

**F7 Chepstow Wednesday 5 December 16.45 – 17.15**

***Competing Discourses of Excellence and Inclusion: Marketisation in English Higher Education Policy, 1987-2017 (0200)***

**Colin McCaig<sup>1</sup>** *<sup>1</sup>Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom*

This paper traces five stages of rationale development covering a 30 year period. The stages are partly cumulative, but the paper will argue that these are not necessarily linear, nor do they follow a single purposeful design. While initially market-like incentives and exhortations were designed to make a rapidly expanding system more cost-efficient and meet the changing needs of the economy, the need to ensure institutional and social diversity also emerged at an early stage (Greenbank 2006; Harrison 2011). Later, the expanding number of universities led to pressures to differentiate by institution type or mission (Archer 2007), and this became steadily more important as tuition fees were introduced and raised, leading to an ever growing burden on the state (which underwrites the fees). The five stages are:

- 1986-1993 Efficiency and accountability, human capital
- 1993-2000 Diversity as a good; efficiency and accountability; human capital
- 2000-2006 Diversity as a good; efficiency and accountability; human capital; differentiation
- 2009-2013 Diversity as a good; efficiency and accountability; human capital; differentiation; competition on price and quality
- 2016 - Diversity as a good; efficiency and accountability; human capital; differentiation; competition on price and quality; risk and exit

With the introduction of each new policy rationale, successive Government's have usually been careful to preserve previous policy rationales, such as efficiency and diversity, which have taken on the status of shibboleths, with new discursive rationales (e.g. price competition and the risk of market exit) designed to deliver them. Using political discourse analysis (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013), this paper examines the changing policy context which makes sense of these new agendas and offers insights into how these varying rationales may be employed in different international systems. Where this paper will be of interest to an international audience is the progression and trajectory of the various policy rationales which may (or not) be actuated in different national contexts (Bowl, McCaig and Hughes 2018).

**Methodology/methods used**

This paper employs political discourse analysis (PDA) (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013) to explore the progression of policy rationales in the field of marketisation policy between 1986 and 2017. PDA is a variant of the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA often focuses on *positionality* as a projection or representation of reality (Fairclough 1993) that takes institutions and organisations beyond their essence. Institutions (re)position themselves in the marketplace of ideas, as evidenced by mission and values statements in a differentiated market (Gibbs and Knapp 2002; Bowl and Hughes 2013; Graham 2013).

While CDA is a useful tool for analysis of institutional responses to policy incentives, PDA analyses the policymaking process at the systemic or state level. Governments have to persuade and win the argument for policy change or reform in the form of commissioned Reports (e.g. Dearing Review, Browne Review) consultative Green Papers, White Papers (which often contain plans and rationales for legislative changes) and Acts of Parliament. PDA reveals the gestation of arguments and the use of persuasion and policy incentives to establish a set of desired aims and goals (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013). In this case, argumentation and persuasion occurs within a tightly regulated but relatively autonomous English HE system (Gellert 1993; Shattock 2008). Argumentation is required in these cases because of institutional autonomy; autonomy sets the framework for competitive differentiation - a sphere in which institutions are seen most likely to respond to incentives that help them maintain or improve their position vis-à-vis other institutions.

**Method:** The paper uses the results of a full thematic analysis of policy statements in order to model the changing level and depth of uses of key terms relating to: *efficiency; accountability; diversity; widening participation; human capital; employer needs; differentiation (by type); competition; new alternative providers; risk; and exit/failure.*

Timing is found to be an important factor. Often, arguments are raised in policy statements but only several years later become solidified in policy change in the form of incentives or directives; in other cases concepts (such as regional economic planning) emerge but are then discontinued in the discourse. PDA thus reveals the often turbulent trajectory of policy, and in turn reveals the extent of the influences of competing ideologies, changes of governing party, longer term economic policy imperatives, and also the constraining factors represented by non-governmental actors, all of which are specific to different national contexts

## **Conclusions**

In the case of the dozen policy documents that are the subject of this paper, PDA reveals the varying - and non-linear - ways that successive UK governments have introduced and rationalised marketisation policies into the English system, reflecting a shifting understanding of what marketisation of a HE system can mean at any given stage; which set of levers would most appropriately enable the desired outcomes at any given moment.

This analysis suggests that a complex interplay of factors, policy agendas and economic conditions have contributed to the highly marketised state on English higher education in 2018, and that oversimplified notions such as linear neoliberalisation are insufficient as an analytical tool. Rather than a phased introduction of steadily developing and well argued rationales for the use of market incentives, this analysis reveals a wide range of justifications and arguments, often in response to external factors such as lobbying pressure on Governments' (e.g. from elite institutions that lobbied for 'variable' tuition fees to create a market differentiation) and the effects of the 2008 economic crisis which necessitated the trebling of English tuition fees in 2010. Taken individually, the marketisation policy positions and prescriptions discussed in this paper can be useful for comparative analytical purposes in varying international contexts.

## References

- Archer, L (2007) Diversity, equality and higher education: a critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol 12, No.s 5-6 October-December 2007, pp. 635-653
- Bowl, M and Hughes, J (2013) 'Discourses of 'fair access' in English Higher Education: what do institutional statements tell us about university stratification and market positioning?' *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 15 (4): 7–25
- Bowl, M. (2016) 'Differentiation, distinction and equality – or diversity? The language of the marketised university: an England, New Zealand comparison' *Studies in Higher Education* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1190961>: 1-18.
- Bowl, M, McCaig, C, and Hughes, J (Eds) (2018) *Equality and Differentiation in Marketised Higher Education: A New Level Playing Field?* Palgrave. Palgrave Studies in Excellence and Equity in Global Education
- Brown, R & Carasso, H (2014) *Everything for Sale; the marketisation of UK Higher Education* Abingdon: Routledge
- Brown, R & Scott, P. 2009. *The Role of the Market in Higher Education*, Higher Education Policy Institute
- Fairclough, N (1993) 'Critical discourse analysis and the marketisation of public discourses: the universities', *Discourse and Society*, 4 (2): 133-167.
- Fairclough, I and Fairclough, N (2013) *Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students*. Routledge, London
- Gellert, C. (ed) (1993) *Higher Education in Europe* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Gibbs, P & Knapp, M (2002) *Marketing Further and Higher Education Research: an educators guide to promoting courses, departments and institutions*, London, Kogan Page

Graham, C (2013) 'Discourses of widening participation in the prospectus documents and websites of six English higher education institutions', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34 (1): 76–93

Greenbank, P. (2006) 'The Evolution of Government Policy on Widening Participation' *Higher Education Quarterly* 60(2): 141-166.

Harrison, N. (2011) 'Have the changes introduced by the 2004 Higher Education Act made higher education admissions in England wider and fairer?' *Journal of Education Policy* 26(3): 449–468.

Marginson, S. (2013) 'The impossibility of capitalist markets in higher education' *Journal of Education Policy* 28(3) 353-370.

Shattock, M. (2008) 'The change from private to public governance of British higher education: its consequences for higher education policy making 1980–2006' *Higher Education Quarterly* 62(3): 181–203.