Collaboration and Capacity Development for TESF

TESF Briefing Note

Introduction

This briefing note sets out, at the start of this collaborative learning journey, our understandings of *collaborations* and *capacity development* and how these relate to activities within the network. The final section outlines the main elements of our approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).

What is capacity development?

A working definition of 'capacity development' for the purposes of our network is:

> the processes by which the capabilities of individuals and groups to conduct, support and use research for Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures are strengthened.

By way of elaboration, we can say that capacity development occurs in individuals and groups (e.g. organisations, coalitions, countries, sectors, multi-stakeholder partnerships, etc.) through formal, informal, intentional and accidental processes of learning and resource development. It may involve, but is not limited to, the enhancement of *intellectual capital* (e.g. the knowledge and skills involved in designing, implementing, commissioning, evaluating or coordinating research), *social capital* (e.g. relationships and opportunities for collaboration) and the *individual and corporate agency* necessary for action. It also

involves fostering *enabling conditions* for individuals and groups to engage with and utilise research, such as the allocation of time and other resources, and conducive policies at national and organisational levels.

Why is collaboration necessary?

Collaborative structures and processes are integral to the work of TESF. One reason for this lies in the nature of sustainability itself. Sustainability is not a fixed scientific concept about which we can simply synthesise existing knowledge and centrally develop resources for sharing within academic, practitioner or policy networks (Wals 2019). Rather, sustainability is a social construction which emerges from processes of collective 'deliberation, questioning, negotiation, and experimentation' (ibid., p.62). The implication of this is that education for sustainability is something which develops organically through collaborative processes of inquiry and learning.

Transforming education for sustainable futures calls for collaborations across multiple stakeholder groups, or 'multi-stakeholder partnerships', which span traditional boundaries – academic, professional, geographical and generational. As Brouwer and Woodhill (2016) explain:

"Our actions are linked with the actions of others, our solutions are embedded in a web of interlinked interests and responses, and we cannot work alone." (p.4)

For this reason, it is important to recognise role that representatives from government, science, business, and civil society organisations have in both *informing* and *enabling* the changes that are needed. Firstly, because the perspectives, knowledge and resources of each stakeholder group are required for understanding what education for sustainability looks like in different contexts of practice; and secondly, because change requires concerted action across these groups, as: "[although] no one group can bring about change on its own, the power of one group can be enough to block the actions of others" (ibid.). Box 1 summarises some of the relevant stakeholder groups participating in TESF launch events in India, Rwanda, Somalia and South Africa.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are an increasingly common feature of research which aspires for real-world impact on education policy and practice. Equity within these relationships is a recurrent concern, in terms of: who participates in establishing the focus of research; who is involved in a study's design and implementation; and how wider

power dynamics affect the distribution of labour and benefits amongst different stakeholder groups, in terms of location (e.g. South, North) and hierarchical status (e.g. academics, practitioners) (Bradley 2017; Fransman & Newman 2019).

Box 1 Stakeholder groups participating in TESF engagement events

- Key policy makers in Government ministries and departments
- Representatives of NGOs/CBOs and other grass roots organisations representing historically marginalised groups
- Representatives of key multilateral agencies and regional NGOs/CBOs including country and regional offices of UNESCO, ADEA, FAWE, etc.
- Researchers based in HEIs that work on topics germane to our work
- Representatives of other relevant research networks
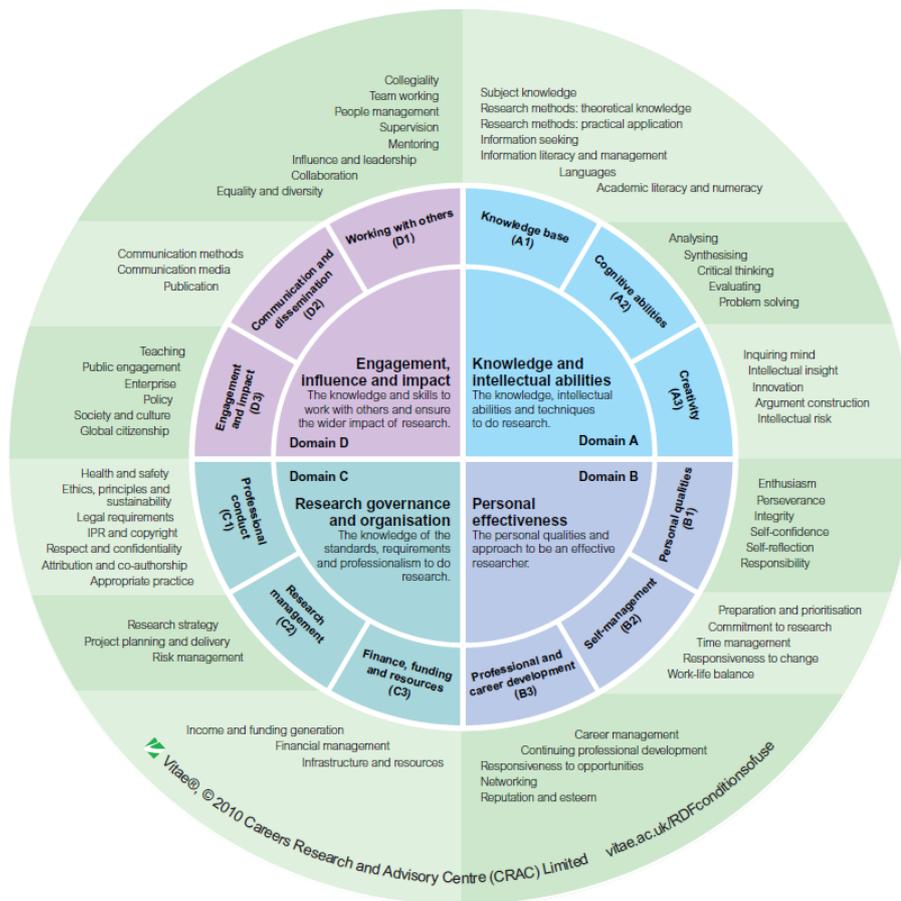
To assemble the elements above, we can say that: transforming education for sustainable futures is best conceived from an ecological perspective, as a process involving multiple-stakeholder groups working together equitably to develop contextually-relevant practices through collective inquiry and learning.

A focus on learning

One implication of the above is that *everyone* within the network is conceived as a learner. Learning occurs within and across different tiers of the network, at the level of network leadership, the hubs, and the funded projects. Learning occurs individually and collectively, formally and informally, online and offline, in planned and unplanned ways, and ideally occurs in relation to the immediate and longer-term interests of individuals, groups and the network as a whole.

The Researcher Development Framework (RDF) (Vitae 2010) is a useful heuristic for mapping key areas of learning in relation to research capacity development. The RDF was developed from empirical work in the UK context as a means of helping university staff and students to audit, and plan for the development of their academic research capacities. The RDF provides an overview of the values, knowledge and skills required for research, and provides an entry point for thinking about different aspects of research capacity which may be a focus for different individuals and groups in different locations and levels of the network.

Although learning is at the heart of our work, it is not the only means through which TESF will develop research capacities. Other elements include material resources, and collaborative relationships which will endure beyond the lifetime of the project (Huang 2014).

The role of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in TESF

A working definition of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) in the context of our network is as follows:

MEL is an ongoing process of reflection and action that focuses on understanding what the TESF network expects to achieve, and what it is achieving, at different levels and in diverse contexts, and creating mechanisms to identify and (wherever possible) address gaps between expectations and realities.

Our approach to MEL is intended to support the transformation of education systems which are highly resilient. Realising such changes requires those involved to engage in learning and reflection frequently, if not continuously. TESF takes advantage of two forms of monitoring and evaluation that provide for this: Collaborative Indicator Development (ESDinds 2011; Hoover & Harder 2014) and Reflexive Monitoring and Evaluation (van Mierlo et al. 2010). Both approaches emphasize active stakeholder involvement in joint agenda-setting, collaborative learning, and creating space for emergence in light of changing understanding, perspectives and contexts.

Our approach to MEL focuses on actions that are expected and enacted in the four hubs, where the actors involved reflect on the ambitions of the innovation plans, the practices flowing from their implementation, the ways these are embedded in communities, schools and universities, and on developments in the wider system. These reflections are translated by the participants into re-affirming, fine-tuning or re-designing their plans and practices. This iterative,

reflexive way of working can contribute "to coherent, structural change without the route and destination necessarily being mapped out precisely beforehand" (van Mierlo et al. 2010, p. 12).

There are essential differences between this iterative and reflexive approach and more traditional and familiar MEL practices. As discussed previously, this is due to the complex nature of education for sustainable futures. Since the future may not develop as predicted, strategies have to be developed 'on the fly'; some results only become visible after a time, and a project's objectives are likely to shift during implementation. It is, therefore, not realistic to have an independent evaluator collect data for subsequent evaluation using pre-defined objectives. Participatory types of monitoring and evaluation in which the actors have an equal say can help ensure that participants learn together and adapt together. Learning from monitoring and evaluation is not the end in itself, but a means of developing solutions to challenges encountered in system innovation projects. This will allow projects to contribute to the structural changes that are needed for sustainability, and help participants "go a step further than making plans with no obligations, and genuinely get involved with an initiative" (van Mierlo et al., 2010, p.12).

Collaborative indicator development

The process of collaborative indicator development began with a values elicitation phase at the project launch event in Bristol in January 2020. In this phase, workshop participants identified project outcomes that they regarded as valuable, meaningful or worthwhile, and envisioned best-case scenarios for TESF. This `values-centred' approach is underpinned by well-established concepts of participatory, collaborative and utilization-focused evaluation, and in particular, of *process use* in evaluation – the recognition that an evaluation process starts to bring tangible benefits well before the publication of the final report (Burford et al. 2013). Its key features include fluidity, responsiveness to change, and inclusion of diverse voices to generate a co-created indicator framework.

TESF's collaborative indictor development

Outputs from the Bristol workshop, in combination with outcome statements extracted from the original bid documents and captured from keynote presentations at the event, generated a diverse range of values-based 'proto-indicators' (statements to catalyse conversations about potential indicators). A series of online webinars in February and March 2020 gave network members opportunities to collaborate and co-design a draft indicator framework by selecting the most relevant proto-indicators, organising them into strands, optimising the wording, and adding new indicators as necessary. The draft framework for the network level was subsequently refined through collaborative work on a shared document. This will be adapted further based on participants' inputs at hub events through the year, in order to meet the differing needs and contextual priorities of the four hubs. While focusing on the project's overarching goal of *Developing Knowledge and Capacity*, the framework also facilitates the capture of data on 'ripple effects' – influences on policy and practice at international, national, regional/sub-national and local levels.

Reflexive Monitoring in Action

While collaborative indicator development is primarily concerned with *what* is evaluated, Reflexive Monitoring in Action (RMA) focuses on *how* MEL is actioned within a project to facilitate system-level innovation. An RMA approach entails an ongoing, systematic and iterative process of reflection on the relationships between three key elements: (i) the ambitions of the project, as outlined in the indicator framework; (ii) the current norms of practice and how they are embedded within the respective system; and (iii) developments in the system that may present opportunities for, or barriers to, innovation. As envisaged for TESF, this will involve named individuals adopting the role of monitor, engaging in a sequence of observation, analysis and reflection activities, and then recommending adjustments to project activities to maximise the likelihood of system change.

Multilevel design

The multilevel MEL process design mirrors the structure of the project as a whole, distinguishing three levels: the *whole-network* level, the *hub* level (referring to the four country hubs to be created in India, Rwanda, Somalia and South Africa), and the *grantee* level (referring to the small and medium-sized projects that will receive grant funding through the hubs). The multilevel design reflects an understanding that different stakeholders and contexts are likely to have different priorities for evaluation (Brockwell 2018). By embedding procedures for monitoring the participation of different groups at the hub level, TESF is supporting institutional MEL capacity beyond the lifetime of the programme.

Hub-level monitors will support grantees with their self-evaluations – facilitating reflection on what to evaluate, providing a template for grantees to complete at the mid-term review and final evaluation stages, and drawing out learning between and across projects. At the network level, the external evaluator (Dr Ash Brockwell) will serve as a `meta-monitor', overseeing the work of hub-level monitors and highlighting synergies, divergence and key case studies between and across hubs.

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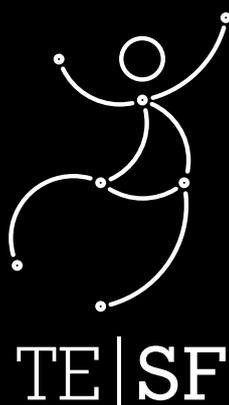
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