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Published online: 10 Oct 2022.

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The representation of students in undergraduate prospectuses between 1998 and 2021: a diachronic corpus-assisted discourse study

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ABSTRACT

This article traces how students are represented in undergraduate prospectuses from 1998 to 2021 by employing a corpus-assisted approach to critical discourse analysis of a 1.9 million word corpus of prospectuses from a single Russell Group university in England. Recent decades have witnessed an increase in tuition fees and competition to attract students; hence, it is important to understand to what extent, if any, the representation of students has changed in the prospectuses. Our findings add to the literature by showing for the first time that the representation of students in prospectuses has shifted in ways consistent with the impact of market-driven policy on the sector. Initially, students were positioned primarily as learners, partners to the university, and members of a community. Latterly, students are positioned primarily as consumers and future professionals. These findings are significant because they capture the extent to which a market-driven agenda has been normalised by institutions, and demonstrate how this process of normalisation occurs. Even before they reach campus, young people are conditioned and defined by the market, with the prospectus presenting university as an opportunity to enhance earning power rather than to benefit from life-changing education.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) has been increasingly marketised over recent decades in a number of countries, influenced by global trends (e.g. Giroux, 2014; Morrish & Sauntson, 2013). The market is typically assumed to offer a more sustainable funding model by transferring some or all of the costs from the state to the user, and bringing great transparency about how income is spent by making universities more accountable to their student-consumers (Willetts, 2017). Marketisation in English universities has thus involved higher fees for both home and international students, a move attended by metrics, league tables, *excellence* frameworks and other forms of rivalry assumed to incentivise performance. The

discursive framing of the policy has typically been around 'choice' and 'freedom' (e.g. DfBIS, 2016), with student-consumers ostensibly empowered within a new and dynamic market environment. Those opposed to a market-based direction of travel have tended to argue that education is more appropriately conceptualised as a human right than a saleable product (e.g. Smyth, 2020). Marketisation puts consumer satisfaction at the heart of the university (Maringe, 2010), while backgrounding the university's role in offering critical learning and life-changing education (Biesta, 2007; Giroux, 2014), creating internal and external communities (Jongbloed et al., 2008), and building student partnership (NUS, 2012). When students become members of a community at university, they develop a sense of belonging, which may enhance their success (NUS, 2012) and contributions to the wider community engagement (Jongbloed et al., 2008). Additionally, student partnership presents an opportunity for the co-creation of knowledge, collaborations on research, institutional decision-making and community engagement, which may improve students' learning experiences and lead to transformative education (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; NUS, 2012). Partnership is important because it 'offers a valuable alternative to the rhetoric of consumerism' (NUS, 2012, p. 5) given that higher consumer orientation was found to correlate with lower academic performance (Bunce et al., 2017; Harrison & Risler, 2015). Universities often communicate their roles in promotional materials, which may shape how stakeholders, including students, see themselves (Ng, 2014).

Among the promotional materials that universities use to attract students are university prospectuses, printed or digital booklets that typically offer information about the institution and its available courses, including advice on how to apply and the benefits of accepting a place. In the literature, there has been considerable interest in how universities represent and promote themselves in their prospectuses (e.g. Askehave, 2007; Fairclough, 1993; Ng, 2016); however, no attention has been paid to what extent, if any, the representation of students in prospectuses has changed over time. This paper fills the gap by systematically tracing the representation of students in a 1.9 million word diachronic corpus of university prospectuses from a single university in England between 1998 and 2021, using a corpus-assisted approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). The examination of how students are discursively constructed is important, since university prospectuses have the potential to influence students' identities and expectations of their university education. Ng (2014, p. 152) notes that the prospectus persuades readers/students to 'subscribe to particular values and ideological perspectives'. As a public-facing document, the prospectus is also one of the ways through which the role of universities is implicitly communicated to wider society. We look at prospectuses because they offer a means to document possible changes in the way that universities talk about students, and offer an insight into the (projected) relationship between the institution and students. We see prospectuses as one way to track how global trends in HE are mediated at the local level and consider how students are (re)constructed during the period of marketisation.

Background

The context for this study is the English HE system, which has recently witnessed unprecedented growth in market-based policy, with associated expectations for universities and their staff to embrace instrumental outcomes, league table rankings, and the metrics than underpin them (e.g. Morrish & Sauntson, 2020). Surveys of teaching

'quality', such as the National Student Survey, have come to dominate institutional management cultures; national audits, like the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, have rewarded compliant universities with gold, silver and bronze awards. Such measures drive consumerism and give prominence to student satisfaction in HE, and thus create a more transactional and corporate relationship between students and the university. The risk is that this can harm pedagogical, collaborative and mentorship relationships (e.g. Maringe, 2010).

During the period in which this research takes place, the funding model for English universities was overhauled. Tuition fees were introduced[1] for full-time resident students in 1998, the year in which our diachronic corpus begins. Variable tuition fees were then introduced via the Higher Education Act 2004, enabling universities in England to charge up to £3,000 a year for students entering university from 2006–07. In 2012, university tuition fees rose to £9,000 per year for most students. Crawford and Jin (2014) estimated that students left university after the 2012 student finance reforms with nearly £20,000 more debt than under the previous system. Since the 2018/2019 academic year, tuition fees for home students have been further increased up to a maximum of £9,250.

The market turn in English HE was enabled by policy reports that softened the sector for structural change. The Dearing Report (1997, p. 313) opened the door for the current funding model by noting that 'the arguments in favour of a contribution to tuition costs from graduates in work are strong'. The Browne Review (2010) went further, proposing that universities should be free to set student fees with no upper limit. Within policy discourse, students began to be positioned very differently. For example, *Students at the Heart of the System*, a government White Paper (DfBIS, 2011) that set out policies for the reform of the HE sector, justified the move to a market system. The government reimagined its role as a light-touch regulator, replacing the Higher Education Funding Council for England with the Office for Students – the latter so called to give the impression of championing students – in 2018.

Previous research on CDA approaches to institutional discourses of HE revealed that universities have adopted the language of business when they promote themselves and their 'products' in a range of documents and websites (e.g. Fotiadou, 2020; Mautner, 2005; Morrish & Sauntson, 2013, 2020). An early example is Mautner's (2005) analysis of the 'entrepreneurial university', which documented the rhetoric of the free market, as manifested through corporate lexis. Mautner showed how macro-level political phenomena could be captured through micro-level linguistic analysis, using corpus-based approaches to demonstrate the extent to which the language of business was being borrowed 'too liberally and too naively' (Mautner, 2005, p. 114) by the HE sector.

More recently, Morrish and Sauntson's (2013) analysis of university mission statements and Fotiadou's (2020) analysis of conceptualisations of 'employability' on university websites both demonstrated how institutional language often embraced buzzwords and slogans rather than substantive statements of educational purpose and commitments to academic values. Brooks (2018) explored how this affected students, suggesting that policy imposes on students the identity of 'future worker' rather than current learner. Morrish and Sauntson (2020) specifically brought the tools of Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL) to the discourses of the marketised, managerial academy, turning to the context in which texts are created to decode their meaning, thus providing the mechanism through which underlying power structures could be identified and critiqued. Like Mautner (2005)

and Fotiadou (2020), they concluded that the language of marketisation and corporatisation has become commonplace in the contemporary university.

Our methodological approach is most similar to Mautner and Learmonth (2020) because we seek to explore changes (if any) over time. Mautner and Learmonth (2020) mapped representations of hierarchy and prestige in management writing using a diachronic corpus dating from 1956 to 2018. They concluded that management writing was being used in increasingly obfuscatory ways. Here, we use a corpus of prospectuses to glean similar insights on the assumption that prospectuses offer a window into how universities construct their students during phases of marketisation. The prospectus holds a special place in HE discourses because it allows the institution to speak directly to potential applicants; hence, our diachronic corpus-assisted study offers unique insights into the changes in the positioning of students by universities in response to wider policy change and market-based trends in HE.

The present study

This exploratory study addresses the following research question:

> To what extent, if any, does the representation of 'students' change in the undergraduate prospectuses of a university in England from 1998 to 2021?

Corpora of undergraduate prospectuses

We compiled a corpus of all undergraduate prospectuses between 1998 and 2021 from a single university in England. This case study design allowed us to avoid any possible influences of confounding variables, including size, location, and perceived prestige of different universities. The availability of the prospectuses diachronically from a single university in England motivated our case study design. Although the first author made attempts to search for the prospectuses of other universities, pre-2010 prospectuses were not widely available in the sector. The undergraduate prospectuses come from one of the Russell Group[2] universities. Our corpus is only representative of the prospectuses (1998–2021) of this university, which is classified as 'research-intensive'. Therefore, discursive representation of students in the prospectuses of this university is not generalisable to those of other universities, and no wider representativeness is claimed. However, the changes identified in our analysis are likely to mirror those in similar universities in sectors in which marketisation is at work (see Morrish & Sauntson, 2013).

Table 1 shows the size of the corpus of undergraduate prospectuses, which was compiled as follows: The PDF files of the undergraduate prospectuses were downloaded, converted into plain text files and then manually cleaned. We had access to the pre-2005 hard copy prospectuses via the special collection section of the university library which was open to public use. Those prospectuses were digitised, and optical character recognition errors were checked and cleaned, using Notepad++, a free text editor. We determined the cut-off date to be 1998, due to the limited available resources for digitisation. Also, 1998 was the year in which the tuition fees were introduced in England; hence, our data captured the period during which fees rose, from their point of introduction in 1998, through the 2006 and 2012 increases, to the present day.

Table 1. The corpus of undergraduate prospectuses.

Year	Tokens
1998	71,020
1999	73,018
2000	73,715
2001	72,850
2002	82,675
2003	93,446
2004	94,580
2005	107,507
2006	107,740
2007	109,585
2008	124,962
2009	88,227
2010	91,520
2011	85,914
2012	83,649
2013	84,262
2014	80,776
2015	83,171
2016	61,688
2017	61,833
2018	64,076
2019	68,797
2020	49,263
2021	61,702
Total (*n*= 24)	1,975,976

Methodology

This study combines corpus linguistics methods and CDA approaches (e.g. Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008; Mautner, 2022). CDA is concerned with 'critique of discourse and explanation of how it figures within and contributes to the existing social reality, as a basis for action to change that existing reality in particular respects' (Fairclough, 2015, p. 6). The combination of CDA with corpus linguistic methods, which use computational methods to identify frequent linguistic patterns in corpora, increases the rigour and systematicity of analyses in comparison to solely qualitative studies in CDA (e.g. Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008). This combination allows the analysis of a relatively large data set to remain manageable, provides strong empirical evidence for CDA and minimises biased selection of texts or linguistic features for qualitative analysis (Mautner, 2022).

Collocates signal the meaning of words in a given context and suggest attributes, actions, concepts and processes that are associated with words (e.g. Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008). Hence, the analysis of lexical collocates allows us to identify how social actors (prospective students) are represented discursively and how their identities are constructed (Mautner, 2022). Lexical collocates have been used as starting points for the analysis of the representation of social actors in previous critical discourse studies (e.g. Baker et al., 2008; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Mautner & Learmonth, 2020). Though lexical collocates revealed frequent and/or salient representations of social actors in discourse, they do not capture their representations fully. In this study, we first extracted lexical collocates, which are two words that co-occur more than expected, of (prospective) students. By examining these collocates in their context within their (expanded) concordance lines, we interpreted the discursive construction of students by identifying themes, and by categorising collocates into these themes according to their meanings in context.

The identification of themes was qualitative, taking a bottom-up approach, based on the discourse patterns of lexical collocates (not based on their dictionary meanings) and their surrounding co-text. In this way, we identified students' roles in the prospectuses and labelled them. For example, when students were framed as participants in and agents of educational activities, these instances were coded as 'learners'. These themes were collaboratively developed and refined manually following discussions between the authors. We were then able to map changes in the representation of students in the prospectuses over time onto the socio-political context in which the universities operated and their prospectuses were published, by using the lens of CDA (see van Dijk, 2001).

The first step was to segment the corpus into six subcorpora that included equal time units and texts (n = 4). A yearly sub-corpus of the prospectuses, especially between 2016 and 2021, proved too small to provide meaningful data for collocation analysis (see Baker et al., 2008); hence, our top-down segmentation (Marchi, 2018) was underpinned by our motivation to create sizeable subcorpora that included an equal number of texts in each period for diachronic analysis of the collocates. In order to capture the representation of (prospective) students over time and address our research question, we examined the collocates of *student** (11,326 occurrences in the whole corpus) and *you|your|yours|yourself|yourselves|you'.** (45,461 occurrences in the whole corpus). It is not surprising that the forms of second person pronoun (*you*) were more frequent than *student**, since this pronominal reference directly appeals to and addresses prospective students, whereas the nominal reference suggests a distancing tone. Fairclough (2015, p. 89) notes that the use of *you* in promotional discourse is a form of 'synthetic personalisation', which creates an impression of a personal relationship with the reader, while disguising instrumental purposes of the addresser. Other alternative words that can be used to address prospective students, including *applicant** (1,332 occurrences in the whole corpus) and imperatives (2,459 occurrences in the whole corpus) were comparatively much less frequent; therefore, they were beyond the scope of the study. We removed the function words (*of*, *the*, *to*, etc.) in this study, so as to focus only on lexical collocates, though it should be acknowledged that function words have important functions in discourse and could be illuminating in other studies (see McEnery, 2006). Numbers/percentages were included as collocates since they contributed to the framings of students.

We used a free corpus tool #LancsBox 5.1.2 (Brezina et al., 2020) to identify lexical collocates of the following two node words in each period of the prospectuses, as shown in Table 2, separately: (1) *you|your|yours|yourself|yourselves|you'.**; (2) *student**. In order to identify the lexical collocates within a range of five words both left and right side of the node

Table 2. The diachronic segmentation of our corpus and the frequencies of node words.

Periods of the prospectuses	Tokens	Raw frequency of *student**	Normalised frequency of *student** per 10,000 words	Raw frequency of *you|your|yours|yourself|yourselves|you'.**	Normalised frequency of *you|your|yours|yourself|yourselves|you'.** per 10,000 words
1998–2001	290,603	1875	64.52	6816	234.55
2002–2005	378,208	2574	68.06	8285	219.06
2006–2009	430,514	2462	57.19	10,578	245.71
2010–2013	345,345	1843	53.37	9244	267.67
2014–2017	287,468	1441	50.13	6216	216.23
2018–2021	243,838	1131	46.38	4322	177.25

words (5L-5R) (Baker et al., 2008), we combined four measures: (1) The mutual information (MI), which measures the strength of collocations, needed to be at least 3 because an MI-score of at least 3 is an indicator of a strong collocation (e.g. Baker, 2006); (2) The log-like-lihood, which is a statistical measure used to filter collocations that may occur due to chance (e.g. Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008), needed to be at least 15.13, which corresponds to a *p* value of < 0.0001 since this cut-off point indicates a confidence level of 99.99% (Rayson et al., 2004) that lexical collocates that co-occur with the node words are not due to chance; (3) Dispersion, operationalised as range, which means that each collocation needed to occur in at least 3 out of 4 prospectuses in each subcorpus so that collocations would be representative of each period of prospectuses; (4) Frequency, operationalised according to the relative frequency of the node word in each subcorpus. In terms of collocation frequency, following McEnery et al. (2019, pp. 421–422), we aimed to make a 'principled decision' and set 'a relative minimum frequency threshold' for each subcorpus based on the relative frequency of the node word. When the relative frequency of the node word *student** was smallest in the subcorpus for the period of 2018–2021 (see Table 2), the collocation frequency threshold was set at 10. It should be noted that the minimum collocation frequency threshold was 5 in McEnery et al.'s study (2019), and such frequency thresholds are arguably arbitrary. We determined a more conservative threshold of 10 for the smallest subcorpus to filter very infrequent collocations from our analysis. This figure proportionally increased according to the relative frequency of the node word in each period to minimise the influences of different subcorpus sizes and ensure consistency in our identification of collocations (McEnery et al., 2019). The minimum collocation frequency, for instance, became 38 in the subcorpus for the period of 2018–2021 when we analysed collocations whose node word was *you|your|yours|yourself|yourselves|you'.** These four measures were combined, since we aimed to capture both frequent and exclusively associated collocations that occurred in a majority of the texts in each subcorpus.

After distilling the lexical collocates using the four measures, we focused on the top 30 lexical collocates, ranked by the MI-score, in each period of the prospectuses for each node word separately to generate a manageable amount of data for qualitative analysis. The proportion of the top 30 lexical collocates ranged from 31% (highest in 2018–2021) to 14% (lowest in 2006–2009) of the total number of lexical collocates that met the above-mentioned four criteria. Then, we used these lexical collocates as starting points into the wider context in our corpora and read the (expanded) concordance lines to understand their meanings in context. Our examination of the concordance lines allowed us to interpret how students were represented in the prospectuses and code these representations into themes. We also read the expanded concordance lines when a single concordance line was not deemed adequate to interpret how students were framed. Our diachronic analysis of lexical collocates comprised both 'consistent collocates', those that occurred in at least 70% of the subcorpora in the overall corpus (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008, p. 11), and 'seasonal collocates', those that occurred in a few subcorpora but not others. This decision was made to analyse both possible changes in the meanings of the consistent collocates in the prospectuses over time and dynamic trends in discursive representations of students through seasonal collocates (see Brookes & Wright, 2020). Where the lexical collocates had multiple meanings, we coded these into one theme, considering their most predominant meaning. In order to increase the trustworthiness and rigour of this analysis, the second author independently analysed 30 randomly selected

lexical collocates from different periods of the prospectuses. The inter-coder reliability reached 93.3% percent agreement (we agreed on 28 out of 30 collocates). We resolved any disagreements through discussion on the meaning of the collocates in the expanded concordance lines. After that, we agreed to code one of the first of these collocates (*talented*) into the 'other' category and agreed on the meaning of the second lexical collocate (*undertake*) in the prospectuses. The 'other' category represented lexical collocates that had no predominant meanings in context or did not fit into the themes of this study. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the strongest top 30 lexical collocates for each period of the prospectuses and their themes into which the collocates were manually grouped based on the meanings in their context for each period.

Due to space limitations, we present only the five most common representations of students in the next section. Figure 1 shows the relative frequency (per 10,000 words) of the different representations of students, as reflected in (expanded) concordance lines in the prospectuses over time. The five themes that we identified were: (1) Students as learners; (2) Students as consumers; (3) Students as future professionals; (4) Students as inclusive members of a community; (5) Students as partners.

Analysis

This section expands on each of the five themes presented in Figure 1.

Students as learners

The theme 'students as learners' refers to instances in which prospective students appear in an educational framing, as potential acquirers of knowledge within their academic
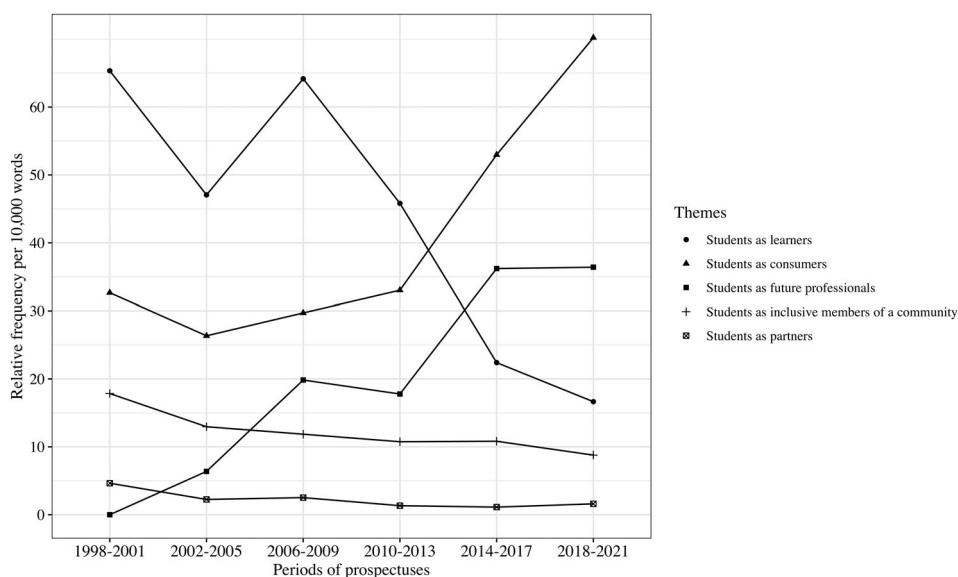
Figure 1. Frequency of reference to (prospective) students per 10,000 words in the prospectuses over time.

Table 3. Lexical collocates of *student** in the prospectuses over time.

Themes	Periods					
	1998–2001	2002–2005	2006–2009	2010–2013	2014–2017	2018–2021
Students as community members	union; officer; friendly; welcome; relaxed; relations; get; welfare; societies; know; encouraged; needs; meet; informal; staff	union; welcomes; relaxed; difficulties; informal; friendly; first-year; needs; welcome; home; EU	union; mature; widening; population; participation; helpful; recruitment; disabilities; income; pastoral; home; encouraged; EU	union; mature; committee; fellow; disabled; recruitment; returning; EU; women; widening; organised; welcome; pastoral; participation; funding; societies	union; disabled; fellow; hub; action; volunteer; share; EU; welcome; volunteering; societies; living	union; disabled; hub; societies; action; involved; countries; financial
Students as consumers	giving; overseas	homes; registration; benefit; overseas; life; wishing	hub; homes; entitled; wishing; registered	hub; homes; satisfaction; survey	satisfaction; 96%; survey; 100%; consistently; national; 2014; 2013; currently	satisfaction; 90%; survey; satisfied; 2016; national; living; quality; services
Students as partners	participation; representatives; ensures; elected; active; run	representatives; participation; run	nightline; mentoring; views; committee; operates; telephone	peer; mentoring	mentoring; active	active; run
Students as learners	registered; taking; fieldwork; involve	intake; registered; enrolled	enrolled	tutorial; tutors		portfolio
Students as future professionals			teachers		previous	former; awarded; train; previous; completed
Students as debtors		loans; loan	loans	loans	loan; eligible; fee; tuition	England; tuition
Students as applicants	mature	mature; encouraged		accepted; grades; achieve	accepted	
Other	wishing; come	come; majority approximately	occupational; created; majority	occupational; identify	talented	suitable; designed; guide

Table 4. Lexical collocates of *you|your|yours|yourself|yourselves|you'.** in the prospectuses over time.

Themes	Periods					
	1998–2001	2002–2005	2006–2009	2010–2013	2014–2017	2018–2021
Students as learners	progress; tutor; classification; personal; develop; specialise; enable; help; allows; pursue; able; opportunity; results; allow; follow; give; attend; learn	keep; tutor; progress; maintain; learn; personal; equally; help; pursue; discuss; develop; allows; prepare; gives; attend; allow	assessed; equally; learn; maintain; help; attend; enables; tutor; develop; complete; give; gives; enable; hours; allows; specialisation	equally; progress; enable; develop; allow; enables; build; give; balance; specialise; allows; giving; maintain	equally; allow; progress; enables; maintain; balance; gives; start; specialise	begin; allow; specialise; knowledge; dissertation
Students as consumers	want; choose; wish; select; find; choice	choose; need; select; want; interested	want; decide; choose; need; wish; select; interests	allowing; want; choose; wish; flexibility; chosen; interests	tailor; interests; allowing; need; chosen; want; interested; choose; choice	tailor; interests; chosen; allowing; interested; allows; flexible; want; follow; choice; choose; interest; degree; options
Students as future professionals		enables; enhance; build	prepare; pursue; career; visits; undertake	prepare; keep; help; pursue; undertake	give; enable; help; prepare; giving; future; develop; make	enhance; give; enable; employability; help; prepare; make; future; develop
Students as applicants	receive; apply; application	think; receive		need; application; visit	application; apply; receive	need; apply
Students as community members		know; welfare				
Other	need; write; spend	write; spend	final; spend	final; spend	spend	

disciplines and participants in scholarly activities, such as tutorials. This construction of students showed a sharp decline after the period of 2006–2009, as seen in Figure 1. This theme represented the most common framing of (prospective) students until the period of 2014–2017 when the representation of students as learners was superseded by that of students as consumers (see Figure 1). The marketing value of learning or studying apparently became less worth communicating at this point, falling from 60 occurrences per 10,000 words in 2006–2009 to fewer than 20 occurrences per 10,000 words in 2018–2021.

Biesta (2007) notes that one of the civic roles of universities is knowledge creation and dissemination through both research and teaching processes. As extracts 1 and 2 illustrate, prospective students were initially portrayed in ways consistent with this purpose.

(1) In a typical week, *you* will *attend*[3] 12 lectures, two tutorials and six hours of laboratory. (1998–2001, repeated in 2002–2005)[4]

(2) Besides basic computer systems, *you* will *learn* about expert systems, neural networks, human psychology and knowledge engineering. (1998–2001, repeated in 2002–2005)

Prospective students were also portrayed as those who would engage with their subject matter in-depth so that they could be experts or specialists in their field, as extract 3 shows. This trend was present in the university prospectuses, except for the period of 2002–2005 in which the lexical collocate *specialise* or *specialisation* was absent in the top 30 lexical collocates of both node words.

(3) *You* also start to *specialise* in areas of urban planning and regeneration, or environmental and landscape planning. (2010–2013)

In the most recent two periods of the prospectuses, students were constructed as learners less frequently than in the previous periods. Extract 4 gave students an active role as learners regarding their course units, which represented rare examples of students constructed as learners between 2018 and 2021. The lexical collocate knowledge only occurred in the period 2018–2021; however, the construction of this knowledge was in relation to professional skills, as illustrated in extract 5. Extract 5 is representative of discourses that involved students developing their knowledge for the sake of their future 'professional practice'.

(4) As a Joint Honours *student*, you'll take an equal *portfolio* of our course units across your two subject areas in your first year, benefiting from the full breadth of expertise and choice in both departments. (2018–2021)

(5) Projects are an excellent opportunity for *you* to integrate your *knowledge* and skills and apply them to real situations – exposing you to professional practice. (2018–2021)

Notably, the key actors of knowledge creation and dissemination, namely academic *staff* members or *tutors* (see Tables 3 and 4), stopped collocating with the node words in the two most recent periods of prospectuses. As we showed in extract 4 and examined the collocates of *student** in expanded concordance lines, it was not made explicit whose 'expertise' students would be benefiting from; hence, academics seem to be rendered invisible over time in relation to learning.

Students as consumers

This theme reflects the construction of student-consumers as users of services or products in exchange for payments made directly or indirectly to exercise choice. The theme involves decision-making about services and products based on perceived attributes, including student satisfaction and students' interests (Maringe, 2010). This could be seen as a privileging of individual choice and interests (e.g. Giroux, 2014) over collective values and learning. Our examination revealed that the student-consumer phenomenon was not new. As shown in extract 6, the choice for prospective students was initially between a limited number of course units, whereas in more recent sub-corpora students were empowered to create their degree from hundreds of course units (see extract 12).

(6) *You* then *choose* four further courses in your first year and six each in your second and third years. (1998–2001, repeated in 2002–2005)

(7) They provide you with a basis designed to maximise flexibility of choice if *you* subsequently *wish* to change your degree programme. (2006–2009)

The other lexical collocates, including *wish*, *want*, *wishing* (see Tables 3 and 4) were used to suggest that students' preferences for units and changes in their programme of study would be met, as exemplified in extract 7. It is noteworthy that the direct addressees of the prospectuses (*you*) were constructed as consumers much more than *student**, as can be inferred from the number of lexical collocates in the 'students as consumers' theme (see Tables 3 and 4). As Figure 1 shows, the representation of students as consumers showed an overall increase over time and became the most dominant construction of students in the two most recent periods of the corpus, 2014–2017 and 2018–2021.

The lexical collocates *satisfaction* and *survey* that emerged in the prospectuses in the period of 2010–2013 served to position students as consumers who judge the perceived quality of services and teaching, specifically through the National Student Survey (NSS), as exemplified in extract 8. This framing maintained and even intensified in the two most recent periods of prospectuses, when *satisfied* emerged as a further collocate, and metrics, including satisfaction rates and NSS data also appeared as collocates of *student**, as shown in extract 9. The focus on student satisfaction based on NSS scores risks reducing students to consumers who shop for services and judge their quality against consumeristic principles. As Maringe (2010) argued, the value of HE can only be understood fully in the long term, and its quality cannot simply be measured.

(8) *96% student satisfaction* in the National *Student Survey* (NSS) with one of the highest ranking for teaching quality of any degree course in the UK (2010–2013, repeated in 2014–2017)

(9) 91% of students on our BSocSc Sociology are *satisfied* with their course (National Student Survey 2016) (2018–2021)

There was also evidence of increased personal customisation and choice based on student-consumers' self-interests in the two most recent periods, though this was much more emphasised in the period of 2018–2021, as shown in Figure 1 and exemplified in extracts 10 and 11. Increased flexibility was coupled with increased individual accountability, since students would take the responsibility of selecting their 'course units' to customise their degree, as exemplified in extract 10 in which they would have the task of choosing units from 260 options. Where students' choices and individual responsibility were foregrounded, the university's pedagogical responsibility was backgrounded.

(10) Create a degree that suits *your interests* with more than 260 course units to choose from. (2018–2021)

(11) *Tailor your* studies to *your* own academic *interests*, by taking specialised options that enable you to develop your interests in the context of your career aspirations. (2014–2017, repeated in 2018–2021)

Extracts 10 and 11 illustrate that the prospectuses moved over time towards the language of choice rather than pedagogy. Additionally, as evidenced by the use of collocates, including *interest*, *interests*, and *interested* (see Table 4) in concordance lines, prospective students were expected to have certain academic *interests* so that they could select relevant course units from the options provided (see extract 11). Such instances often serve to privilege the needs of the market economy, since students were expected to develop their interests in the context of their 'career aspirations'.

Students as future professionals

Where students are discursively constructed as future professionals, their career prospects are privileged over their status as learners. This representation first appeared in the prospectuses in the period of 2002–2005 and notably increased after the period of 2010–2013. Since the period 2006–2009, prospective students were portrayed as individuals with power, responsibility, and choice in terms of their careers.

As extracts 12 and 13 exemplify, students would have the choice to pursue certain professions and hold power over their career, valorising individual responsibility and freedom to plan their career during their studies and after graduation. In the most recent period of prospectuses, one of the buzzwords in HE (e.g. Fotiadou, 2020), *employability*, emerged as a lexical collocate in our corpus. As extract 14 illustrates, the university began explicitly taking credit for preparing students for the job market by developing their employability skills. Though these skills remained unexplained and unexemplified, students were advised to take responsibility to seek 'internship opportunities'. The representation of students as future professionals became more prevalent in the two most recent periods of prospectuses, but vagueness regarding students' future career prospects tended to remain, as seen in the extracts of 13 and 14. This is unlike the representation of students in the periods of 2006–2009 and 2010–2013 in which there was a tendency to provide examples of certain professions and career pathways (see extract 12).

> (12) *You* could *pursue* a *career* in industry as a design engineer, consultant or manager or you could choose to undertake research and development of new products and processes. (2006–2009, repeated in 2010–2013)

> (13) You want to take charge of *your future*, learning about potential career paths and prospective employers, so you can plan for an exciting future and find out what you need to do to succeed. (2014–2017)

> (14) Throughout your degree, we'll offer advice and training on career opportunities and on developing *your employability* skills. You can meet and discuss graduate recruitment and internship opportunities … (2018–2021)

Students as inclusive members of a community

The construction of students as inclusive members of a community reflects collectivism marked by support, togetherness, involvement and interactions within a social group, either within the university or in the wider local community. According to Jongbloed et al. (2008), universities create internal communities that include students and staff members, and have close relationships with external communities that involve local community members, along with other outside groups, including alumni. This theme showed a linear decrease after the period of 1998–2001 in terms of its relative frequency, as shown in Figure 1.

In the periods of 1998–2001 and 2002–2005, there were lexical collocates that described the characteristics of the community in which students were members, including *informal*, *friendly* and *relaxed*, as extract 15 shows. *Staff* ceased being constructed as part of a community with students in the prospectuses after the period of 1998–2001, since it was not among the top 30 lexical collocates of the node words.

(15) Relations between *staff* and *students* are *friendly* and *informal*. (1998–2001)

From the period 2002–2005, promotion of a diverse student community, including *mature students*, became a feature of the prospectuses, as shown in extract 16. Our examination of concordance lines revealed that this framing of community membership was widened to include *students* with *disabilities* or *disabled students*, and *students* from *widening participation* backgrounds in the period of 2006–2009 (see Table 3). Throughout all periods of the corpus, the *students' union* was represented as a social community in which students would get together for activities and societies, as exemplified in extract 17.

(16) The University … has a programme of information and support for *mature students*. For information contact *Student* Recruitment, Admissions and *Widening* Participation Division. (2006–2009)

(17) We provide a warm *welcome* to all our *students*. In addition to activities organised by the *Students' Union*, your School and your hall of residence, the University offers international student orientation programmes … (2010–2013)

The nature of students' community membership evolved and included the local community in the period of 2014–2017, as exemplified in extract 18 in which students were constructed as volunteers. On the other hand, *mature students* and *students* from *widening participation* backgrounds were not explicitly included or marked as members of a community in the periods of 2014–2017 and 2018–2021. This confirms that inclusive framings of students faded in more recent prospectuses. It is also telling that inclusive statements such as 'we provide a warm *welcome* to all our *students*' (see extract 17) and 'we welcome applications from all sections of society' were replaced in the two most recent periods of prospectuses by performance-related statements along the lines of: 'We welcome *talented*[5] *students* from all backgrounds who have achieved excellence in a wide range of UK and international qualifications.' The representation of students as inclusive members of a community further decreased in the most recent period of prospectuses (2018–2021), as shown in Figure 1, and this community membership was largely limited to getting *involved* with *student societies*, as exemplified in extract 19.

(18) *Student volunteering* – *Student* Action runs weekly *volunteering* projects and one-off events helping people in the local community. (2014–2017)

(19) Get *Involved*

400 + *student societies* – from … Game of Thrones to K-pop. (2018–2021)

Students as partners

The representation of students as partners involves discourse in which students, together with other stakeholders at university, contribute to decision-making, teaching, research, and other missions of the university (see Cook-Sather et al., 2014). The National Union of Students (NUS, 2012, p. 6) advocates for partnership and emphasises its benefits in its manifesto. Against this backdrop, prospective students were never portrayed as partners at university over 24 years in the prospectuses when the collocates of *you|your|yours|yourself|yourselves|you'*.* were examined. On the other hand, as revealed by the examination of the collocates of the node word *student** (see Table 3) in their concordance

lines shows that there was evidence of partnership, particularly in the early prospectuses; however, the representation of students as partners showed a decreasing trend after the period of 2006–2009, as seen in Figure 1.

Extracts 20 and 21 exemplify a broader discourse of students as partners who would actively participate in committees and decision-making and express their views about their courses from the period of 1998–2001 to 2006–2009. After the period of 2006–2009, the construction of students as partners was backgrounded both quantitatively and qualitatively. Student partnership was limited to *peer mentoring*, as seen in extract 22, or leading student societies at university. Strikingly, student partnership in the form of decision-making or curriculum development at university became absent after the period of 2006–2009.

(20) … and there is *active participation* by *students* in decision-making, through represen-tation and consultation. (1998–2001, 2002–2005)

(21) The student-staff *committee* ensures that *students' views* about the courses are discussed regularly and that suggestions are acted upon. (2006–2009)

(22) You'll enjoy … a *student peer mentoring* system involving the student-run Art History Society. (2010–2013)

Discussion

Our corpus-assisted study has diachronically revealed changing patterns among rep-resentations of students in the prospectuses of a single Russell Group university in England from 1998 to 2021. Our systematic analysis of the top 30 lexical collocates of the node words shows that there is a trade-off between the representation of students as consumers and the other identities and roles ascribed to them, including learners and community members. As the portrayal of students as consumers increased in the pro-spectuses, the construction of students as learners, partners and community members decreased.

Over time, in our corpus, learning turned into the acquisition of instrumental knowl-edge and experience for professional practice. This is a reflection of the positioning of uni-versity teaching as an extension of the employability agenda through policy like the Teaching Excellence Framework (DfBIS, 2015), a manifestation of a metricised system that gives little space for foregrounding learning for the sake of critical inquiry, scholarly debate or dialogue (e.g. Giroux, 2014). It is also telling that academic *staff* members or *tutors* slowly became absent in the discursive representation of students as learners as they no longer collocate with the node words in the two most recent periods of prospec-tuses. This absence may reflect a diminution of the role of scholarly interactions between students and academic staff members in learning, at least in the university prospectuses.

The increasingly prevalent construction of students as consumers in the prospectuses is a corollary of marketisation trends across HE (e.g. Giroux, 2014; Ng, 2016) and rising tuition fees in England. This also echoes the UK government's positioning of students (DfBIS, 2016) and other UK policy documents in which there is frequent reference to 'student choice' (see Brooks, 2018). The policy (DfBIS, 2016, p. 8), for instance, states that: 'Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their

game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception.' The most recent university prospectuses in this study perpetuated and reconstructed such positioning as evidenced by lexical collocates such as *quality*, *services*, *choice*. Our findings suggest that the dominant representation of students in the university prospectuses follows the lead of policy discourse (see Morrish & Sauntson, 2013 for university mission statements).

In the literature, it is argued that students are positioned as empowered/powerful consumers (e.g. Nixon et al., 2018) in discourses of HE. We note that the positioning of students as consumers driven by 'student choice' could disproportionately empower those with the cultural and social capital necessary to make 'informed choices' (DfBIS, 2016, p. 11), tailoring their courses to their academic *interests* and *career* aspirations. According to Eagleton-Pierce (2016, p. 21), 'choices are not made in a vacuum', and they are constrained by 'resource scarcity with respect to time and money'. Hence, the impression of 'over-choice', as manifested by 'creating a degree' or 'tailoring studies' to 'career aspirations' in the most recent prospectuses, may not be empowering for all students, especially those lacking access to information and advice from trusted sources and those with strained financial resources. We do not know whether the large number of course units claimed in the most recent prospectuses reflects the actual number of course units offered at university, and the number may be much fewer at other universities. The representation of students as future professionals also increased in the university prospectuses over time, valorising individualism and private interests that were projected onto students. The construction of students as future professionals in the most recent prospectuses is in line with Fotiadou's (2020, p. 283) findings on the UK university careers services webpages that represent students as 'marketable and sellable products' and 'the notion of employability as the only solution to finding employment'.

The representation of students as partners and inclusive members of a community decreased in the most recent prospectuses, privileging individualism and self-interest over collaboration and collectivism (e.g. Giroux, 2014). Interestingly, students from diverse backgrounds were explicitly represented as members of a community in the periods of 2006–2009 and 2010–2013. Such inclusive representations might be reflective of the widening participation agenda and expansion of HE during the New Labour government (1997–2010) (e.g. DfES, 2003). It should be noted that widening participation is still on the agenda in one of the government's more recent White Papers (DfBIS, 2016), which had 25 references to widening participation; however, it seems to be backgrounded in comparison to principles, such as 'choice' and 'competition', which occurred 160 and 51 times, respectively. Hence, universities may be following policy discourse and deprioritising widening participation, at least discursively in the prospectuses.

The construction of students as partners was largely reduced to peer mentoring after the period of 2006–2009, which coincides with an increase in tuition fees at universities in England and Wales. NUS (2012) compellingly argues for student-staff partnership for shared responsibility, collaboration, and co-production to engage students in transformative scholarly interactions rather than transactional arrangements; however, prospectuses have moved in the opposite direction, positioning students in ever more individualistic terms. Though empowered by political rhetoric (e.g. DfBIS, 2016), the prospectuses are a reminder that the consumerist power of students is mostly illusory.

Conclusion

Prospectuses reflect institutional values and project an identity onto their readers, in addition to giving students a first impression of what the university and its programmes are. We find that the representation of (prospective) students in the prospectus has shifted over time from 'learners' to 'consumers' and 'future professionals', at the expense of other identities, including inclusive members of a community and partners at university. The academy may thus appear less welcoming to students who see themselves simply as learners within an inclusive community.

The trend for English university prospectuses to position students less as 'learners' and more as 'consumers' is hardly unexpected given the policy landscape. However, our data expose important paradoxes and inconsistencies within the enactment of market-based thinking. For instance, despite the political instinct to valorise students' agency as consumers by placing them at the heart of the system, we found that students were positioned as partners to the university less frequently over time. In earlier prospectuses, partnership was regularly exemplified through students' centrality to institutional decision-making processes and curriculum development; however, recent prospectuses tended to interpret partnership in narrower ways, often stressing the availability of experiences like one-to-one peer support. Similarly, despite policy commitment to the widening participation agenda, recent prospectuses tended to highlight inclusion and community less, instead focusing on individual ability and talent as prerequisites for entry.

Our study is limited because the corpus we use includes the prospectuses of one university only. However, the findings are likely to be applicable to the representation of students in other research-intensive or similar international universities' prospectuses given that Morrish and Sauntson (2013) found similarities in how different universities in the UK represented themselves in their mission statements. Future studies could investigate the multimodal representation of students in other forms of university branding from a diachronic perspective.

The findings of this study have implications for the representation of students in future university prospectuses and other forms of self-promotion internationally, since market-based trends are reflected in the language of university branding in many countries (e.g. Morrish & Sauntson, 2020; Ng, 2016). Though it is possible that many prospective students/readers of prospectuses embrace – and perhaps respond positively to – the more consumeristic identities projected onto them, some students may feel that the prospectuses speak less directly to their values and academic needs (NUS, 2012; Nixon et al., 2018). In more recent prospectuses, individual responsibility and choice on the part of students are foregrounded, while opportunities to learn from expert staff are mostly backgrounded. In such ways, policy discourses are repeated, and institutions become complicit in reproducing and enacting a market agenda.

Prospectuses are unlikely to return to the representation of students in 1998 given the current climate of HE funding in England and many other countries. However, our evidence suggests that the positioning of students has grown narrower, with identities projected onto applicants that increasingly downplay their status as learners. The choice for prospectus writers, and for the senior managers to whom they are accountable, is whether to risk disrupting market-based logic with fresh narratives that involve partnership and a collaborative spirit of learning within an inclusive community, or whether to continue parroting the language of governments and the private sector.

Notes

1. Technically, 'reintroduced', because fees at some English universities were levied prior to the Education Act 1962.
2. Russell Group (2021) refers to 24 self-selected 'research-intensive and world-class universities' in the UK.
3. In extracts, words in italics are the collocations presented in their context.
4. In each section, extracts are presented in a chronological order.
5. The word *talented* was one of the lexical collocates of the node word *student** in the prospectuses (2014–2017), and it was coded into the 'other' category.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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