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Circular logic? Analysing the professional standards framework for higher education

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ABSTRACT

The Professional Standards Framework (PSF) issued by the UK's Advance HE in 2023 aims to be a globally-recognised systematisation of HE provision. Announcing both improvements in practice and its own ideological neutrality, the organisation claims to be 'benchmarking success within HE teaching and learning' by enhancing effectiveness, impact and inclusivity. To understand the Framework's assertions, ambitions and ambivalences, I suggest it involves a discursive process wherein *context* shifts to *co-text* and, ultimately, *pretext*. These steps matter because they involve a shift from actual practices to statements about these practices (using forms of recognition such as descriptors) and figures which establish the overtly circular nature of the claims made. Highlighting the fundamentally tautological structure of the document's assertions and diagrams, I treat it as a 'diagram' which, in the Deleuzean sense produces events rather than representing them. This diagrammatic approach questions the Framework's empty centre, its neutrality and, therefore, its claim to build spaces where 'all learners feel respected, valued and have equity in opportunity to succeed'.

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Introduction

This paper examines the role of the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) from the professional body representing professionals in the UK's higher education sector (Advance HE 2023a). As 'focal points for developing discourses of professionalism' (Friedman and Afitska 2023, p. 1), such organisations are essential to our understanding of the discursive aspects of professionalism. Moreover, Advance HE boldly declares itself to be 'compelling wherever and however higher education teaching and learning are delivered' (Advance HE 2023a). Boasting a 'network of global associates and partners' and working with 'with people, providers and systems around the world' (Advance HE 2024a), its support for a wider professionalising agenda through networking and accreditation is increasingly international in scale. Reducing systemic inequality and enhancing provision and inclusivity across the globe is a key objective, using the power to 'transform' HE for 'people, places, and society' (Advance HE 2023a). This includes the delivery of 'educational

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transformation' by helping 'institutions and governments' to develop, as well as by facilitating 'cultural transformation' for 'people of all identities' and the institutions to which they (i.e. we) belong (Advance HE 2024c). Recent work on professional development as a collegial activity, for instance, must be understood in this light (e.g. Teledahl *et al.* 2024, Díaz-Sacco and Muñoz-Salinas 2024), as should criticisms of some developmental practices as a superficial exercise in control (e.g. Cathcart *et al.* 2023).

This paper considers these claims and their significance. Given the Framework's reflection of international concerns for quality in HE provision, my analysis starts with a brief background to the notion of professionalisation in HE and then Advance HE's role as a promoter of this agenda. I stress the purpose of Frameworks generally, the timeliness of the Framework in the current HE context, and discuss the increasingly spatial nature of the organisation's ambitions and assertions. Turning to the Framework itself, I then analyse its form and content from the point of view of this spatialisation. This analysis leads to the conclusion that a three-step discursive process is embodied by the text, and the possibility of the text's fundamental emptiness is raised: a circular conceptualisation of practice rotating around an empty centre.

However, rather than dismiss the Framework as pure rhetoric, I turn to Gilles Deleuze's reconceptualisation of the function of a diagram as a blueprint, pilot or driver of change (Deleuze 1981, 1986). Briefly, I suggest a way of reading such documents which complements the question of 'what does it mean' by asking 'what does it do'? This typically Deleuzean strategy suggests that questions about meaning and intention (*who* wrote a text, *why, how* and *when)* can be less productive than questions about how a text functions. In the case of the PSF, it involves asking how certain features of a text (circularity) might take precedence, potentially leading to an emphasis on certain features over others. In seeking the text's effects in the way it interacts with its own context, co-text and subtext, such reading may well go 'against the grain', but focuses, in theory at least, on what is internal to the text (its diagram) rather than what is outside it. This analysis leads me to suggest that, beyond the entirely reasonable (but common) criticisms of the rhetorical and bureaucratic nature of frameworks such as the PSF, Advance HE's 'diagrammatic' 3-step process may struggle to recognise or foster kinds of effective, inclusive, even transformative practices it aims to foster.

Professionalisation and the PSF

These claims must be understood within a wider discursive context. Although described as a "new paradigm"in which HEIs must survive (Hayes 2023), the practice of 'professionalising' sectors such as HE has long elicited debate in many countries (e.g. Tobias 2003, Canning 2007, Evetts 2009, Shagrir 2015, Dickerson and Trodd 2022, Nezhad and Stolz 2024). Indeed, recent developments in HE echo long-standing concerns about deprofessionalisation in Anglo-American society at large (e.g. Haug 1975) and a shift from a focus on professional autonomy to one of accountability from the perspective of British education (Evans 2008).

The HE Framework itself was first published in 2006. Reflecting the wider trend in educational professionalisation referred to above, many areas of UK public provision are now used to referring to professional bodies with the aim of identifying, sharing and accrediting good practice (HESA 2024). A particular feature of these bodies has been the

establishment of various standards and frameworks designed to provide benchmarks against which practice might be monitored in a spirit of continuous improvement. The 2023 PSF is instructive in this regard. Intended to build on the existing framework's strengths, it is now increasingly emphasising three themes (impact, context, inclusion) that practitioners will recognise as central to increasingly global HE provision. The Framework, moreover, is not alone in declaring an interest in the improvement of practice. In the UK, the office for Students (OfS) is responsible for the Teaching Excellence Framework, a system of rating universities according to the quality of its provision (OFS Office for Students 2024).

Such frameworks illustrate what Friedman (2023) identifies as a broad shift in the discourses and practices of professionalism from providing CPD to monitoring it. This shift correlates with debates (in the anglophone world) that frequently highlight the many ethical and technical questions raised by internationalisation (e.g. Khutan 2013, Wihlborg and Robson 2018, Tight 2022) and 'McDonaldisation' of HE in many contexts (e.g. Roberts and Donahue 2000, Ritzer 2013, Bérubé and Ruth 2016). These concerns, often linked to wider debates about culture wars and equality, have also attracted criticism in the UK. For Davidson (2004), tensions exist between changing definitions and expectations of professionalism, and marketisation, performance management and quality assurance practices in UKHE can fragment academic selfhood. More profoundly perhaps, according to Adcroft and Willis (2006, p. 45), the shift has probably caused the 'deprofessionalisation of academic staff and commodification of the work they carry out' (see also Hartley 1995, Garland 2008, Beighton 2018). More recently, indicators of deprofessionalisation such as growing precarity and pay restrictions (Burton and Bowman 2022, Universities and Colleges Employers Association UCEA 2025) have compounded such concerns, notably since COVID 19. Certainly, claims about the wholesale 'deprofessionalisation' of HE in UK institutions represent a highly problematic generalisation. However, as we will see, critics of schemes such as Advance HE's arrangements for professional recognition suggest that their contribution to professionalism may be less effective than Advance HE would wish.

It's easy to see why Advance HE might seek to counter this rather broad-brush narrative, stressing high quality provision, access and inclusivity. Referring to itself as the 'custodians' of professionalism and 'experts in higher education' (Advance HE 2023a, 2024a), the professional body's repeated evocations of its global ambitions are not isolated cases of rhetorical exaggeration. The Framework, as I show below, relies on a spatialised view of HE practice and its overt intention to model the future of global HE provision is also framed in topological terms. This, I argue, has significant implications both for practice and wider understanding of how professional bodies, frameworks and regulations function. Their claims are interrogated by looking closely at the PSF's language, logic, and internal functioning, highlighting a number of spatial tropes which converge in the text to form a tightly interconnected diagram of practice. This diagram, I suggest, has a discernible, if not immediately obvious, direction of travel from the *context* of practice to the *co-text* of statements about it. The *pretext* for this shift can be found at the centre of a 'doughnut' of practice in the figures of the Framework itself. Drawing on the concept of diagram as blueprint in the work of Gilles Deleuze, I show how the PSF's spatial diagram takes states of affairs as *context* that exist to be represented in practice; it then represents these states as *co-text* by identifying practice with discourse;

it then produces a *pretext* for organising these grand ambitions around an empty centre. These elements form a diagram which distances professionalism from practice, by framing it discursively in terms of a circular, empty void.

Advance HE

With a clear stake in this trend, in the UK at least, Advance HE is a 'not-for-profit higher education development organisation' (Advance HE 2025). Led by its members entering its 7th year of existence. Claiming to be 'of and for the sector', it works with 'partners across the globe' and 'higher education institutions around the world' to improve higher education not just for staff and students, but even 'society', referred to in the broadest possible terms, too (Advance HE 2024a). At the same time, Advance HE is keen to minimalize its own influence and denies that, as an ideologically neutral educational charity, it has special powers or a campaigning role (Advance HE 2022).

Nevertheless, the organisation wields considerable power. With a membership of over 450 organisations and over 197,000 teaching and learning fellows in 117 countries its current priorities are maximising the impact and value of membership; supporting leadership, management and governance; and developing 'educational excellence' (Advance HE 2025) transformational change, achieved by supporting support members to 'both do different things and do things differently' is seen as a key way of preparing for and delivering 'future success' (ibid.) Much of this development involves recognition through internal processes and ongoing professional development by (paying) institutions accredited by the organisation (Advance HE 2023b). Membership continues to grow 'as does our reach and impact' as the organisation seeks to build 'confidence and trust' in HEIs (Advance HE 2024c). Beyond strictly pedagogical concerns, the 2021–24 Strategic plan had a focus on familiar areas of post-pandemic concern: equity and wellbeing; structural racism and systemic inequality; inclusivity and sustainable development (Advance HE 2024c). The 2030 strategic plan continues to stress the organisations belief in the 'transformative power of higher education for people, places, and society' and a vision is of HE providers and systems as 'inclusive, sustainable and high performing in all they do' (Advance HE 2025).

These ambitions should be understood alongside the organisation's stated purpose to supporting members in 'working out approaches that are appropriate for them' since:

> We do not seek to compel our members to adopt particular theories, methods or stances – indeed, we have no power to do so even if we wanted to (Advance HE 2022)

Not unreasonably, the PSF defines practice in relation to the individual circumstances and priorities which frame members' ability tackle the 'difficult, sensitive and contested issues' around Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) across the higher education sector (Advance HE 2022). Given the organisation's stated international, cross-cultural ambitions, this may be unavoidable. Such relativism is, perhaps, useful when one's goal includes 'celebrating success'. However, whether such 'celebration' leads to improved practices rather than, for instance, a largely bureaucratic process of 'benchmarking' **might be questioned.**

What are frameworks for?

Established by recognised professional bodies, accreditation frameworks serve two purposes. First, they offer visible assurance to stakeholders (notably prospective students) that provision meets meet the standards set by a given profession. Second, accreditation is intended to support quality assurance, quality enhancement[1] and, consequently, recruitment in a competitive system of measurable educational supply and demand.

Thus, the work of 'benchmarking success within HE teaching and learning' (2023a) involves the PSF and its twofold goal:

> "External and independent confirmation that professional development is aligned with the PSF. Accreditation provides participants on accredited programmes with the opportunity to be professionally recognised through the Fellowship scheme in recognition of their continuing success in teaching and learning support. (Advance HE 2023a, p. 1)

This statement of purpose highlights the centrality of the PSF as the benchmark for accreditation granted and maintained as a measurable outcome. Funded by membership fees in the case of Advance HE, it also offers the 'opportunity' for professional recognition by the body and a retrospective account of members' 'continuing success' in HE teaching and learning provision.

Critically examining the precise nature of this 'opportunity' is the purpose of this paper, which also discusses the extent to which the PSF is able to 'recognise' the sort of success it trumpets. Some studies describe engagement with accreditation as 'surprisingly positive' (Cathcart *et al.* 2023, p. 329) and good for confidence (Botham 2017). Asghar and Pilkington suggest that 'carefully managed professional dialogic routes' (Asghar and Pilkington 2017, p. 145) offer effective ways of recognising professional practice, especially compared with less collegial paper-based approaches. On the other hand, critics question the 'ambitious but debatable targets' set by institutions (van der Sluis 2023, p. 418), noting the 'widespread scepticism that this extended "box-ticking exercise" improves pedagogy' (Goodall and Rich 2023). Any attempt to atomise professional development into 'checkable, observable, countable episodes' is criticised when 'requir-[ing] teachers to give account of their learning in such ways' can undermine the efficacy of professional development (Mockler 2024, p. 1).

The PSF seeks a more holistic approach to the representation of practice but, for critics, the efficacy of *any* such system is questionable when attempts to improve (professional) practice necessarily depends on factors outside the control of such frameworks, however successful. Understating institutional barriers or 'filters' and overstating practitioners' agency have both been identified as significant reasons why practice may remain unaffected by attempts to improve practice (Ketsman *et al.* 2024, Nezhad and Stolz 2024). Increasing complexity, geographic boundaries and the varying pace of change in divers academic disciplines are increasingly a problem (QAHE 2024).

Specific aspects of the recognition and benchmarking process are also open to critique: reflective practice and reflective accounts of practice are a key requirement for many practitioners wishing to apply for professional recognition by 'peak professional bodies' such as Advance HE, the Staff and Educational Development Association, the Higher Education Research and Development Association (Advance HE 2020, p. 12) However, questions about the origins, purpose and efficacy of such 'pervasive' and 'endemic'

practices regularly arise in the literature (Tight 2023, see also Macfarlane and Gourlay 2009, Russell 2013, Beighton 2021), as do their 'active management' and mandatory, time-consuming nature, perceived by some as 'coercion, resistance and compliance' (van der Sluis 2023, p. 420, see alsovan de Sluis *et al.* 2016). Given concerns, for some, that a 'largely self-reflective exercise' (Cathcart *et al.* 2023, p. 329) constitutes merely a 'mechanism for one-off retrospective benchmarking' (Shaw 2017, p. 156), examining the tropes deployed by the PSF itself and, notably, the extent of its spatial reach, is justified.

The 2023 professional standards framework: spatialised practice

Advance HE is keen to reflect the HE 'learning and teaching landscape', which has changed significantly since 2011 when the PSF was last reviewed (Advance HE 2023a, QAHE 2024). The organisation reminds us that we live 'in a complex world' in which 'navigating seismic change' is required to meet the challenges of the 4th industrial revolution, artificial intelligence (AI), and changing geo-political events (Advance HE 2024c). To drive 'both excellence and efficiency', Advance HE seeks to help build 'distributed' technological capability 'across our provision' (Advance HE 2025).

These claims, and their topological focus, are worth taking seriously, not least because membership has become a serious matter for many institutions in the international market. Membership itself is, however, a somewhat circular exercise: announced as a way of helping HEIs 'be the best they can be', the specific reasons to join refer to fellowship and accreditation as desirable in themselves. Joining to 'prioritise Fellowship' or 'access teaching and learning accreditation' may have value, as may the ability to Advance HE support, 'come together with the sector' and 'save money on Advance HE events, programmes and consultancy' Advance HE (2024b), but the circularity of the argument for engagement with the PSF is striking.

This circular logic may seem innocuous, but within the much-debated 'age of performativity' (Feldges *et al.* 2015) many aspects of HE practice, not least in the UK are considered in this light (e.g. Visser *et al.* 2024, Stoten 2024). An important aspect of the performative gaze is that, in many cases, it can be superficial and easily-eluded when the *appearance* of compliance matters more than *actual* adherence, questioning the kinds of research data which record displays of compliance. This is compounded when performance is (literally and increasingly) the subject of datafication (e.g. Williamson *et al.* 2020, Gourlay 2022, Su 2024) and where monitoring of compliance is restricted to the collection and management of data about practice rather than practice itself, as the analysis below shows.

It is in this light that documents like the PSF should be considered: the organisation's modesty in declaring itself as ideologically-neutral convenor and provider of access to 'thought leadership' must be questioned, as should its globalising ambitions (Advance HE 2024b). This *spatial focus* is crucial to understanding the content of the Framework and makes the 2023 PSF especially worthy of scrutiny. As part of the organisation's wider 2021–24 strategy, the PSF is now a 'globally-recognised framework' aimed at 'benchmarking success' within HE teaching and learning practices (Advance HE 2023a). It corresponds to the continuing interest in the shifting impact on globalisation on HE provision (e.g. de Wit and Altbach 2021, Tight 2022, Moscovitz and Sabzalieva 2023).

The related issue of (post) digital architectures and AI in educational space(s), notably in HE, is already a familiar topic of debate (e.g. Gravett *et al.* 2023, Bond *et al.* 2024, Lindqvist *et al.* 2024).

Moving on from these familiar arguments, however, my analysis looks specifically at how the PSF explicitly frames professional practice in terms of context, co-text and pretext. Together, these three parameters form a diagram of practice whose discursive importance should not be underestimated. Its impacts, I suggest below, include an instrumentalisation of the relationship between context, co-text and pretext implying, paradoxically, a deprofessionalisation of practice.

Part 1: context and space

From the start, the PSF draws our attention to context, defined in the spatial terms in which change and current practices are to be framed by repeated references to the 'wide variety of local and global contexts in which higher education operates' (Advance HE 2023b, p. 2). Any understanding of the professional standards must be made 'in your context' (p. 5), since it is 'communities and contexts' which 'shape' knowledge (p. 4). These assertions refer to two kinds of space in this connection: literal (geopolitical) space and its figural (geometrical) counterpart, both of which merit close examination.

Context as literal space: a geopolitics of practice

The economic context is perhaps the most obvious of these contextual features. Beyond local context, where some fear an impending financial crisis in HE (FT, 2024; THE, 2024), global factors such as the 2008 crisis, economic downturns linked to events such as Brexit,[2] COVID-19 and violence in Ukraine and Middle East have affect the willingness and the ability of students to undertake for higher education. As online provision grows and the need for physical presence or physical mobility for higher study becomes less important, this trend is likely to continue. As we have seen, the PSF reflects this concern by emphasising context and recognising the global nature of these trends. But they also underpin the Framework's internal claims, with reference to the 'settings' 'environments' and 'context' in which practice literally takes place. However, the nature of the precise link between varied *individual* contexts, settings and environments and the homogenising claims about the HE global 'landscape' remain, perhaps necessarily, unclear.

Context as figural space: a geometrics of practice

A degree of clarity emerges, however, with the systematic recourse to figural spaces in the Framework. One can certainly take the PSF's assertions at face value, and geometrical diagrams, which are segmented into 'areas', 'sets', 'dimensions', and 'cores' imply a topological space in which people can 'achieve professional recognition' within the ubiquitous 'frameworks' designed to this effect (Advance HE 2023a, p. 6). This geometrics signals an extra-discursive figural logic of shape, form and movement and confers a pseudo-scientific tone to what are essentially arbitrary divisions which are nonetheless '[e]ssential to professional practice' because they 'identify what professionals do' (ibid).

This shift from spatialised object to figural representations can also been seen in the Framework's 'Areas of activity', which are also defined in terms of their relation to other aspects of the Framework. Existing to 'bring together the Professional Values and forms of Core Knowledge', which is the best way of 'showing the essential activities that support delivery of effective practice'. This move, which grants agency to a subsection of the Framework itself, is characteristic of the way the PSF establishes criteria which only operate within the context, co-text and pretext of the text's own statements.

Part 2: co-text and recognition

This distancing exists to facilitate the display, demonstration and distribution of adherence through statements which refer to other parts of the text: co-text. Maintaining professional practice is explicitly defined as continuing to work in accordance with the Professional Standards Framework by the organisation, and the Framework's insistence on this representation reconfigures the context as an immaterial discursive space where text is defined by its co-text. Values, knowledge and access are all about displaying what is assumed to already exist in relation to other parts of the same text. This translation of context into co-text, is perhaps best demonstrated by the concept of 'recognition'.

Recognition

Repeated 13 times in the PSF's 12 pages, 'recognition' is a regulatory practice designed to re-inscribe practice in discourse. The Descriptors (literally the act of turning into writing) enact this recognition, a polysemous term deployed to bring many different aspects of practice under the same defining movement of re-cognition.

Initially, *recognition* acts as the defining epithet of 'recognition frameworks' (op.cit, p. 6) generally. As such it reminds us that gaining *recognition* is *the* defining attribute of this particular Framework and its *ratio essendi* (op.cit, 2). However, this *recognition* applies not just to the organisation's desire to display its regard to practitioners in a general sense, but also to the perlocutionary process of awarding titles: Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow or Principal Fellow (op.cit, p. 11). Elsewhere, it is not the organisation, or the Framework, but a subsection of the latter (its 'Dimensions', see above) which 'recognises the variety of practice and roles' (op.cit, p. 6). While here *recognition* refers to the awarding of accreditation as a largely bureaucratic process, elsewhere it serves the wider aim of spatialisation, allowing practice to 'respond to the wider context in which higher education operates' by 'recognising implications for practice' (op.cit, p. 5). Precisely what these 'implications'[3] are remains vague, beyond the 'high-quality learning' and 'high-quality teaching' and the 'essential activities that support delivery of effective practice' (op.cit, pp. 2; 4; 8; 9). This is not unreasonable: an overly prescriptive approach would no doubt attract criticisms of micro-management, inflexibility or unresponsiveness to context. However, as effective practice is *recognised* rather than *defined* by the Framework, recognition is both a cause and a result of formal accreditation, indicating a circularity at the heart of the Framework. So while the framework is clearly intended to foreground impact on practice the PSF's neutrality means that, despite repeated references to 'practice' (32 times in 12 pages), it cannot define what 'effective practice' might include. apart from the fact that it is 'essential' and can be 'delivered' (ibid). While this

approach may indeed streamline processes and help in the development of global partnerships, impact on actual practice might be hard to ascertain.

Part 3: pretext and circularity

This void at the heart of the Framework seems to run counter to its frequent references to revision, impact, effectiveness, delivery and accessibility. The void in question comes from way these ideas function in context. The PSF's 'streamlining' is a good example, since it is clearly integral to the spatialisation analysed above, defining the kind of space in question and allowing accelerated impact:

> *Fully revised and streamlined*, the PSF 2023 emphasises effectiveness and impact, inclusion and context, as fundamental aspects of practice. (Advance HE 2023a, *my emphasis*)

'Full' revisions to the old scheme allow the text to present itself as faster, lighter, more (aero) dynamic and therefore better suited to practice. The central aims of the PSF clearly situate the document in this globalising, technologically-enhanced present where increasing efficacy, regardless of spatial inconvenience, is key:

> With a greater emphasis on digital/technology, professional values, support for students, and collaboration, the revisions will ensure the PSF is fit-for-the-future and remains relevant and compelling *wherever and however* higher education teaching and learning are delivered (Advance HE 2023a, *my emphasis*)

These tropes are familiar to HE practitioners. Post-pandemic research remains high in areas such as digital technology and its claims (and counter-claims) of technological revolution. Some highlight technology's potential for improving provision, notably via AI, while others underline its risks to mental health, educational trivialisation, increased surveillance and induced passivity (e.g. Selwyn *et al.* 2020, Williamson *et al.* 2020, 2023, Ferrante *et al.* 2024). As Sian Bayne (2023), p. 1) suggests, despite much utopian thinking, the ramifications of technologically-enhanced lifelong education remain deeply problematic:

> Its political economy is troublesome, its implications for sustainability and climate health are questionable, and its moral arc to date bends more toward extraction, surveillance and inequity than justice

The PSF is quite aware of these issues and seeks to remedy them by making 'all learners feel respected, valued and have equity in opportunity to succeed' (Advance HE 2023a). Whether the Framework is indeed capable, even in part, of doing so remains questionable for reasons I now turn to.

The PSF's wheel of fortune

Although much of the Framework's language invites interpretation, an obvious aspect of the PSF lies in its visual iconography. Keen to present itself in diagrammatic form, the PSF, and indeed Advance HE, present themselves as a set of interlocking circles. The approach is highly consistent: first occurring on page one, 'Advance HE' is preceded by two circular dots that fade into the organisation's name to emphasise

its progressive, accelerating nature. Many possible interpretations might be of course be advanced (e.g. a representation of intended meaning or episodes from the document's construction over time), but if we choose to read such illustrations as part of a text, then its function(s) might be expected to echo those of the text instead. For example, a trefoil, framing an empty circle, forms the centre of each diagram which itself appears as a footer on each page. Similarly, the standards themselves are integrated into a geometrically-sectioned wheel whose segmented layers interconnect to form a single circular, doughnut-like device. The purpose of the wheel is literally to provide a framework for the circular logic of its own prescriptions:

> D1 is suitable for individuals whose practice enables them to evidence some Dimensions. Effectiveness of practice in teaching and/or support of learning is demonstrated through evidence of: (Advance HE 2023a, p. 7)

This systematic redundancy reinforces the organisation as internally consistent, forward-looking and moving on (Advance HE 2023a, p. 4). A (spatial) dimension is promoted to individual practitioners so that they can demonstrate, by providing 'evidence,' of having met the Dimension in question. This is a professional space in which individual actors are responsibilised for individual actions a space where practice has 'breadth and depth' (p. 8). This individualism plays the crucial role of responsibilisation but becomes opaque when described in a seemingly self-referential way. The 'Descriptor' in question exists to allow practising individuals to 'evidence all Dimensions' (ibid.), a tautology which involves providing discursive evidence of statements as evidence.

Circularity

This circular logic can be seen across the document. Taking just one example, Descriptor 3 (9) is particularly significant because it serves to recognise the practice of those most likely to influence others:

> Descriptor 3 (D3) is suitable for individuals whose comprehensive understanding and effective practice provides a basis from which they lead or influence those who teach and/or support high-quality learning. (Advance HE 2023a, p. 9)

This descriptor is designed to accredit 'senior fellowship', and asks that senior HE practitioners evidence 'comprehensive understanding', 'effective practice' and support for 'high-quality learning,' however we define them. These 'seniors' – whose seniority does not necessarily reflect their grade or experience - must first demonstrate 'a sustained record' of support and leadership of high-quality teaching and learning; second, they must show practice that is both effective and inclusive and 'integrates all Dimensions'; and third, they must have documented evidence of practice that extends 'significantly beyond' teaching support for learning in a direct sense (i.e. leadership and management of learning as defined by the framework). This is just one example of how the tautology of recognition requires the production, display and dissemination of evidence as a record of efficacy. In an increasingly circular tangle of representation, evidence of evidence, records of records, and statements of statements distance the applicant, step by step, from practice.

Acceleration

In order to create a space in which nothing hinders forward progress, the criteria for accreditation are extremely vague. For example, to demonstrate the appropriate professional values, one should:

> use scholarship, or research, or professional learning, or other evidence-informed approaches as a basis for effective practice (Advance HE 2023a, p. 5)

The main advantage of such an indeterminate approach is to facilitate speedy accreditation: no doubt a variety of values can be accepted to expedite membership. But given the espoused focus on specific kinds of equity in the organisation's Strategic plan (see above), this variety is, presumably, finite. But only an equally vague 'other evidence-informed approaches' comes close to referring to things that practitioners might actually do to prove that they are working to promote inclusion, equity and so on in non-tokenistic ways. Practitioner research may in theory help achieve this, and applications are doubtless tightly vetted, albeit often by accredited institutions with a vested interest in rapid processing. But the fact that such indeterminacy may facilitate the rapid channelling of applications is unlikely to be coincidental. Thus, after setting out its *context* (the various spaces, places and areas) and after introducing the *co-text* as the discursive representation of this context, the document turns to its *pretext*, in this case a set of self-defining statements encircling empty bureaucracy of accreditation regardless of the actual values being practised.

Analysis: the PSF as diagram

Creating, updating and promoting such an empty model of practice might seem like a pointless exercise for an organisation seeking to influence global higher education. One way of explaining why such models might have developed is to consider them as forming what French thinker Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) calls a 'diagram'. Deleuze develops the idea in less well-known, single-authored texts (1981, Deleuze 1986, 2023) and in the joint works which tend to be more familiar to educators (e.Deleuze and Guattari 2004). Deleuze is well known for his interest in complexity science and wants explain why and how stuff does not just appear out of nowhere. At its most basic, a diagram is the set of parameters that allow a real situation to emerge and fully exist. For example, educators are (over)familiar with the example of the panopticon as a circular prison whose physical architecture facilitates not just the constant surveillance of its inmates but the internalisation of this surveillance. Since the inmates, unsure whether they are actually being watched or not, learn to self-manage *without the actual surveillance* the panopticon is not (merely) a physical structure, but also a set of ideas, discourses and practices (Deleuze 1986). Unwilling to simply accept that such stuff is 'there' or 'socially constructed', Deleuze wants to establish where and how these things actually come to be rather than just discuss just manifestations which are, in any case, just their latest, contingent actualisation of the diagram. So when digital constraints (algorithms, screen-time, platformisation etc) replace the bricks and mortar of Victorian prisons, for Deleuze a panoptic diagram *drives* these changes and will continue to do so when its actual manifestations change.

Importantly for the case in hand, this means that a diagram does not function as a discourse which reproduces itself (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 163). Diagrams have positivity and, rather than signify, illustrate or represent an existing state of affairs in a metonymic way, they are subject to 'creative lines of flight' which 'run off in all directions' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 158, see also Deleuze 1981, pp. 94–95).

This positivity has implications for the diagrams embodied in and by the PSF. Advance HE may well distance itself from accusations of interference (see above) and plead neutrality, but even the most material aspects of an event or period – a spear, a stirrup, a plough – pass through the abstraction of a diagram. A diagram produces interconnected events and, thereby material change, when it picks things up, changes their purpose and creates new devices, uses and customs (Deleuze 1986, p. 47). Pre-existing the substance, form, content or even expression familiar to many linguistic tropes a diagram expresses positivity by affect: displacement, conjugation and recombination rather than re-presenting, re-cording or, especially, *re-cognising* (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, pp. 156–157). It is therefore comparable to a blueprint of power relations which conjugates relations between things. These do not lie, like some ideological or economical superstructure outside, below or above the apparatuses that they produce (Deleuze 1986, p. 44), but rather are woven into the very fabric of reality itself as a driver or attractor state (see for example Deleuze 1981, p. 106, Delanda 2005, Williams 2006),

The PSF's metaphysics of presence

This view encourages us to see diagrams as much more than simply illustrations, representations, or simplifications of more complex things. As a diagram, the Framework's circularity is both literal and metaphorical. It is also figurative and figural in the sense that it relies on figures rather than rational discourse to meet its objectives. If we treat the document as a diagram of practice, the way it functions by assuming a given, which it then transforms into ill-defined statements about 'effective' practice, grants it significance as an apparatus with the power to drive practice in the future.

A diagram does not have to 'mean' anything to do this. Effective practice, here, rather than corresponding to some definite real-world entity, expresses an assumption or assertion of practice as given. That said, the PSF's claimed purpose is not to describe or prescribe good practice but to 'recognise' it systematically (p. 11). Such recognition is suggestively polysemous: practice is recognised (identified) so that the recogniser (Advance HE) can in turn recognise (reward) it. As a practice, then, recognition operates as a defining feature at multiple levels, defining the purpose of the organisation, the Framework, and even subsections of the latter.

Thus the PSF presents the overarching fact of globalisation not as a process or ambition, but as a *fait accompli* with specific spatial characteristics. Not only is continued globalisation the future for which the PSF claims to be 'fit' and 'compelling' (Advance HE 2023a) but it is a ubiquitous space instantly accessible to those who are recognised or *framed* by PSF. That HE is described as a discrete object to be 'compelled' and 'delivered' from one place to another, will surprise none of the critics of neoliberal, consumerist trends in higher and lifelong education. But it is reinforced by the Professional standards framework and its self-defining diagram of circular logic.

Conclusion

Advance HE claims that the Framework's contribution to the rewarding and recognition of professional practice is 'unsurpassed' (Advance HE 2023b). Many similar claims about global reach, influence and leadership are made, as we have seen. Examining the exact nature of such claims on their own terms has been the purpose of this paper.

A reading which focuses on what is meant by the text by examining (for instance) its history and intentions has obvious benefits and is not replaced by this papers' diagrammatic approach. However, this kind of analysis grants the Framework a positivity in these statements which achieve something. Readers are well used to the argument that such texts are mere representations of some prior ideological rhetoric (marketisation, neoliberalism, McDonaldisation etc). The idea that that they exist to help create docile bodies capable of accepting any instruction, any route, any interpretation on offer will be equally familiar to readers. A diagrammatic analysis, however, suggests that the PSF constructs a very specific practice *space*. Backed up by its disciplinary power (as official sector professional body), its marketing power (as coordinator of an international network of self-reinforcing institutions) and its symbolic power (as figurehead of one of the country's most distinctive and profitable cultural entities), Advance HE may well make hope to transform the global HE landscape.

A diagrammatic reading positions these claims as a matter of spatial context of a literal and figural sort: the literal spaces of practices, institutions and global provision are configured by the figural geometries of areas, dimensions, cores and so on. Described and defined in terms of each other, the text's recourse to circular logic presents us with a literal flattening of space to facilitate a re-cognition of the already-there. On this reading, the Framework's two-dimensional wheels enact a sort of mantra or refrain, which cannot be grasped in terms of good practice, enhanced professionalism or increased inclusivity. The effect, instead, risks unmooring practice from its *context* and reframing it as *co-text* under the *pretext* of making things more efficient, more inclusive, more impactful, these wheels, records and cycles of practice literally prefigure a circular logic whose outcome may well struggle to grant the respect, value and equity that are so important to HE professional practice

Notes

1. It is notable that the PSF does not require practitioners to regularly demonstrate their standing once recognition has taken place. While one can imagine various reasons for this choice (expression of trust, lowering costs and administrative burden, assumed internalisation of the regulatory gaze and so on), it foregrounds the administrative elements of the recognition process and may even reinforce the belief that professionalism itself is partly, if not largely, a bureaucratic matter.
2. Highman *et al.* (2023, p. 230) attribute falling enrolment, mobility, research and capital funding and especially the loss of a 'larger sense of belonging within the global space' to Britain's exit from the EU.
3. The reader may be interested to note that, etymologically, *imply* is derived from the latin *in-plicare*, meaning to fold, another spatio-geometric reference.

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