

Title: **Control, Complexity, Chaos: ways of thinking about our work**

Presenters: **Sue Purnell, Ian Willis and Anne Qualter**
University of Liverpool

Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

Participants will be able to:

- Explore the idea in complexity theory that ‘the edge of chaos can be the most effective and creative place to work’.
- Discuss the idea of complexity theory providing a useful language to frame our experiences

Session Outline

‘Well, in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing’. Lewis Carroll.

We want to discuss the varied ways in which we work (run fast) and to relate these to different ‘management styles’ and implied values. We are beginning to conceive our work as falling into three broad categories: programmes, projects and emergent events, each with its associated management and measurement processes. The first two will be mentioned only briefly, as they are well established and have a dominant position in the way things are done. They are characterised by being planned, controlled and measured (at least in theory!). In contrast, complexity theory invites us to think about the world in very different ways. We exist in a web of relationships, we can influence but not control and unexpected outcomes can, and do, emerge from every action. If we see this as a useful way of examining our work; how do we make ‘not knowing what the outcomes will be’ acceptable in an outcome driven environment? How do we value emergent serendipitous events?

We will outline cases from our practice that have led to unexpected connections and productive outcomes. We would expect that participants will be readily able to identify with these and tell their own stories. The challenge is how to create a framework and language that make it OK to sometimes initiate change-orientated processes without really knowing what the outcomes will be. How does this way of thinking about our work fit within the dominant paradigms? How is it to be measured, reported, managed and resourced?

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

- Outline of complexity and how it might apply to our work, and the contrast to traditional HE management - 20 min
- Cases as illustrative examples - 10 min
- Structured discussion in small groups of comparable experiences, learning gained, and emerging strategies
Identification of key points arising from discussions - 20 min
- Collation of evidence and experience in the full group - 20 min

- Discussion in full group of ways to support working in a complex environment, including future dialogues/cooperation - 20 min
- Summary

References

Land, R. (2001) Agency, context and change in Academic Development. International Journal for Academic Development Vol 6 NO 1 2001

Mason, M. (2005). Complexity Theory and Educational Change. Paper presented at the Complexity, Science and Society Conference, University of Liverpool, Sept 2005

Tosey, P (2002). Teaching at the Edge of Chaos. LTSN Generic Centre