Introduction

TL5003 is being formed around the idea of contemporary issues and how they impact on higher education practices at the University of Limerick. Issues naturally and continually emerge through the interactions of people with their environment: their material, virtual and social worlds. Issues have the potential to influence thinking and behaviours and therefore lead to the adaptation of existing and the invention of entirely new social practices. Because we are interested in the way people, issues and environments relate and interact, we are using an ecological conceptual framework to view and appreciate the effects of contemporary issues in higher education and related teaching and learning practices.

Societies from which issues emerge are messy ‘complex systems’, in which many independent agents interact with each other in many different ways. When a higher education institution encounters an issue emerging from the society in which it is embedded it responds by adapting its behaviours ie it acts as a complex adaptive system (Seel 2008). The adoption of an ecological framework provides a conceptual tool that acknowledges this complexity and helps us make sense of it.

Issues are subjects, problems and challenges that people are thinking and talking about in order to consider, engage with and often try to resolve in their own contexts and circumstances. Issues can be personal ie they arise from within an individual’s own life and circumstances including their immediate work environment. They can be global, for example issues can emerge from significant changes like the development of new technologies that have changed the way we communicate. Issues can be societal, for example changes to Government legislation can impact directly on universities and colleges. And they can be organisational as leaders and managers recognise and draw attention to issues that they believe need to be addressed.
Seven TL5003 students completed an online questionnaire to share their views on what an issue was. In their responses, and subsequent discussions they identified a number of dimensions to the idea of an issue.

- A shared area of concern
- Anything that impacts upon the efficacy of the learning and teaching engaged in at any level.
- Anything which can impact on the performance of my duties
- Something that requires teachers, students and other members of the HE community to work together in order to address. It is not something to be "solved" per se, but rather a challenge to be met.

A number of additional points were raised in classroom discussions.
- 'Issue' is an abstract idea - context gives it meaning
- What constitutes an issue is a matter of perception and perception is culturally constructed
- If something is an issue it implies a level of significance and complexity
- A significant issue 'disturbs ecosystems' - perhaps personal issues affect the ecologies we create to sustain learning and to achieve something. One metaphor considered to represent this idea was that of a pebble cast into water causing ripples. In a similar way the effects of a significant issue ripple through the ecosystem.
- In higher education we need to consider disciplinary domains when considering the effects of issues
- Ever more rapid and powerful ways of communicating and distributing information means that issues can be surfaced, examined and commented on quickly and in many ways by many more people.

TL5003 adopted an ecological framework to support exploration of how particular issues emerge

**An ecological framework for viewing issues that impact on educational thinking and practice in higher education**

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, introduced his ecological paradigm for interpreting human development, 'in order to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs' (Bronfenbrenner 1994:1643). Bronfenbrenner's work culminated in his theory of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner 1999). His conceptual framework drew attention to the nested and interconnected nature of ecosocial systems.
Informed by this way of seeing the interactions of people with their environment, Jackson (2016) is developing and applying the idea of ecosystems and learning ecologies to educational practices in university settings. An interpretation for this course is provided in Figure 1 and outlined below.

Figure 1 Ecological framework for understanding the way contemporary issues form and impact on thinking, behaviours and practices in higher education

Four levels of ecosystems are shown global, societal, educational system and institution. Within the institutional ecosystem teachers create ecologies within which students learn and students and teachers create their own ecologies for learning.

Educational institutions are located within a **societal ecosystem** which provides the socio-economic, historical-cultural and political contexts within which all activities are undertaken. It includes the legal framework within which HEI’s operate and government policies and strategies for promoting and supporting a citizen’s right to learn.

Every societal ecosystem hosts a **higher education ecosystem** comprising all the institutions, agencies and other infrastructures and resources (including knowledgeable and skilled practitioners and administrators) that deliver the educational policies and expectations of the society. The HE ecosystem contains...
representative bodies for HEI's, agencies for funding teaching and research, agencies for quality assurance and enhancement, organisations that are independent of Government, agents and brokers, and networks and associations that connect people across institutional boundaries.

The Irish societal ecosystem includes the political and economic influences of the EU which is active in the formulation of strategies for education and training, lifelong learning and open learning. Institutional ecosystems are connected to the societal ecosystem in many ways and are subject to the influences of many different agents for example employers, professional bodies and regulatory bodies, higher education agencies for quality assurance and enhancement.

The societal ecosystem is open to influences from the global ecosystem composed of many societal and other ecosystems. Pervasive developments in the global ecosystem - for example technological developments involving the internet and communications technologies that have revolutionised the way we communicate, develop and share knowledge, and learn affect societal and institutional ecosystems and teaching and personal ecologies for learning. This profound technological change has encouraged and facilitated profound changes in thinking, practices and behaviours at all ecological levels. It has led to the emergence of more open learning and educational practices and to new 'connectivist' (Seimens 2004) ideas about learning. The global ecosystem also contains other higher education systems with which we compete (eg for students). At the policy level our societal ecosystem may appropriate and adapt policies from other systems, at the institutional level HEIs may form alliances for the delivery of education. At both levels we are able to learn from what others do.

Institutional ecosystems: Ellis and Goodyear (2010) develop a compelling narrative for viewing the university as a large complex ecosystem involving all the relationships and interactions of all the inhabitants - students, teachers, researchers, support and administrative staff, managers and leaders, and their connections with employers and society more generally, and the resources, physical spaces and virtual environments, processes and practices that are played out day to day. A university ecosystem includes its culture which Seel suggests 'is the emergent result of the continuing negotiations about values, meanings and proprieties between the members of that organisation and with its environment - in other words culture is the result of all the daily conversations and negotiations between the members of an organisation about the way we do things [or perhaps would like to do things!] here'. Written and unwritten rules, procedures and policies that govern and control behaviour within which social (educational) practices are constructed.

Within a university ecosystem teachers, through their own pedagogical thinking and practices, create ecologies within which students learn drawing on the affordances and resources of the institutional ecosystem (Jackson 2016). At this ecological level
institutional culture, policies and practices impact on teachers’ pedagogical thinking and practices and therefore on the affordances for students' learning and development. It's the level at which guidance and tools are provided to help learners fulfil the requirements for their programme. Appropriately organised activity and support enables students to learn more and learn more effectively in their own learning ecologies.

At the level of individuals (students and teachers) we are concerned with **personal learning ecologies** - the ecologies that individuals create in order to learn, create, develop and achieve, which relate to the particular circumstances and contexts of an individual’s life (Jackson 2016). This is the level at which we encounter situations, make decisions and plan what to do and how to do it and the level at which we act and use our capability (everything we know and can do) to deal with a situation. This is the level at which we reflect on our experiences and the effects of our actions. This is the level at which we create our own ecologies for learning, developing and achieving.

The ecosystems model highlights the connectivity and interdependence of the different parts of higher education and the society within which it is located. While the higher education ecosystem and any institutional ecosystem can be mapped at any point in time, these points lie on a trajectory of change.

Issues, driven by different forces (eg new ideas, policies, technologies, economics…..) emerge at different points and in different parts of the ecosystem and the disturbances and interactions they create lead to change, adaptation and innovation. Because different parts of a higher education ecosystem are able to act independently, different responses to an issue occur in different parts of the ecosystem. This explains the diversity of practices that occur in any HE landscape.

A higher education ecosystem doesn't just come into existence: it is a continually unfolding and emergent process of formation shaped by history and tradition and influenced by powerful political and managerial forces mediated by the passions, interests, creativity and pragmatic responses of individual practitioners, institutions and other agents within the ecosystem. We can think of a higher education ecosystem as being in perpetual motion, continually reacting and responding to different forces as they emerge, wax and wane over time. Long lived forces for change tend to morph into different specific issues over time.

Another important feature of a higher education ecosystem is that things often happen in parallel. New structures, policies and practices are being created and implemented simultaneously in different parts of the system and not sequentially across the whole system. That one lot of changes driven by a particular set of issues interferes with another is inevitable and sometimes the directions of travel conflict.
Example of an evolving HE ecosystem showing how issues morph over time

Using the UK HE system as an example, Jackson and Ward (2016) illustrate the idea of an evolving higher education ecosystem with reference to the issue/challenge of encouraging, supporting and recognising students’ lifewide learning and personal development over the last 25 years. This particular issue was the subject of the conference that the article was written for and the idea of lifewide learning and its representation in an institution’s approach to lifewide education is bound up with the universal challenge (educational issue) of how higher education institutions prepare learners for a lifetime of engaging with the complex problems of an ever changing, messy and disruptive world.

Figure 2 shows some of the more important interventions and educational developments over the last 25 years through which UK HE has developed an ecosystem for encouraging, supporting and recognising students’ lifewide learning, development and achievement. This is far from complete but it serves to illustrate how key changes in a higher education ecosystem emerge and evolve over time in response to a range of forces, issues and challenges.

**Figure 2** Some of the more important interventions and educational developments over the last 25 years through which the HE system in England has developed an ecosystem for encouraging, supporting and recognising students’ lifewide learning.

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Abbreviations: EHE - Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative, UUK - Universities UK and GuildHE (these are the current universities and colleges representative bodies, formerly these two bodies were called CVCP - Committee Vice Chancellors and Principals and SCOP Standing Conference of Principals). National Committee of Inquiry into
New policies and practices are grown in particular institutional contexts and developed for particular purposes so perceptions about anything are influenced by the local perspectives that people have mediated by any large scale developments that are taking place. Ecosystem development is a messy business and while the narrative outlined below might seem well ordered it is a simplistic linear representation of the emergence of different policies and practices over nearly three decades.

New elements and order in the ecosocial system emerges on the scale of years and decades. This pattern is brought about through the continuous interactions and adaptations of ideas, policies, practices and technological advancements through a combination of bottom-up inventions and practitioner movements grown within institutional ecosystems often, but not always, in response to interventions and pressures from the societal ecosystem including policies and other interventions by Government and its agents (eg Funding Councils) and independent agents. The net effect is to gradually change structures and resources within institutions, and teaching and learning practices. The system as a whole feels like it is in continuous change and over time the trend is to increase the complexity in the ecosystem as new components are added, piloted and implemented, and then efficiencies and other improvements are sought to connect the components and sometimes integrate them in new systems and processes.

It should also be understood that progress towards an HE ecosystem that encourages, supports and recognises that students' develop through their lifewide experiences is not the result of pursuing this goal. Rather, it is a consequence of pursuing a raft of political goals for example - changing the emphasis in the pattern of purposes of a higher education system, increasing the levels of participation in higher education, a stronger emphasis on student employability and enterprise, making the outcomes of a higher education experience more explicit, and providing better information to graduates and employers about the outcomes of a higher education. Perhaps it's also a consequence of encouraging learners to take more responsibility for their own learning and managing their own development. However the net effect of introducing policies to accomplish these goals has been to create an environment which also encourages, supports and recognises that students' develop through their lifewide experiences.

Nb We could apply the same approach used in this case study to studying any of the issues within TL5003
References


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VERSION 5 23/06/17
LEARNING ACTIVITY (50mins)

Goal - to share perspectives on and experiences of contemporary and historical issues & challenges in Irish higher education and create a big picture within which issues and challenges considered in TL5003 can be more fully understood.

In groups of 3 or 4 (about 30mins)

1) Share your own perspectives and experiences of issues that have affected you historically, or are currently affecting you.

2) Using a sheet of flip chart paper - create a poster. Using the ecosystem framework outlined in Figure 1 and map the range of issues you have identified onto it identifying the source of the issue, the force of the issue and if possible its effects (real or potential).

POSTER PRESENTATIONS 20mins

3) Each group has upto 5 mins to present their synthesis to the whole group. These pitches will be recorded so you can upload them to your portfolios.