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Beyond tick boxes: re-imagining education for sustainable development in higher education

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ABSTRACT

We are in an era of climate breakdown, mass extinction and global injustice. Through analysis of the new UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) for academics, this paper explores some global challenges of incorporating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the neoliberal university. The PSF is a globally recognised framework for professional development, yet its recent review concluded that ESD could not be included within it. The paper discusses the disconnect between the growing recognition of the need for education that responds to our planetary predicament and the particular logics and rationalities of a neoliberal framework. In its critique of the underpinning assumptions of the PSF and its wider context, it discusses (im)possibilities of values and unlearning in a performativity driven setting. Next, it provides generative provocations to those using such frameworks for their own professional development or to support the development of peers. It invites academics to find new ways of using the limits of these narrow professional development practices as prefigurative for a less disconnected university where other possibilities for responding to our planetary predicament can be imagined.

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Introduction

We are in an era of climate breakdown, mass extinction and global injustice. This is something that is broadly known but what that 'knowing' looks like varies and it seems almost impossible for many, especially the most privileged, to fully acknowledge it. Or, rather, the powerful (including academics) have found multiple 'discourses of climate delay' (Lamb *et al.* 2020) and ways to continue 'business as usual'. Higher Education (HE) has an important role in responding to all this. This paper, as its contribution to discussions about HE's role, specifically explores issues around the ongoing non-inclusion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and draws out points with wider implications for professional learning and development (PLD) and ESD in HE.

In UK universities, there is an expectation that academics and HEIs will use Advance HE's PSF to support PLD and career progression. The first edition of the PSF was published by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2006, largely at the behest of HE funding bodies (Bradley 2021 and van der Sluis and Huet 2021 both provide histories). The HEA later merged with another organisation to form Advance HE, which has considerable discursive and formal power due to its history and its links across the HE sector. The PSF is used by academics applying for fellowship

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status which is used for job applications and promotions. It is also used as a basis for PLD programmes within HE, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (which is sometimes an Academic Professional Apprenticeship) and as a template for institutional academic promotion frameworks. Individuals can apply directly for fellowship status but HEIs can also provide routes to the four levels of fellowship:

Advance HE institutional accreditation provides a mechanism through which professional development programmes can be confirmed as being aligned to the PSF enabling those who complete them to be recognised as an Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow or Principal Fellow (Advance HE 2023a, p. 11)

Advance HE say the PSF is now a ‘globally-recognised framework for benchmarking success within HE teaching and learning’ (Advance HE 2023b) and give examples of its use in other countries (2023a). They say that their ‘work spans nearly 100 countries’ (Advance HE 2021, p. 3). Therefore, the focus of the PSF has implications for what is valued in HE, in the UK and in many other countries.

There was recently a review (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023) and revision of the PSF. The starting point of this paper is the review’s ambivalence about whether to include ESD in the new PSF. The review suggested it was important but then found it ‘impossible’ to include.

Those working in ESD and/or related educational responses to our planetary predicament have long grappled with the ambivalence of, on the one hand, using tick boxes to be heard in a tick box culture versus, on the other hand, calling for transformative change which can be unintelligible in a tick box culture. Key features of these educational approaches such as imagination, openness, reflexivity and collectivity are not easily measured and attempting to measure them diminishes them.

In this article, I discuss and trouble first ESD and related concepts, then the context of neoliberal HE. I then offer a critique of the specific case of the PSF and the recent review which led to the non-inclusion of ESD within it. I suggest that such neoliberal frameworks, taken at face value, are antithetical to the transformative PLD needed for ESD. However, in the second half of the paper, I move to a more reflexive voice to offer generative provocations and invitations for academics attempting to use the PSF (or similar frameworks) prefiguratively as a potential space for more transformative PLD (Kennedy and Stevenson 2023) in response to our planetary predicament. I draw on a range of theorists to approach all this in a spirit of critique:

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept rest . . . Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. (Foucault 1988: 154 cited in Olssen *et al.* 2004, p. 40)

Our planetary predicament and ESD

As Stevenson argues, ‘anyone engaged in professional learning and development cannot ignore the context in which we work, and the impact of the crises that we face’ (2023, p. 400).

Soaring inequality, accelerating climate crises, ecological collapse, and social and psychological breakdown represent a multi-faceted socio-ecological crisis that is threatening viability of life on Earth (Stewart *et al.* 2022, p. 1)

The roots of this planetary predicament are very deep. Lent (2017) argues that the separation between humans and the environment is linked to the mind/body dualism and soul/body dualism, which have been central to Western thought for two millennia. More recently coloniality and neoliberalism have exacerbated our planetary predicament through extractivism and hierarchies. As Stein says, those living metaphorically in ‘the house that modernity built’ do not recognise ‘the security and sovereignty that the house promises for its inhabitants is made possible through various violences (exploitation, expropriation, displacement, dispossession, ecological destruction),

which are constitutive of the house itself but projected outward as if they were external to it' (Stein *et al.* 2017, pp. 69–70).

The necessary shifts are very deep seated and transformational; they are not just about recycling. Hence, the importance of transformative *education*, rather than just behaviour change, for both academics and students. In (an inevitably partial) response to all this, a 'constellation' (Sterling 2021, p. 1) of approaches such as Environmental Education (EE), Education for Sustainability (EFS); Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE); Climate Change Education (CCE); and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) have been developed. All of these terms are contested, not least ESD. 'ESD' is the term used in the review of the PSF (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023). In response to their review, I will also use 'ESD' but as very broad term to encompass multiple educational responses to our planetary predicament. If starting from a blank slate, many of us might argue for the inclusion of a less problematic term in the PSF than ESD but there is not space for an extended discussion of terms here. I am using 'ESD' in the spirit of both 'using and troubling a category simultaneously' (Lather 2005, p. 2).

Perhaps, ESD is now best known through Target 4.7 (Sustainable development and global citizenship)¹ of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) (UN 2015) but even that does not have a consensus on its emphasises or on the relationship between the target and indicators (see, for example, the contributions in Wulff 2020). Engagement in ESD must include questioning the assumptions of ESD itself (McCowan 2023). One important criticism of ESD is of the 'SD' element. This is anthropocentric and it is questionable whether the 'development' and 'sustainable' aspects are compatible (e.g. Bonnett 2007). My own background has been more in global learning (Young and Shah 2008, Bentall and Hunt 2022, GLL 2023) which is part of the ESD 'constellation' but places a strong emphasis on global interdependence. That background led me to a recognition that decolonising and anti-racist work (which do not appear in every definition) must be central to ESD. I would argue that ESD without an understanding of the coloniality of modernity (Stein *et al.* 2017) undermines itself.

Vare and Scott (2007) in writing about ESD proposed that it was helpful to value both ESD 1 and ESD 2 and used the concept of Yin/Yang to articulate this relationship. They describe ESD 1 as:

Promoting/facilitating changes in what we do

Promoting (informed, skilled) behaviours and ways of thinking, where the need for this is clearly identified and agreed

Learning for sustainable development. (p. 193)

And ESD 2 as:

Building capacity to think critically about (and beyond) what experts say and to test sustainable development ideas

Exploring the contradictions inherent in sustainable living

Learning as sustainable development. (p. 194)

Their distinction is helpful for the following analysis as ESD 1 is much easier to measure (and hence use in narrow frameworks) than ESD 2. As set out in the next section, neoliberalism drives a focus on what can be measured and hence loses much of value.

The context of neoliberal HE

This article is about the specific case of the PSF but that is just one symptom of the wider system of neoliberal HE (and of much of wider society) which is prevalent globally. The 'neoliberal imaginary' (Ball 2012) of HE makes it almost unintelligible to look beyond hierarchies, market systems of measurement and the focus on economic growth. Politics is obscured and the 'system fosters competition, homogenization, and standardization in both

national and international spheres' (Sterling 2021, p. 4). Those who find this approach to 'education' deeply problematic find it hard to escape the neoliberal goldfish bowl and to transform education. On the darkest reading, 'most academics have merely found ways to dwell in the ruins' (Fleming 2021, loc.87). Much of this writing despairing of HE is about the experience of academics and their students. An even bigger question about the increasingly neoliberal nature of HE is the implications this has for the planet and that is the focus of this paper. A Europe-wide review on ESD found 'the literature continues to show that higher education institutions (HEIs) do not fully understand the true nature of this challenge' (Mulà *et al.* 2017, p. 799). Furthermore, 'Our educational systems are implicated in the multiple crises before us, and without meaningful rethinking, they will remain maladaptive agents of business as usual, leading us into a dystopian future nobody wants' (Sterling 2021, p. 1). In the UK, universities have been accused of being 'complicit in reproducing the very neoliberal "commonsense" that fetishises economic growth and valorises competitive individualism to the ultimate detriment of environmental concerns' (McGeown and Barry 2023, p. 6). All this suggests a system of HE that is far from open to the kinds of transformation our planetary predicament requires.

The PSF is just one of the multiple technologies of the self (Ball 2013, 2015) constituting particular academic subjectivities implicated in a neoliberal system in which academics are expected to market themselves and demonstrate their 'impact' through multiple metrics. Where only that which can be measured through standard metrics can be valued, transformative PLD is sidelined. Neoliberalism and coloniality are intertwined and standardisation generally means standardisation to the models of the powerful (although standardisation can be problematic whoever's model it follows). HE seems to be becoming closer to schools where:

The technical turn in education is particularly evident in the prominent role of teacher professional standards, a global phenomenon in Western contexts in recent years, insofar as these standards are often focused on the skills and behaviours that teachers need to perform rather than the intellectual or ethical dispositions teachers should cultivate ... the spread of professional standards reflects the increasing acceptance of neo-liberal emphases on depersonalised regulation in the name of accountability at the expense of the critical or creative, the personal or situated. (Clarke and Phelan 2017, p. 60 cited in Ashbridge *et al.* 2021, p. 300)

Collet-Sabé and Ball argue that, in schools, this context has led to students who are 'individualised, competitive, entrepreneurial' (2022, p. 3). The PSF can be seen as part of this 'technical turn' in HE (van der Sluis 2021) with similar implications for HE academics and students. There are attempts to incorporate sustainability within this neoliberal rationality of marketisation and league tables. However, this can often be limited to performativity (Latter and Capstick 2021, McCowan 2023). As an example of this, universities are ranked according to their Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) data, through an, arguably arbitrary, algorithm. This 'Impact Rankings' league table can be seen in a report interspersed with adverts for various universities and services (Times Higher Education 2022). Rankings are used for marketing and the report has a survey about the importance of 'sustainability' for attracting prospective students (p. 39). Ranking highly does not mean that any particular university submitted any data under SDG 4 (Quality Education) as 'different universities are scored based on a different set of SDGs, depending on their focus' (p. 66). As suggested by this ranking, my own university has chosen particular SDGs to include in the corporate strategy (luckily, this does include SDG 4) rather than all of them. Conversely, the UN Preamble to the SDGs states that they 'are integrated and indivisible' (UN 2015). The Times Higher Education Impact Ranking system does not include any metrics specifically on SDG Target 4.7 (Education for 'Sustainable development and global citizenship') within their metrics for SDG 4 (Quality Education) (p. 68). The system is an example of rankings and tick box culture but also shows that universities claiming to follow the SDGs may not be encouraging Target 4.7, which most closely aligns with the focus of this paper. It also hints that ESD is not easy to measure.

Neoliberal HE, with its focus on measurement and performativity, can be seen as the context for the ambivalence about ESD in HE as illustrated through the examination of the PSF in the next section.

The Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and the non-inclusion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

The PSF is a symptom of neoliberalism. It involves academics demonstrating, through a complex framework, certain ‘Professional Values’ and ‘Core Knowledge’ across ‘Areas of Activity’ with ‘Descriptors’. The PSF can shape how academics see and practise their role as it is used for PLD courses (leading to fellowship status); for applying for fellowship status directly; and for job applications; and promotions.

The PSF, in both its earlier (2011) and current (2023) iteration, allows for individuals and institutions already engaged in ESD or other related approaches to education to draw on their work in these areas in an instrumental way. However, there is no encouragement for those not already engaged to develop work in this area. The ‘Professional Values’ which must be demonstrated in the PSF seems the most promising dimension:

Professional Values

In your context, show how you:

V1 respect individual learners and diverse groups of learners

V2 promote engagement in learning and equity of opportunity for all to reach their potential

V3 use scholarship, or research, or professional learning, or other evidence-informed approaches as a basis for effective practice

V4 respond to the wider context in which higher education operates, recognising implications for practice

V5 collaborate with others to enhance practice. (Advance HE 2023b, p. 5)

These might be used by academics already engaged with ESD to discuss their ESD work but they do not, in themselves, give any hint that ESD is important.

Not only is our planetary predicament increasingly obvious and dire, but key international documents such as those from UNESCO regularly call for ESD to be integrated in HE (Mulà *et al.* 2017). This was reiterated in 2021 with their *A new social contract for education* which aims for ‘futures [that] are more socially inclusive, economically just, and environmentally sustainable’ (UNESCO 2021, p. 10). PLD is central to all this.

In this context, Advance HE conducted a review of their PSF and published a report of this review, *Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education: report of the review 2021–2023* (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023). They say the review was an ‘[HE] sector-led and evidence-based tri-phased review process [that] considered comprehensive and repeated consultation and co-creation with the sector to be fundamental’ (p. 5). It included responses from 24 countries (p. 2). ‘Phase one reviewed the existing evidence base and explored concepts, ideas and potential solutions through 28 online sessions’ (p. 5). Then, ‘Phase two undertook an open access, online survey to test proposed revisions’ (p. 5). ‘Phase three’s focus was to sense check final revisions with the sector’ (p. 5). The report of the review says the following about the review process and its ambivalence about whether to include ESD in the revised PSF:

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): ESD was identified within phase one data as an emerging area of practice that warranted consideration as a potential new component of the PSF. However, its inclusion received very low support in phase two.

The concerns related to *interpretation, assessment, the risk of dictating curriculum and one element of practice being prioritised over others*. Although analysis identified slight variation in response according to profession and country, all indicated significantly low support. ESD was therefore removed from subsequent redrafts of the Framework, although to recognise its importance, *reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has been made in the Purpose of the PSF. Advance HE will continue to support practice in this area, ensuring examples of ESD-related practice will appear in guidance materials*. (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023, p. 8, my emphasis)

Presumably, the reasons ESD was proposed by respondents in ‘phase one’ stem from our planetary predicament. The reasons that it was not included in ‘phase two’ seem to fit with the neoliberal logics and rationalities of the PSF in the HE context outlined in the previous section. It seems there was a demand and desire for the inclusion of ESD but the neoliberal rationality of the framework made its inclusion unintelligible and hence ‘impossible’. The reasons given in the review document and italicised in the quote above are explored in the sub-sections below (with sub-titles from the above quote).

‘Interpretation’ (p. 8)

‘Interpretation’ is the first ‘concern’ given in the review document (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023, p. 8). It is no surprise that there are problems of ‘Interpretation’ of ESD as responses to our planetary predicament are inherently political and in need of democratic deliberation. However, as McCowan (2023) points out, HEIs are a key site where this should be deliberated on (whichever of the constellation of contested terms the PSF had used). It is also worth noting that there are other terms within the PSF which are contested such as (the neoliberal tropes of) ‘engagement’ and ‘effectiveness’. (Advance HE 2023a).

There is a complex and contested relationship between the PLD of HE educators; the learning and development of their students; and wider social change. Yet, it seems that the PSF is underpinned by a modernist desire to follow a consensus based, ‘two-part theory of change: (1) a *description* of the primary problem . . . (2) A *prescription* that purports to “solve” that problem’ (Stein 2021, p. 483). Stein notes that ‘regardless of their specific content, the underlying premise of most theories of change that follow the description – prescription formula is that it is desirable to seek and establish consensus around a single path forward for social change’ (Stein 2021, p. 483). This craving for consensus can be seen in the issues of ‘interpretation’ (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023, p. 8) given as a reason for not including ESD in the PSF. Performative frameworks require attributes which are fixable and measurable. However, as Stein points out the future is ‘volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous’ (Stein 2021). Furthermore, consensus is not consistent with a conception of HEIs as sites of deliberation and debate. As most educators in the constellation of approaches responding to our planetary predicament (Scott 2021) recognise, this is not a context in which fixed and measurable responses are appropriate.

‘Assessment’ (p. 8)

I suggest that it is not up to the PSF to address the challenges of assessing ESD—reflexive educators need to do that. The aims of education need to come before ways of assessing education. Some of the most important aspects of education are hard to measure but this is not an issue which the PSF needs to provide answers to.

However, I offer some brief reflections on issues around assessment in ESD. This builds, in part, on the discussion around the contemporary preoccupation with measurement and ranking in the previous section on ‘The context of neoliberal HE’.

Assessment and evaluation of ESD needs to be consistent with the principles of ESD and work has been done on this over many years. For example, Huckle and Sterling’s 2006 indicators (Tilbury and Janousek 2006, p. 28) are still relevant. There have been ongoing tensions of the ‘using and troubling’ kind around outcome-based measures. For example, Vare discusses the use of ‘competences’ in the ‘Rounder Sense of Purpose’ framework (The

RSP Partnership 2018) and says, it ‘uses the language of competences in order to engage with current debate in this area but the project’s name belies a deliberate attempt to raise a broader concern, that is, the need to reframe the purpose of education beyond its narrow, predominantly economic focus’ (Vare 2022). In this, Vare seems to be saying that he sees limitations to the concept of ‘competences’ but is using it in order to be intelligible within a neoliberal context.

‘Learning as sustainable development’ (Vare and Scott 2007, p. 194, my emphasis) is inherently hard to measure. This is one of the challenges explored further under ‘Invitations to imagine otherwise’ in the second half of this paper.

‘The risk of dictating curriculum’ (p. 8)

There is a sense in this objection that ESD is seen as being solely ‘about’, rather than ‘for’ or ‘as’ sustainability (Gajparia *et al.* 2022). Education ‘as’ sustainability implies education which is prefigurative for a more sustainable world. In the language of the PSF, this might mean ESD should be seen as a ‘Professional Value’ at least as much as ‘Core Knowledge’.

The first ‘Professional Value’ in the PSF is ‘respect individual learners and diverse groups of learners’ (Advance HE 2023b, p. 5). Extending this ‘respect’ to humans and the more than human world within and beyond the university does not seem to involve ‘dictating curriculum’.

Significantly, a ‘hidden curriculum of unsustainability’ (Wals 2020, p. 825) including the constant necessity to measure things is already ‘dictated’ within the PSF, as described above in the section on ‘The context of neoliberal HE’.

‘One element of practice being prioritised over others’ (p. 8)

As mentioned earlier, education for life on earth does seem worth prioritising (to put it mildly). The phrasing of this also hints at another disconnect. ‘One element’ implies that ESD is a minor add-on to something fixed that does not need to be troubled too much. In contrast, the following quote appears in another Advance HE publication: ‘ESD is holistic and transformational education which addresses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment. It achieves its purpose by transforming society’ (UNESCO 2014; cited in Advance HE and QAA, 2021, p. 8). This paper attempts to express this sense that ESD needs to be transformational rather than an ‘element’.

‘Reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has been made in the purpose of the PSF’ (p. 8)

The review document (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023) gives the inclusion of the SDGs in the ‘Purpose’ as a counter to the absence of ESD from the actual framework. In the final PSF document, one of the eight points in the Purpose states that it: ‘provides a structure to support institutions and individuals in advancing higher education practices to meet the evolving needs of learners and society, such as acting in support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals’ (Advance HE 2023a). There is not space in this paper to discuss the many limitations of the SDGs (Wulff 2020, Chankseliani and McCowan 2021). However, this mention of the SDGs in the ‘Purpose’ of the PSF may, possibly, give some starting points for reflecting on the aims of education.

Practically, the large and complex matrix of ‘Professional Values’, ‘Core Knowledge’, ‘Areas of Activity’ and ‘Descriptors’ can make it easy to lose touch with the eight ‘purpose’ bullets. However, as Biesta (2009) argues, in any educational endeavour, the aims need to be the starting point. Reflecting on the aims of education is central to PLD as discussed in the ‘Invitations to imagine otherwise’ section below – although it is not easy when the purposes of the neoliberal university are already prescribed outside of the educational context.

ESD is specifically associated with SDG Target 4.7 so the mention of all the SDGs dilutes this focus and, as with the Times Higher Impact Ranking referred to above, it can be easily lost.

'Advance HE will continue to support practice in this area, ensuring examples of ESD-related practice will appear in guidance materials' (p. 8)

This is the final counter given for the absence of ESD in the PSF. However, those not starting with an interest in ESD are unlikely to seek out these publications. Interestingly, Advance HE and QAA, (2021) provides various pointers and states:

Some HEPs [higher education providers] may choose to start with a mapping exercise that examines where ESD already occurs and where it needs strengthening. However, it is important that the process of mapping does not become the focus and that energies are directed towards the outcomes wanting to be achieved (Advance HE and QAA, 2021, p. 15)

This issue that the 'map' is not the 'territory' is central to this paper. I also want to invite readers to consider how 'outcomes' can be broadened greatly to be more transformational.

Having discussed the reasons provided for not including ESD in the PSF (Baldry Currens and Alexandrou 2023, p. 8), I will consider potential responses for those attempting to use the PSF in PLD. There is a danger that a tick box approach actively undermines possibilities for transformation. However, I suggest that a call for both/and, may still be a tentative way forward. Despite everything, academics might attempt to use the PSF document in new ways that can be prefigurative for a less disconnected university where other possibilities can be imagined.

Invitations to imagine otherwise

This section is addressed directly to academics completing professional development based on the PSF or supporting colleagues to do so. Many of us who work in UK HE have been encouraged to complete an application using the PSF and/or take part in an accredited course based on it. In doing this, academics can experience an ambivalence which mirrors that of the PSF itself. Academics need to demonstrate that they are complying with the performative framework to 'get ahead' in academia. This can jar with wider visions of education and with educators' recognition of their role in responding to our planetary predicament. I am part of this and completed my SFHEA (Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy) in 2020. I will not be quoting my report here (despite it including such terms as sustainable development, decolonising, anti-racist education, etc.) as my intention here is to trouble the writing (of fellowship applications; promotion applications; PLD curricula; and PLD assignments, based on the PSF) rather than provide a 'how to guide'. In presenting these invitations to imagine otherwise, I am not able to fully escape the box ticking approach. As Stein says of her attempts to move beyond a description-prescription model, 'for those of us socialised within modern education, it is nearly impossible not [to] reproduce this formula, especially if we want what we offer to be intelligible to others' (Stein 2021, p. 483). Decolonising and anti-racist work in HE has similar problems of being turned into tick boxes. Ahmed's big question in relation to 'diversity' work is relevant to the discussion in this paper: 'What is the relationship between "doing the document" and "doing the doing"?' (Ahmed 2007, p. 591). Ahmed finds a limited relationship and a lack of the latter. In this section, I acknowledge that it is very hard to think otherwise whilst using these narrow frameworks (Shaw 2017, p. 147) but offer provocations for those obliged to use the PSF (and similar frameworks) to use their framework-based PLD as a space to begin to adumbrate ways of thinking otherwise, and of *doing* otherwise. This may be easiest for those designing and studying courses such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education but these invitations are for everyone using the PSF.

Important recent articles about education end with pleas to ‘think otherwise’ (Collet-Sabé and Ball 2022) and ‘imagine otherwise’ (Stein 2021, p. 493). A challenge of the ‘otherwise’ is providing the openness for this recognition that another world is possible without shutting down the imagining with another fixed map or framework that restricts capacities to further ‘imagine otherwise’.

Ball (2006) draws on Foucault to suggest that maybe, ‘things are not as inevitable as all that’ (Ball 2006, p. 5). Current ways of doing things were constructed through human imaginations and could be different. Recognising this does not mean that finding an ‘otherwise’ is easy (Hursh *et al.* 2015). It is hard to get outside of the ‘neoliberal imaginary’ (Ball 2012) of HE and to move beyond equating value with measurement. I suggest that a key way to start is to focus on what the aims and purposes of education should be. Imagining otherwise implies thinking of the big picture; the wood, rather than the trees. Doing this is often supported by practices which can be rare in academics’ day-to-day lives such as the arts or time outdoors. These can encourage us to think about bigger questions of what is important.

In his qualitative study with UK academics who had attained SFHEA, van der Sluis found that ‘the writing of the RAP [reflective account of practice] was not experienced as inspiring or intellectually stimulating’ (2021, p. 425). Yet it could be otherwise and an example from New Zealand finds more positive engagement with PLD through the PSF where the Māori value of *manaaki* (care) was integrated in the framework by the HEI in response to ‘the fact that many of our communities have become disconnected from the land and from each other’ (Buissink *et al.* 2017, p. 573). It seems that this sense of care and connection are starting points for reflexively imagining otherwise. Issues to do with humans’ relationships with the planet and with each other in an unequal world need to be addressed structurally but, in this section, in the ambivalent spirit of both/and, I am addressing individuals working on themselves and on these broader issues, in ways that move beyond tick boxes. Ball says that ‘The neo-liberal subject is malleable rather than committed, flexible rather than principled’ (2013, p. 139). Those of us whose subjectivities have been constituted in the neoliberal university (and maybe through the PSF) find it hard to move beyond performativity to an ethical reflexivity. However, ‘As Youdell (2006, p. 42) explains, Foucault’s later work suggests “that the person is made subject by and subject to discursive relations of disciplinary power, but being such a subject s/he can also engage self-consciously in practices that might make her/him differently. The subject acts, but s/he acts within/at the limits of subjectivation”’ (Ball 2013, p. 144). We need to work to identify ‘the limits of subjectivation’ (p. 144) and spaces for ethical action in response to our planetary predicament. Central to such ethical reflexivity is a recognition of the constitutive denials of modernity/coloniality which can be summarised as ‘1. The denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm . . . 2. The denial of the limits of the planet and of the unsustainability of modernity/coloniality . . . 3. The denial of entanglement . . . 4. The denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together . . .’ (de Oliveira 2021, p. 23). Andreotti (2012); de Oliveira (2021, pp. 78–79) (the same author writing under two names) provides helpful questions for interrogating the modernity/coloniality of our subjectivity. Her questions cannot operate in isolation but need to be accompanied with unlearning and with knowledge around how modernity/coloniality has shaped the university and each discipline. As I argue elsewhere, concepts of accountability need to be reclaimed from neoliberal (counting) understandings (Young 2017). Stein suggests we need to deepen ‘capacities for self-reflexivity, accountability, and discernment’ (2021, p. 483). This accountability is an accountability to community and planet, not in the narrow accounting sense of tick boxes but in a broader ethical sense.

As academics, we are expected to write using the PSF (fellowship applications; promotion applications; PLD curricula; and PLD assignments). It is vital that whatever is temporarily fixed for the document remains open for practice, policy and dialogue. Doing this requires

recognition of cravings for fixity and certainty. De Oliveira says that ‘Within modernity/coloniality, being is defined by reason and it is the certainty of knowing (through description/prescription) that anchors the security of being’ (de Oliveira 2021, p. 22). Despite the craving for security, ‘we do not know (all) the answers and live in a world marinated in uncertainty and complexity. It is in this world that we need to address the challenge of sustainability with some urgency’ (Wals 2010, p. 145).

I propose extreme wariness of ‘Best Practices’, which are constructed to meet cravings for security, but which can limit imagination. A key feature of responses to frameworks, such as the PSF, is the tendency to work with models of ‘best practice’. Both PLD and ESD literature are awash with ‘Best Practices’. A key effect of such models is narrowing and shutting down what their users can imagine. All practices are shaped by contexts, values, and aims but the construction of ‘Best Practices’ tends to obscure all this politics by the presentation of neutrality. Brown describes ‘Best Practices’ as ‘the Trojan horse through which law and the political order it secures may be transformed for and by neoliberal reason’ (Brown 2015, p. 141). Observing the practices of other academics and institutions is frequently extremely valuable but it is essential to observe these in conjunction with a recognition of their situatedness and aims. Similarly, ESD Guides may be helpful *if* their readers can maintain a radical openness and see them as provocations rather than as fixed or providing ‘best practice’ that all must follow. There are a range of such ESD guides available, for example, UNESCO (2021), Advance HE and QAA, (2021), UE4SD (2016), Sterling (2012). Many of the sources referenced in this article can also be seen as providing practical guidance to educators (e.g. Andreotti 2012, Stein *et al.* 2017, Facer 2019, de Oliveira 2021, Singer-Brodowski *et al.* 2022).

Some ESD guides include lists of decontextualised competencies and/or skills. Breaking down ESD outcomes can ‘atomise learning in a manner that is antithetical to the holistic ethos of sustainability’ (Vare 2022). Furthermore, the absurdity of decontextualised generic skills is well illustrated by Ashwin’s application of a typical university ‘generic skill’ list to ‘the writing of a shopping list for a household’s food for a week’ (Ashwin 2020, p. 21). Tick boxes and frameworks are antithetical to deep and holistic learning. Stories are important (Facer 2019) and it is intriguing to read that *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Ghosh 2021) is a key text for the new Black Mountains College, which is offering ‘a radical new degree course designed to prepare students for a career in times of climate breakdown’ (Barkham 2023).

In addition to stories and deeper reading, thinking otherwise needs to take place with others. In an age of crises, what educators need ‘may be less about professional development providing answers, and more about professional development providing spaces for collective thought and reflection’ (Stevenson 2023, p. 400). A recognition and embrace of relationality are central to generative responses to our planetary predicament. Sutoris suggests that ‘Educating for the Anthropocene encapsulates three key ingredients: radical imagination, agonistic pluralism, and intergenerational dialogue’ (Sutoris 2022, p. 24). I began with ‘imagination’. ‘Agonistic pluralism’ requires both a radical openness and dialogue. I suggest here that dialogue needs to be between peers and with students as well as with the wider community. Lecturers’ and students’ emotions are central to engagement with our planetary predicament (e.g. de Oliveira 2021, Singer-Brodowski *et al.* 2022) and to how we approach dialogue collectively. (I note that Paulsen also proposes dialogues ‘between different living creatures’ (Paulsen 2021, p. 227)).

Dialogue with students as citizens engaged in the world rather than as consumers of an educational product (Young and Jerome 2020) is important for PLD as well as being educational for students. Many students want more learning and action on sustainability (SOS 2023, UN 2023). Mulà *et al.* (2017, p. 802), drawing on Tilbury (2016), note that, ‘The work of student associations and societies on campus, as well as sector-wide student networks, is growing in importance as a mechanism for supporting education change towards ESD’ (p. 802). Where students find formal societies and associations inadequate, informal forms of protest and occupations arise (e.g. Wenham and Young 2024) and it is important that academics also learn from these.

The PSF invites professional peer observations. These are flexible and there is potential to use them for generative dialogue if appropriate peers are chosen and mutual openness is established. By drawing on all this, dialogue can support the imagining otherwise explored in this section and be prefigurative for ways of being that move beyond neoliberal subjectivities.

Conclusions

As McCowan says, in writing about HE globally, ‘Ultimately the most important and distinctive role that tertiary educational institutions can play in relation to sustainable development may be to question and recreate its meaning’ (2023, p. 5). This paper has attempted a small contribution towards how this might occur through academics working individually and collectively in the UK and beyond. It has explored the growing recognition of the need for PLD and education that respond to our planetary predicament alongside the limitations of the logics and rationalities of a neoliberal framework in responding to this. Whether one uses (and troubles) ‘ESD’ or other educational responses to our planetary predicament, imagining otherwise is needed.

Academics, in neoliberal HE globally, can often be torn between, on the one hand, succeeding according to narrow performativity measures and, on the other, striving for values, meaning and the possibility of making a richer contribution. Educational responses to our planetary predicament need holistic approaches that cannot be neatly captured by a performative framework. At the same time, since academics have such a framework, I would very much prefer for ESD to be in it. All of us engaged with universities need to engage with how to incorporate this in all we do whilst simultaneously moving towards different ways of conceptualising what universities are for, beyond narrow performative frameworks.

Much of this article has been a critique of the neoliberal constitution of the PSF. However, the final section aimed to do more; to find ways to use the PSF to encourage radical imagination and action, despite the performativity driven context. Approaches to prefigurative politics are helpful for prefigurative approaches in education institutions:

Proponents of theories about prefigurative politics claim in the same manner that criticism is not enough to transform unsustainable systems into sustainable futures; one also needs to act and, in an experimental way, realize one’s political ideals in the present (Amsler, 2015; North, 2011) . . . By demonstrating that other ways of being are possible, a sense of agency and hope are evoked. (Ojala 2017, p. 80)

The provocations and invitations in the final section are provided as a way of looking towards prefigurative PLD practices for a university without a rationality and logic that inhibits ESD; in other words, *for* a university where sustainability can be central.

Note

1. ‘4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development’ (UN 2015).

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