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## **A change of heart? A simple textual object serves as powerful agent in legitimising English higher education policy shifts, 2003-2016.**

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### **Research Domains**

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract**

Interdiscursive analysis across four successive English higher education policies, 2003 – 2016, has yielded a novel graphical representation of the way in which the phrase, to be ‘at the heart’ is used. The research lays bare the emergence and growth of a higher education market over this period, mirroring sector-wide research. At the start of the period under consideration, higher education is seen to be at the heart of a socially just society, whereas by 2016, higher education is noted as serving student, taxpayer and economy interests. While messages regarding the growth of a marketised, neoliberal discourse are not new, research findings evidencing the way in which this specific textual object is carried across successive policies are. The phrase functions repeatedly as a powerful agent in legitimising ever-changing policy problems and solutions, revealing the power of such textual-semiotic modes to reinforce underlying ideologies and reflect the political landscape of the time.

### **Full paper**

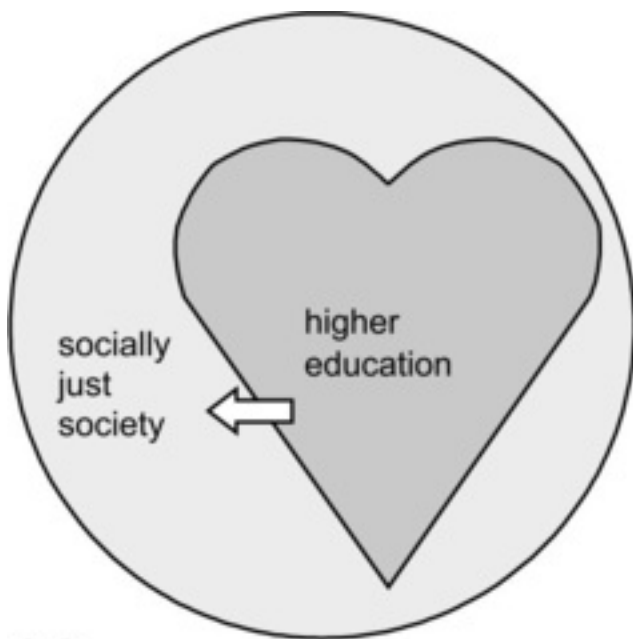
### **Introduction and research approach**

An interdiscursive analysis of four successive English higher education (HE) policy documents (DfES, 2003; BIS, 2009; BIS, 2011; BIS, 2016) was undertaken as context-setting for wider qualitative

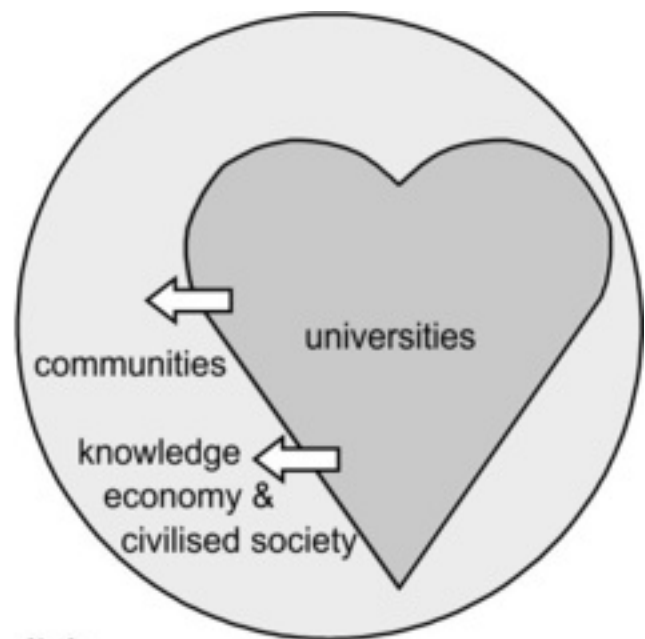
research exploring academics' perceptions of tensions in undergraduate education at one English university. Combining commentary on specific policy textual elements related to the changing HE environment with narrative on the wider discourse surrounding HE has been shown to have value (Mulderrig, 2011; Taylor, 2004). Texts were intentionally bounded within the 13-year period across which university tuition fees were introduced and gradually increased, with a corresponding growth in the discourses of commodification and the 'student experience' as an entity in HE (Sabri, 2011).

## **Research findings**

Analysis revealed a range of changes over the period, including a reduction in mention of teaching, academics, student learning and HE's role in society, with an increased focus on 'student experiences' and students portrayed as clients. Most novel, however, and the focus of this paper, is a unique graphical interpretation (Figure 1) creatively derived from a pattern of intertextual referencing (Prior, 2003, p.122) of how the phrase, to be 'at the heart of' something, is used across policies.



(a)  
2003



(b)  
2009



(c)  
2011



(d)  
2016

**Figure 1:** Diagram showing implied relationships and drivers in English HE (as arrows), inferred through references to 'at the heart' in (a) DfES (2003), (b) BIS (2009), (c) BIS (2011), (d) BIS (2016).

Within DfES (2003), education is 'at the heart of building a more socially just society' (p.68), and BIS (2009) similarly places 'universities at the heart of communities' (p.18) and 'universities as the heart of a knowledge economy' (p.23). These are explicit

statements on the pivotal role HE performs as a public good, for society, community and economy. Use of the phrase escalates in BIS (2011), and the phrase is most well-known for its incorporation in the policy title. It cites the need to 'discuss how we will put excellent teaching back at the heart of every student's university experience' (p.25). Notably however, all further references to the phrase relate to student surveys and evaluations 'at the heart of' teaching quality, and quality assurance procedures 'at the heart of' future arrangements (p.34 and p.37). These reveal a different message, where despite the inclusion of policy aims to improve 'the quality of students' academic experience' and 'increasing their educational gain' (p.25), there is no further discussion of students' educational experiences or academics. Instead, recommendations relate to quality monitoring by students through evaluations and surveys, public information, contact hours and staff teaching qualifications. Students are presented as 'powerful' clients, and notions of universities at the heart of society are absent. BIS (2016) uses the phrase extravagantly, extending the 2011 themes, with students still 'at the heart' of the system, to address 'value for money' issues for 'students, employers and taxpayers'. Students' interests now lie firmly 'at the heart' of a new proposed architecture to ensure their satisfaction and protection, a theme dominant in the BIS (2015) precursor Green Paper that saw the 'job as not yet complete' (p.7), and students are expected to assist in market choices, regulation and drive HE reform and competition.

## **Discussion**

'Heart' as a metaphor can infer care and love, however the relative positioning of 'heart' inferred through texts show that it is being used in a biological sense. Here, 'heart' is a powerful 'life-blood' also observed by Morrish and Sauntson (2020, p.86) who note similar in the HE marketing discourse. However, policy authors rely on 'caring' interpretations to appeal to people's value systems and using Bacchi's (2009) analysis tool of 'what is the problem represented to be?', their responses to such a phrase might immediately be that HE has lost its purpose and identity, or that universities no longer care for students. Readers might also infer that the relative repositioning of specific agents or actors 'at the heart' will remedy this situation, be they universities (in 2003 and 2009) or students and

accompanying regulatory systems. By BIS (2016), students as clients, their interests and satisfaction, are the 'heart' and powerful drivers of an inferred broken system, also portrayed as holding the power to HE's future existence. In summary, a simple textual object has been used as an agent to legitimise policy changes (through a caring imperative) while simultaneously reflecting underlying neoliberal ideologies and sites of power (the biological interpretation) with manifold implications for the changing role and identity of both academics and students, their place in HE, and the HE landscape as a whole.

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