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Raising regional academic voices (alongside data) in Higher Education (HE) debate

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Abstract

As agendas for data-driven measures of excellence dominate policy in UK Higher Education (HE), we argue that the generic structure of national policy frameworks virtually silences regional voices. This furthers a territorially agnostic discourse about universities, downplays institutional history and purpose, risks concealing innovative practices, and fails to tackle entrenched inequalities. In response, we point to the value of live, place-based debate in HE institutions to highlight distributional inequity, raise local voices and connect these with national policy. Yet even as we compiled this article about HE debate, the Covid-19 pandemic took hold globally, cancelling face-to-face meetings, by necessity. We therefore draw on a postdigital perspective, as we share our individual dialogues in support of debate, via collective writing, against this new backdrop of social distancing and widespread uncertainty. We may not currently be able to convene our Midlands HE Policy Network (MHEPN) debates in person, but we can voice the essential part that regional universities play in connecting global technological and biological change, with local social projects, citizens and industry. Postdigital theory offers one route to understanding that Covid-19 does not sit apart from other political economic challenges in HE and beyond, that we need to debate simultaneously.

Keywords

Live debate, regional universities, excellence frameworks, neoliberal policy, Covid-19, 4IR, postdigital, collective writing

Introduction

When we first began drafting this article, we wanted to raise our collective dissatisfaction that live debate in universities has all but disappeared. Each of the authors of this paper has presented at and chaired a series of Midlands HE Policy Network (MHEPN) debates that we recently developed and hosted through the Education Observatory, University of Wolverhampton. Each author also participated in the Higher Education Institutional Research (HEIR) Conference, held at the University of Wolverhampton in September 2019, with the theme of ‘measuring excellence’ in Higher Education. The MHEPN debates were intended as a powerful, place-based forum to hear regional voices that seem to be virtually silenced by the generic structure of national policy frameworks focused on ‘measuring excellence’. Now, as we publish our thoughts on the necessity for live face-to-face debate from regional universities unprecedented measures to resist the spread of Covid-19 mean that ‘virtual’ is literally all that we have left. Whilst the arguments that we share about audible, place-based debate remain highly relevant, a further layer of complexity now unfolds before us. The biological work of this pandemic intermingles with technological communications and social activities to materially and emotionally alter each of our lives.

At this point in time then, when the global economy and healthcare worldwide reel from the pressures of Covid-19, we are moving even more rapidly away from face-to-face meetings by necessity. Yet simultaneously, this crisis reveals the crucial role that local communities play in any national or global efforts to fight a spiralling pandemic. Now is therefore an important time to ‘voice’ the essential part that regional universities play in connecting global technological and biological change, with local social projects, citizens and industry. Postdigital theory (Jandrić et al. [2018](#)) offers one, not entirely perfect, but with room for discussion route, towards understanding also that Covid-19 does not sit apart from other global and local challenges, such as developing creative skills across populations to contend with automation, change, unemployment and opportunity in a 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Peters et al. [2019](#)). People’s lives are now fusions of both analogue and digital technologies and social practices (Jandrić et al. [2018](#)). Such interconnections can be noticed all around. For example, even as airlines are grounded worldwide, in an unplanned global detox for our atmosphere, we are purchasing (stockpiling perhaps... and even making by hand...) more plastic bottles of hand sanitiser than ever before. As fast as we seek to communicate crucial information virtually, we also need to be aware of those who may use little or no technology, or who simply cannot afford to. Whilst contactless forms of payment and automated checkouts are prioritised, at the same time, human forms of social care have never been in more demand. Thus, health, social welfare and sustainability concerns are visibly mingling before our eyes, with economic and technological ones. This is a situation that concerns universities at many levels, and not least because it crosses disciplinary boundaries. It is these messy postdigital connections (where many, but not all people, lead lives that are now simultaneously offline and online, material and virtual) that are omitted from national excellence frameworks, alongside deeply contextual differences between our regional universities.

With this in mind, we will firstly discuss the problems of attempting to capture the rich work of academia through generic, static, national frameworks that are set *for* regional universities, not developed *by* them. This is akin to beginning research (rather unethically) by stating what the findings will be before actually approaching the participants. Instead, adopting a grounded, bottom-up approach, using a variety of methods, can make audible the regional voices expressing what is really being done *by* universities, avoiding assumptions and dynamically informing policy. Perhaps then, at the start of a new (and now very uncertain) decade, it is time to take the triple excellence frameworks of REF (Research Excellence Framework), TEF (Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework) and an emerging KEF (Knowledge Exchange Framework) as more of a departure point, rather than a fixed agenda. Even as we write, the deadline for REF has been suspended, buying us all time to reflect on immediate and fundamental change amid a pandemic. Perhaps this is also a good time to thank these exercises for their contribution in revealing the many issues of a national, largely quantitative, rational interpretation of excellence set *for* universities. After that we might proceed with a richer, more regionally aware agenda, for excellent practices set *by* universities, one that really reflects, and responds to, contextual and locational diversity:

English policy has been relatively territorially agnostic for many years. The dislocation of place or the relegation of civic interests when, in the words of the Commission, ‘university policy remains almost wholly national’, feels precisely the wrong approach in today’s politics. It downplays institutional history and purpose but worse it betrays a lack of interest in what happens to people and places. At this moment in time, that feels like a huge risk. (Westwood 2019)

The singular, generic concept of ‘excellence’, as it has been articulated in HE policy, has played its part then in furthering a territorially agnostic policy discourse about universities. Unfortunately, (and somewhat irrationally), this has also written out and silenced the very people who are actually positioned to participate in developing more plural excellent practices in teaching, research and knowledge exchange in the community (S. Hayes 2019a; Hayes 2020).

Therefore, secondly, we point to a rather ironic contrast between our national political system and our universities. Active debate takes place daily in the UK Parliament, yet through HE legislation and policy delivering generic excellence frameworks, such measuring effectively shuts down these forms of exchanges within regional, educational institutions. Whilst much attention is focused towards diversity and inclusivity at a national policy level, there seems to be considerably less attention placed on how this plays out *differently* between institutions and locations. Universities are immersed in different regional contexts, local economies and historical backgrounds. They are interlinked with the communities, schools, industry, local dialects, culture, demographics, deprivation and affluence of the places that surround them. Competing simply to occupy a similar national space risks silencing these diverse voices, and overlooking varying needs, talents and opportunities in each region. Even as we write, we note that (amid the escalating Covid-19 pandemic) the UK government is committing to distributing research-related funding more fairly across the UK (Pells and Inge 2020). Yet in the days since the budget announcement by Chancellor Rishi Sunak of his ‘plan to invest in R&D and cutting-edge technologies’ to provide ‘support for people in every nation and region of the UK to gain the skills they will need as the economy evolves’, the government’s pledge ‘to level up opportunity and share prosperity across the UK’ is also being questioned (Pells and Inge 2020). Graeme Reid, Chair of Science and Research Policy at University College London, has expressed concern at always being told ‘the cheque is in the post,’ and bafflement that, ‘in a budget that has got some very interesting and clearly well-thought-through content about the place agenda, they’ve managed to display no progress whatsoever on the Shared Prosperity Fund’ (Pells and Inge 2020). As announcements unfold, a postdigital perspective recognises that whilst scientific and medical knowledge will understandably be key, all steps that are taken will also concern human-technological-material-social-global-regional aspects, as advice is enacted across populations and into the future.

We therefore thirdly each explain (in our own voices) why we believe there is a need for audible place-based debate in HE institutions, via initiatives like our Midlands HE Policy Network (MHEPN). We provide our insights too into why a balance of data, evidence, dialogue, and expertise drawn from our regions is needed, together with suitable investment, to move beyond empty national ‘excellence’ frameworks alone. This has implications for universities, communities, individuals, and policymakers. Live oppositional argument is just one way dynamically to raise voices from regional universities, which are otherwise suppressed by data-driven, nationally focused, measures of excellence. Whilst it is not unusual for media companies to broadcast political debates such as Question Time (BBC 2020) from regional locations, our concern is that such live events appear now to be starkly absent from our educational institutions, where once they thrived. This is not easily changed under current circumstances, when a national lockdown has altered for now the ways in which people live. However, these are key principles that can still be upheld across online technologies and indeed in this article itself. Though our voices are not ‘live’, or being heard by a group of participants meeting in the same room, they still argue, as they would in that regional context. After each dialogue has been presented, we discuss the role of collective writing about debate...to further debate! Lastly, and certainly not least, we invite

others to come forward to host such events as MHERN in the future, (once it is safe to do so), but also to contribute their ideas and voices to extend the experimental format we have developed over the last year. Though it may not currently be safe to crowd into the same room to share the noisy, friendly arguments we have enjoyed during the last year in debate, we can still gather our opinions together, in the act of collective writing.

National excellence and exchange frameworks

As long ago as 1996, Readings pointed out: ‘today, all departments of the University can be urged to strive for excellence, since the general applicability of the notion is in direct relation to its emptiness’ (Readings 1996: 23). Fifteen years on, Molesworth et al. (2011), amongst many other authors who have since critiqued neoliberal policies, discourse and marketisation in Higher Education (HE), suggested that ‘[t]he development of mission statements in an attempt to mark out a distinctive space for a university sees almost all universities attempting to occupy similar spaces of ‘excellence’ as a result’ (Molesworth et al. 2011: 229).

In the UK, we now have a set of largely data-driven national excellence frameworks that tend to uphold the neoliberal economic values that structure society and education. These are transmitted across institutions via a rational policy logic which assumes that generic excellent practices can be automatically applied across different contexts with little effort. These frameworks effectively move university mission statements even closer towards competing for a similar space, rather than a diversity of place, as they endeavour to respond to the generic topic of ‘excellence’. This leaves HE institutions simply repeating dominant patterns of rationalisation in wider society, like those noted by George Ritzer in his McDonaldisation thesis, and that are now also replicated and augmented online (Ritzer et al. 2018). Yet such a generic approach brings with it a troubling opportunity cost, in failing to address regional inequalities, particularly if “‘policymakers” discursive tropes—from the needs of dynamic “knowledge economies” to the benefits of “excellence”—distract from the distributional conflicts and power dynamics in the sector’ (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017: 3).

A ‘peculiar form of reason then, that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms’ (Brown 2015: 17) simply reinforces persistent patterns of generic rationalisation and McDonaldisation in universities (D. Hayes 2017). Couldry argues that ‘neoliberal rationality is reinforced not just by explicit discourse but also through the multiple ways in which that discourse and its workings get *embedded* in daily life and social organization’ (Couldry 2010: 12). As such, neoliberalism crowds out other ways of organising labour and becomes an institutionalised culture, thus shaping our *organisation of space*. Certain types of spaces become prioritised, whilst others (such as space for critical debate, even in a staff common room...perish the thought..) fall out of use. Unfortunately, the human voices in shared spaces that once existed simply stop being heard (S. Hayes 2019a: 61).

This is further reinforced when, in linguistic tone and structure, HE policy discourse, in the shape of ‘McPolicy’, gives the impression that universities are now the same as any other consumer experience (S. Hayes 2019b; Hayes and Jandrić 2018). This plays down not only the crucial part that universities need to play as sites of connectivity for ‘linking the requirements of industry, technology and market forces with the demands of citizenship’ (Delanty 2001), it also effectively removes an authenticity of place and region (Jopling and Johnson 2019). Yet it is precisely this civic focus ‘that might just help to rebuild trust in universities as well as restoring local growth and tackling deep regional inequality’ (Westwood 2019). These are key concerns as the realities of under-investment in regions, as well as nationally focused assumptions are revealed in the responses to Covid-19 and a 4th Industrial Revolution (Connor et al. 2019). Now is not the time for policy or media rhetoric to drown out diverse regional voices that express a sense of personal investment and belonging, which leads to both the civic engagement and the creative enterprise we need to

draw upon in wider society. Nor should we further a dangerous culture, where education is developed towards therapy, rather than to further autonomous thinking (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019).

Despite appearances, this article is not simply an excuse to reject regulatory frameworks that were developed to evaluate teaching, research, or collaboration with the community. Nor is it a suggestion that we should settle for mediocrity rather than high quality. Our aim is to point instead to deeply contextual factors at a personal, institutional and regional level that further excellent examples of authentic academic practices. These are not captured in generic scales of measurement. There is a dark and eerily quiet alley somewhere in the capital (not due to Covid-19 alone) where we seem to have currently parked HE... perhaps we will not even incur a congestion charge whilst we stall the engine there, but there are other livelier, productive and interconnecting, regional routes that we might actually travel along together. The High Speed 2 (HS2) may be controversial, with environmental concerns needing to be balanced against regional connectivity (Topham 2020), but at least these conversations can be heard. Our triplicate of national excellence frameworks also needs to be in audible dialogue with regional networks, to avoid becoming static products, rather than authentic processes.

At a time of review also for the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) (Advance HE 2020), questions can be asked about whether this too is now occupying the same dark, deserted alley. With potential at its infancy to inform dynamic and diverse, regional teaching practices, Warnes (2020) argues that the PSF has become subsumed, as part of generic university Fellowship schemes, to ‘bolster corporate excellence statistics for marketing purposes’. This means: ‘the personal value of individual excellence is converted via performance management into impersonal institutional excellence’ (Warnes 2020). By definition then, no direct links can now easily be drawn between a framework once aimed at improving the learning experiences of students through reflexive teaching practice, which has been reappropriated to support ‘neoliberal “carrot and stick” performance review policies aimed at improving the skill level of the workforce and/or rooting out underperformers’ (Warnes 2020).

Fawns et al. (2020) point out that many practices are not adequately captured in data that relies on teachers’ and students’ activities conforming to an anticipated model. They suggest instead that a balance of data, evidence, dialogue, and expertise is necessary. Furthermore, within their ‘ecological’ view of HE institutions, rather than considering the performance of individuals in isolation, evaluation can also look at policies, systems and environments, and how these support and constrain educational practice (Goodyear and Carvalho 2019; Fawns et al. 2020; S. Hayes 2019a). As such, they call for analytics that are part of a wider, ecological view of education, where relationships and holistic conceptions of practice are valued above individual variables (Goodyear and Carvalho 2019), and where it is acknowledged that metrics do not capture everything that is important (Fawns et al. 2020). It is here that we suggest that audible regional debate has an integral part to play. Fawns et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of dialogues between teachers and students to make sense of how the formal curriculum intertwines with informal, extra-curricular activity and emergent sites of learning. They suggest that in engaging in dialogue (through workshops, interviews, and other events) with stakeholders, including teaching and administrative staff, students, and the wider community, a values-led vision for universities can be furthered (Fawns et al. 2020).

This is now an even more pressing concern in postdigital society where there is a need ‘to encourage a wider dialogue on the issues raised by the growing influence of algorithms and big data beyond those specialists who are already immersed within the arena’ (Edwards and Fenwick 2016:2). This is a debate that ‘is not just characterised by particular

technologies but by the fusions between these technologies, the capacity to redraw the lines between physical, digital and biological domains and the potential scale, speed and spread of these changes' (Connor et al. 2019). As such, we do not seem to be paying enough attention to the places, or spaces, where innovative and creative dialogue grows and develops because neoliberal policy refuses to take such situational factors into account (Jopling 2019).

The irony is not lost but hope is at hand

The irony of a national political system that encourages active debate in the UK Parliament, yet appears to be delivering excellence frameworks that are effectively shutting these forms of exchanges down within schools, Further Education and HE, is not lost on us. In this time of viral crisis, individual opinions are being aired from households and locations across the country, as they were during recent flood devastation in the UK. Yet, what is missing is any means to gather live, individual and collective regional opinions, actively facilitated by the universities in these locations.

This new biological threat has further silenced live debate events, but this time by necessity, when human lives are at risk. Taking a postdigital perspective on this alarming and surreal situation, however, can offer a helpful critical route for collective discussion and analysis, even if we need to postpone being in the same room together! For example, as 'self-isolation' has recently become a global priority, it is worth reminding ourselves that this new social phenomenon is more than simply social (or anti-social, even). Self-isolation may involve a physical removal of humans from social contact, but it is dialectically linked to forms of digital communication, online and offline choices, economic and political decision-making, and media reporting. For those in UK universities, where an array of national excellence frameworks have been structuring our activities and timescales for quite some time, amid serious global health concerns, this could now be a 'healthy' time to debate some alternative approaches.

The first time we held a regional debate at the University of Wolverhampton in February 2019, we were literally accosted the next day by individuals who attended asking for more of these events. As we have begun to hold debates in other regional institutions, the reaction is the same. The evidence may be anecdotal, but the enthusiasm and engagement are both warm and apparent. We clearly miss hearing the sound of each other's voices in active discussion. Whilst the rhetoric of excellence in policy cannot be the only factor contributing to the absence of live debate, a generic focus on data and frameworks overlooks active dialogue.

Such exchanges develop and improve our educational understanding, experience, knowledge and practices though, as well as bring to light our rich regional differences and challenges. Topics for provocations in our debates so far have ranged from the re-occupation of policy discourse, academic freedom, the question of whether the university is 'dead', possible futures for universities, policy that drives divisions between teachers and students, undergraduate supervision, staff mental health, policy-based evidence, challenging 'fluentism' in the academy, the challenge of developing creativity, and what needs to change. Each topic has generated live debate that indicates the deeply qualitative and contextual nature of teaching and research in regional locations that cannot be easily captured in figures and isolated metrics alone. We turn now, in our own voices, to explain the role that we each understand active debate to contribute to this topic, and how it might help us to reverse out of the dull, dark alley into the network of diverse, regional universities.

The contribution of audible debate to institutions, individuals and policy makers in HE

Why debate? (Dennis Hayes)

‘Why debate at all? The spirit of the age is against it.’ (Tyrrell Burgess 2004: 217)

The Midlands was the home of the English Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, groups like the Lunar Society and the Derby Philosophical Society met in various towns in the Midlands to debate and challenge conventional thought in philosophy and science. The spirit of that age was expressed in a motto by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant: *Sapere aude!* (Dare to know!).

Over two hundred years later, the Enlightenment tradition is in decline and challenging debate is out of fashion. Writing in 2004, a leading educational thinker, Professor Tyrrell Burgess, declared that ‘The spirit of the age is against it’ (Burgess 2004: 217). He gave a general and a personal defence of the reason why debate is important before charting its decline in education. His general defence was that, unlike beasts, we can use language to discuss, criticise and argue. We do not rely on trial and error but can discover error before a trail has damaging consequences. He concluded ‘To eschew debate is to inhibit progress’. His personal defence was that we seldom know anything ‘unless we can explain it to others and defend it against criticism’. It is a powerful aid to (personal) understanding and improvement (Burgess 2004: 217).

In the educational sphere, debate has vanished for two reasons. Firstly, because teachers, policymakers and politicians see education as a technical matter of correctly applying what works. There is nothing to discuss, we just need to work out the right way of doing things. Secondly, there is a parallel cultural change which has turned education towards therapy. Debate, as a consequence of the therapeutic turn, has become mere self-expression. It focusses on feeling. The first is, in part, Tyrrell’s argument. The second is entirely mine (D. Hayes 2019).

Resurrecting debate against the spirit of the age needs initiatives that may seem artificial but they will inhibit—slowly—indulgent and even narcissistic self-expression. We certainly need debating societies in schools and universities that set up debates ‘for and against’ a proposition in what one educationalist called, in a discussion with me, ‘debate in the old fashioned sense’. That old fashioned sense *is* debate. We can leave such debate to students themselves and to initiatives like the sixth-form debating competition *Debating Matters*.

For academics and professionals, the need is for new ways of getting out of echo-chambers and groupthink. Higher Education Institutions will not do this spontaneously. In the Midlands almost by accident, a few academics have begun an experiment in the tradition of those early Enlightenment societies.

Raising voices and raising questions: The place of debate in HE (Michael Jopling)

Like many ideas, the Midlands HE Policy Network (MHEPN) emerged out of dissatisfaction. Where were the spaces for academics, students, and others interested in the state and future of HE to come together and talk? We started the first MHEPN debate at the University of Wolverhampton in England on 27 February 2019, with four brief provocations, not so much calls for action as spurs for reaction, because we thought it might be interesting and because we thought others might agree, and more importantly, might not agree. For all kinds of reasons, some of which we explore in this brief overview, it seems to have found its place.

Why debate?

Debate is a pleasingly old-fashioned word. When we hear it nowadays, it tends to come from a politician calling for ‘public debate’ to raise the profile of whatever change they are proposing or policy they are criticising. But when and where do these public debates take place? Not, it would seem, in the modern, marketized university. In comparing university education and public training, Stefan Collini (2017: 235) makes the important distinction that ‘education relativizes and constantly calls into question the information which training simply transmits’. It is precisely this calling into question that we thought this network could encourage through discussion, provocation and *debate*. It has been striking, and more than a little concerning, how many people who have attended the network have said both that they relish having the opportunity to talk about ideas and that such opportunities are increasingly rare in the contemporary university.

Why Midlands?

Place matters. As our attachments to place become more complex in the UK and other countries, we seem to be increasingly drawn towards, and welcome, simple oppositions. The North-South divide in England is one such opposition. Where does the Midlands sit in all this? It is striking that even advocates for fairly radical forms of regionalism (e.g. Niven 2019) tend to fall into old, oppositional geographical patterns, even whilst ingeniously co-opting the South West into the North. We associated MHEPN with the ‘Midlands’ because it is simultaneously a useful regional marker (although with very open borders) and an ambiguous one. The Midlands represents both somewhere, drawing on a history of debate, challenge, and calling into question, and nowhere. As a between space below the North and above the South, the Midlands resembles the modern university, caught between oppositions such as excellence and enquiry, learning and delivery, student and customer. This does not mean it is the only space in which to debate these kinds of issues, but it does seem to make it a valuable one.

Debate to build dialogue and action on regional inequality (Andy Westwood)

‘Getting Brexit Done’ might have been the dominant theme in December’s General Election but ‘levelling up’ the economy across all parts of the UK has quickly become the most important domestic challenge for the new Conservative Government (Westwood 2020). Regional inequality in the UK is a long-standing, deeply entrenched—and growing policy problem. The gaps between the best and worst performing regions are amongst the largest in both Europe and the OECD (see the Industrial Strategy Commission 2017 or McCann 2019). These differences in productivity and in wages and living standards have been an important driver of political dissatisfaction, influencing voting patterns in both the 2016 Referendum and the 2019 Election.

The Conservatives owe much of their eighty seat majority to constituencies won in ‘left behind’ towns and/or in underperforming regions including in the West and East Midlands. The PM has promised to double Government R&D funding (with a boost to some £18bn overall) as a way of ‘levelling up’ economic performance across the country. His chief adviser Dominic Cummings has pointed to Richard Jones’ ‘Resurgence of the Regions’ paper (2019) as a blueprint for such an approach. But this will involve a significant shift in traditional—as well as more recent Conservative thinking on both higher education and the economy.

In the Black Country, there are new Conservative MPs in Walsall, Dudley, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton. The nearest university with campuses in many of these places is the University of Wolverhampton. As in the North East, there is also a Conservative city region mayor for the West Midlands—Andy Street. In the North and East Midlands, there are new Conservative MPs representing Stoke, Derby and Lincoln. But very few of the universities in these places are likely to benefit much from the proposals to double research funding. Instead they will be more concerned by the Conservative manifesto promise to tackle ‘low value’ courses in higher education.

Data on graduate salaries tells us that weaker regional and local labour markets pay less and that those staying and working in such places will earn less over their lifetime. Universities that recruit locally in areas such as the Black Country or North Staffordshire stand to suffer the most and their finances are already weakened by a market that tends to favour more established institutions in larger, wealthier cities. But it is also these institutions that offer the best options for increasing innovation, skills and R&D and growing underperforming local economies.

A more traditional Conservative view might endorse and accelerate market principles offered by HE reform since 2010. More powers to the Office for Students (OFS), more focus on value for money and possibly fewer or capped graduate places overall especially from ‘lower value’ courses. But that is almost a completely ‘place blind’ approach and creates a big political problem. Withdrawing numbers and weakening institutions are more likely to undermine new geographical priorities.

As Chris Skidmore has tweeted recently, ‘if we are going to level up every part of the UK, universities as anchor institutions will be part of the solution’ (Skidmore 2020). Is this a sign of government’s acceptance of these issues perhaps? But he lost his job as Minister for Universities and Science in the recent reshuffle. Gavin Williamson remains as Education Secretary and represents the South Staffordshire constituency which borders that of several new and existing Tory colleagues across the West Midlands. Amanda Solloway is the new Minister for Science and Innovation and she represents Derby North. Both should have a better understanding of these areas, institutions and the contradictions of traditional policy approaches. Above all they—as well as universities in these places—must understand the pressing need to rethink what higher education can now achieve. Encouraging academic dialogue, understanding and action will be key.

Debate reclaims our positionality in our postdigital contexts (Sarah Hayes)

As well as places of student learning and for challenging knowledge, universities are crucial sites of connectivity for ‘linking the requirements of industry, technology and market forces with the demands of citizenship’ (Delanty 2001) in postdigital times (Jandrić et al. 2018). Regional institutions provide places and spaces for innovative and creative dialogue to develop, even as we contemplate the emerging, global effects of a 4th Industrial Revolution and attempt to navigate a devastating pandemic. A universal, national chant of ‘excellence’, where the parameters have already been set *for* UK universities, will not help us to creatively meet the technological, biological and social challenges unfolding around us. Decades of neoliberal HE policy has treated technology as a neutral ‘add-on’ and a ‘quick fix’ to enhance education automatically and generically (S. Hayes 2019a: 92), rather than as dialectically intertwined with all human activity. This logic has left institutions considerably unprepared for the implications arising from artificial intelligence (AI), big data, algorithms, biometrics and neurotechnologies, as these fuse with politics, human identity, ethics and the law.

Couldry argues that neoliberalism ‘literally changes where we can and cannot speak and be heard’ (Couldry 2010: 12). Collini suggests that the language we use when discussing the university plays its part in how we understand and situate it and also how we live in relation to it (Collini 2017: 35). As regional institutions, where a rich array of voices express what is actually being done *by* universities, we have a much stronger chance, if connections can be made with wider policy. In order to develop this dialogue, we need to move away from an approach to writing policy that effectively writes out the labour of students, teachers and leaders (S Hayes 2019a). It is their place-based innovations, creativity and diverse voices that contribute towards reducing regional inequalities and developing skills. It is here in the varied regions of the UK that universities are crucial sites too, for connecting global technological change with local social projects and citizens. In a ‘new political economy of higher education’, it is a problem if research simply remains ‘policy-orientated, descriptive and under-theorised’ (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017). Debate across regional institutions therefore provides a vehicle to connect new modes of inquiry and to surface academic perspectives on personal positionality, in ‘the new *postdigital* political economy of HE’ (S. Hayes 2020). Postdigital positionality is just one way to interpret our individual contexts and to appreciate that people’s lives are now fusions of analogue and digital technologies and social practices (Jandrić et al. 2018). Our current excellence frameworks fail to take into account these new personal and institutional realities, which are also changing how individuals within HE function, communicate and innovate.

Collective writing to further debate

As authors, we have each added our individual voices in support of developing live debate in education. Indeed, when we first set out to write, we did not realise that (for now) this collective article would be stepping in to raise each of our voices... when we currently cannot convene live debates, due to the pandemic. Whilst collective writing takes a different format to live debate, each of these types of ‘gatherings’ provides a forum to further knowledge. There is scope for both of these collective acts to ‘disturb the existing systems of academic knowledge creation’ (Jandrić et al. 2017), in different ways. In live debate, the chair encourages active participation from those in the room, which increases shared understandings. In this collective article, we look to our open reviewers to comment, as if they were chairing our exchange of argument, thus helping to further each reader’s awareness, via the act of publishing.

However, what collective writing cannot do is to replicate the live discursive event that takes place in a region, to simultaneously raise those local voices. In this article, each author has explained their personal position on why both voice and place matter (together) in live debate. We have each argued from our own positioning that neither voice nor place should be reduced through frameworks that measure university excellence in purely generic, national terms. In a postdigital context, people in local contexts also lead messy lives that are now simultaneously offline and online, material and virtual. Therefore, this postdigital reality should not be omitted either from national excellence frameworks, alongside deeply contextual differences between our regional universities.

As Dennis has argued, education cannot simply remain a technical matter, where seeking excellence involves correctly applying what works, regardless of context. Nor can it turn towards therapy. This simply dilutes debate into narcissistic self-expression, rather than argument that furthers progress. The MHEPN provides local space for each of us to test what we believe we ‘know’, explain it to others, and defend it against criticism. Now, as we seek to enable group meetings online in real time, we need to be aware that behaviours usually change in a virtual context. People joining from different locations still alter the dynamic,

different levels of access to the technology intervene, different backdrops behind people distract us, and a need to mute microphones renders conversations intermittent... yet at the moment this is all we have... and so perhaps we will learn to adapt as time goes on. Meanwhile, Michael pointed out that the MHEPN emerged from dissatisfaction and an agreement that we need to reinstate the lost spaces where we might agree, and more importantly, disagree. Rather than making a special case for 'public debate', this should be an inherent part of our daily activities in education. Even if debate appears to have gone out of fashion, in postdigital times, we are aware that no practices need to be consigned to history. They are not replaced by the digital (as HE policy texts would often have us believe); they simply reside alongside. Live debate moves us beyond a transmission of information, in the form of training, towards education, which 'relativizes and constantly calls into question' (Collini 2017: 235) what we can know. Live debate happens in a certain place, and those places matter. Just as we need to represent the often-overlooked places between North and South, in the modern university, we need oppositional debate to focus on spaces between excellence and enquiry, learning and delivery, student and customer. The MHEPN has opened up a valuable forum in which to debate such positionings.

Reflecting on Andy's comments, 'Getting Brexit Done' may not have disappeared, but it currently gets little airtime. Right now, all eyes are understandably on the Conservative Government's responses to the Covid-19 crisis, but this pandemic does not sit apart from other political economic challenges in HE, and beyond. Whilst political and economic measures to enact Brexit continue, a biological epidemic has travelled throughout Europe and across the globe, simultaneously grinding human travel to a halt. Over a matter of days, our global lives have returned to local lives, by necessity. As we try to grapple with overwhelming implications, postdigital insights can further our thinking and responses. Covid-19 has wrought tragedy on a huge scale, but even amid social isolation, we can make collective, productive observations as we look to the future. The current health crisis has all but closed universities, but these regional institutions are feeding into the collective effort to both research Covid-19 tests and vaccines and to manufacture lifesaving equipment. Across the underperforming regions surrounding many of these universities, low-paid care assistants and supermarket workers are being relied upon, as much as professors and doctors. Predicted automation linked to 4IR has therefore not simply replaced human cashiers and shelf stockers, as anticipated in simple terms, because technological change is interconnected with all other forms of change. There is nothing new in this situation of course. After the Black Death in the fourteenth century, unskilled labour was at a premium. In England at least, this was pivotal in destroying serfdom as it had existed for hundreds of years. Thus, our current circumstances, alongside rapid technological changes, are worthy of continuous debate as we consider how 'levelling up' economic performance and closing gaps between regions might be achieved going forward. As regions unite to tackle the crisis, government thinking on HE and the economy needs to recognise the 'anchor institutions' (Skidmore 2020) in overlooked communities, to support their research and to aid their graduates who stay and work in these regions. In each of these places, spaces for live academic dialogue need to gain momentum to rethink what HE can now achieve.

Sarah is particularly fond of Ritzer's argument concerning the 'irrationality of rationality', meaning that a persistent rationality (including how this plays out in online and augmented situations) often leads to the opposite outcome—irrationality (Ritzer et al. 2018). The imposed rationalities of national and context-free frameworks for excellence only serve to negate personal and institutional positionalities, in our postdigital contexts as they stand. This risks closing down critical, locational dialogue that yields creative and innovative solutions to both current, and future, crises. Couldry (2010) has argued, 'voice matters'. Our HE policy texts are currently devoid of the regional and contextual voices that matter. This

needs to change if the many statements about inclusivity and diversity we read in national and institutional policies are to be upheld. The MHEPN has experimented with one way to restore live, audible, human argument in response. This yielded a powerful response from our colleagues requesting more of these forums. Given that universities are crucial sites to connect global, technological change with local social projects and citizens, we owe it to each other to debate what it really means for humans to re-occupy policy, now and in the future (S. Hayes 2019a). A postdigital perspective recognises all of the aspects that we have brought together above, as intertwined dialectically with each other across time and space. In a further layer of complexity, the biological work of a pandemic has connected with technological communications and social activities to materially and emotionally alter the lives of most people on the planet. This too has raised some voices, suppressed others and restricted global freedom of mobility, requiring people to remain (for now) in their local places

Conclusions

An understanding of the role of place in the wider national and global economy begins with debate. This is a debate that can be furthered by regional universities who can serve as a conduit to connect local community with wider policy contexts. We have argued that attempting to capture the rich work of academia across the UK's regions through generic, static, national excellence frameworks set *for* regional *universities*, but not developed *by* them, is fraught with problems. We suggested this regulatory approach is akin to beginning a research project and unethically predicting what the findings will be, even before approaching the participants. Therefore, new policy frameworks that recognise the voices from regional universities, as well as their complex postdigital contexts, are needed. With the core of this article focused on the role of live, place-based debate to surface the real contributions of universities in their communities and to link these with national policy, we have used collective writing as an alternative way to raise each of our academic voices on this topic, amid a pandemic.

Alongside devastating human tragedy, Covid-19 has revealed messy and ironic postdigital connections, whilst physically disrupting global, neoliberal and McDonaldised life on a grand scale. Whilst we scarcely dare to imagine a future scenario where such a pandemic might actually be repeated, we need to go further now, and actually voice this concern. In countries across the globe, national leaders seek solutions that rely on the commitment and creativity of people from across the local regions. It is time to recognise universities as postdigital sites, for connecting global technological and biological change, with local, social projects and citizens. We discussed the irony of a loss of debate within regional universities, when in UK Parliament, debate remains a key forum through which the current measures to protect the public from a pandemic are being brought into policy. Surely this indicates that the power of live debate should not be confined to national government bodies alone. Each author of this article has presented their case though, not just for live debate, but for place-based regional voices to be raised. Neither a collective article nor a virtual forum can exactly replicate the powerful, contextual live debate that has been generated through the MHEPN meetings so far. However, this collective piece, with its open reviewers acting rather like chairs in a live debate, has offered an alternative 'gathering' to further knowledge on this topic. At a time of unprecedented change, we now invite institutions and individuals worldwide to contribute to this open forum, by any means that is safe to join.

Open Review 1

Regional Dialogue, Within and Beyond HE, to Construct a Collaborative Learning Culture (Alan Tuckett)

Raymond Williams (1977: 122) described how a dominant discourse, however powerful, never manages to eradicate other ways of thinking, and highlights the residual discourse of earlier ways of seeing the world, and the emergent discourse where new forms are imagined and given voice. *Raising regional academic voices* reflects both a reassertion of old values—as in Dennis Hayes’ celebration of debate, as a skill to be learned—and a reassertion of emergent forms, as in the post-digital exploration of collective ways of learning together, captured in the central narrative. What the four authors share in common is a clarity about the things of value omitted in the dominant neoliberal paradigm that has shaped so much of our public lives over the last thirty or forty years. If the initial, modest steps to allocate scarce resources for major science investment, which inspired the first Research Assessment Exercise worked (at least for big science), the subsequent explosion of centrally determined data captures, and the emergence of league tables—and their attendant homogenisation of higher education, has had the perhaps understandable effect of corroding academic collegiality. It has done this in too many places through a top-down managerialist culture, as institutional leaders, trapped in a fiscal fight, if not quite to the death, struggle to respond to external demands that risk distorting institutional missions. All of this has taken place in the name of marketization. The cost of these ways of thinking to institutions’ responsibility to locality was, for me, graphically highlighted as Nottingham University decimated its regional adult learning programmes whilst opening a new shiny campus in Ningbo, China (Tuckett 2017).

The authors reassert the value of dialogue, of argument, within a collaborative exploration of the relationship between the academy and the places in which it is located. The paper emerges from the debates generated in the Midlands Higher Education Policy Network, and is properly alive to the bleaching out of regional responsiveness from the drivers shaping current higher education. Yet, whilst it is properly on the side of devolution rather than a one size fits all centralised higher education discourse, and whilst it celebrates the diversity and difference in a co-operative dialogue, it stays comfortably within the sectoral boundaries of higher education. What, I wondered as I read it, would be different in a wider discussion of the sort that the Cape Learning Region in South Africa engaged in, as educators struggled to explore the distinctiveness of different institutional forms, whilst working to create a wider learning culture. Those ideas have fired the resurgence, globally of interest in Learning Cities and Learning Regions, amongst them the Wolverhampton Learning City Region. There, inevitably, educators recognise that in reconfiguring a learning culture, academics need allies in business, industry, the faith and voluntary sector, and need, too, to imagine new forms of association, involving adults and young people of all sorts. That, surely, is the humus that will be needed if a politics linking productivity, skills, and a learning culture are to be revitalised.

Regions matter. Dialogue is vital. Universities open to both also matter. And neoliberal certainties will be helped on their way by dialogues like this very welcome paper.

Open Review 2

Regional Voices in a Co-digital Age (Ronald Barnett)

What is it to count as a region in higher education? It can surely be spatial as well as it being geographical. But the geographical region is an open matter: a geographical region in the UK is somewhat different from one in the USA or China.

Two days ago, I participated in a webinar in which there were thirty participants in every part of the world, all of whom were active in the event; they each had a voice. The software permitted group break-outs, where we were placed in small groups, as well as hearing distinguished international scholars giving plenary talks and a discussant drawing together the threads of the debate. There we saw a region in action. The event had a focus—that of academic activism as it happens, and it was held within a larger territory (that of the *Philosophy and Theory of Higher Society*)—and so it had a border, community, voices, conversation and an identity. Are those—border, community, voices, conversation and identity—not five ingredients of, indeed conditions of, a region?

And then, the matter of a geographical region becomes interesting in its own right. We should look, as intimated, for a border, community, voices, conversation and identity. And we surely see each of these elements in the fascinating dialogue here, between Sarah Hayes, Michael Jopling, Dennis Hayes and Andy Westwood. Perhaps, though, some elements are more clearly visible than others. Is there, need there be, a definite border to a ‘Midlands’ network. It seems to embrace Manchester but not Birmingham! There are certainly voices and conversation here and we can sense that it builds on a larger community, that of a regional policy network. Of its identity, we cannot be too sure. But what, in these days of fluidity, is to count as identity? Can identity ever be pinned down? It is always in the making.

All of these five elements—as to the making of a collectivity of regional voices—are thrown into high relief in the digital era. I confess to be uneasy by the term ‘post-digital’. (It is interesting that the wordprocessor monitor frowns upon the single word ‘postdigital’, as if the single entity that the unified word implies is suspect.) An implication of the term is that we can get beyond the digital and put the digital behind us or, at least, move onto a higher level of being; but any such temptation must be eschewed. Even those who have no access to computers (often forgotten by those in higher education) are influenced by the Internet, if only in services, messages, cultural resources and information denied to them. We are all not post-digital but *co*-digital, whether we like it or not. All of us, at every level (personal, institutional, national), have our own accommodations to the digital age. Simultaneously, we live with the digital, conduct ourselves alongside the digital, try to outlaw the digital, embrace the digital, hide from the digital, spy on the digital, and court the digital. We are all socially distant from, or socially proximate to the digital; and often both of these, and many other postures as well, in the one set of relationships. None of us is post-digital.

But, to pick up just one issue here, what is regional identity here? Are not new identities being forged in digital regions? And how significant, for the university, is the element of face-to-face encounters? It has long been observed that some students are more comfortable in online learning. There is a shadow presencing here: neither fully in the face of the other but yet sufficient space for one to express a point of view and to have a voice. Perhaps something similar can be observed for the academics themselves.

Now, perhaps, digital media are helping to realize Habermas’ ideal speech situation—and it was advanced *as* an ideal. In the contemporary interactive digital media, inequalities of position fade, if only a little. Formal positions and title (‘Professor’, ‘Dr’, ‘Student’) recede, to be replaced by a name on the screen. Academic identifiers are now more equal.

If any of this is the case, then there are rich pickings available in this co-digital academic age for scholarship and research into new possibilities for academic citizenship, for the very notion of academic argument, for the organisation of space (which kinds of discursive space are conducive to intellectual innovation?) and for the maximisation of cross-border disciplinary flows. Quite new academic ecologies may await here.

But, still, the very idea of region keeps coming back. The authors of this writing collective have surely hit on *three* key points: in the presence of strong states (say, the UK, France, China), the regions are subjugated; a potential mismatch between debate at the national level and its near absence at the regional level; and (consequently) the overlooking of regional identities that are sometimes at odds with the central policies, which are imposed upon the regions. This set of ingredients is a recipe not only for dull uniformity but also for the suppression of regional difference, autonomy and vitality. (It is ironic that, as the authors observe, their exchange is conducted in the presence of a virus pandemic, for its shaping in the UK has followed just this pattern, of failed attempts at the centre to dominate the regions and with dire consequences.)

So there are assuredly tasks and responsibilities for those in geographical regions to work at forming regional identities (which have hitherto) been subjugated. Voice, identity, community and conversation can and should all be worked at. In the process, new kinds of digital citizenship may emerge. Shall we call the new forms of happening not just ‘gatherings’ but ‘*purposive* gatherings’? It is right, however, that the geographical border(s) remain indistinct. Let the borders stay open; well, reasonably open at least.

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