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# The homogenisation of prospectuses over the period of massification in the UK

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**ABSTRACT**

Through historically oriented critical discourse analysis this article considers how the messages regarding the purpose of higher education, as presented in prospectuses of four case study institutions, have been impacted by massification and marketisation in England between 1977 and 2018. The prospectuses of four higher education institutions of different status were analysed to trace how discourses relating to the value of an undergraduate degree could be identified in the prospectuses.

The findings suggest that while the prospectuses presented multiple rationales as to why students should undertake degrees, there was a significant increase in focus on graduate transitions to employment and a parallel hollowing-out of information relating to course content.

The study found that over the period the vocabularies drawn on to present the value of a degree have become homogenised, yet the rationales given for undertaking tertiary study became more numerous and complex, making diversity of institutional offers difficult for prospective students to differentiate.

## Introduction

In the UK, there is increasing government enquiry into the expectations of students about undergraduate education and how the nature of degrees being offered are addressed in course prospectuses aimed at students during the process of choosing their degree and institution (Browne et al., 2010; Johnson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2018; Universities UK, 2016). In the context of a commodified higher education sector (Tomlinson, 2017; Woodall et al., 2014), there have been recent calls for the purpose of the undergraduate degree to be more extensively explained to all students (Tomlinson, 2018). This increase in clarity about diverse outcomes is particularly important within a context of consistent social inequality arising from differential educational outcomes of different institutions (Naidoo & Whitty, 2014) and an 'increased vertical stretch in stratification of the value of student places' (Marginson, 2016, p. 267). This article considers how a selection of UK institutions explain the value of an undergraduate degree in the pre-course materials and whether this process has shifted and changed over the period of massification 1976–2018.

The UK has seen huge tertiary growth in the period under review. This massification of the higher education system (Trow, 2000) has been an important force and has also undergone a notable increase in marketisation (Spence, 2018). There has also been increased pressure on the outcome of undergraduate degrees, with them being, contentiously, seen as value for money (Alderman & Palfreyman, 2011; Morley, 1997; Tomlinson, 2018). The UK government has consistently raised concerns about information given by institutions on undergraduate degrees through pre-entry materials, and guidance has been issued on consumer law and undergraduates (Competitions and Markets Authority, 2015). Efforts to ensure students have access to enhanced information through the student choice process have included analysis of key information statistics, introduction of teaching excellence frameworks to inform students (Spence, 2018), and measures such as standardisation of terminologies (Office for Students, 2018). However, previous work has indicated that increasing the volume of information available about student choice does not necessarily make the student choice process easier or more equitable (Renfrew et al., 2010).

The central premise of this paper is that if as seems the case public documents produced by institutions require specific knowledge of higher education to fully access coded information in them (Knight, 2019), there is an information gap which is a key inequity. If these documents, open to all and apparently read by all, do not offer a clear description of the differentiated nature of provision across the system there is an inherent and potentially serious unevenness in provision. This paper contends that in order to understand how the process of marketing higher education institution operates it is important to identify and analyse the development and implication of the highly professional marketing materials, including prospectuses currently used by higher education institutions in the UK and globally (Chapleo, 2017).

This study aims to understand what messages about the degree are discernible in university prospectuses, made by those who re-write the texts responding, often sub-consciously, to discursive events (Jager & Maier, 2009) which have impacted on the institutions' world view in a defined period. This is not an examination of the process of prospectus writing but rather a close reading (MacLure, 2003) of the texts in order to trace and name the 'idea of a degree' discourses identified in the recent period.

This research this paper is based on explores how concepts of the idea of a degree have been constructed and disseminated by institutions, as can be established from a literature review and a scan of the prospectuses.

## Student choice?

Over the last 40 years higher education's massification and concomitant marketisation (Jongbloed, 2003) has repositioned entry to higher education in consumer terms (Tomlinson, 2017), framing it as student choice. The nature of structural inequalities makes the playing field unequal (Sellar & Gale, 2011) and the entry process is more complex that a simple choice (Budd, 2017). Over the period of marketisation, there has been little concentration on the student-oriented documents and at the start of massification period in the early 1970s (Trow, 2000) the prospectuses were the most easily accessible and widely disseminated form of marketing by institutions to students.

The documents produced for prospective students by institutions and other official sources have been theorised as 'cold knowledge' and their lack of impact noted in

comparison to the 'hot knowledge' of friends and families (Ball & Vincent, 1998). If there is unequal access to first-hand knowledge of higher education then the need for full clarity in the institutional texts gains importance. If there is a problem with the messages sent publicly, this will advantage those able to use their hot knowledge, for example by identifying which institutions deliver the most return. This effect is described by Ball in class terms:

> The particular policies of choice and competition give particular advantages to the middle class, while not appearing to do so, in the way that selection policies did in a previous policy era. (Ball, 2003, p. 26)

It is known that despite the established element of slight distrust found of such documents (Gibbs & Dean, 2015), they remain in frequent use by students, and now the marketing of courses is becoming more complex and more widely available through social media and websites (McNeill, 2012; Simões & Soares, 2010) and mobile marketing (Zinn & Johansson, 2015).

Most prospective students now make their first interaction by reading online material on the university website (Saichaie, 2011). The development of internet-based marketing has changed the process: from the academic year 2014 onwards, many UK institutions ceased printing prospectuses with course details. In the 2018 year some institutions were not producing prospectuses that could be looked at as single documents and downloaded. Some institutions produced a flickable prospectus which was not available for download as a whole. Further, officially published documents such as prospectuses can be for some opaque in their meaning and so leave information gaps heightened by use of obscure language, jargon and unexplained concepts (Naidoo & Whitty, 2014).

This research shows how messages sent by institutions in their prospectuses have fundamentally altered within an expanded system over forty years. The tension between what prospective students want and what information universities provide, as indicated by Hesketh and Knight (1999), is critical for this study. Szekeres claims that in writing marketing materials 'institutions are so intent on managing their image this conflicts with the students' needs for extensive and reliable information to inform their choice' (Szekeres, 2010, p. 436).

## Students use of prospectuses

In the UK, Purcell et al. (2008) studied this area in their longitudinal analysis of students' experiences in higher education, and noted that choices made about higher education can be based on 'inadequate information' (Purcell et al., 2008, p. 165). Briggs and Wilson's study on Scottish students reported that 'Respondents commented that [prospectuses] had too much information – little of which is relevant' (Briggs & Wilson, 2007, p. 64). Concern about a lack of useful information was also found in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2015) synthesis of the literature. They argued in their research that it is critically important applicants are able to make well-informed choices:

> Another key reason for supporting research in the field of higher education choice is the concern for effective decision-making at all levels, and there is general agreement that it is critically important that applicants are able to make well informed choices (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015, p. 256).

A number of studies (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Davies et al., 1997; Davies & Elias, 2003; Harding, 2012; Maringe, 2006; Moogan & Baron, 2003; Winter & Chapleo, 2015) have

indicated that prospectuses 'form a key part of the evaluation process by shaping initial impressions of an institution' (Winter & Chapleo, 2015, p. 6). Moogan et al. (2001) suggest students are so keen to make the best possible choice [that] they will research the 'educational-market' by whatever means available, and their research indicates students do rely on prospectuses, but not always successfully. Other research suggests that: 'some of the stuff you want in a prospectus isn't necessarily the sort of stuff the people that design the prospectuses are in the business to give you' (Hesketh & Knight, 1999, p. 157), however, they remain an important source even with significant online information sources (Lim et al., 2020). This perhaps makes prospectuses a compelling but challenging data source for institutional research and understanding marketing communications (Rutter et al., 2017).

## The role of prospectuses

A concern that available materials do not give clearer information on outcomes of degrees led to a consumer concern even 20 years ago (Hesketh & Knight, 1999) which is only amplifying with massification of the system (Tomlinson, 2017). There has been intense interest in the veracity of information in prospectuses and in the UK regulators have paid increasing attention to their truth claims as 'the information in prospectuses and on websites may be the principal source of evidence for many students' choices' (Bradley, 2018). This is a critical issue in the research and suggests a theme to be considered needed in analysis of prospectuses: what messages are being put forward by the institutions, what arguments are institutions are presenting about the nature of their undergraduate degrees?

Four common discourses deployed in prospectuses about the idea of a degree through a literature search and a first scan of the prospectus data, through moving back between academic articles and the texts themselves, a process further discussed in (Knight, 2020). Briefly, these four arguments promoting degrees were identified as follows: the first argument used in prospectuses to promote the undertaking of degrees is graduate employment, and the second idea is employability: both constructions are used in Archer's work (2003) and Tomlinson (2018) but can be argued to be differentiated. Graduate employment can be seen as indicated by prospectus engagement with graduate employment prospects linked to a degree. Conversely, employability is a concept differentiated from employment (Clegg, 2009) and seen in the prospectuses as being more about a course's ability to support long term employment and indicated in the texts by the invoking of skills developed and capacities formed by said degree.

Another value of higher education identified was the traditional liberal idea of a degree, as defined by Amis's work (1968) in the 'Black Papers' in the UK, drawing on Newman's nineteenth century work (2010) and the universities espouse the idea by talking about love of studying and the broadening of the mind. The final category for the idea of a degree is as a marker of prestige, drawing on Bol and Van de Werfhorst's (2011) work on signalling of qualifications. This prestige argument is marked in the prospectus texts by language which alludes to the impact of the degree in the world, the differentiating ability of the particular programme.

Providing a discourse analysis of the prospectuses to trace these messages could help practitioners and institutions support students in their tertiary choice processes and assist the students to become more knowledgeable readers of the institutional texts.

Marginson, writing from Australia in 1997, noted a global trend alongside marketisation relating to student requirements to make informed choices:

> Increasingly, university advertising provided less information to aid student choices, and more statements about positional value. Some institutions began to claim that not only did they provide career opportunities, their graduates had an advantage over graduates from elsewhere. (Marginson, 1997, p. 9)

There is little existing critical research on the idea of a degree as transmitted by universities in their prospectuses over the period of massification in England, and this article seeks to fill such a gap. Therefore while contributing to this understanding, the research also feeds into a smaller niche of work using discourse analysis of the marketing materials to contribute to the wider debate about the purposes of higher education and the images institutions have about themselves in the world (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Symes, 1996). The research question, therefore, is: how can massification of higher education in England between 1976 and 2018 be seen to change the messages about the value of a degree in institutional prospectuses. The research's findings add to the small but growing (Tomlinson, 2018) area that explores how the value of a degree operates in the student choice process has been little explored (Archer, 2003; Brooks, 2003; Tomlinson, 2017).

## Methodology

The analysis that underpins this article is based on the examination of messages in prospectuses as key institutional marketing documents between 1976 and 2013. The research project uses unobtrusive methods and undertaken documentary analysis of the institutions' pre-entry materials.

### *Institutional sample*

Secondary historical research was undertaken to identify the dates for which to collect prospectus data for each of the four higher education institutions, as collecting for each year of publication between 1976 and 2018 seemed likely to lead to data overload. An interesting early finding from a pilot study in the research was that there was very little change in prospectuses in each year: they changed gradually and could look very similar for up to 5 years. Therefore seven periods were selected through an extensive historical analysis (Knight, 2018) that were judged to have been after a significant policy moment (an 'eventemente' as termed by Goodson (2001)), the period after the policy moment was check against when the prospectuses were published and the next publication following the event was chosen. These periods of collection along with their corresponding policy events which prompted their inclusion are displayed in Table 1:

As a key issue was to see whether institutional pre-entry messages reflected differentiated provision and whether this had changed over the period of massification, it was important to collect prospectuses of institutions of different status. Therefore a diverse case selection technique was used, a collection of cases which have different values in one category to 'illuminate the full range of variation' (Gerring, 2007, p. 90) within the available data through cross-case analysis. This was seen as a useful way of proceeding within the context of the research question. For example, by selecting cases from institutions with

**Table 1.** A listing of prospectus years collected and the key policy event preceding their publication.

| Prospectus year | Key policy event |
| --- | --- |
| 1977 | 1976 Ruskin speech |
| 1984 | 1983 Education (Fees and Awards) Act |
| 1992 | 1992 Further and Higher Education Act |
| 1998 | 1997 Dearing Report |
| 2006 | 2006 Future of Higher Education Act |
| 2013 | 2012 Higher Education reforms on Key Information Sets and fees |
| 2018 | 2017 Higher Education and Research Act |

different status within the sector it is possible to see the impact of the discourses across the diversity of the higher education sector.

Institutions were chosen from a geographically limited area in the UK, as location is an important part of identity (Winter & Thompson-Whiteside, 2017), and categorical selection made using case study methodology (Gerring, 2007) to ensure the institutions where data was collected were of varying status, to reflect the breadth of institutions and to see whether value messaging was different depending on status stratification (Marginson, 2016). The methodological choice of case study institutions means that findings based on these four sites are not necessarily applicable to the whole of UK higher education, and the analysis of these prospectuses should not be taken to mean necessarily that the value messages could be generalised across the sector, but perhaps have some relatability (Bassey, 1999).

This seemed like an obvious category upon which to base the first cut of selection. Flyvbjerg (2006) discussed the nature of decisions that may seem, externally, to be potentially intuitive and emphasised that where choices seem sensible to others immersed in the discourse then they are strongly defensible. Also, in terms of sampling on the esteem and status of institution, using other publicly available frameworks may not be as desirable. One could be the entrance ranking of students based on school leaving results (published as A Level points for the UK), but this would be similar to the groupings that the institutions self-select, and also would be complicated by a decision of where to split groupings in terms of entry scores, and the variation of scores by discipline could be problematic. It is meaningful at this point to reflect on Croxford and Raffe's (2014) assessment of the UK. They argue that although the formal status of universities is similar there is significant informal variation, and describe the UK as being the most differentiated of systems (Croxford & Raffe, 2014).

Although the negative associations of the status hierarchies are frequently questioned (Spence, 2018), they were for convenience used in the choice of institutions and the self-selected groupings also function as pseudonyms for the institutions for this paper. Even though the institutional materials providing data for this paper are publicly available and the digitised versions are available in an open access digital storage the names of the institutions have not been used in this article. As Furey et al. (2014) suggest the brand distinction between the four groupings 'HE' Mission groups is strong and therefore they have been used in selection and as pseudonyms.

The collection of materials was undertaken from four institutions and there was some further narrowing of materials collection by limiting the study to the London area which is discussed in further depth in the main text (Knight, 2018). No specialist institutions were

chosen and where there were multiple institutions in the region from each group that could have been selected, which happened in two cases, convenience sampling of the most available archive of prospectuses was chosen. In this paper the four institutions are known by pseudonyms based on the institution's self-joined group of higher education institutions: Russell Group Institution being shown as 'RGUni', 1994 Group Institution as '1994Uni', University Alliance Institution as 'UAUni' and Million+ Institution as 'MillplusUni' Analysis undertaken.

This research originates from and develops the historical analysis that Fairclough undertook looking at versions of the Lancaster University prospectuses, which he analysed as one set of texts among several to trace the marketisation of universities in the preceding period, posing three levels of questions about the texts (Fairclough, 1993).

The specific type of discourse analysis is a close reading (MacLure, 2003) and follows Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse–historical approach to uncover how the idea of a degree discourse operates. The narrow focus in terms of critical discourse analysis is justified due to the nature of the research problem as it seeks to answer questions about how the meso level practices of institutions are impacted by massification: the micro level prospectus texts are used to examine the institutional messaging.

As part of the literature review a macro review of discourses at play was undertaken and this research works recursively by considering the macro discourses identified about the idea of a degree in answer to the research question of how the messages have changed. This research, however, has looked at a broader sample of texts over a longer period. To keep the sample manageable and meaningful when working with 23 long texts of up to 200 pages each, the challenge was to keep the data collection and analysis orderly. A key concern was to follow a boundaried path in coding so as not to generate more material than could be managed meaningfully, and to ensure the coding and analysis was systematic enough to be possible to be followed and repeated by another researcher. In identifying categories of recording for the code book, the nature of the research being undertaken needed to be borne in mind. Fairclough (2001)argues that in this process the analyst's 'focus is constantly alternating between what is there in the text and the discourse type(s) which the text is drawing on' (Fairclough, 2001, p. 92).

Fairclough (2001) suggests ten model questions for critical discourse analysis which can be adapted and added to depending on the research being undertaken. These questions fall into three types: that of vocabulary related questions, grammar questions and textual structures (Fairclough, 2001). The code book that was used in this research was designed to specifically help answer what are the messages about the idea of a degree that are traceable in the institutional texts, and how these have changed over time. Markers denote vocabularies that can be read as invoking the discourses of the specific topics of the idea of a degree. Understanding that discourse boundaries are fluid (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) and may change over time (Fairclough, 1993) meant that the decision was taken to record excerpts of texts and keywords that could relate to these markers of the discourse. It was decided not to only collect keywords or excerpts that mapped to the list of vocabulary markers identified, but also to record broader categories of coding which could then be analysed and mapped to the discourse topics. The categories of coding that were drawn from the list of vocabulary markers of the discourse topics of the idea of a degree are presented here in Table 2:

**Table 2.** Elements in research code book.

| Discourse topic coding records |
| --- |
| • Context – Positioning of university regarding employment |
| • Context – Projection of the university regarding student body |
| • Keyword – Aspirational or academic language or innovative |
| • Keyword – Careers markers |
| • Keyword – Demographic markers |
| • Keyword – Involvement in industry or economy |
| • Keyword – Involvement of third parties in text – e.g. professional bodies or employers |
| • Keyword – Skills |
| • Keyword – Vocational markers |

The initial data collection spanned 24 institutional prospectuses (four institutions over six periods), with 23 received (MillplusUni 1992 was not available) and then in preparation for this paper, the 2018 prospectuses from the same four institutions were collected. After collecting the data, NVivo's Framework Matrix tool was used to construct a means of bringing all the data together. The tool was used to store text extracts from each prospectus using a code-book approach, drawing on Fairclough's interrogative methods of asking questions of texts (Fairclough, 1995); also excerpts were collected that seem to be drawing on any of the identified ideas of a degree. There was room in the Framework Matrix to assess if there were other interesting constructions of the idea of a degree appearing in the prospectuses.

This coding was done systematically, one institution at a time, and was undertaken from the earliest prospectus in an institution to the most recent. This chronological approach impacted on the data collection as the progression of themes could also be recorded where appropriate, either in the code book, or in the methodological notes. This treatment was significant in itself as it indicated that each institution's prospectuses were more like each other through time than like those from other institutions in the same period – e.g. MillplusUni 1977 and 1994_Group 1977 were more different than UAUni1977 and UAUni1984. Although not a major finding of any note, this reinforces work on an understanding of institutional culture over time, as explained by Greenbank (2007).

## Findings

What follows is a presentation of the four discourses of the idea of a degree that have been traced in each period using Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) method of Discourse-Historical Approach. The analysis is presented chronologically here, across the periods that were reviewed and can be seen in Table 3 below:

**Table 3.** Ideas of a degree traced in 1977 prospectuses.

| Old (pre-1992) or new (post-1992) institution | Traditional liberal | | Prestige | | Graduate employment | | Employability | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Old | New | Old | New | Old | New | Old | New |
| Academic year of prospectus 1977 | X | X | X | | | X | | ? |
| Academic year of prospectus 1984 | X | | X | | | X | X | X |
| Academic year of prospectus 1992 | | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| Academic year of prospectus 1998 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| Academic year of prospectus 2006 | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Academic year of prospectus 2013 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Academic year of prospectus 2018 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | ? |

### 1977 Prospectuses' messages

As seen in Table 3, three of the discourses identified through secondary historical policy analysis, traditional liberal idea of a degree, prestige of a degree related to its awarding institution and graduate employment can be traced within the 1977 set of prospectuses from the four case study institutions. Employability does not seem present but is possibly emerging in the new universities. However, there is significant differentiation by type of institution in relation to the idea of a degree, with the new universities deploying clearly the idea of a degree for graduate employment, but the old universities not as strongly.

The older institutions concentrate on collegial and traditional liberal notions of education, drawing on heritage and research expertise. The idea of a degree as a signal of prestige is invoked only by the old universities. The two non-university HEIs involve external references to support the value of their degree, invoking their historical location, longevity as a polytechnic, and at MillplusUni the awarding body of the CNAA. This suggests they are not able to deploy internal markers of prestige, and recognise their subordinate place in the hierarchy.

The case study institutions' documents reviewed are still products of a system where the idea of a degree, with some rare and future-oriented exceptions, is essentially constructed in elite terms.

### 1984 Prospectuses' messages

The content of the degrees offered by each institution is still explained in depth and in academic terms, but there are no references to any theoretical orientation of courses. The institutions in the case study prospectuses from this era are now framing the idea of a degree in terms of the benefit of higher education for the economy as seen in Table 3 above.

The polytechnic providers engage more with industry and have increased their references to industry links, whereas the old universities still rely on their prestige in enabling the graduates to prepare for graduate employment. That the new universities have career outcomes listed under degrees, a feature introduced in this set of prospectuses, suggests a subtle shift of emphasis of the idea of a degree from subjects studied towards graduate employment.

The period saw the beginning of the idea of a degree as a consumer product, supported by the Conservative government's neo-liberal oriented market ideology.

Marketisation of the texts is not particularly strong, although there are moves towards an introduction of new modes of persuasion which invoke the views of external stakeholders and offer of student support services, described with language suggesting consumer modes. This could be linked to the identified policy change of this period, that being at university now costs money, students do not receive grants, and they are not paid to be there. What can be observed in Table 3 above is a shift to emphasising the economic gains to be made from undertaking the studies, both for students and the economy at large.

### 1992 Prospectuses' messages

The prospectuses are becoming more similar, as shown in Table 3 above, than in previous periods, with some points of difference remaining between the old and the new

universities studied. In this period institutions, through the structural changes to the tertiary system, were less explicitly codified by formal status and the changes within the system made it more challenging to read their status, while the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment gained hegemonic status.

The product of the degree is increasingly commodified and seen in terms of 'graduate outcomes', not the content of the courses: there is concentration on the idea of a degree and graduate employment.

The prospectus material has not yet become markedly more marketised than in previous periods, nor explicitly more competitive. The examined prospectuses (excluding the unavailable MillplusUni prospectus) could be expected to have been impacted by major structural reforms in the ending of the binary system and the apparently related discursive shift to marketisation. As the changes were not introduced suddenly by the UK governments, and there were three years to prepare for the publication of those prospectuses, it is a surprise the materials were notably similar to the previous 1984 set in their delivery of information.

In summary, 1992 showed a change in discursive practices for the new universities as their status grew and they gained degree awarding powers in their own right.

## 1998 Prospectuses' messages

The prospectuses of this period share a hegemonic inclusion of the discourse of graduate employment and employability in the idea of a degree as shown in Table 3. Within the old universities there are traces of the discourse topic of prestige and some element of the traditional liberal idea of a degree re-entering the old universities, but in a new, different form as student experience. The increased focus on graduate outcomes in the prospectuses suggest that the discursive practices of prospectuses changed dramatically in this set.

The key policy change of this period was the introduction of fees for domestic students in the UK, following recommendations in the Dearing Report (1997). A core message of this related to the importance of higher education serving the needs of the knowledge economy; this aligned with the new Labour government's desires, and was a key ideology of the reforms that introduced fees. The linking of higher education to the economy increased the focus on graduate employment as a measure of degree success. There was also a continued development of the marketisation of higher education and now there were metrics such as graduate employment to compare institutions quantitatively.

## 2006 Prospectuses' messages

Although Table 3 above shows in this period little change from previously, there are substantial differences in the presentation of the prospectuses. The traditional liberal idea of a degree is present in the old universities in the new diluted form of student experience. Prestige is invoked by all institutions, whether hierarchical status of institutions or in University Alliance's case a counter-discourse drawing prestige from its industry connections. Graduate employment is still present and employability, while traceable, is weakening from its previous dominance. The discourses deployed have been homogenised and focus on the four discourse topics, indicating a heightened branding and awareness of

the selling of the degree process. Marketisation of higher education has clearly impacted on this set of prospectuses, though it has been uneven in development, and institutions are not necessarily competing explicitly against each other, mostly using the prestige markers to invite students to make comparisons. The key theme is the linking of the degree to business and industry, but the fact that students are paying increased, marketised fees does not appear in these documents to be a significant event. Although the discursive practices within the prospectuses increase their focus on graduate employment and employability and professionalised their marketing (Gibbs & Dean, 2015), they did not become explicitly competitive in their prospectuses.

## 2013 Prospectuses' messages

What was displayed in this set was further homogenising, even more than in the 2006 period, particularly with the increased use of the same vocabulary throughout the documents, as if there were one script from which the idea of degree marketisation derives as seen in Table 3 previously.

The idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes was traced in all prospectuses, in a dilute form connected to student experience and enjoyment of learning. Employability and generic skills language were present in the four prospectuses, although less than in previous periods. That all four identified discourse topics could be traced in the institutions, as noted in Table 3 above, indicates a proliferation of discourses about the idea of a degree, making the reading of the prospectuses to understand and differentiate the offers made much more difficult.

## 2018 Prospectuses' messages

Whereas in 2013 the prospectuses were homogenised, in 2018 the treatment of the idea of a degree was the same but each prospectus sends different brand messages about itself.

The discourse of prestige features in all the case study institutions, with the new universities constructing alternative valuations of higher education institutions such as student experience, engagement with industry as suggestions of counter-discourses to the hegemonic hierarchical status of institutions of league tables (Spence, 2018). Higher education sector internal policy documents and sector-wide markers, such as league tables, external collections of data and research assessment exercises, are all referenced. Graduate employment was mentioned in the prospectuses but was no longer as dominant. Graduate employment markers also seemed in this set more connected to the discourse of prestige than before, as shown by the intensification of the trend to name large or elite employers.

The idea of a degree is becoming openly discussed, and institutions are using a language echoing that found in national texts such as employability and purpose of a degree (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). The old and the new universities have lost their overtly differentiating factors, which once provided a range of higher education modes; there has been a loss of variant voices through marketisation, massification and unification of the system.

There was a change in discursive practices in this set of prospectuses in terms of their heightened marketing focus and new introduction of ideas relating to degree-completion

over some time and also lifelong learning. Therefore, there is also a development from previous prospectuses as the process of marketisation of higher education through the period of massification has been gradual but consistent.

All the institutions, as in 2013, have the multiple ideas of a degree but the change that can be observed within this set of prospectuses across the four institutions is that the language about the degrees is less opaque and more definition is given. There is a significant reduction in concentration on the idea of a degree for employability, with the institutions including text that assumes skills are part of all degrees and not singling out in any prospectus particular skills like communication techniques or problem solving. Tracing the first-person narratives now used also contributes to understanding of not just the brand but the marketing strategy: RGUni emphasises in multiple narratives the importance of making RGUni the first choice, showing its need to compete with other elite brands. 1994_Group focuses on the culture of its out of London and campus-based institution, so the main selling point is student experience and traditional university education. UAUnirepeats the interest prospective students show in its connections with industry which has been a recurring theme. MillplusUni's stories reinforce the idea that going to university at all is worth it, as if the prospective students are considering whether to undertake higher education or not, rather than where to go.

## Discussion

In the 2018 prospectuses, there has been a distinct change in tone, perhaps influenced by consumer legislation brought by the Competitions and Markets Authority relating to the advertising of higher education courses (2015) and all the prospectuses contain disclaimers or contractual information. The experience of higher education is described in great detail and content of the degree programmes is now once again explained in the course pages, mentioning some set texts and detailed themes. In this set of prospectuses the marketisation that was observed across all the prospectuses has been developed further into a commodification of the degree as a product that can be purchased and therefore must be described. This commodifying discourse can be identified, not just in the course descriptions which are far clearer about the nature of the degree that is being bought, and also in the consumer warnings and guarantees, but also in the student or graduate vignettes that appear throughout all four of the prospectuses. These vignettes which give first person accounts have appeared in previous sets of prospectuses: the significant difference with this set is that they are for the first time detailing the student choice narrative before the degree, not the graduate outcome from the degree as in previous prospectuses.

The narratives seem to have different thematic purposes depending on the institution, reinforcing the brand narrative of each institution as explained by Chapleo (2017): his writing, from the same era as these prospectuses, explains the importance of brand definition and differentiation.

The homogenising of institutions' vocabularies to describe themselves is discussed and theorised by Baker and Brown (2007). In the latter periods the institutions consistently use the same terms such as quality, excellence, and student experience and these are seen as appropriating 'the sayings of the tribe' Baker and Brown suggest (2007, p. 380), drawing on Bourdieu's idea of doxa. In addition their article shows the degree of variability in attitude

and approaches towards consumerism of higher education and how students still perceive higher education in ways that do not conform to the hyper-modern student-consumer approach. The implications for university relations and how policy-makers and institutions themselves approach the issue are discussed.

These approaches reflect actions that 'developed strategies to convince parent and student customers to 'buy' a particular, higher education 'brand name'.' (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001, p. 157) The value of the name at each institution is invoked in coded form to put forward the 'brand offer'. In previous prospectuses, such as 1977 or 1984, the institution would explicitly name and address its audience, whether students moving away from home for the first time (RGUni 1984; 1994_Group 1984), mature students looking for industry engagement (UAUni1977), or part-time students (MillplusUni 1977 and 1984). In the most recent set of prospectuses no explicit definition of the target audience is provided. Instead of the previously explicit discussion of audience, taste markers are now deployed differentially to appeal to parts of the market who can 'read' them (Whitty & Clement, 2015). In this way, the differentiation of the institutions has become more covert by suppressing mention of the differing cohorts of students.

The universities, in setting up their brand (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001), in recent years establish their markers of difference in implicit, coded ways. The offer of each institution is identifiable if understanding of the higher education field is available. RGUni's prospectus details its research expertise and the number of academics who are in a Royal Society to establish its brand marker, and does not mention league tables. 1994_Group's prospectus constructs its offer by quoting its high student completion rates and concentrates on the rich extra- and co-curricular experience that the institution offers. University Alliance, as it has done in every set of prospectuses studied, asserts its link to industry and the authentic nature of its job-oriented courses. MillplusUni emphasises the different pathways into its degrees, the commitment of their staff and the flexibility of their provision. This varying discourse of prestige is dominant in the most recent set of prospectuses across all the institutions.

A marked finding of this overall analysis is the increasing standardisation of the publications, in physical form, layout and textual features: the prospectuses at the end of the period of study are more similar to one another than at the start. This homogenisation of form also impacts on the discourses identifiable in the texts. Over the period of study, institutions increasingly struggle to distinguish themselves within a competitive market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Marginson, 2013), and these struggles to deal with the need for marketisation can be shown to have impacted on the constructions of the idea of a degree presented in pre-entry materials.

The significant homogenisation of prospectuses in the period, from distinctive institutional documents in the first set in 1976 to the convergent focus, tone and form of those in 2013 and 2018, reflects this marketisation of higher education and transformation of the university system into a quasi-market of institutions (Marginson, 2013). Also, an increase in the coded nature of the information in such documents between the early period of 1976 and the most recent period of 2018 has been identified in this work, specifically relating to the increasing omission of core academic concepts and the reduced descriptions of course contents.

When considering the messages within these prospectuses, it is noticeable that by half-way through the period there becomes no inclusion of scrutiny of course content, nor any

account of what happens in the lectures and the classrooms. There is increasing interest in the student experience beyond the classroom, and all institutions talk in similar terms, using similar language, about their extra-curricular offers, such as in-course volunteering, while there is growing interest in global reach and possibilities for overseas experience within the degree and afterwards. There are also diluted, student-experience-related, indications of the traditional liberal idea of education, particularly in the older universities, RGUni and 1994_Group.

## Conclusion

The major finding of this study is that over the period there is both a homogenisation of the vocabularies and a proliferation of discourses. It is also found that the four ideas of a degree identified in the literature appear, in relation to different time periods, differently prioritised across the four institutions. Across all the institutions, there has been a reduction in discussion of course content until the 2018 prospectuses and a significant increase in focus on graduate employment.

This homogenisation of vocabularies and drawing on the same discourses of the idea of a degree is seen by this research as a symptom of the marketisation of the universities, in that none of the institutions now wish to be seen to be offering a lesser degree than the others. The increase in homogenisation and the difficulty in separating the institutions through their prospectuses are hidden behind what Gibbs calls a 'deceptive openness' (Gibbs, 2001, p. 85). There is inequity if differences between institutions are not explicit in pre-entry materials and they require insider knowledge (Bowl, 2003) in order to understand. However, an increase in consumer rights, while helpful, will not necessarily question structural inequalities which are transmitted in the messages institutions send in their prospectuses as primary marketing materials.

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