



# The Language of Employability

A Corpus-Based Analysis of  
UK University Websites

Maria Fotiadou

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*For Hermes and George*

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# 1

## Introduction: The Marketisation of Higher Education in the UK and the Language of Employability

### 1.1 Introduction

The early 1980s in the UK is associated with the government's shift towards a neoliberal ideology promoted by the Thatcher government which closed down the heavy industries of ship-building, coal-mining, and steel-making and replaced it in the mid-1980s with the service sector of banking, retail, call centres, and emerging new technologies. The reforms continued with the health and education services, housing, social and legal services, and this 'legacy' was passed on to the next governments of John Major, Tony Blair (Tomlinson 2005: 4), the 2010 coalition government, and the following conservative governments. The economic crisis, which began in 2008, reinforced and intensified the neoliberal ideologies and their effects on society.

The marketisation of higher education in the UK has been associated with the successive governments' approaches to capitalism through liberalising markets and creating a competitive society. As Giroux points out, since the 1970s 'neoliberalism or free-market fundamentalism has become not only a much-vaunted ideology that now shapes all aspects of life [...] but also a predatory global phenomenon' (2014: 1). Among

many things, neoliberal ideology promotes privatisation, commodification, and deregulation. Undoubtedly, universities are 'caught up in the changing relationship between the economy and non-economic areas of life, and in the tendency of the former to colonize the latter' (Fairclough 2001: 30). The Higher Education (HE) scene in the UK changed dramatically with the increase of student numbers which led to more graduates entering the 'job market' and a large number of educational reforms that were gradually introduced by all governments. Although the governments and the politicians that enable these educational reforms defend their necessity due to the 'unavoidable' economic climate, for some people, mostly academics, these reforms are considered an attack on HE. The result from this 'attack' is the universities' 'privatization, intensive marketization, rampant financialization and a challenge to the very notion of the university as a mechanism for addressing social inequality and facilitating the circulation of knowledge whether or not it has immediate practical consequences' (Freedman 2011: 2).

The marketisation of HE is a topic that has been widely discussed and criticised especially within academia. An enormous literature has been produced over the years by academics, who are trying to capture the changes and connect these to each country's socio-political and economic affairs. There have been arguments about whether HE's primary role 'should be liberal, academic and for the public good' (Williams 2013: 40), or more vocationally focused. One thing is for sure, 'the UK has clearly moved in a market direction since 1979' (Brown and Carasso 2013: 126).

Since the early 1980s, UK governments have introduced numerous reforms to the educational system. These governments' stance agrees with Friedman's point who suggested that 'the only way that good *social* ends can be achieved is to leave individuals to compete through markets to get what they *individually* want' (Couldry 2011: 38, original italics). Quite similarly, emphasis on the individual was one of the main points presented in the Browne Report which states that 'The primary beneficiary of higher education is the individual student' (2010: 54). HE students are presented in this report as 'powerful' customers who need employability skills.

In more recent years, and especially since the increase in tuition fees in 2012, students have been urged to focus on developing their employability skills. The concept of employability is an extension of neoliberal values that managed, with the support of dominant groups, such as economic and political unions (EU), official agencies (for example, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [CEDEFOP]), governments, business organisations, employers, HE institutions, and the media, to enter and establish itself as a naturally occurring phenomenon within academia. Such organisations and agencies emphasise the development of employability skills as necessary for those who wish to succeed in the ‘global graduate job market’.

A key factor in the establishment of employability in UK higher education was the introduction of undergraduate tuition fees. When fees were introduced in 1998 (£1,100), and then increased to £3,000 in 2006, these fees were ‘additional funding’ whereas the 2010 reform introduced the ‘replacement funding’ aiming to remove the central block grant fully to universities (McGettigan 2013: 25). While prospective HE students and their parents are being ensured that their education will have value, students are encouraged to become employable, *make the most of their time at university*, and *land their dream job*. Specifically, UK universities advertise, through their careers and employability services, their ability to assist and guide HE students towards becoming employable during their time at university.

## 1.2 Careers Services and Advisers in HEIs

Careers services in British universities are the ‘strongest example of specialist careers guidance services within educational institutions’ (Watts 1996: 127). The history of careers services in UK academia is rich and there has been extensive literature produced on their development (for example, Watts 1996; Peck 2004). Their roots can be traced to the University of Oxford and around 1892 (Watts 1996: 128). In this section, however, I focus on HE careers guidance since the early 2000s.

The importance of the careers services’ role in UK universities has been mentioned in HE policy since the early 2000s. As Williams notes, when

the Labour government was elected in 1997, it ‘made offering careers advice and guidance to young people a priority’ (2013: 67). The *Future of Higher Education* White Paper highlighted that students have to make a ‘complex’ choice and ‘decide which HEIs to apply to’ (DfES 2003: 47). Besides the information provided by ‘family and friends’, careers advisers are also mentioned as providers of information that could affect the students’ choice (DfES 2003: 47). The Browne Report also notes that universities have invested in the expansion of their ‘career advisory services’ with the additional funding collected from the 2006 rise in undergraduate tuition fees (2010: 19). Moreover, the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* states that many universities ‘provide excellent services to support [students] during their time in higher education and to prepare them for life afterwards’ (BIS 2011: 35), or, for the ‘world of work’ (BIS 2011: 4). Such services include careers guidance. Careers services and advisers within HEIs have an ‘expertise’ that is considered ideal for such training.

The coalition government (2010–2015) introduced its plans and willingness to improve careers services by establishing ‘a strong quality assurance framework for careers guidance’ (BIS 2011: 57). The document states that the advisers’ ‘status as trusted experts’ needs improvement so that the profession is treated with ‘respect’ in educational institutions, but also by ‘young students and their parents’ (BIS 2011: 57). For this reason, the government set up a committee in 2010, the *Careers Profession Task Force* (CPTF). As the report states, the Task Force was ‘given a clear remit: to set out our vision for a transformed careers workforce in England which can offer young people the excellent careers service they deserve and expect’ (CPTF 2010: 2). According to the Chair of the CPTF committee, that was ‘a key turning point in the history of career guidance’ (CPTF 2010: 1). ‘Helping’ and ‘supporting’ young people in ‘making decisions about their future’ is presented as the careers advisers’ obligation (‘we owe it to all young people’) (CPTF 2010: 1). The report also highlights the significance of ‘professionalism’ in careers advice:

The Task Force has no doubt that professionalism underpins quality and our recommendations are designed to uphold common professional standards and ethics that will raise the status and integrity of career guidance in this country. (CPTF 2010: 1)

Thus, it was not too long ago that careers services restructured their professional occupation and practices, with the government's support, to become more 'respected', 'raise [their] status integrity', and show the importance of their field's work in the educational setting. The committee's recommendations were taken into consideration by the *Careers Profession Alliance* 'to develop new professional standards for careers advisers' (BIS 2011: 57).

The primary mission of the *Task Force* committee was to set out their 'vision for a transformed careers workforce in England which [could] offer young people the excellent careers service they deserve and expect' (CPTF 2010: 2). The report highlights the necessity for the development and establishment of careers advisers and 'educators' as 'a single authoritative voice' and a professional, expert body (CPTF 2010: 3–6). Interestingly, the committee recommends that the 'Government **should** demonstrate its active support and encouragement for this process' (CPTF 2010: 15, emphasis added). In other words, the careers profession seeks support and endorsement from the government, as this legitimises the profession, naturalises their practices in the educational setting, and gives 'power' to advisers as professional actors. As will be explained in Chapter 3, for an organisation or an individual to claim professional status in an occupation, they need to show that they 'possess a distinct body of specialized knowledge that is essential for the exercise of their occupational tasks' (Scott 2001: 100). Thus, it was understood that careers services in educational settings needed to acquire the necessary professional status that would secure 'obedience', 'trust', and the 'acceptance' (Scott 2001: 104) of the careers advisers' expertise by the students.

Besides the government's support, professional associations are presented as vital for the establishment of a professional body. According to the CPTF (2010: 14), the 'five main professional associations for the careers profession' are shown below:

### **Institute of Career Guidance (ICG)**

Represents career guidance practitioners/managers/leader, and Careers Advisers working in the public, private and voluntary sectors across the UK. Its annual average memberships is over 4,500.

### **Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)**

Has a membership of around 2,130 careers service managers, Career Advisers and other careers service staff based in higher education institutions across the UK.

### **Association for Careers Education and Guidance (ACEG)**

Represents Careers Educators—mainly Careers Coordinators and Careers Leaders—and has a membership of around 1,330.

### **National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults (NAEGA)**

Has around 700 members who provide adult career guidance at different levels and in different settings.

### **Association of Career Professionals International (ACPI)**

The United Kingdom arm of this international body represents individuals working in careers, or career-related roles, in the private sector. The total membership is 450, of whom 38 are active UK members.

As the document explains, the careers profession covers a wide range of age groups, or ‘customers’ and their ‘individual interests’ (CPTF 2010: 14). For this reason, different professional associations aim to represent their customers’ individual needs and interests. In the HE context, the *Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services* (AGCAS), is the professional body for careers and employability professionals working with higher education students and graduates and prospective entrants to higher education (AGCAS 2017). Specifically, AGCAS aims to: ‘provide a lobbying voice for its members’; ‘be the focal point for sector-wide research and expert opinion’, and ‘provide a range of support and development opportunities for its members’ (ibid.). So, what are the careers professionals’ goals when working with young people? The CPTF document (2010: 11) states that the role of careers professionals is to ‘help’ young people:

- Choose the subjects and qualification routes that are right for them and meet their aspirations for further and higher education, work-based learning and work; and
- Make decisions that enable them to achieve in education to the highest possible level.

They also claim that they ‘contribute to a young person’s preparation for, and understanding of, the world of work by helping him or her to’:

- Understand the opportunities within a dynamic labour market;
- Access local, national and international labour market information;
- Understand the requirements and demands of particular occupations;
- Understand the attributes and values required for working life; and
- Gain first-hand experience of career and educational opportunities (CPTF 2010: 11).

Thus, besides choosing subjects and qualification routes, and making decisions, careers professionals assist in the students’ preparation and understanding of the ‘world of work’. A key process highlighted by the *Careers Profession Task Force* is the process of ‘understanding’. Students are being assisted in understanding the: ‘dynamic labour market’, ‘requirements and demands of particular occupations’, ‘attributes and values required for working life’, ‘career routes and the knowledge and skills they need to succeed’. They also ‘help’ students with planning their careers, developing ‘personal responsibility’ and ‘resilience’, ‘raise’ their ‘aspirations’, become more confident (‘appreciate their potential to progress’), and ‘gain access to wider networks’.

It would be interesting at this point to quickly examine in practice what careers services in HEIs state when introducing their practices to prospective or current users. Not all university careers services’ websites include ‘About us’ or ‘Our Mission/goals’ statements. So, I chose to look at eight universities’ ‘About Us’ sections (four Russell Group and four post-1992 universities). These universities were not chosen based on the content of the texts discussed below but rather on the ease of gathering such information displayed on their web pages. The central themes discussed in these sections include:

- Providing **support, advice, and guidance**
- Providing **services, tools, and resources**
- **Preparation** for future career
- Providing **information**
- Assistance in **understanding**: the market, student competencies, aspirations, options, goals, and employers' expectations
- Assistance with **networking**

These services also highlight their focus on collaborations with employers, partners, professional networks, and external agencies. One of the services states that it aims to be known for its expertise, professionalism, and customer-focused approach, while others focus on the importance of being impartial, independent, and objective. Also, five of the eight universities mention 'employability'. Thus, it is clear that the main points highlighted by UK governments in educational policies and documents when it comes to the students' preparation for the 'world of work' and the careers services' role in it, is present in the universities' web pages. This argument will be examined in more detail in the analytical part of this book (Chapters 5–7). The next section introduces one of the main concepts in contemporary academia that is considered to be of great importance to HE students, institutions, businesses, and employers.

### 1.3 Employability and Skills

The development of skills and enhancement of employability is viewed as a necessity for HE students who are willing to compete with 'success' in this financially insecure environment. As the Wilson review points out, there is a need for employability and enterprise 'strategies', and it is the universities' responsibility to implement them:

Strategies to ensure the development and recording of students' employability, enterprise and entrepreneurial skills **should be implemented** by universities in the context of the university's mission and promoted

through its public literature to inform student choice. (Wilson 2012: 2, emphasis added)

Thus, the employability agenda is considered vital and should be projected to the universities' 'mission and public literature' so that the student-customer can make an informed decision on choosing degrees and courses.

As mentioned before, since the 1980s, UK governments have introduced numerous reforms to the educational system. By the mid-1990s, 'universities were considered by the policymakers to be more about conferring private benefit upon individuals than public benefit upon society as a whole' (Williams 2013: 41). The 'burden of financing' HE was placed on the 'individuals' (BIS 2009: 17), as it was considered that HE 'transforms the lives of individuals' by giving access to 'higher status jobs' with higher earnings (Browne 2010: 14). The Browne review clearly states that

The primary beneficiary of higher education is the individual student. The student chooses where to study and what to study; and the student chooses where to use the new skills they have acquired. Businesses benefit from employing highly skilled graduates and they pay for that benefit through higher wages. (2010: 54)

Besides the fact that the individual is considered the primary beneficiary of HE and the one who has the 'power' to choose (the power of the consumer), this statement creates a direct link between HE, students, and employers which all have one thing in common: the interest in teaching, acquiring and using (respectively) employability 'skills'. The notion of employability is particularly linked with the promotion of 'individual' 'needs' and 'benefits' when it comes to HE. The following section examines the meaning of the notion of 'employability'.

## 1.4 What Is Employability?

A widely quoted definition used by a variety of sources such as employability books (Gravells 2010; Neugebauer and Evans-Brain 2016), research articles (Boden and Nedeva 2010), government policy (BIS 2011), and some careers services websites, states that employability is:

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke 2006: 8)

It is also defined as ‘the ability to keep the job one has or to get the job one desires’ (Rothwell and Arnold 2007: 25). So, like HE, ‘employability’ is considered beneficial for the individual. It enhances the chances of ‘gaining’ employment, but it is also viewed as beneficial to the ‘workforce, the community and the economy’. Employability also ‘helps’ individuals ‘keep’ their jobs. This is due to its link with ‘lifelong learning’ as individuals are expected to ‘refresh their knowledge, upgrade their skills and sustain their employability’ (DfES 2003: 16).

Prior research on the concept of employability (Grazier 1999; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005) reveals that it can be traced at three historical eras: the beginning of the twentieth century, the 1950s–1960s, and the 1980s (Fejes 2010). The concept of ‘employability’, as we now know and understand it, came to its current form with the expression ‘initiative employability’ in the 1980s (Grazier 1999). As Fejes (2010: 89) notes,

A couple of decades ago, employability emerged as a discourse that replaced the previous way of describing the workforce [...]. Instead of speaking about a shortage of employment and describing the citizen as employed or unemployed, policy now spoke about a lack of employability, and the citizen came to be described as employable or not employable [...] or in need of employability skills.

Thus, besides the popular definition of employability cited in different contexts including careers services within the UK HE sector, there is a critical interpretation of this notion that highlights the distance kept

by the state in contemporary societies when it comes to the welfare of citizens. In other words, the notion of employability takes away responsibility from the state. Instead of ‘speaking about a shortage of employment’, in terms of what governments could do to create more employment positions that would lead to stability and security in the ‘labour market’ and into the citizens’ lives, we talk about ‘employable’ or ‘not employable’ citizens who are responsible for developing their ‘employability skills’ to succeed in the ‘competitive job market’. The discourse of employability promotes a reality where economic insecurity and labour competitiveness are presented as natural, or ‘common sense’. Individuals are expected to develop, enhance, improve, or update their skills, become flexible, adaptable, and employable. The notion of employability is thus used ‘as an explanation, and to some extent a legitimisation, of unemployment’ and this use of discourse ‘positions the citizen as responsible for her/his own employment, and less emphasis is placed on structural inequalities and problems in the labour market’ (Fejes 2010: 90).

HEIs in the UK have accepted and promoted the notion of employability. More specifically, the UK government has excluded itself from any blame with regards to the ‘market dysfunction’ while universities were given the responsibility of preparing the ‘workers’ that employers need (Boden and Nedeva 2010: 43–44). Thus, universities have taken up the task of preparing students to enter the ‘job market’. As a matter of fact, employability is ‘at the heart of today’s university practices’, and as Chertkovskaya and Watt further note, this notion ‘has come to redefine what universities are ultimately for’ (2017: 184).

## 1.5 Why Examine the Discourse of Careers Services?

When people decide to use a service, there is a problem that needs to be addressed. Higher education students visit careers services in person or online to ask for assistance, for example, with job searching, writing CVs and applications or preparing for an interview. Also, when students are invited for an interview or at an assessment centre, they might

ask for assistance with preparing for such events or understanding the procedure and what is expected of them. This is due to the difficulty some students face in finding employment after graduation. It could be claimed that the recruitment process for some sectors has become too complicated and demanding. Besides presenting the ‘perfect’ CV, and cover letter/personal statement, applicants are asked to prepare for a recruiting assessment centre, take assessment tests (psychometric, intelligence, numeric, specialist, etc.), prepare presentations on specific topics, and attend interviews (two or three interviews until final decision). A quick search of online newspapers shows articles that stress HE graduates’ struggle to find employment (see, for example, Espinoza 2015; Viña 2016). Similar evidence can be found in *The Student Room*, an online student community, with discussions initiated by HE students entitled, for instance, ‘Do you know what career you want to do or [are] you still clueless?’, ‘Keeping yourself occupied while job hunting’, ‘I feel so unemployable’, and ‘Struggling To Find A Job After Uni’ (The Student Room 2017).

A regularly used expression is: ‘a degree is not/no longer enough’ (Berntzen 2012; Okorie 2016; Ortlieb 2015). Young people are told that they need to develop skills and become employable should they wish to succeed in the competitive job market. As Mautner notes, ‘industry, politics, and the media are vociferous in their demand for more “employable” graduates’ (2010: 81). UK universities promote their ability to assist and guide students towards becoming employable during their time at university. As discussed later in this book, some even state that the employability of their graduates is their ‘priority’, or ‘central’ to their institutions’ academic approach (Chapter 5).

The notion of employability has been promoted by UK governments and accepted by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). One of the ways students learn about the idea of becoming employable while at university is through the careers services. Careers staff are given the roles of the ‘expert’ professionals who are there to support and guide students towards developing their employability skills. In brief, the careers services suggest that if HE students focus on ‘gaining’, ‘developing’, ‘enhancing’, ‘improving’ their skills while at university, they will become more employable and earn an advantage in ‘securing’ a job after

graduation. Employability is thus presented as a remedy to the social problem of unemployment. Careers services in UK HEIs have direct access to students who are trying to figure out how to ‘succeed’ in this stressful and insecure graduate ‘job market’. The language used by the services can affect the way HE students view the job-seeking ‘reality’ and their role in it. The examination of the careers services’ discourse and the consequences of their linguistic choices on the students’ perception and interpretation of the job market and general employment ‘reality’ is important as it can highlight possible problematic issues and raise awareness that will, ideally, in time, be addressed and encourage social action and change.

## 1.6 Previous Research on the Marketisation of HE and Employability

Over the last three decades, there has been a growing body of research highlighting the use of marketised and managerial discourse by HEIs around the world. The impact of the market on HE has been a key focus in the field of linguistics, especially by researchers who adopt a critical point of view. Various data sources have been examined when it comes to the marketisation of (higher) education such as policy documents (Mulderriig 2011, 2012; Wodak and Fairclough 2010), election manifestos (Pearce 2004), online corpora (Mautner 2005b, 2010), prospectuses (Fairclough 1993; Askehave 2007; Teo 2007), university strategy documents (Mayr 2008), websites (Mayr 2008; Zhang and O’Halloran 2013), memos, presentations and interview data (Trowler 2001), and job advertisements (Fairclough 1993; Xiong 2012; Kheovichai 2014). Similar to the methodology chosen for this book, some of these studies use CDA (Fairclough 1993; Pearce 2004; Askehave 2007 [with genre theory]; Zhang and O’Halloran 2013 [with critical ‘hypermodal approach’]), and corpus-based CDA (Mautner, 2005a, b, 2010; Mulderriig 2011, 2012; Kheovichai 2014). The majority of these studies apply ‘critique’ when it comes to the explanation and evaluation of their findings. For example, the ‘marketization of public discourse’, with particular reference to HEIs in contemporary Britain, was first explored

by Norman Fairclough in 1993. In his influential paper, Fairclough talks about the ‘marketization of the discursive practices of universities’ and their operation ‘as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to customers’ (1993: 143). Fairclough mentions that this was the result of ‘government pressure’ (ibid.). In addition, Mautner highlights the absurdity of the term ‘entrepreneurial university’ and explores the ‘changing relationship between academia and business’ and the collaboration between the two (2005a: 96).

The marketisation of HE has been a point of interest in many linguistic studies over the last three decades. However, when it comes to the notion of employability and the discourse of careers services in universities, linguistic research is scarce. There are some examples of linguistic analysis integrated into the work of discourse analysts such as Fairclough (2015), Mayr (2008), Mulderrig (2011, 2012), and Mautner (2010) that mention ‘employability’ and ‘skills’ but none of these studies provide a complete analysis of these notions. As a result of the research project presented in this book, two papers have been published (Fotiadou 2020, 2021). In Fotiadou (2020), I focus on the representation of the jobseeking ‘reality’ and the notion of employability. The second article examines the careers services profession and the nature of their role (Fotiadou 2021). The analytical part of these papers is presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

## 1.7 The Aim and Position of the Book

As previously mentioned, HE students are expected to ‘invest’ their time at university in getting prepared for the transition from HE to the workplace. This book aims to explore the main issues that evolve around the practices of careers services and advisers, such as the representation of the job-searching reality, competition in the ‘graduate job market’, the notion of ‘employability’, the focus on skills development, and the nature of the careers services’ role(s).

The approach adopted in this book is in line with the general critical view taken by critical discourse analysts on the marketisation of HE, and the pervasive nature of market forces. It also considers the language used

by careers services of vital importance, as it is one of the services where students face directly the neoliberal ‘reality’. Thus, the main aim is to explore the discourse used by the careers services and also understand their role(s) inside academia.

To examine the discourse of careers services, I use a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and corpus linguistics (CL) methods and tools. The study of language and its use in contemporary capitalism can unveil the promotion and circulation of ideologies by powerful groups that intend to promote their interests, influence people’s perception of how the world works, and affect their choices and actions. As Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 258) explain, CDA sees discourse as a form of ‘social practice’. Social practice is further explained as a ‘social activity’ (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002: 193), such as a career consultation or an online text produced and published by a careers service on a website. Those who choose to do discourse analysis accept that ‘language shapes reality rather than simply mirroring it’ (Mautner 2016: 12). So, there is a dialectical relationship between language use and ‘reality’. In addition, ‘discursive practices may have major ideological effects: that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations’ (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258) between powerful and powerless groups, such as employers and their prospective employees. Unequal power relations often employ linguistic strategies that can make certain ideologies appear as ‘normal’ or ‘common sense’. CDA aims to unravel or ‘denaturalise’ ideologies or ‘to investigate how ideologies can become frozen in language and find ways to break the ice’ (Bloor and Bloor 2007: 12).

For example, Mautner notes that: ‘The language of the market is now so fully integrated into everyday text and talk that it can easily go unnoticed’ (2010: 2). Universities are described as ‘entrepreneurial’, they ‘produce’ entrepreneurial graduates, they have strategic goals and plans. HE students are often described as ‘paying customers’ who are looking for courses and degrees that offer ‘value for money’. Graduates are presented as ‘employable’ or ‘work-ready’, while some universities instruct their students to ‘sell themselves’ to employers (as shown in Chapter 5).

The methodology used for the analysis of the data is corpus-based critical discourse analysis. We use corpora and corpus processes to locate

linguistic patterns that can enable us to understand how language is used by people, organisations, (powerful) groups to create discourses. The use of CL software, tools, and methods allows the exploration and examination of a large number of electronically encoded linguistic texts. I collected the data and built my corpus, the Careers and Employability Web pages Corpus (CEW15), in 2015. It consists of 2.6 million words deriving from 58 UK university websites and, in particular, their careers and employability services web pages. For reasons explained in Chapter 4, I have chosen to collect texts from 24 Russell Group and 34 post-1992 (ex-polytechnics) universities. University websites have become huge databases of information for prospective and current students, accommodating multiple discourses. Their content is significant not only because it targets prospective or current students, but because it also expresses the universities' formal views on various matters surrounding issues of importance for this book, such as the 'job market' or the notion of employability.

## 1.8 Research Questions

As the issue of employment is of significance to students who choose to 'invest' in their HE, this study aims to examine whether the ideas and messages disseminated from these services could affect the students' understanding of the 'job market' and the workplace, and their role in it. For this reason, I will be looking at the careers services' description of the 'world of work', the notion of employability, and I will also focus on the services and advisers' professional role. In addition, I have added a comparative angle to the analysis by observing the possible similarities and differences in the language used by two university 'groups', namely the Russell Group and post-1992 groups. The reasons for the selection of these two university groups are explained in Chapters 4 and 7.

Thus, the overarching research question is: *How do the careers services use language to inform and support students?* The following three sub-questions aim to assist in answering the central question in the three analytical chapters:

**RQ 1.** What kind of job-seeking ‘reality’ is being presented by the careers services to their users? (Chapter 5),

**RQ 2.** What is the nature of the careers services’ professional role? (Chapter 6),

**RQ 3.** Are there any similarities and differences in the language used by Russell Group and post-1992 universities’ careers services? (Chapter 7).

## 1.9 Overview of the Book

The exploration of the discourse of careers services develops around the theoretical, recent historical, economic, and social background that has led to the development and progression of careers services in UK universities. The book starts with a policy and literature review on the marketisation of HE in the UK. In particular, Chapter 2 gives an overview of HE policy since the 1980s and focuses on topics that emerge from these documents, such as the abolition of the binary line with the *Higher and Further Education Act* (1992), the introduction of tuitions fees, competition between HEIs, the representation of a ‘competitive’ world reality, and the representation of students as customers.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical and linguistic background. It starts with an introduction of ‘social power’ and the two traditions of *power*, namely the *mainstream* and the *second stream*. Other important concepts introduced and discussed in this chapter include *ideology*, *hegemony*, and *expertise*. We then move on to explore the linguistic background, namely critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and their synergy. Emphasis is also given to Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (1994), van Leeuwen’s work on social actors (2008), and other linguistic theories and concepts (presuppositions and assumptions, and metaphors), which contribute to the explanation and interpretation of the results. In general, this part of the book demonstrates the effectiveness of the CDA and CL synergy.

Chapter 4 introduces the data and analytical methods. In particular, this chapter explains the reasons for the selection of university websites as the primary source of data for the linguistic analysis and provides an

overview of the data selection process, the corpus design, construction, and some methodological issues relating to its creation. The methods and tools utilised for the linguistic analysis of the careers services corpus are also introduced in this chapter. In addition, there is a discussion on the corpus-based discourse analytical stages that combine quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis before I move on to present the framework for each analytical chapter.

The analysis of the data focuses on three major themes: (i) the representation of the job market and the notion of employability (Chapter 5), (ii) the careers services and advisers' professional role(s) inside academia (Chapter 6), and (iii) the similarities and differences in the language used by post-1992 and Russell Group career services (Chapter 7). Specifically, Chapter 5 explores the construction and representation of the job-searching 'reality', the importance of the notion of employability, and the development of skills. In Chapter 6, we look closely at the careers services (their professional titles, the places in which they act, and their involvement in the educational part of HE), the resources and tools offered to their users, their focus on 'helping' HE students, and the development of therapeutic culture and discourse. In addition, since HEIs in the UK are not a homogenous group, Chapter 7 compares two university groups that are described in the literature as 'prestigious', 'elite', 'old', and 'research-led' (the Russell Group), and 'newer', 'less prestigious', or 'ex-polytechnics' (the post-1992 group).

In the final section of the book (Chapter 8), there is a general discussion of the major issues raised by the corpus-based critical discourse analysis. This is where linguistic analysis meets critique to point out the general consequences of the careers services' use of language.

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# 2

## Higher Education Since the 1980s

### 2.1 Towards the Marketisation of HE

The marketisation of HE has been widely examined over the last four decades, and extensive literature was and is still being produced. According to Brown and Carasso (2013: 2), there has been a ‘long process of marketization under which, through the policies of successive governments of all political parties since 1979, British Higher Education [...] has increasingly been provided on market or “quasi-market” lines’. Although the marketisation of HE is a global phenomenon, it has to be noted that the United Kingdom is one of the ‘first countries, after the US, to introduce market conditions in higher education’ (William 2011: 74). The UK ‘has gone further than most in developing mechanisms to promote market behaviour among HEIs, students and other consumers of higher education services’ (ibid). Businesses and employers are included in the category of ‘other consumers’ of HE services.

Even though universities in the UK are ‘legally independent from the national governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland’, and thus operate as institutions autonomously, ‘the governments of the UK still exercise a considerable degree of influence over

institutions' (William 2011: 74–75), mostly through the allocation of funding and the regulation and evaluation of main HE activities, such as research (REF) and teaching (TEF). Thus, in reality, the government and its intermediary bodies and agencies, 'attempt to steer institutions in the direction of government policy' (William 2011: 75). For this reason, it is necessary to take into consideration the position taken by the UK governments and the ideology they express.

This chapter aims to review the key educational acts and policies produced in the UK since the 1980s. Over the last 20 years, there have been published more 'government documents on the topic of HE' than there 'were published in total up to the Second World War' (Williams 2013: 43). These government practices describe the gradual transition of universities towards the 'market society'. As Mautner (2010: 7) explains, there are many 'general trends, such as de-regulation, competition, partial withdrawal of the state and increasing dependence of private-sector funding', that 'have directly impacted on universities, triggering socio-cultural transformations that are widespread and reach deep'. This chapter presents examples of such market 'trends', as promoted by governments in the UK, in educational policy since the early 1980s. We will explore HE's shift to 'managerialism', its colonisation by 'market forces' and the 'market economy', and the role of careers services within HEIs. Emphasis is placed on the policy documents produced by UK governments. As the legal authority of this country, the discourse produced and disseminated by the government has the power to *legitimise* ideologies and *naturalise* the practices of certain social groups (Chapter 3). As will be shown shortly, one of these groups is the careers services within HEIs.

## 2.2 The Early Stages of Managerialism in HE

As Silver (1990: 94, cited in Tomlinson, 2005: 40) notes, universities 'suffered under a combination of cuts and greater government control in 1981, with reductions in student numbers and staffing' which has led them to 'greater industrial and commercial relevant, responsiveness

to economic needs and the world of business'. The 'financial uncertainty' of the time and 'national economic difficulties' has affected the funding universities received as the 'quinquennial system has been abandoned since the mid-1970s' (Pratt and Lockwood 1985, cited in Tight 2009: 37). This situation led to an investigation of universities' existing management practices which was fulfilled with the Jarratt Report in 1985.

The Jarratt committee, which was 'led by an industrialist', carried out 'efficiency studies of the management of six universities' and it was 'one of the first bodies in the UK to refer to students as "the university's customers"' (Tight 2009: 137). As the Jarratt committee was led by a businessman, the results of the investigation indicated the need for 'radical changes' in UK HEIs and 'the adoption of private sector management practices' (Tight 2009: 138). Thus, efficient management and planning were one of the key recommendations of the Jarratt Report in addition to the 'need for reliable and consistent performance indicators' (ibid). The report also commented on the role of Vice-Chancellors. Vice-Chancellors were presented as 'powerless' actors or 'scholars', executing the will of academic groups instead of acting as 'leaders' (The Jarratt Report 1984: 26–27). The committee expressed the necessity of transforming the scholar Vice-Chancellor to the business-focused role of 'chief executive' that would be responsible for the management of the institution (ibid).

The Jarratt Report was clearly an example of the early stages of 'managerialism' introduced in UK HEIs. As Anderson (2008: 251, cited in Mautner 2010: 19) notes, managerialism is 'the introduction of private sector management practices to public sector institutions'. The report noted that the shift to 'managerialism' was rising and considered vital for the future of HEIs. There is also an indication that the 'transformation' from the educational to the business model would 'spread' and be followed by other academic staff in managerial positions, such as Pro-Vice-Chancellors. So, since the 1980s, universities were forced into adopting managerial methods and staff were urged to change their roles from academics to entrepreneurs. As far as the application of

these suggestions, the Jarratt Report was taken into serious consideration by universities that responded ‘quickly at national level’ to adopt the suggested changes in management (Tight 2009: 139).

## 2.3 The Abolition of the Binary Line

The *Further and Higher Education Act* (1992) is considered a turning point in the history of HEIs in the UK. Two of the most important changes brought with this Act include (a) the creation of a unified funding council, the ‘centrally controlled Higher Education Funding Council for England’ (HEFCE), which aimed to ‘distribute money to universities in England and Wales and hold them accountable for spending’, and (b) the abolition of the ‘binary’ line between polytechnics and universities (Tomlinson 2005: 65). This development allowed ex-polytechnics and some HE colleges—called ‘new universities’ at the time—to become HE degree-awarding bodies, but it also meant that there would be competition between the ‘new’ the ‘old’ universities for state funding. Very soon a clear division between the two groups emerged. As Tomlinson (ibid) notes, ‘A quick pecking order quickly appeared among the universities’, the Vice-Chancellors of the ‘old’ and research-focused universities met and decided to create a group, called the Russell Group after the hotel they met. Competition between university groups will be examined in Sect. 2.3. Before that, however, it is necessary to discuss the introduction and rise of undergraduate tuition fees.

## 2.4 The Introduction and Rise of Undergraduate Tuition Fees

In 1996, the Conservative government assigned a committee chaired by Ron Dearing to provide recommendations on ‘how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over

the next 20 years' (Dearing 1997: 3). As a result, the report recommended that the participation of young people in HE should be raised to 45% (Dearing 1997: 97). This suggestion was justified as a response to 'increased demand for higher education' (Dearing 1997: 100). The committee also 'acknowledged and confirmed the wider public benefits of higher education which justified continuing state involvement in funding' (Brown and Carasso 2013: 83). However, due to 'evidence' that was taken into consideration, it was deemed necessary to introduce the 'contribution by graduates in work to their tuition' (Dearing 1997: 321). It is also interesting to note that the committee recommended the government's 'planned' shift 'away from block grant [and] towards a system in which funding follows the student' and their 'choices' by the year 2003 (Dearing 1997: 297).

Although the Labour party came to power in 1997, the new government which in opposition 'had consistently opposed the introduction of tuition fees for undergraduate students', passed the *Teaching and Higher Education Act* in 1998. This Act included the introduction of 'student loans and the abolition of maintenance grants', on top of the introduction of £1,100 per year up-front tuition fees for undergraduate students (Tomlinson 2005: 155). The introduction of tuition fees directly paid by students became 'the most obvious symbol of the marketization of HE' (Williams 2013: 48).

In 2001, New Labour was re-elected and although their election manifesto stated that there was not going to be an introduction of top-up fees, the 'first announcement by the incoming Secretary of State for Education Charles Clarke in November 2002 back-tracked on this position and claimed that more money should come from students and alumni' (Tomlinson 2005: 156). This idea was realised with the 2004 *Higher Education Act* when the Labour government announced the application of variable tuition fees (up to £3,000 a year), to be active from 2006. Students would be allowed to pay their tuition fees taking out interest-subsidised loans through the Student's Loan Company, and then repay their debt after graduation and while being employed. Since students were expected to have an income after graduation to repay their debts, the loan was considered a financial investment that should bring 'secure' income in return. This message was forwarded to students and HEIs.

Students had to make a difficult decision: 'In choosing a university to attend, the job of potential students is to weigh up the known cost against a hypothetical return' (Williams 2013: 53). This twist in the British educational system was presented as the only available alternative, especially by politicians: 'as countries throughout the world have discovered, requiring students to contribute to the cost of their education is the only realistic alternative' (Charles Clark, Education Secretary 2002–2004, cited in Freedman 2011: 4).

Also, the Browne review (2010), *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*, includes an evaluation of the system where the committee discusses HE policies 'over the last 50 years' starting with the Robbins Report in 1963. This part aims to justify the introduction of variable fees with students positioned as the main 'contributors' of 'their own' higher education. The review notes that 'previous reforms failed to deliver a real increase in private contributions for higher education' and highlights that due to the 'limited' public resources, there is a need for 'new investment' which 'will have to come from those who directly benefit from higher education' (Browne 2010: 27). Thus, besides the representation of a reality where the government is presented as having financial difficulties ("limited" public resources) without explaining the reasons, HE is once again presented as an 'investment' that mainly benefits the student.

Although the Browne review was commissioned by the Labour government, the recommendations were taken into consideration and put into action by the coalition government even though one of the Coalition's partners, the Liberal Democrat party, 'had made a manifesto pledge to abolish university tuition fees' (Brown and Carasso 2013: 92–93). In the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011), the coalition government makes specific mention of this:

We inherited an enormous deficit which required difficult decisions. The changes to student finance have been controversial. We could have reduced student numbers or investment per student or introduced a less progressive graduate repayment mechanism. But these would all have been unfair to students, higher education institutions and the country.

Instead our proposals for graduate contributions ensure good universities will be well funded for the long term. (BIS 2011: 5)

Thus, one of the ‘difficult decisions’ was to raise the cap of undergraduate tuition fees to £9,000 per year for students entering HE from 2012 onwards. This statement could be viewed as a rhetorical technique. The coalition government, presents the worst version of ‘reality’ (‘reduced student numbers’, ‘less progressive repayment mechanism’), to convince citizens that the ‘required difficult decisions’ are for the students’ own good. As the worst version of ‘reality’ is regarded ‘unfair’ to students, then it could be assumed that the ‘new’ measures taken by the coalition government were deemed ‘fair’.

This version of ‘reality’, however, is considered highly problematic. The reform programme that was announced by the coalition government in 2010 is, according to Brown and Carasso (2013: 1), ‘the most radical so far in the history of UK higher education, and amongst the most radical anywhere’. On the whole, it is considered that students are in the worst place ever in the history of HE in Britain, with an estimation of £40,000–£50,000 (depending on family income) of ‘real student debt at graduation’ (Crawford and Jin 2014: 21). So, there is ground to claim that this measure cannot be considered, in any democratic ‘reality’ presented by the coalition government, as ‘fair’ to those students who entered HE since the year 2012. The introduction and rise of tuition fees have, on the other hand, increased competition between universities in the UK.

## 2.5 Competition Between HEIs in the UK

As discussed above, HE policy highlights the idea of student ‘choice’ when it comes to deciding which university to attend. Student ‘choice’ and its effect on the amount of public funding HEIs would receive from the government, took competition between universities in the UK to a higher level. As students are expected to get ‘a hypothetical return’ (Williams 2013: 53), from their ‘choice’, HEIs are expected to use every available resource at their disposal to ‘persuade students that they should

“pay more” in order to “get more” (Browne 2010: 4). Student ‘choice’ has been associated with ‘quality’ (DfES 2003: 47), and ‘quality’ is raised by ‘competition’ (Browne 2010: 2). As the Browne review states, HEIs in the UK are called ‘universities’ but ‘this one word does not capture the reality of their diversity’ (ibid).

The meaning of the noun ‘diversity’ is rather vague when it comes to the characterisation of HEIs in the UK. To be more specific, UK HEIs are ‘highly differentiated by origin, status, mission, resources, research activity and income, educational provision and student characteristics’ (William 2011: 75). As William (ibid) continues, the ‘key sub-groupings are fairly stable and largely delineated by age, historical wealth and relative focus on research’. These include the ‘old’ and ‘research-intensive’ Russell Group universities; those institutions that were universities before the 1992 Higher Education Act; the post-1992 universities (ex-polytechnics and some colleges), and the post-2004 universities. Thus, according to the Browne review, the introduction of variable tuition fees aimed to reinforce this ‘diversity’ and increase competition between HEIs in the UK.

Furthermore, the Browne committee states: ‘one size does not fit all’ (Browne 2010: 2), or in other words, even though all HEIs are called ‘universities’ in the UK, the ‘products’ on offer are not the same. The notion of market competition is further displayed with the following statement: ‘Relevant institutions will be able to expand faster to meet student demand; others will have to raise their game to respond. [...] Their choices will shape the landscape of higher education’ (Browne 2010: 25). This quote differentiates universities to ‘relevant’ and, although not clearly stated, ‘irrelevant’. Those that are ‘relevant’ are also powerful, resourceful, and able to withstand the new challenges brought by the removal of the block grant and their dependence on student ‘choice’. On the other hand, it is interesting to note the distant and unsympathetic stance towards those universities that could face severe consequences from the removal of government funding.

The competition between HEIs for funding has ‘winners’ and losers, with ‘winners being those universities who can best respond to these evolving economic challenges’ (BIS 2009: 7). Taking into consideration