

145 Narratives of higher education and the university in UK general election manifestos: 1945 to 2019

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

In the UK since 1945 there have been 21 general elections, producing a corpus of 63 manifesto texts written by Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. These 21 elections present a corpus of 63 texts making up 651,696 words for analysis. Here we draw upon diachronic corpus-assisted discourse analysis and narrative policy frameworks to analyse how political priorities for universities and higher education have changed. Diachronic discourse analysis is used to track change over 74 years and the narrative policy frameworks are employed to analyse context, the actors involved and how parties position universities and higher education within their visions for governing.

The findings of this paper and the broader project will produce a grounded theory to understand political priorities for higher education, which will advance understanding of policy and potentially influence future manifestos.

Full paper

General election manifestos are the discursive culmination of the key political issues of the day through the prism of political ideology, broader public and media discourse and narratives to convince the electorate of worthiness for office. These texts are not produced in ideological silos but draw on the discourse and challenges of their time of writing. Manifesto texts are being analysed as data in a wide range of contexts and disciplines. For example, industrial relations (Lamare and Budd, 2022), empirical analysis of perceived ideological position (Gabel and Hix, 2002; Pelizzo, 2003) and political economy of home ownership (Kohl, 2021).

This research paper reports on a work in progress empirical study of UK political party manifestos from 1945 to 2019, which asks how references to higher education and universities in UK political manifesto documents have changed over the period. The form and function of the political manifesto affords us the opportunity to analyse the political economy of higher education (Durazzi, 2019). Drawing upon this large corpus of texts shows us how, over time, prospective governing administrations describe the role of universities and how much space they give to them in a manifesto document relative to other priorities such as health and schools.

The work builds on Souto-Otero's (2011) finding that between 1979 and 2010 the left and right of the political spectrum saw a convergence of perspectives on higher education with some differences in access, finance and management but broadly converging in perspective on neoliberal capitalism and marketization (Pearce, 2004).

In order to trace the changes in political discourse on UK higher education we are adopting aspects of diachronic corpus-assisted discourse analysis and narrative policy frameworks. Diachronic corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Partington, 2010; Candarli and Jones, 2022) tracks discourse over a period of time (diachronic) using computational text analysis (corpus linguistics) (Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008) under the broader umbrella of discourse analysis (Foucault, 1971; Branco Sousa and Magalhaes, 2013; Gee, 2015).

We draw together the broad methodological theories of discourse (Mills, 2004) and narrative (Roe, 1994; Caine, Clandinin and Lessard, 2022) over time (diachronic) using computational text analysis (Mahlberg, 2014; Gillings, Mautner and Baker, 2023).

We draw together the innate objectivity and positivism of computational analysis alongside the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) which makes the case for texts to be used in empirical studies in contrast to poststructural literary

theory (Jones and McBeth, 2010). Schlaufer et al (2022) describe NPF as a relatively new approach which is gaining traction across many disciplines with much experimentation and integration with other theories and methodologies to understand policy processes. Here we show how such flexibility and integration can provide a way of analysing political manifesto documents discourse and narratives over time in an empirical manner which is both rigorous and open to interpretation.

Initial findings indicate:

- Peaks in use of keywords 'higher education' and 'university/universities' in 1966, 1987, 2001 and 2010 (Chart 1).
- The Labour Party uses the keyword 'higher education' more often than other parties (Chart 2).
- Broadly parties talk of universities equally as often (Chart 3).
- References to higher education and universities can be most often found in sections on Education, followed by dedicated headings of Higher Education. Frequency of mentions of universities and higher education following Education and Higher Education are: Science and Innovation, Economy, Introduction or Conclusion, Further and Higher Education, Immigration and Regional and National Devolution (Table 1).
- From 1945 onwards the scope and focus of the role of universities has broadened significantly from education and science and innovation to economic growth, immigration and lifelong learning. This progressively broadens out to a myriad of perceived roles, responsibilities and influences on society.

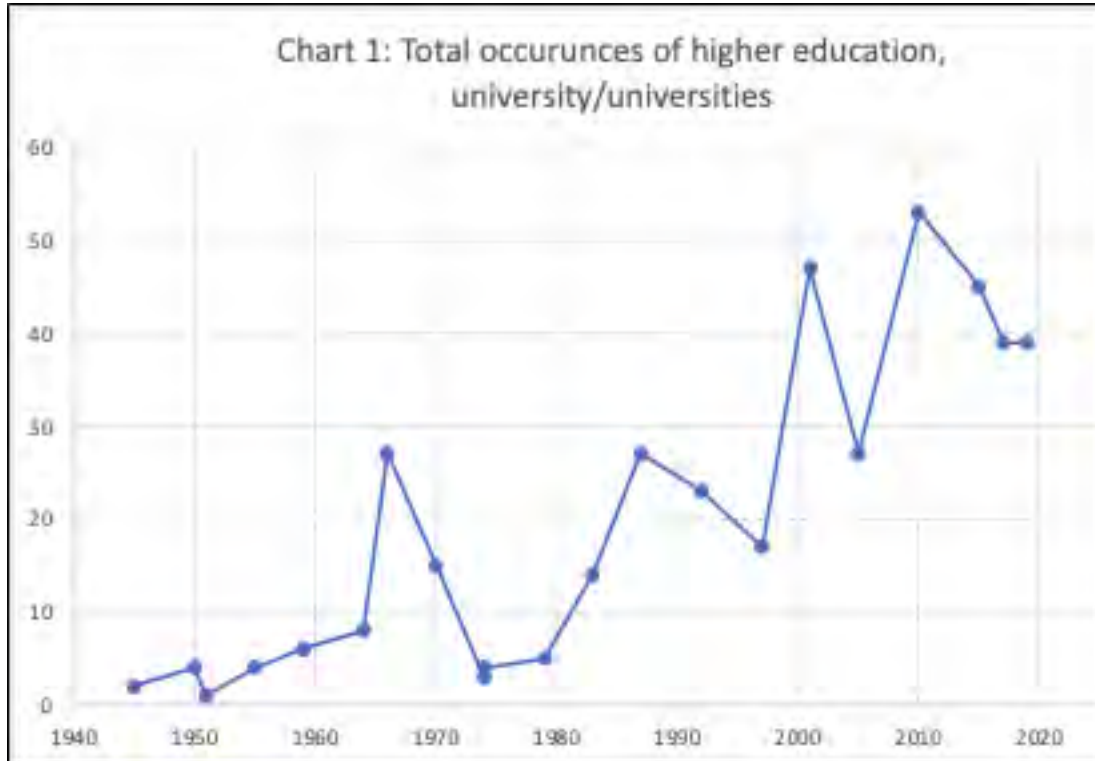


Chart 2: Uses of 'higher education' across the sub corpus of parties

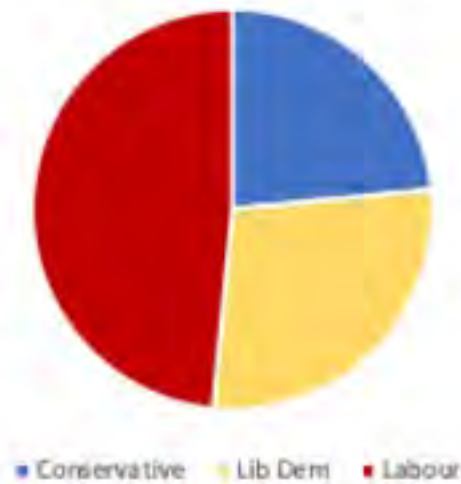


Chart 3: Uses of 'university*' across the sub corpus of parties

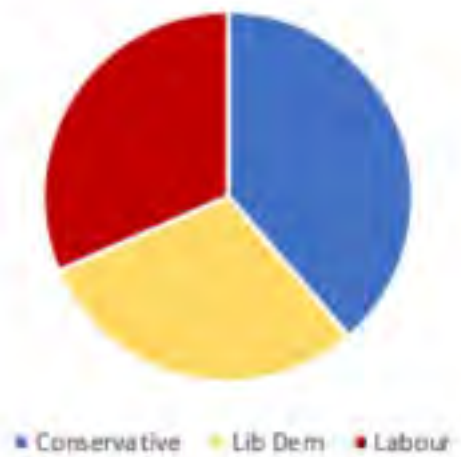
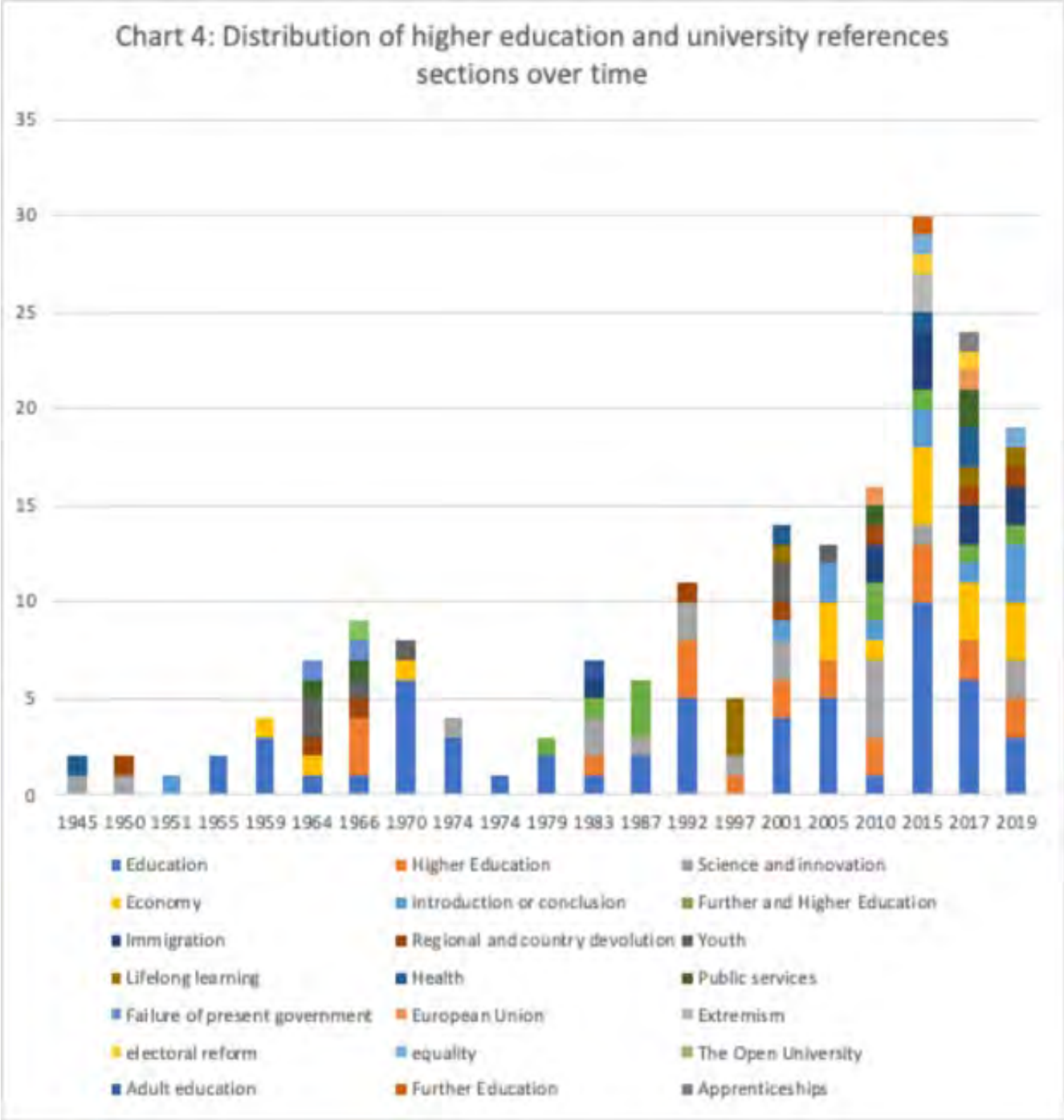


Table 1: Keyword use in manifesto sections	
Manifesto section headers	Total
Education	56
Higher Education	21
Science and innovation	18
Economy	17
introduction or conclusion	11
Further and Higher Education	10
Immigration	10
Regional and national devolution	8
Youth	7
Lifelong learning	6
Health	5
Public services	5
Failure of present government	2
European Union	2
Extremism	2
electoral reform	2
equality	2
The Open University	1
Adult education	1
Further Education	1
Apprenticeships	1



These initial findings are in line with the work of others who have highlighted the change in political economy of higher education and the role of the university (Wilensky, 2002; Schulze-Cleven et al., 2017; Matthews, 2022). The findings presented here and in the broader work of this project enhance understanding of how UK political parties position universities and higher education within their visions for the future and their policies for delivering them, demonstrating increasing expectations for their scope and impact on society.

Further work in the project will draw further on NPF to analyse manifesto narratives around setting, characters, plot and moral (Shanahan, Jones and McBeth, 2018).

This work also provides a platform for further research, which could drawing upon international comparisons of discourse and narrative in political manifesto texts using datasets such as The Manifesto Corpus (Merz, Regel and Lewandowski, 2016).

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