Online Postgraduate Teaching: Re-Discovering Human Agency

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1 Introduction

Concerns have been expressed that online learning can be seen as a way of academic expansionism (Fawns 2019), but such simplistic views can risk obscuring the considerable human effort involved in designing and teaching successful and engaging online programmes. In this chapter we firstly raise the problem that, following a rapid increase in online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, related institutional policy documents may now not be fit for purpose. We proceed to argue that high quality online postgraduate education is built on establishing learning communities; is provided by experienced and inventive educators; requires careful design, based on interaction; and goes far beyond traditional conceptions of teaching. We urge universities to be more explicit about this in their communications and policy documents, and to more carefully acknowledge the human endeavour required to manage learning and teaching online.

Growth within this area appears to be expected within academic institutions, often with no clear institutional strategy of how this might practically be attained. Furthermore, university policies are often developed in isolation from each other. This can mean that important policy overlaps, tensions and disconnects for individuals, related to their positionality in this context, may be overlooked (Hayes 2021). By positionality, we refer to the social and political context that contributes to a person's identity, e.g., background, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status.

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Positionality also describes how each person's identity influences, or potentially biases, their understanding of, and outlook on, the world. It is now necessary to explore, for example, 'the complex and dialectical human-technological relations that are currently missing from university inclusivity frameworks' and 'how these intersect with each individual's levels of digital skills' (Hayes 2021). If policies across these areas do not articulate with each other, or acknowledge the diversity in the student and staff bodies, then this can lead to profound marginalisation, rather than empowerment to enter and succeed, in education and the workplace.

As such, we recommend a stronger focus, within policy and discourse, on the 'postdigital positionality' (Hayes 2021) of online students and educators. This will help to increase their visibility, and more clearly foreground postgraduate education as a means of developing new knowledge and insights, and eroding traditional boundaries between academic and professional spheres. A postdigital perspective captures the notion that technologies now permeate and intersect all that humans do. Through positionality, the contested nature of online and offline spaces is acknowledged too, understanding that inequalities exist amongst individuals, and experiences are varied and diverse. We therefore recommend that, just as institutions frequently call for teaching to be reshaped, related policy documents are reviewed, to clearly state the human agency required for successful online teaching and learning. Successful online teaching is about much more than the effective use of technology, and support for staff should address pedagogical and positional concerns, as well as draw on existing expertise to further promote the possibilities for meaningful engagement and professional learning offered by online postgraduate education.

2 Policy Critique

At a time when the Covid-19 pandemic has caused universities to rely heavily on online learning, with many educators having to develop their programmes for online teaching, it is worth examining just how fit for purpose education-related institutional policy documents are. In our experience, there has been a persistent tendency in recent years for university policy discourse to emphasise the agency of strategies, technologies, frameworks and other textual constructions, rather than to explicitly state the human capacity and effort required to run successful online programmes (Hayes and Jandrić 2014; Hayes 2015, 2019; Hayes and Bartholomew 2015). Yet, curiously, this dehumanising discourse contrasts starkly with policy frameworks that have been developed for inclusivity and diversity. In policies for inclusive practices, there is a foregrounding of human-to-human relations, but the inclusion of digital technologies is often neglected or entirely omitted (Hayes 2021). These patterns in policy texts can lead to a fragmentation in how lived experiences are understood. There can be a failure to appreciate how inequalities and disadvantage get compounded in individual contexts through human and technological actors alike (Hayes 2021).

For example, in a recent report seeking to eliminate attainment gaps (UUK and NUS 2019), there was no mention of the role that technological developments now play in these situations. Nor was digital technology referred to in relation to equality and diversity objectives in the strategy for the Office for Students (Office for Students 2018-2022). If the postdigital nature of online learners and teachers is overlooked, such policies will remain focused only on ingrained inequalities, bias and disadvantage at human-to-human levels (Hayes 2021). There is also a danger that well-meant interventions may lead to unintended harm. For example, to simply issue laptops to students who may not have their own, in an effort to be inclusive, could lead to a greater marginalisation later through a lack of Wi-Fi, data poverty (an inability to access sufficient data for one's needs), or a deficit in skills.

Even before the pandemic led to a dramatic shift towards running taught programmes through online platforms, many universities' educational policy documents indicated a desire for digital expansion. For example, in its 2030 Strategy (published in 2019), the University of Edinburgh states:

> In reshaping our teaching for the future, we expect to expand interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, postgraduate and digital education. (University of Edinburgh 2019: 25)

The intention to expand is clearly stated here; however, when it comes to the detail of how this will be supported, the text becomes somewhat vague:

> Multidisciplinary postgraduate education pathways will support flexible whole-life learning. (University of Edinburgh 2019: 31)

Whilst in a high-level document, the specifics of how this expansion will occur might be expected to be less clear, neither of the above aspirations mentions the staff who will be required in order to successfully provide this education. Instead, emphasis is placed on the activities of 'multidisciplinary postgraduate education pathways' that are expected to support 'flexible whole life learning'. Elsewhere, on the University website, a similar pattern can be observed:

> A variety of platforms are used to deliver content and enable you to collaborate with other students and academic staff. (University of Edinburgh 2021)

So, whilst students learn that they can collaborate with other students and staff, the course content appears to be delivered by platforms, not people. Similar statements are made concerning undergraduate arrangements:

> The undergraduate curriculum will support breadth and choice, preparing students, graduates and alumni to make a difference in whatever they do, wherever they do it. (University of Edinburgh 2019: 29)

In the above text, 'the undergraduate curriculum' (rather than academic and professional staff) is attributed with a wide-ranging ability to support and prepare students, graduates and alumni. In an example from University of Brighton, again similar patterns emerge:

> Postgraduate provision will develop new flexible specialist and continuing professional development opportunities responsive to changing workforce needs. (University of Brighton 2017-2021: 8)

Here, the considerable work undertaken by programme teams is simply attributed to 'postgraduate provision', which we understand will develop what sounds like extensive 'professional development opportunities'. Then, below, it is interesting to learn just how hard working a 'student guidance framework' can be:

> [We will] Further develop our personal tutor and student guidance framework to ensure it delivers inclusive, well-informed and consistent high-level academic support and pastoral care across all of our provision. (University of Brighton 2017-2021: 11)

Clearly, there would be a group of academic and professional staff involved in designing such a framework and in providing the care and support described above, but none of these people are mentioned and, instead, it is a framework alone that 'delivers' this. The issues we raise concerning the linguistic structuring of these statements and the tendency to omit references to human agency have been examined in detail elsewhere (Hayes 2019). As can be seen in the examples below from University of Glasgow (2013–2020), it is a pattern that is repeated across policies from many different universities. In the following case, it is 'the strategy' that 'sets out a vision' and that 'outlines' how 'e-learning' (rather than educators) can support the University's vision:

> The Strategy outlined in this document sets out a vision for the future learning environment at the University of Glasgow and a pathway to follow to achieve this vision. (University of Glasgow 2013–2020)

The Strategy outlines how e-learning can support this vision, and identifies specific priorities for the coming years and the enablers that will allow the delivery of these priorities.

Given the current drive to expand digital education, we argue that there is now a pressing need to identify more explicitly which people are involved in the complex design, teaching, assessment and support of online programmes, and to detail the breadth of activities that they will be undertaking. This is particularly urgent when many universities will be assessing the economic implications from the Covid-19 pandemic and making accounting decisions based on who does what. If some staff are less visible than others in policy referring to their taught programmes, there is a risk of inequitable decisions being made on their roles.

3 Institutional Concerns

While students may be largely unaffected by many wider academic policy issues, the same cannot be said for teaching staff—institutional drivers and policies have a profound effect on those planning and delivering academic programmes (Aitken et al. 2019a). Those postgraduate students paying to study online are rightly demanding, and expect, a return on their investment. Postgraduate students who are also working professionals are also likely to be time-poor, perhaps requiring consideration for extensions to periods of study and taking longer to complete their studies than undergraduate students. Thus, they may come into contact with academic

regulations more regularly than undergraduate students. Teaching and administrative staff are responsible for enacting academic regulations and policy, and thus may be considered the visible manifestation, to students, of university policies, whether this relates to fee structures or processes for seeking extensions to study. Similarly, any dissatisfaction, for example, around expectations of technology or support relating to fee payment, will be dealt with directly by academic or professional services staff, not those setting out the policies. Indeed, postgraduate taught (PGT) students report greater affiliation at programme rather than institutional level (Vilkinas and Ladyshewsky 2012). Yet staff have reported not having sufficient autonomy to make the decisions they felt necessary (Hatcher et al. 2017).

Macleod et al. (2019) have discussed the importance of staff availability and flexibility, and the resultant positive influence on students' experiences in their postgraduate studies. Even if some students are attracted to institutions because of their research reputation (Universities UK 2016), they are likely to stay because of the relationships built with staff (both academic and administrative) and the relevance and quality of the academic offering. In our opinion, there needs to be wider recognition of this factor, and the importance that individual staff agency has to students' experiences and the consequent effect on word of mouth and programme reputation. Staff efforts within a course play an important role in student recruitment and in recognition of the value of online postgraduate education. Considerable staff effort is entailed, and there is often little support for staff in very visible, student-facing roles, who are juggling many more roles and responsibilities than just those apparent to students.

A more sophisticated analysis of academic roles, as called for by Fanghanel (2007), would not only acknowledge the impact of staff in shaping the experiences of their students, but also help prevent further disempowerment of online educators. Institutional structures, policies and systems need to provide the necessary flexibility for staff to undertake this work effectively. These are challenging times for all academic institutions; mechanisms that allow staff to share good practice and innovations should be put in place to help avoid duplication of effort and ensure that bottom-up practices can be recognised and shared, along with acknowledgment of the staff effort involved. Conversely, corporate organisational structures that attempt centralised control of entities such as 'student experience', perhaps through roles or policies dedicated to improving it, often overlook the day-in, day-out efforts of those staff who work with students. This then largely misses the vital impact of programme staff on the diverse experience of each and every student they come into contact with.

There is currently too great a disconnect between those who develop and write academic policies and those who have to implement them. The current inflexibility and commercial drivers to standardisation have moved too far from the increasingly diverse needs of postgraduate students. Institutional discourse that positions students as consumers enhances pressures on educators, as they are increasingly seen as providing a contractual service rather than education (Aitken 2021). Academic institutions are increasingly moving to more corporate cultures where commercial drivers and values can clash with pedagogical approaches, adopted by many

involved in postgraduate teaching, based on discussion and community building. Such organisational cultures site decision-making well away from classrooms, in committees of senior managers (van der Velden 2012). Those involved in online postgraduate education need to consider how best to influence such groups to offer a more balanced view of the benefits of online postgraduate study. Teaching and support staff with expertise in designing, supporting and teaching these programmes should have a clearer role in developing policies, rather than always having policy imposed on them in a top-down manner, which is likely to stifle academic creativity and demotivate and disengage them (see the chapter by Fawns et al. 2021, for further consideration of how this may happen in practice).

4 Online PGT as a Growing, But Under-Explored Area

Online postgraduate taught programmes operate in a competitive and dynamic worldwide marketplace. Students are not constrained in programme choice by reason of geography and can choose programmes of study anywhere in the world that best meet their perceived needs and, admittedly, their ability to pay the necessary fees. Competitors include not only other academic institutions but also large tech companies who are increasingly offering bite-size learning and development programmes. Academic institutions need to think carefully about what it is that marks them as different to remain competitive in an increasingly congested market—which, undoubtedly, is the purpose of the various strategy documents included above. A greater focus on teaching at institutional and local level, rather than the current focus on rhetoric, would help clarify these differences. The fundamental problem is that the current focus on reductionist institutional language fails to capture the variety and diversity of online postgraduate students and programmes, as well as the importance of teachers exercising their discretion on how to situate their programmes best within their individual contexts.

Often delivered on a part-time basis, such online programmes open up the possibilities of online study to working professionals, who can combine study with work without the need for taking a career break. While this is undeniably a challenging undertaking, degree inflation now sees postgraduate degrees as essential in many job descriptions. Taking health professions education as an example, there is a suggestion that postgraduate qualifications are seen as a way of supporting the transition from competent clinician to academic leader (Tekian and Harris 2012). With regulatory bodies such as the General Medical Council and General Dental Council now requiring evidence of educational training, it is unsurprising that the numbers of such programmes have grown from a handful to several hundred worldwide (Tekian and Harris 2012). Along with those relating to education, PGT programmes associated with healthcare are experiencing disproportionate growth compared to the wider sector (Universities UK 2018). Graduates of such programmes report their studies as impacting on their clinical practice (Aitken et al. 2019b; Sethi et al. 2016), and developing self-efficacy, critical thinking and an

expanded worldview associated with a sense of belonging to a wider academic community. This development of learners sees the impact of academic staff spread far beyond the confines of the academic institution that employs them.

Postgraduate programmes can operate in a degree of isolation, often removed from the large teaching organisations that service undergraduate programme. Postgraduate programmes are frequently reliant on a small number of core staff bolstered by a number of external contributors. Since students can be based anywhere in the world, synchronous teaching regularly happens out of traditional office hours to accommodate different time zones. Programme teams are often thinly stretched and increasing student numbers have the potential to overwhelm teams that are not adequately resourced and supported. The efforts of individual staff are obscured, not only in policy documents, but also in practice. Online PGT staff are particularly at risk of marginalisation. The Higher Education Commission noted that postgraduate teaching is 'a forgotten part of the sector' (Higher Education Commission 2012: 17), and those teaching postgraduate students online echo this feeling of being overlooked, with their efforts perceived as invisible and unappreciated (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020).

While there is rightly considerable effort expended by academic institutions to better understand the experiences of their students, we argue that less effort is spent in understanding the experiences of educators. The perceived demand for postgraduate programmes means universities and other educational providers have been quick to appreciate the income generating potential of such programmes, in particular those delivered online, with the common misapprehension that unlimited student numbers can be accommodated (Fawns et al. 2019). The neoliberal drive currently dominant in higher education that sees institutions competing in a global marketplace can be illustrated by the proliferation and marketisation of online postgraduate programmes. Their growth potential means such programmes are at particular risk of commercialisation (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020). As programmes expand, more staff become involved in their delivery, staff whose work is unlikely to fit neatly into traditional conceptions of academic endeavour (a theme discussed further in the chapter of this book by Jones 2021).

The resultant commercial and academic pressures can lead to conflicting priorities for staff, often leaving them between a 'rock and a hard place' (Macleod et al. 2019: 493). Staff may not have traditional academic backgrounds, often coming late to academia as a second career, and often with a professional background in the area they now teach in (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020). While this experience allows good insight into the learning needs of a particular professional group and enhances an individual's teaching credibility, it can make it difficult for educators to navigate the new and unfamiliar academic terrain. For those whose primary focus is on teaching, they often lack the forms of capital valued and influential in many higher education institutions, such as a research profile, which compounds the problems relating to lack of visibility in policy and strategy documents.

While taught postgraduate degrees now account for over 25% of all degrees awarded by UK institutions (Universities UK 2018), the quantity of students' fees that goes back to support the delivery of this teaching is less clear. A recent review

of the views of UK PGT Programme Directors and administrators by the UK Council for Graduate Education (2018) suggests that teaching is still considered very much the poor relation of research in most institutions, with teaching income routinely used to support research activity.

5 The Importance of Teaching

Clearly, there is likely to be much variation between institutions in how online postgraduate teaching is organised, but we offer this description of how a large online postgraduate degree in health professions education is planned and taught as a case study to prompt discussion. The approach taken by the University of Edinburgh team in its Clinical Education programme has been described in the introductory chapter of this book (Fawns et al. 2021) and elsewhere (Aitken et al. 2019b; Aitken 2021). Their pedagogical approach is based on hospitality (Ruitenberg 2011), advocacy and collegiality, and accepts that learning occurs as students move recursively between clinical and academic environments. This approach challenges the view that learning only occurs online when a student is working on their computer, and recognises that online teaching requires time, effort and expertise from teachers (Fawns et al. 2019). The teaching philosophy adopted by the Edinburgh team is considered further in the chapter by Marley et al. (2021). This approach resonates with other experienced online educators (Jones et al. 2000).

Teaching relationships in online PGT programmes are likely to be more horizontal in nature, because staff and students tend to interact as fellow professionals (Leung and Kember 2005). The flattened hierarchy in some online programmes, such as Edinburgh's Clinical Education one, is well suited to postgraduate education, democratising the student and educator roles (McShane 2004). The part-time nature of study, in particular where studies extend over a period of many years, can allow more intimate relationships to develop (Conceicao 2006) challenging the commonly held view of the socially impoverished nature of online learning (Fawns et al. 2019).

Teaching online takes time and effort: time to design and produce content; time to support students in their learning and development; and time to review, plan and evaluate teaching. While this is the case for all teaching, the time commitment required to teach online can be particularly onerous, relating to the need for meticulous planning (Doube 2000), including such factors as preparing contingency activities in case of technological failure and extra time for student support often required in diverse postgraduate cohorts. As discussed in the chapter by Bussey (2021), considerable organisation and management is required to ensure the visible educator presence in online programmes that is essential to their success. Teaching presence has been found to have a positive impact on students' satisfaction, perceived learning and sense of community (Gorsky and Blau 2009), and is associated with the reasonable expectations by students that they will have regular contact with the academic staff on the programme they enrol on. There is a similar recognition

amongst those involved in online teaching that interaction is a key determinant in the degree of satisfaction learners may express with their learning (Wanstreet 2006).

As the demand for online learning and student numbers grows (Hoskins 2011), one would hope that a similar growth in staff supporting such programmes would be apparent. Recruitment would preferably be managed in such a way that staff are in place before increases in student numbers, in order to prevent the constant catch-up played by staff where growth in staffing comes after growth in student numbers. While online teachers have described contact with students as the most enjoyable aspect of their work (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020), this can become stressful and burdensome if programmes are not resourced and staffed adequately. The lack of recognition of staff time and effort perpetuates the myth that online teaching can be easily expanded, a myth that is compounded by carelessly-worded policy documents that obscure human endeavour.

6 Student Support

The additional time required to support postgraduate students should not be surprising, with the varied nature of the group likely to contribute to diverse support needs. Some students will be very self-directed while others may be anxious if it has been some time since they were last in a formal academic programme. Different professional backgrounds, with differing conventions, coupled with differing cultural approaches to learning will all impact on the divergent levels of support required. As with many aspects of online teaching, this time requirement is difficult to predict and quantify, and must be managed to some extent by individual educators as they see fit. The transition to postgraduate study can be difficult and one cannot assume that the attainment of an undergraduate degree in some way produces expert students equipped for postgraduate study (Tobbell et al. 2010). Key here is good planning and active management by educators of the transformation to postgraduate learner. Preferably at the outset of the degree programme, it is important to make expectations explicit, and sign-post and provide access to support (Bamber et al. 2017), as well as ensuring that feedback is provided early in the first term (McPherson et al. 2017).

Additional support may be required to help individual students navigate various university systems, not limited to the virtual learning environments. Systems for processes such as admissions, matriculation or finance can also be challenging for the uninitiated and often require staff time to help facilitate their navigation. Staff often adopt an advocacy role between students and university as regulations and systems are frequently problematic for this group (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020), developed as they often are with a strongly undergraduate focus (Aitken et al. 2019b). As argued in the chapter by Stone et al. (2021), if we accept that online postgraduate students are a different and more diverse group than traditional undergraduate students, then we are better able to appreciate some of the challenges educators face when teaching and supporting this group of students. Recognition that it

takes time and effort to successfully support online postgraduate students would help wider understanding of the workload implication of running online postgraduate programmes.

7 Online Postgraduate Education as a Bridge Between Academic and Professional Settings

Online postgraduate education can be conceptualised as spanning the boundaries of academic and professional work. Working here can be challenging and uncertain, with staff at risk of role strain (Churchman 2006), and conflicting demands and influences that can be particularly problematic if they contradict their own values as an educator. Examples might include centralisation of decision-making regarding timetabling, centrally imposed increases in programme fees, or marketing strategies attempting to cover the whole offering of one institution in a few pithy sentences. Academic staff may feel deeply uncomfortable in seeing their efforts being commodified in this way (Kauppinen 2013).

Staff delivering postgraduate programmes work in an in-between (Solomon et al. 2006) or third space (Guitierrez 2008), at the boundaries of academic and professional arenas, but requiring expertise and knowledge of both areas. Institutional conceptions of academic work in the teaching:research dualism can be seen as obscuring the complexity of the work undertaken by online educators in the postgraduate setting. While the advantages to students of learning at boundaries can be profound (Akkerman and Bakker 2011), offering opportunities to share and learn from new contacts, it requires experienced and credible academic staff to design, deliver, curate and manage this, and who understand the market within which their programmes operate. This is a challenging and difficult undertaking. Online programmes may be marketed as a package but, in reality, they are in a constant state of evolution, with those leading programmes describing the need to continually scan the horizon for new developments to ensure their programmes remain competitive and up to date (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020). This adds commercial pressures to the more traditional academic concerns of Programme Directors.

Managed well, online postgraduate programmes offer working professionals the opportunity to come together and learn with, and from, a diverse group thus building their individual professional networks, but also sharing expertise. Considering temporal aspects of learning, as individuals move through the different spheres that they inhabit, allows us to see the learning potential of making links between settings. In this way, the expansive nature of online postgraduate education can be seen, with students acting as brokers (Roxa et al. 2011), who can share new insights between settings. With an improved understanding of what online postgraduate students and educators do, and the complexity of their interactions, we are better placed to explore underpinning pedagogical approaches, and consider why some techniques are more successful than others. Suppressing the value and labour of teachers in online educational discourse is damaging to this development.

8 Positionality Reveals the Diverse Postdigital Roles of Online Students and Educators

The consumerist positioning of students and educators in policy discourse, described above, has detracted from the idea of an inclusive educational community. For example, Apperley cautions against an

> [i]ncreased emphasis on the student experience, signalled in part by the rhetoric of student-centred education, but also by the forced emphasis on universities as 'learning institutions' as opposed to teaching institutions. The idea that universities might be *educational* institutions involving *both* learning and teaching has increasingly been suppressed by these rhetorical strategies. (Apperley 2014: 732)

Whilst it is understandable that a focus would be placed on how students are experiencing their education, statements in university policy tend to lump together aspects of individual identity under the generalised banner of phrases like 'the student experience' which then overrides individual 'postdigital positionalities' (Hayes 2021). In policy documents it is, therefore, not unusual to find 'the student experience' treated rather like a product the university is able to 'deliver':

> The purpose of this Student Experience Strategy is to deliver the student experience ambitions of Edinburgh Napier University as set out in Strategy 2020. (Edinburgh Napier University 2020: 3)

The first problem we find with such statements as this one is that experience is a deeply personal and individual perception for students and staff members. It should not be discussed as something singular or relating only to the ambitions of a university (if, indeed, a university can have ambitions, when it is the people within each institution who would hold such aspirations). Secondly, many universities have detailed inclusivity frameworks through which they acknowledge the diversity of their students and staff. Suggesting that everyone's experiences can be described as a singular event dismisses this diversity and, therefore, there is now a need for such inclusivity policies to be in much closer dialogue with strategies written for online learning (Hayes 2021). As Bussey (2021) argues in her chapter, in order to be meaningful, it is necessary to promote a workplace culture that promotes individualised ways of working for all workers, regardless of any disability. Elsewhere in this book, Buchanan (2021) points out that existing inequalities are often reproduced or amplified in digital spaces. These are far from being a utopia, free of the hierarchies of non-digital space (e.g. those relating to gender, class, sexuality, identity, geographical location, disability, etc.). With such arguments in mind, we suggest that universities need to address a dangerous disconnect between the policies they write for education, that emphasise only technological enhancements, and those that focus mostly on human-to-human interactions, in relation to inclusivity and diversity (Hayes 2021).

The many personal narratives that have emerged from students and educators during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jandrić and Hayes 2020; Jandrić et al. 2020; Peters et al. 2020) have revealed their unique individual positionalities as online learners

and teachers. Furthermore, these accounts have provided a window into the lives of individuals who are seeking to balance home, family, work and study, in spaces and circumstances that can vary enormously from person to person (Watermeyer et al. 2020).

9 Online Teaching Is Complex and Messy: One Size Does Not Fit All

Many have tried to capture the varied competencies associated with online teaching—see, for example, Goodyear et al. (2001), who acknowledge the inherent problem in taking such an overly reductionist approach when attempting to capture complex human interactions in this manner. Online programmes that have adopted social constructivist approaches require the academic input of individuals who are able to explicitly role model their problem-solving process as a basis for learning. The Cognitive Apprenticeship Model (Collins 2006; Ghefaili 2003) is one such framework that attempts to expose the cognitive process involved in learning, describing content, method, sequencing and sociology as the four dimensions that should be considered in establishing a successful learning environment. Boling et al. (2014) looked specifically at the method component in a study designed to better understand educators' experiences in an online course, describing activities as scaffolding, modelling, coaching, articulation, reflection and exploration (Collins et al. 1987), perhaps more neatly captured as orchestration by Fawns (2019, citing Goodyear and Dimitriadis 2013).

What is clear is that the staff who work at the boundaries of academic and professional fields have to be agile and forward-looking, undertaking diverse and challenging work that is in a constant state of evolution. Staff with such experience need to be more prepared to speak up and be heard, challenging the top-down, *one size fits all* approaches that many academic institutions adopt when discussing learning and teaching. While there is an onus on individual members of staff, institutions also need to consider the processes to best allow these challenges to be heard (see also Fawns et al. 2021, this book).

As online learning grows, so do expectations on online teachers (Bezuidenhout 2015). These expectations come from students themselves, institutions that provide online learning, and wider society. Individual teachers may work hard to bridge any perceived distance between themselves and their students, but this can be challenging when institutional policies hinder this interaction (e.g. by introducing standardised processes that reduce educators' discretion). Similarly, as programmes grow, the roles undertaken by staff also seem to proliferate, some of which take up much time that might have been previously spent with students. The complexity and diversity of roles undertaken by those who lead such programmes have been conceptualised by Aitken and O'Carroll (2020) as akin to circus acts, from trapeze artist, to clairvoyant, contortionist and conjuror. The growth agenda apparent in most academic institutions adds to the complexity and demands of the role and the

pressures on staff. There is often no training or support for those in these roles, with many relying on more experienced colleagues for help (referred to in Aitken and O'Carroll as 'seasoned performers'). Review of policy and strategy documents that obscure teacher effort may offer insights into some of the reason for this lack of support and training.

Such continuous increases in work demands, often associated with a reduction in resources, is described by Hobfoll (1989) in the conservation of resources theory, and linked to increasing levels of burnout in staff. Academic staff are often the visible face of an institution as far as students are concerned (Quartermaine et al. 2012), and the pressure associated with the 'always on' perception of online learning is supportive of the findings of Watts and Robertson (2011) who report levels of psychological distress in UK academic staff as comparable to those working in the health professions.

10 Changing Nature of Academic Work

The changing nature of academic work requires careful consideration so that increasing demands on staff do not lead to a reduction in educational quality. The voice of the educator must be heard in this conversation, but research about how online teachers evolve their expertise and engage in addressing complex problems associated with online teaching remains limited.

The casualisation of the academic workforce is apparent in online teaching, with the unbundling (Macfarlane 2011) of academic work into smaller more specialised components. This has led to a growth in 'e-tutoring' roles, where staff are appointed to short-term, fixed hours contracts to support those on substantive posts with moderating discussion boards, marking assignments, etc. This development is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it increases the pressure on those in more traditional academic roles who have to recruit, train and support *ad hoc* workers. Secondly, it diminishes the core expertise that is required to successfully manage the many conflicting demands on academic staff. Perhaps most importantly, it traps more junior staff in a succession of short-term, insecure contracts. The approaches to quality online PGT described above need core staff who can get to know students and develop relationships over time, and administrative staff who are embedded in programme teams and can also build similar relationships. It takes time to build such expertise, as well as confidence to speak out and challenge established orthodoxies or unhelpful academic regulations. Institutions can no longer rely on individual staff members working excessive hours to maintain the quality educational programmes, without adequate support and recognition (Dodo-Balu 2017).

Baran et al. (2013), in their case study investigation of six individuals identified as expert online teachers, stress the link between the individual's evolution as an online educator and changing conceptions of how they perceived themselves within the online environment (see also Aitken and Loads 2019 for similar findings). Through a process of learning to make themselves heard and known by their

students online, and considering best how to do this within their own particular setting, educators actively participated in the development of what Baran et al. (2013: 2) refer to as an 'online teaching persona'. This vital, but difficult to quantify and somewhat ephemeral; quality will be immediately obvious to all experienced online educators (and is similar to the process described by Lee 2021, in her development as a doctoral supervisor elsewhere in this book). It relates to the concept of 'social presence', referred to by Richardson and Swan (2019), that connects people through the disclosure of personality, empathy and caring. These attributes cannot be manufactured or delivered by machine or policy, but by educators driven by a sincere desire to teach in an authentic manner.

To date, the technical aspects of online teaching have been foregrounded at the expense of teacher agency (Rennert-Ariev 2008), with a need for better support for those new to online teaching that goes beyond how to use technology. Hiding the value of teachers' work in the rhetoric and discourse of online learning also hides the need for the kind of nuanced pedagogical support and faculty development necessary to facilitate this development. Staff development in this area is often still approached through traditional, front-loaded training programmes (Aitken and Loads 2019). Baran et al. (2013) have identified four areas within which online educators develop as they become more expert: increasing structure and planning in course design, increasingly organised course management, increasing teacher presence, and better-established student-teacher relationships. This development is rarely acknowledged, celebrated or drawn on, yet we argue that it should form the basis of online support for online educators.

It is important for online educators to seek out connections with others in similar positions to prevent isolation and develop supportive communities (Crawford-Ferre and Wiest 2012). Sharing expertise and experiences will add to the confidence of those planning and orchestrating online teaching, strengthening pedagogy and helping to resist the potential temptation to try to replicate on-campus approaches online (Natriello 2005). The pitfall of media comparison (Lockee et al. 2001), where the efficacy of an approach (or whether it 'works') is determined by merely comparing it to on-campus teaching, can be avoided if one considers how technology can support the type of teaching the educators judges best for their particular student group. For further consideration of this topic, please review the chapter in this book by Fawns and Sinclair (2021). Through discussion, staff can establish a clearer, shared appreciation about what they aspire to in their teaching. Coming out of disciplinary silos to discuss practice will establish shared academic understanding, leading to a more coherent educator voice and better organisational understanding of online postgraduate education.

Those identified as outstanding online teachers by their peers recognise the educational limitations in technology and contrive to find solutions (Baran et al. 2013), rather than using technology to try to copy how they would teach on campus. The agency of individual teachers is as important as the content and technology. Without sufficient teacher agency, online courses could become little more than a form of electronic textbook, or a marking machine, with no need for human involvement (Baran et al. 2013). We argue that it is this human agency that academic institutions

must celebrate and publicise in the online education they offer, and that this is one of the important ways to differentiate their programmes from commercial competitors.

We must start to describe what we mean by quality in online learning, and this chapter provides our views. The *Manifesto for Online Teaching* (Bayne et al. 2020) challenges the deficit model of online learning. However, to realise the possibilities of online approaches, educators need to contribute to ongoing debates and enhance their visibility. Online teaching does not stop once a course or programme is designed; considerable time is required to run programmes in such a way as to offer opportunities for international and interprofessional education, and to allow students to engage in valuable, ongoing dialogue with each other and their tutors (Aitken et al. 2019b). Considerable staff effort is required for careful and creative design and support that allows online PGT programmes to be a forum where individuals can: reflect and refine their practice; bring conundrums from the workplace to the academic setting for consideration; and take ideas back to the workplace. However, these possibilities require academic staff to have the space, expertise and confidence to create and design such learning opportunities.

11 In Conclusion

The effort of those who teach postgraduate students online is largely invisible. This is partly because there are no overflowing lecture theatres, or groups of undergraduates crowding corridors, that bear witness to the teaching that is occurring. This issue is compounded because teaching is often done outside of traditional office hours, and often from home. The impact and benefit of this teaching is seen most in settings far from the campus. If institutions are serious about scaling up their online postgraduate teaching, then they need to move on from the current 'out of sight, out of mind' (Stone 2017: 26) approach which is now apparent to both online students and educators. If they do not, then any inclusivity frameworks that universities design will only be inclusive of what can be 'seen'. Given the increasingly online activities of universities this is a risky position to take.

Online PGT education is undertheorized, and we need more critical investigations of this increasingly popular mode of teaching. The online educator's voice should be heard in a confident, not an apologetic, way. Online learning has advantages and disadvantages, but it can offer profound educational benefits to working professionals. We are concerned that, for institutions to remain competitive in this field, the current focus on online postgraduate education that sees students as consumers and a source of income, must evolve to one based on community and pedagogy. Academic institutions must recognise and reward the staff effort involved.

Academic institutions also need to urgently consider the wellbeing of their staff alongside their students, as considered in the chapter by Bussey (2021). Even before the Covid-19 crisis, there were calls for more attention to be paid to 'an epidemic' of poor mental health among higher education staff (Weale 2019). Staff, especially

those who teach are the very visible face of the university for their students. They are often the only representative of the institution that online students will come into direct contact with. If staff feel their efforts are not recognised or rewarded, they are likely to become disaffected. Similarly, if staff are over-worked and working under continual pressure, it will be difficult for institutions to rely on their healthy, energetic, and creative human capital to maintain advantage in the increasingly competitive higher education sector (Bezuidenhout 2015: 259).

Online education offers the possibilities of building global networks and communities, bringing people together in today's increasingly fragmented world. We need to recognise its importance as a source of human interaction. Whilst technology affords the possibility for interaction, it cannot by itself determine outcomes or engagement. At the same time, in university policy frameworks focused on inclusivity, there is a strong emphasis on people but often the influence of commercial digital platforms gets overlooked. In other university policies, the focus on digital technologies or strategies completely overshadows the activities of academics and students. It is, therefore, important that, just as institutions frequently call for teaching to be reshaped, policy documents are debated and re-written also, to clearly state the human agency required for online teaching and learning (Hayes 2019, 2021). Perhaps too, if online educators were not so overstretched, they would be able to contribute more meaningfully to this debate.

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