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Educational development and sustainable development: common fields or different discourses? (0189)

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Background and research focus: There exists a growing corpus of research based around the field of sustainable development, and the role that higher education institutions could or should have in sustainability issues (Cortese, 2003; Cotton *et al.*, 2009; Leal Filho, 2011; Shephard, 2008). Further, much research examines the views and perspectives of different groups of higher education staff (e.g. Reid & Petocz, 2006) and, to a lesser extent, students (e.g. Kagawa, 2007) on sustainability issues. Meantime, the profile of sustainability has increased in the higher education sector, partly due to a number of 'drivers', reflected in various policies, initiatives and awards, whilst a second edition of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) *Sustainable development in higher education* policy was published in 2009. But whilst interest in and research about sustainability has increased, there is relatively little published material about *educational developer* perspectives. This is an important issue, because a key part of sustainability in higher education relates to the possible inclusion of sustainability issues in curricula. Again, a range of studies consider issues and barriers associated with integrating sustainability in curricula (Reid & Petocz, 2006; Wals & Jickling, 2002), but if sustainability is to be integrated in *more* curricula, there is surely a need to consider the educational developer perspective because curriculum development commonly falls within the remit of the educational developer (see, for example, Clegg, 2009). This study invited a sample of staff working in educational development for their views about sustainability issues. In summary, it sought to address the following two research questions: (a) To what extent (if at all) do educational developers feel that it would be useful for them to be more fully involved in sustainability as part of their own professional roles? (b) Should (and how should) sustainability policy be developed to encourage educational development about sustainability?

Theoretical framework: The purpose of this project was to collect educational developer perspectives and views about the extent to which their current work includes any component of sustainability and whether they feel that an educational developer role should embrace sustainability issues. Definitions of educational development were applied to the study based on recent papers by Clegg (2009) and Shay (2012). The study also drew on Lipsey & Lancaster's (1956-7) 'theory of the second best' to inform the design of the research and illuminate the findings. This has its origins in welfare economics, but fits well with this project due to sustainability often being 'de-prioritised' against other institutional initiatives. It has been used in previous sustainability research by Cotton *et al.* (2009) who point out: "Where institutional and other constraints make it impossible to achieve optimal situations... seeking 'second best' solutions may provide a way of making progress, and stimulating processes of reflection and cultural transition" (p. 732). The theory focuses on the 'ideal state' of an issue, recognising that achievement of this state depends on certain underlying variables, such that if one or more of these are constrained, it might be better to aim for a 'next best state'. Very often, competing agendas mean that 'second best' is the best option to adopt.

Research approach: Nine semi-structured interviews were undertaken with educational development staff at six (UK based) universities. Such an approach enabled the study to be implemented at two levels of analysis: a cross-institutional level (through undertaking interviews at six different institutions) and a single-institution level (by undertaking four interviews within a single institution). Participants were asked to undertake a small amount of pre-reading, including a one side summary of sustainability definitions and issues (written by myself). Interviews took one hour each, and were conducted at the participant's own institution or using *Skype* software. Ethical procedures and guidelines were followed (BERA, 2011) and ethical approval was obtained. All data was transcribed and analysed by myself, using a recognised thematic approach, documented in Cousin (2009). A number of other sources were used to guide different aspects of the design of the study, including Cotton *et al.* (2009) and Silverman (2009).

Preliminary findings: At the time of writing this document, the data analysis is nearing completion. Separate themes for the cross-institution and single institution levels of the study will be developed, cross-compared and presented. An initial analysis suggests wide-ranging views amongst educational developers, with some advocating a more central positioning of their role within sustainability, and others taking a much more critical stance. Further, there were different conceptions about sustainability *per se* amongst the educational developers, though all were broadly supportive of practices associated with it, even if they preferred not to be involved. There was general consensus that there are broader challenges associated with pro-sustainability curriculum change, but different views as to how any such curriculum change could be encouraged or implemented. Participants offered mixed views of current HEFCE sustainability policy, but most indicated that it should address pedagogic and curricula issues in more detail.

Discussion points and implications: As pointed out above, preliminary analysis of the data indicates that educational developers have varied experiences of and opinions about the issues raised in the interviews. My conclusions will suggest that sustainability remains a confused term and that policy documents could help address this. Some ideas for educational developers interested in sustainability will be offered. It will be advocated that the findings of the study offer some support for the theory of the second best, in that sustainability remains important, even though many higher education policies prioritise other issues. It will be concluded that sustainability might best be regarded as a distinct field from educational development, and should not be imposed on educational developers, but that it does provide important and genuine opportunities for those working in such a role. Policy bodies such as HEFCE might consider doing more to demonstrate and encourage this.

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