumventing the established financial constraints around setting up a programme with existing resources and only recruiting more staff once the programme itself had generated sufficient income. This accelerated expansion into online education, along with structural elements to support such a move: staffing, technological infrastructure, support infrastructure, and so forth (Haywood 2018). It also increased the legitimacy of online PGT programmes for many staff at different levels of the institution, though we recognise that this is an ongoing struggle, even in the wake of the increase of online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In many ways, the results of the DEI initiative established the basis for further online or digital education initiatives at the institution, including the Distance Learning at Scale initiative,[2] the NFT project, and a large number of MOOCs (discussed in Macleod et al. 2015), for which more than 3 million people have registered, and which form a stated part of the University's commitment to knowledge exchange and community outreach.[3] At the same time, the DEI initiative amplified a strategy and narrative of growth, which arguably did not take enough account of institutional culture and the on-the-ground realities of designing, developing and sustaining innovative new programmes.

As a contrasting example, NFT sought to develop methodologies that could generate a vision of digital education which connected current practices to a future-oriented dynamic. As a piece of participative visioning work, it attended to culture, not to strategy, and unlike the large, well-funded institutional change project that was DEI, it did not have such immediate impact. Its longer-term influence is yet to be seen (and, indeed, the mechanisms for change remain ambiguous), but changes in programme-level values and practices encouraged by the project are likely to be slow to emerge and not easily visible. It is also notable that NFT was targeted not just at online PGT programmes but took a wider view of digital education as permeating undergraduate and on-campus. This lack of attention to modalities signalled a growing awareness of an erosion of the distinction between online and on-campus, or digital and non-digital (Fawns 2019), leading up to the current emergence of hybrid programmes (which was already underway before the Covid-19 pandemic, most prominently by the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI)[4]).

The NFT's assertive dissemination of project results and outcomes contributed to the ongoing, gradual reconfiguration of informal teaching-related networks within the institution, and the extension of these outward to connect with others beyond the University. However, expertise in online or digital education develops slowly, and this means that networks, and patterns of influence within them, must also transform slowly. In the move to emergency remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, parts of the University's online education community provided both formal (e.g., where experienced online PGT educators designed and ran courses on online and hybrid teaching and course design for on-campus, undergraduate teachers; see, e.g., Fawns et al. forthcoming) and informal support (in the form of dialogue and communication through teaching networks). It is, however, notable that formal courses were primarily facilitated by teachers attached to programmes that were already fully online before both DEI and NFT initiatives (e.g., Digital Education and Clinical Education). Further, the largely informal, loosely-coupled mechanisms of the University mean that making use of these forms of help is also at the discretion of programme-level staff and, in the absence of top-down approaches to distributing support, those not connected into teaching networks must find their own way.

This *ad hoc* approach to faculty development and support in relation to online teaching, without reconfiguring teachers' workloads or recruiting more staff to create space for what is

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[2] See https://www.projects.ed.ac.uk/project/p0305. Accessed 29 March 2021.
[3] See https://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/online-learning/free-short-courses/about. Accessed 29 March 2021.
[4] See https://efi.ed.ac.uk/. Accessed 29 March 2021.

increasingly recognised as a challenging enterprise (Aitken and Loads 2019), is a continuation of the previous institutional approach, where central processes and structures were slow to adapt to the different context of online PGT. Alongside this, evaluation processes have not been adapted for online PGT (see Fawns and Sinclair 2021, this book) and there is limited central oversight of quality. Ultimately, some tension remains between ill-fitting central structures and policies, and excessive local discretion without sufficient support and structure (Bannink et al. 2015).

Alignment and Coherence
In this section, we consider what these projects can tell us about how an organisation like the University of Edinburgh might increase alignment between centralised and localised policy and practice, and the extent to which such alignment is desirable.

As we have argued above, loose couplings allow for ambiguity between the aims of senior leadership and the values expressed through the day-to-day practices of teachers. This, in turn, allows teachers considerable programme-level discretion (Weick 1976) in the way they interpret and realise top-down policies, strategies and governance structures (Bannink et al. 2015). Through our conversations with the online PGT community at our institution, we are aware of a range of examples of such discretionary practice. PGT online programmes, being predominantly asynchronous, deviate from centralised and standardised timetabling processes. In workload modelling, online teachers have to translate a significantly different set of practices into an approximation of on-campus equivalence (see, e.g., Stone et al. 2021 in this book). While most online PGT programmes now use the primary, centrally-supported virtual learning environment (Blackboard Learn), many other platforms are also brought in to get around its limitations. Assessment practices for many online PGT programmes deviate from institutional expectations due to differences in student cohorts, pedagogical approaches, or an increased emphasis on trust and community-building (for example, some programmes avoid using Turnitin, or use it for submission and marking but disable its plagiarism-checking functionality).

Teachers may exercise their discretion to subvert and modify centralised policy, in part as a way of resisting change that they feel is forced upon them without sufficient recognition of their local needs and existing practices. Indeed, some of the current resistance to online learning is remarkably similar to that seen in the University's first institution-wide technology initiative, *Email for all*, in 1992. As Professor Emeritus and ex-Vice Principal of Digital Education, Jeff Haywood (2018: 109), writes, those looking to drive this change in staff communication process had to contend with responses such as 'the traditional face-to-face methods are better, ... students would find electronic communication "impersonal" and local desire to be distinct against a uniform system ("won't work here")'. However, the examples of programme-level discretion above are also expressions of a programme's established philosophies, pedagogies and perceived student needs (Fawns et al. 2019; Aitken and Hayes 2021). Allowing localised discretion may be particularly important in an online PGT context, where the student cohort has a different set of characteristics from the dominant undergraduate context (Stone et al. 2021, this book), as well as a different and more varied pattern of progression (Haywood 2018). Through this, a diverse array of teaching practices can exist across different programmes and Schools. These can cross-pollinate across distributed teaching networks and, potentially, inform institutional strategy and policy. For example, the early developments in online PGT programmes in Education, Medicine and Law were an important basis for the argument for creating the DEI initiative.

Importantly, however, in a loosely-coupled system, the adaptation of teaching practices or programmes in response to local contexts, emerging research or external activity in the field will not, by itself, exert influence over formal institutional decision-making processes, strategy,

or policy (Weick 1976). Indeed, there is a risk, particularly in ancient universities with more entrenched and systemic loose couplings, that such discretionary practices might exacerbate a disconnect between programme-level practices and centralised and streamlined governance. Representation on central committees by teaching-focused staff is limited, particularly in research-focused institutions, and centralised actors may be unaware of that expanding disconnect, or may try to address it by tightening the couplings between centralised policy and systems, and local practice (e.g., by standardisation or incentives). This is particularly likely where centralised leadership and programme staff hold different views of the nature of educational challenges (Bannick and Trommel 2019).

Meeting in The Middle: Negotiating Top-Down and Bottom-Up Activity
Mihai and colleagues (2021) argue that if initiatives in blended or online learning are to become institutionalised (i.e., established and embedded across the institution), they must have the endorsement of diverse stakeholders (managers, teachers, administrators and students). However, 'endorsement' is not binary–after all, senior leaders and managers officially endorsed the DEI project at a high level (e.g., by writing it into policy and funding structures and by promoting it to Schools) but were not directly invested in how it was implemented, or in the practices or communal knowledge and expertise produced through it. While the creation of space to develop new practices within both DEI and NFT projects has undoubtedly led to valuable developments in programme-level expertise, this will not result in a coherent institutional approach without a collective direction, which suggests that an effective whole-of-institution approach (Stone et al. 2021 in this book) is cultural as much as it is strategic.

A whole-of-institution approach suggests to us a degree of alignment across a loosely-coupled system, in which the values, purposes and approaches are—broadly—internally coherent. The NFT project can be seen as an attempt to formalise a focus on developing the wider educational culture (by threading values through the different institutional layers), as an integral aspect of structural change. Yet, even with such an institutionally-endorsed initiative, such change takes considerable time, during which the way that values need to be interpreted is also changing.

Mihai et al. (2021) stress the need for 'an integrative approach, whereby individual actions are met with support from leadership'. As notes, endorsement in the form of permission or setting up a budget is insufficient, and a lack of further action is likely to impede the development and success of such initiatives. To be sustainable, cultural change requires reciprocity between central and local elements (as implied by the term 'coupling'), where teaching practices emerging from programmes are routinely communicated to and inform those generating centralised policy and strategy, just as strategy and policy is translated down into schools and programmes. 'Whole-of-institution' means reframing these central / local tensions in terms of distributed processes and positioning new relations to bring coherence to them. Notably, attempts to reframe teaching in relation to prominence (in relation to research, particularly), interdisciplinarity, digital education, and postgraduate-level study can be seen in annual reviews and strategic plans over a number of years (University of Edinburgh 2019), signalling the ongoing work that is needed to produce cultural change.

Where DEI was disruptive, introducing a range of new features, practices and decision mechanisms all at once, the NFT initiative took a more gradual, 'bottom-up' approach to the development of shared values, with the aspiration to support sustainable, incremental change across the institution (Mihai et al. 2021). The implicit aim of both DEI and NFT to create space for the development of new practices highlighted the distributed nature of institutional decision-making at The University of Edinburgh. Yet Maassen and Gornitzka (1999: 302) explain that 'institutional fragmentation', and the ways in which decision-making is distributed, shape the possibilities for coherent and coordinated change. As Lipsky (1980)

notes, while 'street-level' practices may have little or muted influence on formal, standardised policy and processes, it can be argued that through using their discretion to reinterpret the top-down forces of centralised management, programme staff exert influence on diverse 'institutional practices' and constitute 'the institution' as much as central managers do. Thus, without some alignment with localised culture and practices, strategic plans are limited in their capacity to signal progress.

Beyond initiatives such as those discussed in this chapter, distributed governance requires the ongoing involvement of educators and students in developing School-level and centralised goals and processes of evaluation. Through this, educators might also come to better understand the rationales for centralised initiatives and may adapt their practices accordingly. In other words, there may be benefit in including programme-level educators and students (including online PGT representatives) as legitimate members of what Empson (2017) calls a 'leadership constellation', within centralised decision-making contexts, in which they can exert influence and act decisively without formal authority. Arguably, with its co-creative methods, the NFT provided opportunities for teachers, students, administrators and others to be part of a leadership constellation for the duration of that project, and established stronger ties that would continue beyond it. Of course, this was still an exclusive process (not every teacher or student could be part of the NFT project group) but it did allow for a greater variety of voices to influence institutional vision.

It follows that coherent approaches to online education require ongoing, progressive negotiation of top-down and bottom-up activity. While centralised support and structure, in the form of policy, infrastructure, resource allocation and faculty development initiatives, are crucial in providing a base for successful teaching and course design, the discretionary practices of educators and programmes could also form a valuable source of expertise for informing institutional change. Institutional alignment could be increased by allowing and encouraging students' and educators' perspectives to feed up into centralised policy and governance. After all, in a non-traditional educational domain like online PGT, the experience of practitioners and students is necessary to inform policymakers of the different requirements of the online modality and the online postgraduate student population.

Processes of faculty development, programme and course approval and quality assurance, workload models, promotion processes, etc., require adjustment for online postgraduate contexts. The appropriateness of these processes for our context not only affects people's ability to do the work of online teaching but their attitudes towards it (Mihai et al. 2021; Porter et al. 2014). For example, diverse programme-level practices could usefully inform technological acquisition and use, and subsequent policy and strategy governing that use. Teachers could also help to shape more sustainable recruitment, workload and promotion processes by updating institutional definitions of teaching to incorporate online educational practices. Similarly, students' insights can be a valuable source of change. Alongside formal instruments (e.g., student representatives and Student Staff Liaison Committees at the programme level and student representation on all major University committees) and informal, programme-level channels (e.g., course discussions and individual student support sessions), students should have expanded and diverse channels through which they can more readily contribute directly to centralised decision-making. This was the case with the NFT, which used collaborative methods involving a range of stakeholders, but not with the DEI, which provided resources but placed the onus for changes in practice to programme staff.

Supporting those (both staff and students) with programme-level expertise and experiences to inform institutional discussions around policy, administrative systems and the procurement of technology is both challenging and critical. Indeed, this was explicit in the intended outcomes of the Near Future Teaching project and its stated need to 'put the student and staff experience at the centre of educational technology development, decision-making,

and procurement' (Bayne and Gallagher 2019: 19). The backing of the NFT project by senior leadership also provided a basis for programme-level educators to resist inappropriate directives, by providing a set of institutionally-endorsed values against which educational practice can be evaluated (Fawns et al. 2021). The NFT project, with its co-design methods, can be seen as an attempt to fill a gap between existing governance structures (in which School-level strategy and governance feed 'up' to College and University committees governing bodies) and the perceptions of those 'on the ground' of being disconnected from institutional governance. However, as a vision project which intentionally did not set out an implementation plan, it remains to be seen whether it will be successful in this regard.

The NFT attempted to not only centre student and staff experience, but to incorporate it into a vision that could inform institutional development and procurement, by making teachers and students a legitimate part of a dynamic and temporary leadership constellation (Empson 2017), while, at the same time, making senior leadership a legitimate part of an influential teaching network. In contrast, the methodology of the DEI project involved primarily senior leaders and teachers in the development of its aims, objectives and quality criteria. Reducing ambiguity may require an ongoing, reciprocal involvement of senior leaders within local teaching networks, such that they take on some of the values of educators and students. In this way, students, educators and leaders might develop more constructive and trusting relationships and work together to define 'the governance arrangement and its application' (Bannink et al. 2015).

Haywood's (2018: 124) position that 'shared leadership depends upon trust, between those in the most senior and the most junior positions in the organization' illustrates the challenge this presents. For practical reasons, not all teachers can be involved in governance, and not all managers can be involved in teaching networks. However, as Evers and Kneyber (2015: 282) put it, 'in order for trust to rise, there should be spaces where teachers, students, the state, teacher educators, politicians and so on actually meet'. To some extent, the communication channels through which programmes surface exemplary or innovative practice to policymakers, and through which policymakers consult with educators, are also ambiguous and emergent. Where existing networks and forms of communication (e.g. formal channels between Boards of Study, PGT committees, School, College and University-level committees; or established informal channels such as faculty development units) are insufficient to realise the aims of leadership constellations centrally and teaching networks locally, new ones may need to be generated to complement these.

More than anything, trust across the breadth of online PGT programmes and the wider online education initiative requires attention to the ways in which the pillars of strategy, structures and support (Graham et al. 2013) are adapted to be sensitive to this context. This all requires time, and effective communication, for the themes and values emerging from programme-level practices to inform or translate into strategy and policy. The time and space needed for cross-pollination of practices to routinely occur will rarely align with managerialist tendencies towards efficiency and accountability (Boitier et al. 2018). However, the generative surfacing of teaching practices that emerge across the University's array of online PGT programmes requires focusing less on generalised outcomes (consistent with efficiency and accountability) and more on ecologies (consistent with encouraging an array of online programmes to surface innovative or exemplary practices, see Fawns and Sinclair 2021 in this book). Here again, we see a need to negotiate centralised processes with programme-level discretion (Bannink et al. 2015) in order to produce complementary, holistic evaluation practices, to both describe and develop the quality of online PGT programmes and teaching (Fawns and Sinclair 2021). Thus, beyond connecting teaching networks with leadership constellations, we might look at how more open and formative evaluation practices might help to inform desirable change at different levels of the institution.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that quality in online PGT programmes is contingent, not only on the educational practices within courses and programmes, but also on institutional policy, governance and infrastructure. Looking at our own 'loosely-coupled' institution (Weick 1976), the University of Edinburgh, we have considered the dynamic negotiation of centralised values and aims of the wider institution, and the diverse local values and aims of educational practitioners. Significant ambiguity may be inevitable due to competing pressures (e.g., market-forces, quality assurance processes, educational scholarship, discourses of good practice, etc.), and some ambiguity is also necessary to allow educators discretion in reinterpreting policy for localised contexts.

Through an examination of two initiatives aimed at enacting institution-wide change in online education, we have considered the importance of alignment and ambiguity in allowing for centrally supported and structured, yet discretionary, localised practice. We have argued that localised problems cannot be solved by centralised interventions, and that to build expertise, educators need support and space to develop practices based on sound pedagogical values and principles. This requires a negotiated, distributed approach in which centralised support and structure complements localised, discretionary practices. To this end, we have argued for an overlapping of centralised and localised perspectives and practices, in which programme-level educators participate in centralised leadership constellations, while centralised staff also participate in localised teaching networks.

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