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Neoliberalism, new public management and the sustainable development agenda of higher education: history, contradictions and synergies

Sophie E.F. Bessant*, Zoe P. Robinson and R. Mark Ormerod

Institute for the Environment, Physical Sciences and Applied Mathematics; School of Physical and Geographical Sciences, Keele University, Staffordshire, UK

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This paper explores the ideological and the practical relationship between neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM) and the sustainable development agenda of western higher education. Using the United Kingdom and specifically English universities as an example, it investigates the contradictions and the synergies between neoliberal and NPM ideologies and the pursuit and practice of the sustainability agenda, focusing in particular on education for sustainable development (ESD) and ESD research. This paper reveals a range of challenges and opportunities in respect of advancing sustainability in higher education, within the prevailing neoliberal context. It illustrates using examples how neoliberal and managerialist control mechanisms, which govern institutional, departmental and individual academic, as well as student behaviour, are working conversely to both drive and limit the sustainability education agenda. The case is made for further exploration of how 'nudging' and 'steering' mechanisms within English HE might provide further leverage for ESD developments in the near future, and the implications of this for sustainability educators.

Keywords: sustainable development; sustainability; education for sustainable development; higher education; neoliberalism; new public management

The sustainable development and education for sustainable development agendas of western higher education

The concept of Sustainable Development (SD) and of education as imperative in the drive towards sustainability, were largely borne out of two key events: the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 and the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, 1992 (Filho 2000). The sustainability movement within western Higher Education (HE) has emerged and gained pace over roughly the last 20 years and is now very much part of the global HE landscape. HE's fundamental responsibility towards sustainability is espoused on many grounds, including its critical role as a societal leader, future shaper and exemplar of best practice, its influence on local and national policy, and its role in educating the next generation of global citizens (van Weenen 2000; Corcoran and Wals 2004; Gough and Scott 2008).

*Corresponding author. Email: s.e.f.bessant@keele.ac.uk

Universities have tended to approach sustainability through four main realms of university activity, namely (1) sustainability-focused education and teaching; (2) sustainability-focused research; (3) campus operations and environmental management; and (4) community engagement around sustainability issues. Sustainability-focused education and teaching is commonly referred to as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), emphasising its goal of contributing to a more sustainable future. Approaches to ESD within universities are philosophically and practically diverse, with different emphases, ranging from more formal curriculum-based ESD, to informal campus-based and student-led ESD projects, as well as interactive community-based sustainability learning. ESD has been integrated into university structures at disciplinary and interdisciplinary levels, through embedding sustainability within educational programme design and quality assurance and enhancement procedures, as well as specific sustainability-focused undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses and modules. A commonly used definition of ESD is as follows:

> Education for sustainable development is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. ESD applies transdisciplinary educational methods and approaches to develop an ethic for lifelong learning, fosters respect for human needs that are compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and the needs of the planet and nurtures a sense of global solidarity. (UNESCO 2002, 1)

Many factors have culminated in an increasing focus on sustainability within English higher education, and more specifically ESD, which has gained increasing momentum over the last 5–10 years. Key drivers for change include *inter alia:*

- The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) from 2005 to 2014, which arguably has provided momentum for some national-scale developments;
- The work of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), through their ESD thematic area since 2005, and their Green Academy change programme since 2011;
- The Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) sustainable development 'strategic statement and action plan' published in 2005 and updated in 2009 (HEFCE 2005, 2009). The latest HEFCE sustainable development framework is currently being finalised. HEFCE funding has also been hugely important, e.g. the Revolving Green Fund and the Students' Green Fund;
- A growing number of sustainability organisations, communities of practice, benchmarking activities and awards, including the People and Planet Green League table of universities, the Green Gown Awards from the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges and the Sustainability in Higher Education Developers (SHED-SHARE) network; and
- Increasing demand for sustainability from staff, students and local communities.

Although there are many developments taking place which are pushing ESD up the higher education agenda, many ESD practitioners in the UK and further afield believe that genuinely transformative ESD requires more radical and fundamental change, which goes beyond 'integrating', 'embedding' or 'mainstreaming'

sustainability within HE. Calls have been made for a more transformative whole systems response which places sustainability at the heart of higher education's 'raison d'être' (Sterling 2013, 18): an epistemic and paradigmatic reorientation of universities towards sustainability. A distinction is drawn by these authors, between 'whole systems' cultural shifts and the sorts of sustainability advances which occur from *within* our current HE system as it stands, but which do not fundamentally change the make-up and ideology of the system itself (Cortese 2003; Ryan 2012; Blewitt 2013; Sterling 2013; Tilbury 2013; Jucker 2014).

The higher education system that we are working within in the UK is one characterised by the dominating political-governmental ideologies of Neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM). Indeed, the forces currently shaping higher education globally are multiple and complex. Processes of globalisation, internationalisation, dynamic technological and social media interactions, commercialisation and corporatization have fundamentally changed our lives and the HE landscape. Along with the UK, countries such as the United States, Australia and New Zealand have also seen their HE systems significantly reoriented over the last thirty years, by the logic of neoliberalism. It is within this complex neoliberal system that sustainability educators have advanced and grown their work and will continue to do so in the near future.

Neoliberalism and NPM in the UK

Neoliberal ideology, most famously associated with the 1980s governments of Reagan and Thatcher, is based upon the principles of economic liberalisation and decentralisation, including: free trade, open markets, privatisation, deregulation and a decrease in the welfare role played by state (Giroux 2002; Harvey 2007). Neoliberalism has been described as 'the defining political-economic paradigm of our time' and has been adopted by political parties of the centre, the traditional left and the right (McChesney 1998, 7). Ideologically, the coherence of the neoliberal doctrine continues to stimulate academic debate. Key debates centre on the ways in which governments that employ neoliberal tactics, i.e. marketisation and decentralisation, often also rely heavily upon measures of state dirigisme. These governments therefore portray seemingly paradoxical elements, as the state is simultaneously non-interventionist and decentralised in some realms, and highly interventionist and centralised in others, described as 'roll-back' and 'roll-out' neoliberalism (Gamble 1988; Peck and Tickell 2002; Graefe 2005).

Centralised state steering of the public sector within the neoliberal climate is commonly known as new public management (NPM) or new managerialism. NPM involves discourses of management derived from the private for-profit sector, being introduced into public services in the quest to modernise, reduce spending costs and improve 'efficiency, effectiveness and excellence' (Deem 2001, 10). NPM is characterised by the use of markets (and quasi markets) which drive competition between public sector providers; empowered entrepreneurial management; explicit standards, measures of performance, goal setting and quality assurance mechanisms; and a focus on outputs (Hood 1991; Gruening 2001; Deem and Brehony 2005; Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008). NPM may be thought of as an extrapolation of agency theory principles (the principal-agent problem) vested in neoliberal discourse (Goedegebuure and Hayden 2007), i.e. government (the principal) exerts control over the public sector (the agents) and ensures that public institutions move in

desired policy directions, through using varying NPM mechanisms of control (Eisenhardt 1989; Williams 1997).

The effects of neoliberalism and NPM on higher education

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK have been reformed and managed since the 1980s, through a complex mix of both decentralising and centralising processes, and the creation of markets and quasi markets (Williams 1997; Kogan and Hanney 2000; Middleton 2000). Quasi markets are essentially market mechanisms which operate in the public, rather than the private sector, and differ insofar as they are somewhat artificial, induced and regulated. In the quasi-market set-up of English HE, government purchases teaching and research services, from independent HE providers in competition with each other, via the non-departmental public body (NDPB), HEFCE, through the yearly block grant it provides to institutions (Dill 1997). University behaviour is steered as HEIs strive to reach particular performance levels with regard to research and to attract high numbers of (high quality) students (within allowed parameters) to maximise their income. In the last two years, the quasi market for teaching funding has shifted towards the student body, who now bring the majority of teaching funding into HEIs through significantly increased fees, although HEFCE continue to define the parameters, including the Student Number Control for each HEI, by which individual HEIs can recruit Home/EU students. This is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

'Real' markets also overlap with these quasi markets and include, for example, the market for external research funding from the UK Research Councils, the EU, and from business partnerships, or the market for recruitment of international students which is uncapped and represents a significant funding stream. In this highly competitive higher education set-up, universities are becoming evermore fiscally focused, businesslike and managerialist, and we are witnessing some huge transformations to the purpose, mission and framing of higher education. The changing direction of university strategic plans and policy priorities towards increased income generation, innovation, commercial enterprise, business engagement, and indeed, the advent of university 'corporate' plans highlight this change (Jary 2005; Marginson 2007; NEF 2008; Streeting and Wise 2009; McArthur 2011). The range of neoliberal and NPM impacts on HE are well documented in the literature and have been summarised in Table 1, with a focus on the UK/English HE context.

Education for the public good within the neoliberal university – paradox or possibility?

For many academics with an interest in the neoliberal and managerialist transformation of higher education, both from within the sustainability sector and beyond, these forces have often been viewed as antithetical to the purpose and responsibilities of higher education. Many have criticised HE for undermining its core values through choosing to uphold the neoliberal ethos and for the inevitable trade-offs faced with other values such as social justice, equity, environmental protection and ethical and democratic decision-making (Readings 1998; Saravanamuthu and Tinker 2002; Devaney and Weber 2003). In the 30th anniversary edition of his seminal work, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Freire 1970), Richard Shaull closes the book's foreword with the following:

Table 1. The effects of neoliberalism/NPM on higher education and characteristics of the 'new' twenty-first century model of HE.

General characteristics

- Universities are more businesslike and managerialist
- Focus on outputs, financial control, efficiency, value for money and strategic planning
- More interaction with businesses and the commercial and corporate sector
- Relationships and roles defined more in corporate terms, e.g. customers and service providers

Government funding and control mechanisms

- Increased transparency of government funding via formula funding mechanisms based on student numbers, discipline type and assessed research excellence
- Proliferation of accountability, quality assurance, audit processes, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs)

Research and research funding

- Competition between HEIs for governmental research funds in a quality-related funding system
- Competition between HEIs for research funding from UK Research Councils, charities, the EU and business/industry partnerships
- Diversification of research funding to include more business/corporate funding partnerships
- Continued concentration of research funds from government in the highest performing institutions
- Marginalisation of research into fields which are recognised by rating systems and research funding bodies

Competition for students, student funding

- Competition for students between HEIs
- Drive to maintain student numbers and increase numbers in areas where this is possible (e.g. students with the grades A, B, B or better and postgraduates) and thus government teaching funding
- Drive to increase numbers of international students and associated revenues
- Reductions in unit resource of student funding from government
- Increases in student fees, from no fees in the early 1990s to ca. £1000 per year in 1997, to ca. £3000 per year in 2006 and up to £9000 per year in 2012

Academic staff

- Vice-Chancellors more akin to CEOs from the business world
- Pressure to compete for external research income from funding bodies and businesses
- Pressure to work on research projects outside of chosen field, to 'follow the money'
- Pressure to generate additional revenue streams, for example enterprise, CPD, new postgraduate courses and international partnerships
- More structured, monitored and managed regime than in the past
- Pressure to produce particular 'products' within ever tighter timescales with fewer resources
- Academics increasingly strategic about research collaborations and where work is published
- Staff appointments often based on research track record and potential rather than teaching capability
- Less genuine collegiality

References

Chandler, Barry, and Clark (2002), Giroux (2002), Mendivil (2002), Fridell (2004), Hill (2004), Archer (2008), Clegg (2008), Dowling (2008), Kolsaker (2008), Klenowski (2009), Reid (2009), Harland et al. (2010), McArthur (2011), Waitere et al. (2011)

> There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Shaull 2000, 34).

Following from Freire's work, a leading group of critical pedagogy theorists in the UK have strongly championed seeking alternatives to the neoliberalizing university (Amsler et al. 2010). Critical pedagogy has been described as 'overtly political and critical of the status quo' and 'committed to progressive social and political change' (Crowther 2010, 16). Critical pedagogy theorists challenge us to rethink universities as radically democratic social and political institutions, to confront the monolithic nature of neoliberalism and to regain confidence in Marxist critiques of capitalism (Amsler et al. 2010; Cowden and Singh 2013). Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010) discuss several scenarios to counter neoliberalism in their paper 'After neoliberalism', and advocate, like many authors in the area of ESD, 'big picture' alternative frameworks, politics and economies for mobilising alternatives.

Critical pedagogy points of views are echoed in the works of many writers who seek to advance the public, socio-democratic and sustainability 'good' of higher education, arguing that if we operate *within* the paradigm we seek to shift, we are not only helping to sustain it, but are also compromising the radical potentialities of other emancipatory educations (Hall 2005; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Irwin 2007; Blewitt 2013; Jucker 2014). Indeed, ESD discourse has been described as fundamentally implicated as part and parcel of the neoliberal regime (Irwin 2007; Blewitt 2013). Jucker (2014, 38, 41) has noted, 'There is no real progress in the sense of the necessary paradigm change … ESD is only possible with a radical paradigm change'.

To counter these views, one could argue that English universities have responded in ways that are necessary to survive in the current climate and that they do not currently have the choice to opt out of the neoliberal regime. From an ESD perspective, advocating that nothing truly meaningful can be achieved within our HE system as it stands, negates the huge successes of the many innovative and life-changing educational transformations going on as a result of the growing ESD agenda. If examined practically and without supporting any one ideological stance, we believe that the prevailing neoliberal and managerialist regime in English HE has presented multiple opportunities for enhancing and progressing sustainability and ESD and that many sustainability advocates continue to exploit neoliberal and managerialist characteristics of universities to advance their work. On the other hand, we are also sympathetic to views that neoliberalism has tangibly stifled and contradicted the development of ESD in many ways and that more wholesale change of the system is certainly desirable. This paper continues by examining the political framing of higher education within the 'knowledge economy', student funding mechanisms and the 'student as consumer' rhetoric, quality assurance processes, quality-related research funding, and the relationship of these explicitly neoliberal and managerialist mechanisms to ESD. Examples from the UK and English HE systems are drawn upon throughout to demonstrate the contradictions and synergies present, before moving on to evaluate the implications of this for sustainability educators.

The political framing of higher education in the UK

There have been six different government departments responsible for higher education in the UK since the 1980s, which until 2007 were badged with 'education' in their title. In 2007, Brown's Labour government moved responsibility for HEIs to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), which was then merged into the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) in 2009. Losing the terms 'education' and then 'universities' from departmental terminology raises fundamental questions for those actively concerned about the core purpose and underlying values of our HE system. Specifically, it implies that universities in the UK are being subsumed as a key supply-side component of the country's economic and business engine (Middleton 2000). The mission statement of BIS (2009), where university responsibilities reside, suggests this is so:

> The Department for Business, Innovation and skills (BIS) is the department for economic growth. The department invests in skills and education to promote trade, boost innovation and help people to start and grow a business.

McArthur's (2011) paper, 'Reconsidering the social and economic purposes of higher education' explores these critical issues in depth. She notes, 'Such a change suggests that higher education is primarily seen as a tool that contributes to the achievement of other primary goals – namely business, innovation and skills – rather than a priority in its own right' (McArthur 2011, 738). Higher education is no longer seen as an end in itself but the means to economic ends. Universities are increasingly being positioned as a key component of the 'knowledge society', in which education and research is primarily focused towards enhancing the economic prosperity of the country (Dill 1997; Mendivil 2002; Henkel 2007). In two of his early speeches as Secretary of State for BIS, Lord Mandleson made these priorities quite explicit as follows:

> I believe the logical home for university policy is in a new department whose core remit is investing in economic growth, investing in our future. Over the last decade or so our expectations of the HE system in delivering economic impact have risen sharply – and rightly … After students themselves, you [business] are the key clients of the higher skills system. (Mandleson 2009a, 2009b)

Using the phrase 'higher skills system' as opposed to 'higher education system' represents a deep shift in how the UK's leaders value and publicly represent what was once a system of higher learning and discovery (McArthur 2011). Although many educators agree that the 'ivory tower' view of universities is outdated, and that HEIs must demonstrate a broader societal role which addresses the many challenges of the twenty-first century, government's overriding focus on rebuilding the economy, and universities as implicated as part of this rebuild, does little to support universities who are attempting to holistically address societal, environmental and economic concerns. Sustainability advocates and educators would argue that this stance should be reformulated into a focus on the transition towards sustainable development and a sustainable green economy; a movement away from the primacy of neoliberalism (SDC 2004; Huckle 2008).

Higher education funding mechanisms, tuition fees and student consumers

In September 2012, a new HE funding system came into operation in England which very substantially reduced the teaching grant paid to universities by HEFCE

and allowed universities to charge undergraduate students up to £9000 per year in tuition fees, an almost threefold rise from the previous maximum of £3290 per year. The government White Paper which accompanied this policy change, 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS 2011, 5) notes:

> The changes we are making to higher education funding will in turn drive a more responsive system. To be successful, institutions will have to appeal to prospective students and be respected by employers. Putting financial power into the hands of learners makes student choice meaningful.

The recent tuition fee hike, coupled with a growing emphasis on the development of 'employability skills' as a key goal of higher education programmes, is further stimulating competition between HE providers and encouraging students to view their education as a private economic investment focused on maximising future earnings (Giroux 2002; Harland et al. 2010). Whilst there is no doubt that securing a job after university is a hugely important and rightful concern for students, the growing 'student as consumer' and employability agenda may be seen as dangerous, as McArthur (2011, 743) has noted, 'it risks being complicit in students' understanding their identity mainly in terms of their exchange value in the world of work', rather than being based on other more humanistic, creative and ethical values which *can* (and arguably should) be developed at university (McCulloch 2009; McArthur 2011). In this sense, neoliberal agendas may significantly overwhelm values-building associated with sustainability within the student population.

Associated with these developments are potential changes to the types of subjects that students opt to study at university under enhanced fees regimes. As students become more focused on getting a financial return for their money, and universities become more anxious about securing student numbers (and related revenues), perceived poorer 'performing' subjects, in terms of student recruitment and graduate employment prospects, are more vulnerable to closure (Wolff 2010; Garner 2012). A real concern for sustainability educators here is that these sorts of changes could negatively impact upon the continued uptake of degree courses focusing on sustainability, which may be seen as 'soft', 'fuzzy' and not as explicitly linked with the typical graduate job market. Previous work in this area has shown that the average yearly intake for specific sustainability-focused undergraduate degrees in the UK is between 5 and 20, which means that they are vulnerable targets for closure in the efficiency-driven neoliberal market (Robinson and MacGregor 2011).

Conversely, a significantly growing discourse area in the ESD world involves drawing direct linkages and synergies between ESD and the student employability, skills and consumer rhetoric. To give a few examples from universities in England, Keele University offers a module to all first year students entitled: 'Greening Business: Employability and Sustainability', and Exeter University advertises a whole suite of 'SUSTAINability' modules through emphasis on students enhancing their employability skills by undertaking the modules. A Higher Education Academy (HEA) supported think tank report by Luna et al. (2012), 'Universities and the green economy: graduates for the future', has also discussed how universities in the UK, through the graduates they produce, might contribute towards shaping the growing 'green economy'. These sorts of linkages serve three key purposes: (1) they are practical way of championing sustainability education and literacy to the wider HE community, especially to staff and students who have a keen interest in employability issues, (2) they help to reinforce the importance that all graduates should be

entering their careers with the ability to contextualise and action sustainability within their professions, and (3) they help to ensure that more graduates are prepared for jobs in specific environmental and sustainability sectors.

A significant advance to England's ESD movement has also recently been made possible, in part, by capitalising on the student consumer agenda, and the aforementioned government White Paper 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS 2011). The HEA and the National Union of Students (NUS) recently commissioned a series of surveys and corresponding reports over three years, reaching over 15,000 undergraduate students, entitled 'Student attitudes towards and skills for sustainable development'. The reports demonstrated that over 60% of students would like to learn more about sustainability and see sustainability covered as part of their university course (Drayson et al. 2013). The NUS were able to use these results to champion for increased sustainability-related funding from HEFCE, arguing along the lines: if students are at the heart of the system and their demands are important, then these reports demonstrate that they are demanding more sustainability exposure, and hence, this should be financially supported. This resulted in a £5 million grant from HEFCE in 2013 called the Students' Green Fund which is coordinated by the NUS and has funded 25 innovative student-led sustainability/ESD projects in HEIs in England.

Quality assurance agendas and ESD

As detailed in Table 1, quality assurance processes are a key mechanism of centralised NPM control over teaching and learning, which ensures that HEIs, 'as public institutions acting in the marketplace, remain accountable yet independent' (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008; Reid 2009, 575). In England, quality assurance is governed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (in conjunction with the universities themselves), who carry out institutional reviews every six years. The remit of the QAA includes the definition and safeguarding of teaching/degree standards, as well as the production of subject benchmark statements. A recent HEFCE funded project, 'Leading Curriculum Change for Sustainability: Strategic Approaches to Quality Enhancement' (HEFCE 2012), was the first tangible attempt at moving towards linking sustainability education with national quality assurance and enhancement programmes. The QAA itself has also recently published its first sector-level cross-disciplinary guidance on incorporating ESD into formal university curricula. This attempt at symbiosis between ESD and quality assurance is working to enhance, promote and raise the profile of ESD at many different levels within universities, including encouraging engagement from the administrative centre of HEIs, which may ultimately lead to further mainstreaming of ESD.

ESD research – the impact of quality-related research funding

A quality-related research (QR) funding system was first introduced in the UK in the late 1980s to apportion funding for research between institutions, based upon the assessed quality and volume of an institution's research in different Units of Assessment (UoAs) (or subject areas). HEFCE carries out these 5–6 yearly research review processes, known formerly as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and since 2012 the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and distributes research funds accordingly. The effect of this state-led managerialist instrument on general research

drivers within institutions, on sustainability research, and on ESD research in particular, provides further insight into the contradictions and synergies between neoliberalism and NPM, and the sustainability activity of universities.

One impact of the RAE/REF systems has been the incentivisation of university staff to follow certain research directions at the expense of others in order to optimise QR funding and research rating esteem. Several studies have described the ways in which quality-related research exercises sustain environments which favour disciplinary over interdisciplinary research, short-term over long-term research, individual rather than group research, internationally applicable rather than nationally-relevant research, and which undervalue pedagogical research (Elton 2000; McNay 2003; Waitere et al. 2011). This has significant implications for ESD research which is often interdisciplinary, collaborative, and through its concern with the long-term impact of educational innovations on students' sustainability literacy and skills, longitudinal in nature. Much ESD research being produced in the UK is also nationally focussed and draws on specific institutional case studies, which potentially restricts how highly it can be rated in a system which gives much greater weighting to internationally significant research.

Although there has, as yet, been no systematic review of the impact of the RAE/REF systems on environmental/sustainability *education* research specifically, it is worth noting the lack of overt mention of the terms 'sustainable development', 'sustainability' and 'ESD' within the descriptors which detail the types of research accepted to the following UoAs: 'earth systems and environmental sciences', 'geography, environmental studies and archaeology', 'education' and 'social work and social policy'. Furthermore, ESD researchers come from a variety of background discipline areas and may be discouraged, actively or otherwise, from carrying out ESD research which is seen to detract from more conventional and rewarded research in their home discipline area. These pressures will no doubt impact upon staff choosing to bid for funding, undertake and submit for review ESD-related research projects. Which ultimately brings into question what value and esteem ESD research is currently afforded in our research system? Published research in this area is surely essential though, in order to understand the successes and challenges of the role of educating for a sustainable future, and to drive sustainability activity in institutions, as much ESD research follows an 'action research' methodology.

On the other hand, there are also examples from the quality-related research regime which are beneficial to the growth of sustainability and ESD research or have the potential to be in the near future. Under the new REF system, the *non-academic* 'impact' of research will now account for 20% of total mainstream QR funding which all submissions must demonstrate through selected case studies and an impact template. 'Impact' has been defined as follows: 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (REF 2012). This potentially provides new scope for ESD research projects to be better valued in the REF context if they can demonstrate a range of beneficial non-academic impacts to different communities. There is also increasing national recognition of the value of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research in finding effective solutions to global societal challenges, as Research Councils UK (RCUK) have in recent years identified six multidisciplinary priority areas, five of which can be directly linked to SD: energy; global food security; global uncertainties; living with environmental change and lifelong health and

well-being. The impact of these trends on supporting ESD research more specifically remains to be seen.

Concluding comments

Through this paper, we have attempted to explore some of the ideological and practical implications of the relationship between neoliberalism and managerialism in Western higher education, and the progress of sustainability education agendas. Whilst we support the continuing quest for reforms of educational models towards holistic and integrated sustainability education across all disciplines, and recognise the value of calls for paradigmatic reform of HE away from the dominant neoliberal, reductionist and corporate paradigm, we also recognise that there are myriad sustainability and ESD success stories to date within English HE and that these success stories continue to proliferate. There are evidently many different ways of working towards sustainability within our current, fundamentally neoliberal and managerialist, HE system. Thus, are we not contradicting ourselves if we say that nothing meaningful can be achieved within our existing system? Are we failing to celebrate all of the great work going on? Are we focusing on the negatives rather than the positives? Are we getting frustrated and disillusioned by the lack of systemic change? Are we being overly ideological and not practical and rational enough about the nature of change? Or by working within the neoliberal system, are we unwittingly continuing to support it?

Educating university students to critically engage with sustainability issues within their personal, academic and future professional lives, and equipping them with the skills to contribute towards a more sustainable future is urgent and imperative in light of the many social and environmental problems we face globally. One way of attempting to raise the profile and legitimacy of sustainability education and ESD research within the English HE system is for the agenda to be better represented and valued within the managerialist and market-led mechanisms and drivers which govern our academic systems and behaviours at the institutional, departmental and individual level. These mechanisms/drivers include *inter alia*, the distinctive academic reward systems of research quality assessment and promotion, improving reputation and status, incentivisation through funding and resource flows, and meeting the requirements of educational quality standards and benchmarks. By the same token, a key challenge is to interweave sustainability and ESD into instruments which publicly measure institutional performance and influence student choice of university and degree course, such as league tables and the National Student Survey, which provides satisfaction scores on students' university experiences.

It is neither possible nor desirable to exert directive 'one size fits all' sustainability policy on HEIs (Katayama and Gough 2008). Furthermore, enforcing/requiring change or employing sanctions is a notoriously bad way of attempting to change academic behaviour, and fundamentally will not result in the required engagement with the deeper ethical and values-based issues of sustainability and sustainability education that are required. However, the concept of 'steering' for sustainability (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008; Broadbent, Laughlin, and Alwani-Starr 2010) and 'nudging' for sustainability (Thaler and Sunstein 2009) may provide some powerful and useful ideas for embedding sustainability into institutional structures and raising the profile of ESD, which would not only be beneficial for those currently working in this field, but could also make it easier, more desirable and

more rewarding for academics across all disciplines to engage with this agenda. The following bodies all have the power to play a significant steering role in relation to sustainability education and ESD research in England: the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), including the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Research Councils UK (RCUK), the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the National Union of Students (NUS), Universities UK ((UUK) who have thus far been rather silent in their support for ESD), as well as Unistats, who provide metrics data about university courses. Furthermore, individual institutions may deploy their own steering and nudging mechanisms to further ESD developments internally. Given the highly complex reality of higher education in England, we believe that ESD practitioners must strategically consider how to manage and progress their ESD work given the neoliberal contexts with which we are faced, to ensure that the current education system really does help us move towards a more sustainable future.

Notes on contributors

Sophie E.F. Bessant works as Sustainability Project Officer at Keele University and is a part-time PhD student. Sophie studied at The University of Nottingham from 2004 to 2008, graduating with a BSc Hons Degree in Geography and an MSc in Environmental Management. Sophie's PhD research focuses on the relationship between the sustainable development agenda of higher education in England and neoliberal and new public management political-economic influence within the sector.

Zoe P. Robinson is a Senior Lecturer in Environmental Science and Sustainability and Director of Education for Sustainability at Keele University, having started lecturing at Keele in 2004 following a period of time working in environmental consultancy. Zoe was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy in 2012 for her work contributing to the field of Education for Sustainability and Open Educational Resources. Zoe co-founded the environmental education group 'Science for Sustainability' in 2006 which has a nationally leading reputation and has won awards for its innovative work in engaging and educating young people and communities in environmental and sustainability issues.

R. Mark Ormerod has been Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) at Keele University since August 2011, having previously been Head of the School of Physical and Geographical Sciences since its formation in 2005, and of the School of Chemistry and Physics. Professor Ormerod has been at Keele since 1992, when he was appointed to a Lectureship in Chemistry. Professor Ormerod's research interests centre on sustainable processes, in particular clean catalysis, sustainable materials chemistry, fuel cells and biogas conversion. Recently, he has extended his research interests to interdisciplinary research in sustainability including sustainable energy and lifestyles and education for sustainable development. Mark co-leads the 'Science for Sustainability' group.

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