

Chapter 102

The Systems Forum: What Value Have Systems Ideas in Making Sense of The Complexity of Issues Like Migration?

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ABSTRACT

This is a report on the first session of a new venture for the UK Systems Society, called 'The Systems Forum'. We seek to discover how the idea for a Systems Forum might develop and this account is a report on the feedback from this first session. The intention of 'The Systems Forum' is to create a space for connecting policy and decision makers with the ideas and processes of system thinking. The Systems Forum is intended to identify then address complex global issues that impact at local level. Different systems approaches will be investigated to see how appropriate and useful they are in addressing large scale organisational problems and at the grass roots, day to day management activities¹. The theme for the first session was 'migration'.

SESSION ONE - ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Systems Forum is an idea that emerged from the UK Systems Society as it explores ideas to redefine its role in the face of changing circumstances. We discuss this in more detail below. First we wish to acknowledge those who have contributed to our thinking and helping to get the first session off the ground. In particular, our thanks go to Gerald Midgley of the University of Hull and to Elin Jones and Dr Jenneth Parker from The Schumacher Institute.

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ORIGINS OF THE IDEA FOR THE SYSTEMS FORUM

The UK Systems Society has been in existence for 40 years and is entering a new phase with a venture entitled The Systems Forum. Each forum will explore how different systems approaches might tackle different complex issues by bringing together policy / decision makers and systems protagonists. Different approaches will be discussed to address assortment of perceptions on a variety of issues.

Since the formation of the society the way in which we communicate has changed. Emphasis within business and society is now upon instant communications, quick answers to complex issues. The way that we have addressed this issues has been through publications and conferences. But these are now under threat as open access and on line conferences become more widespread. Added to this the impact of university research exercises has had a detrimental effect upon the UKSS. Sources of academic funding have been curtailed and ideas that were radical and fresh in the latter part of the 20th century seem to have lost their appeal. For some there is the belief that we at the end of the ‘systems’ era, where there seems no new, unexplored territory left. This is of course an incorrect analysis.

Factors such as the emphasis on impact factors as a feature of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) research funding², whilst commendable, has had some unintended consequences upon the academic world. The exercise has resulted in the concentration on the production of papers on a small number of high-end journals dedicated to specific areas of expertise. This policy has seriously constrained academic budgets which tend to be allocated activities considered ‘REFable’³. This exercise [as with the previous RAE] has effectively closed down areas of funding for topics outside the listed Units of Assessment (UoA). The policy has reduced the ability of societies like the UKSS to attract sufficient paying delegates to support large conferences. The effect of this, coupled with the increased cost of staging events, has increased the risk factor to a level where alternative strategies need to be considered. Paradoxically there seems to be interest in ‘systems thinking and practice’ in the world of work that seem to offer a fruitful area for the practice and for developing ideas. But this is anecdotal and requires tangible evidence that such a source of interest will translate into the level of funding to support ‘big’ events and produce the income that the society requires. To this end we plan to hold a series of events such as *The Systems Forum* to communicate and learn from the community about Systems practice and theory.

INTRODUCTION

This account has multiple layers. We address the level of content - a real problem (in this case the issue of migration) and how this relates to the wider system (i.e. complex global issues). We are concerned by how we, as a systems community, are tackling and exploring the specific and the general issues surrounding such weighty matters. Our concern too is as a Systems society, is to advance the value of systems thinking and practice for such ‘real world’ complexities. Beyond this we are looking at ourselves as the Systems community and reflecting upon the question ‘what the UK Systems Society in the 21st century?’ We seek a new vision about the role of a specialist and learned society such as ours. Amongst many considerations the most important is the views of our community and this end we wish to engage with policy makers, practitioners and the academic community.

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