

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0613

Universities and ‘Unicorns’: A Critical Analysis of Investors’ Discourse of the Rise of Educational Technologies Within the COVID-19 Pandemic Context

Javier Mármol Queraltó¹

¹*Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: Within the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, EdTech investors are scaffolding new digital markets in HE, reshaping the conceptualization of universities, HE and the sector itself more generally (Williamson 2021). This investigation is primarily qualitative and focuses on the subtle discursive nuances brought about by alternative linguistic configurations in the reshaping of the HE sector. These are examined operationalizing a cognitive-linguistic approach to Critical Discourse Studies (CL-CDS; Hart 2020) with a focus on Conceptual Metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and event-construal in terms of force-dynamics (Talmy 2000). The data examined includes investment theses and manifestos, interviews with EdTech professionals and investors, financial prediction charts and fund announcements. Our findings reveal that a small number of Conceptual Metaphors serve to underpin the ideological foundations for the acceleration of digitalization processes of HE, along with the formulation of push and pull factors affecting the sector in terms of force-dynamics. These findings broadly reflect a neoliberal logic, and also inform of the subtle transition towards models of assetization (Komljenovic 2020, 2021) in the HE sector.

Paper: British Higher Education (HE), especially in England and Wales, has been witness to processes of marketisation since the early 1980s (Fairclough, 1993), while since the 2010s this process has been both consolidated and accelerated (Brown, 2015). In the context of the current SARS-COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing process of digitalization of HE has become a prominent area for social, financial and, increasingly, educational research. HE researchers agree both on the unpreparedness of countries and institutions faced by the pandemic, and on its potential lasting impact on the educational sector (Goedegebuure and Meek, 2021). The relation between investors, EdTech and Higher Education institutions (HEIs), which before the pandemic was promoted and emphasized, and evolved steadily in terms of investment, is now accelerated by the needs (partly) fuelled by and associated with the pandemic. New forms of digital capitalism are driving the merging between HE and existing political demands for universities to become more market-focused, competitive, and data-driven (Williamson, 2021). The extensive use and adoption of EdTech in order to bridge the gap between HE professionals and students due to the application of strict social distancing measures has been welcomed by investors as an opportunity for EdTech to establish themselves as key players within an educational landscape under a process of marketisation (Komljenovic, 2020, 2021).

While EdTech has enabled education on the whole to continue with more or less 'bumps' along the way, researchers call attention to important debates about the relationships between investors, EdTech, HEIs, and governance. In this evolving scenario, researchers have found, taking the perspective of HE staffs and students, that in the move to online teaching the loss of education as a communal, embodied experience is the most prominent fear (Eringfeld, 2021). Importantly, both learning and working conditions have suffered a significant (in many occasions negative) impact (Moja, 2021). More generally, from a financial perspective we are observing a new stage of capitalism, more aptly termed 'technoscientific capitalism' (Birch and Muniesa, 2020), which is evolving into a model based on assetization within HE contexts (Komljenovic, 2020, 2021). Investors and EdTech are scaffolding new digital markets in HE, reshaping the conceptualization of universities, HE and the sector itself more generally (Williamson, 2021; Komljenovic and Robertson, 2016).

With this backdrop, this investigation is primarily qualitative and focuses on the subtle discursive nuances brought about by alternative linguistic configurations in the reshaping of the HE sector. These are examined operationalizing a cognitive-linguistic approach to Critical Discourse Studies (CL-CDS; Hart 2017) with a focus on Conceptual Metaphor (Lakoff 1987), and event-construal in terms of force-dynamics (Talmy 2000). In order to provide a broad picture of the representational patterns put forward by investors in relation to our objectives we have collected and systematically examined a variety of text-types disseminated in the public and semi-private domains. These include: (a) publicly available videos (i.e. YouTube), (b) investment manifestos, (c) professional interviews, (d) global financial reports, and (e) charts. These texts are primarily designed for company-external communication and they are understood to be instrumental in the communication of both leadership and crisis/change (Darics and Koller, 2018) within the context in which the texts are produced and distributed. The overarching purpose of the texts analysed is primarily informative and self-promotional, and secondarily agenda-setting.

Our findings reveal that a small number of Conceptual Metaphors serve to underpin the ideological foundations for the acceleration of digitalization processes of HE, along with the formulation of push and pull factors affecting the sector in terms of force-dynamics. Ideologically relevant metaphorical patterns include the conceptualisation of companies and Educational Technologies investors as 'ships', where the factors propelling or alternatively hindering business processes can be realized as 'tailwinds' and 'headwinds' respectively. More generally, EdTech investors and companies' activities within the sector are mainly represented as desired processes instrumental to generate substantial revenue. These actions are represented as desired 'push' factors aimed at disrupting the HE sector, while at the same time EdTech investors depict themselves as necessary 'enablers'. The pandemic and its effects on the market and educational practices in HE are depicted in rather abstract ways, however it is mostly positively represented as a 'catalyst' for desired investment processes. These findings broadly reflect a neoliberal logic, and also inform of the subtle transition towards models of assetization (Komljenovic 2020, 2021) in the HE sector.

References: Birch, K., & Muniesa, F. (Eds.) (2020). *Assetization: Turning Things into Assets in Technoscientific Capitalism*. MIT Press direct. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12075.003.0002>

Brown, R. (2015). The marketisation of Higher Education: Issues and ironies. *New Vistas*, 1(1): 4-9.

Darics, E., & Koller, V. (2018). *Language in Business, Language at Work*. Palgrave Higher Education.

Eringfeld, S. (2021). Higher Education and its post-colonial future: Utopian hopes and dystopian fears at Cambridge University during Covid-19. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(1): 146-157. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2020.1859681

Fairclough N. (1993). Critical Discourse Analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2): 133-168. DOI: 10.1177/0957926593004002002

Goedegebuure, L., & Meek, L. (2021). Crisis – What Crisis? *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(1): 1-4. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2020.1859680

Hart, C. (2017). Cognitive linguistic critical discourse studies. In J. Richardson, & J. Flowerdew (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis*. Routledge.

Komljenovic, J. (2020). The future of value in digitalised higher education: Why data privacy should not be our biggest concern. *Higher Education*. DOI: [10.1007/s10734-020-00639-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00639-7)

Komljenovic, J. (2021). The rise of education rentiers: Digital platforms, digital data and rents. *Learning, Media and Technology*. DOI: [10.1080/17439884.2021.1891422](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2021.1891422)

Komljenovic, J., & Robertson, S. L. (2016). The dynamics of 'market-making' in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 31(5): 622-636. DOI: [10.1080/02680939.2016.1157732](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2016.1157732)

Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*. Chicago University Press.

Moja, T. (2021). National and institutional responses – reimagined operations – pandemic disruptions and academic continuity for a global university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(1): 19-29. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2020.1859688

Talmy, L. (2000). *Toward a Cognitive Semantics, Vol. 1: Concept structuring systems*. MIT Press.

Williamson, B. (2021). Making markets through digital platforms: Pearson, edu-business, and the (e)valuation of Higher Education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62(1): 50-66. DOI: 10.1080/17508487.2020.1737556