

Talking across the Chasm: Opening up Higher Education against the Policy Backdrop of the Knowledge Economy

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This paper is a preprint of a chapter that was published in *Open(ing) Education: Theory and Practice*, edited by Dianne Conrad and Paul Prinsloo, in January 2020. The full book can be accessed via this link: <https://brill.com/view/title/56897>.

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Recommended citation

Witthaus, G. (2018) *Talking across the Chasm: Opening up Higher Education against the Policy Backdrop of the Knowledge Economy* [Preprint]. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3670623

Abstract

The focus of this chapter is on the implications of the discourse of marketisation in higher education (HE) for academics who practise (or wish to practise) open education in English universities. Academics in favour of open education often face barriers to implementing openness in practice as a direct result of national policy, which emphasises competition and exclusivity in contrast to the collaboration and inclusivity at the heart of the open education agenda. One recent policy development, in particular, is likely to increase these barriers: the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). To explore these differences, this chapter presents a comparative critical discourse analysis of the UK government's White Paper for the TEF, and a Science for policy report by the European Commission on opening up education.

Situating the Study: The Teaching Excellence Framework and its Role in Regulating Higher Education in England

The TEF was introduced in England in 2017 to improve the quality of teaching in undergraduate programmes in higher education (HE) (BIS, 2016). It aimed to do this by “rewarding and recognising excellent teaching, supportive environments and ways of learning, [and] whether studying has enabled students to fulfil their potential (usually in employment or further study and training)” (HEFCE, 2018). The TEF metrics are drawn from

student satisfaction ratings, retention/drop-out rates, and data about graduates' employment or engagement in further study after completing their degrees. Participation in the TEF is optional for HE institutions, but from 2020 the ability to increase tuition fees in line with inflation will depend upon successful achievement of the TEF metrics. The TEF therefore pits HE institutions against one another in a new form of ranking which reflects a dramatic intensification of marketisation of the HE sector in England. "Marketisation" here refers to a characterisation of HE as being part of a "knowledge economy" in which it is desirable that "providers" (institutions) should enter into competition with one another, in the belief that this will result in "consumers" (students) getting the best value for their money.

To understand this trend, some historical background follows. While the earliest English universities were originally privately funded, from the late 1800s onwards, they began to receive significant state aid as the benefits to the wider society of HE and research became apparent. In 1919, the University Grants Committee was established to coordinate all government grants to universities, and it continued to operate until 1989, presiding over a strong national HE system. From 1962, HE was made free for all students, and the state also provided maintenance grants on a means-tested basis. This was partly to simplify the complex array of grants and scholarships that had evolved to support poor students (Anderson, 2016), but also a manifestation of the belief of policy makers at the time that "the communities that have paid most attention to higher studies have in general been the most obviously progressive in respect of income and wealth" (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, para. 626).

As post-war demand for HE grew, a number of new, state-funded "polytechnics" (HE bodies without degree-awarding powers, and with a teaching remit rather than a research focus) were established in the 60s, necessitating an increase in the national budget for HE. Then, with Thatcher's rise to power in 1979, came an aggressively market-focused view of HE as a private good, and cuts were applied to HE grants. By the 1990s, many of the grants that had not been cut were being converted into loans. At the same time, there was a competitive realignment of the sector, as all the polytechnics were converted into universities. Access to university was promoted as a universal right, unlike in the post-war years when only the top 25% or so of high school leavers were expected to opt for HE, and this added to the pressure on the treasury (Anderson, 2016). It was Tony Blair's Labour government that, in the mid-90s, introduced tuition fees of first £1000 and then £3000 per year. The state paid this upfront on behalf of students as an income-contingent loan, while continuing to heavily subsidise HE through teaching grants. In 2010, the Conservative government abolished the teaching grant altogether and allowed HE institutions to triple fees to a maximum of £9,000 per year from 2012; two years later they also raised the interest on loan repayments to 6.1%, a step which is likely to generate an average student debt of £57,000 (Belfield, Britton, Dearden, & van der Erve, 2017). Since HE is not truly a market in the economic sense of the word (Marginson, 2012), it is not surprising that most HE institutions in England chose to raise their fees to the maximum level allowed.

Against this backdrop, one of the central aims of the TEF is to try to create more of a market-like economy in the sector, making any further fee increases contingent upon the meeting of metrics which will supposedly differentiate HE institutions according to the quality of their offers (Ashwin, 2017). Questions of the suitability of the metrics, the likely outcomes of the TEF initiative, or the social consequences of the student debt being amassed, are beyond the scope of this study; suffice it to note that much doubt has been cast on these issues elsewhere (e.g., Esson & Ertl, 2016; Frankham, 2017; Walker & Tran, 2017; Wilsdon, 2017).

The next section looks at the growing awareness of open education in English Higher Education Institutions, and the role (or potential role) of a European Commission-authored series of reports on opening up education in this context.

Open Education and the OpenEdu framework in English Higher Education Institutions

In a seemingly parallel universe, recent calls for greater openness and collaboration between HE institutions are backed by increasing evidence that these characteristics enhance both the learning and the teaching experience (e.g., HEFCE, 2011; Nerantzi, 2017, The Open University, n.d.). A significant contribution to the literature on open education has been made by the European Union, with a series of scientific and technical reports published by its Joint Research Centre under the auspices of the OpenEdu project (Castaño Muñoz, Punie, Inamorato dos Santos, Mitic, & Morais, 2016; Lažetić, Souto-Otero, & Shields, 2015; Souto-Otero et al., 2016; Witthaus et al., 2016). The final report from this project (Inamorato dos Santos, Punie, & Castaño Muñoz, 2016) proposes a strategic framework, referred to as the OpenEdu framework, comprising ten dimensions of openness. Six of these dimensions (access, content, pedagogy, recognition, collaboration and research) are described as “core” and four (strategy, technology, quality and leadership) as “transversal.” The report advocates that those responsible for strategic planning in HE should develop a holistic strategy that embraces all ten dimensions. Two follow-up reports (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2017a; Inamorato dos Santos, Punie, & Scheller, 2017b) examine policy approaches to open education in all EU member states, and provide policy recommendations for open education at EU, national and regional levels respectively.

Within the UK, the notion of open education had already been woven into the fabric of the HE sector through the founding of the Open University (OU) in 1969 (The Open University, 2018), with the aim of widening access to HE through distance programmes. Through the OU, many thousands of British academics have experienced open education in the sense of open-access courses with flexible delivery – either as OU students themselves in the past, or as OU tutors or academics at some point in their careers. Many more academics learned about open education, in a wider sense, through participating in the UK government-funded open

educational resources (OER) programme from 2009 to 2012 (JISC, 2013), or in the EU-funded research projects on open education and their associated online communities for sharing resources and findings. These projects focused on a wide range of applications of openness in HE – not just in terms of open educational resources, but also open educational practices and policy. By the time the OpenEdu framework report and its sister reports in the OpenEdu project were published, they therefore had a ready audience of academics within English (and other British) HE institutions who were advocating and practising open education, albeit often with limited institutional backing.

Everyday Obstacles to Openness in Higher Education – Three Scenarios

A few anecdotal examples (all drawn from the author's own direct or indirect experience in English HE institutions) are provided here to indicate the kinds of obstacles and challenges facing academics who wish to practise open education against the backdrop of the growing marketisation of the sector:

- At Institution A, academics in the business school who wish to publish their own teaching materials as OER are prevented from doing so by an intellectual property clause in their employment contracts, because the school's management believes that sharing in-house materials under an open licence in the public domain would be tantamount to "giving away the family silver."
- At Institution B, a senior academic who teaches a popular but highly specialised elective module in a postgraduate programme is close to retirement. Aware that the department has not managed to recruit a replacement for her, she proposes to the dean of the school that students should be offered the option to choose from a range of relevant massive open online courses (MOOCs) taught by experts in other universities in Europe, and which include supervised assessments and award academic credits. The dean refuses to even consider the idea, positing that students would never accept such an arrangement considering the high tuition fees they are paying.
- At Institution C, an academic course team is asked by their head of department to develop and deliver a MOOC. The team is initially excited about the opportunity to deliver open education through a high-profile university initiative. However, they soon learn that the funding for the MOOC has come from the marketing department, whose priority is to ensure that the course acts as a "shop window" for the university, and the team is instructed to ensure that all educational resources are fully branded and copyrighted to the university (i.e., no open licensing allowed, and no use of OER from other institutions that might "weaken the brand message"). Also, all materials must go through an internal quality assurance procedure that takes several weeks, thus making it impossible to respond flexibly to learners' needs that arise during delivery by creating new materials.

These scenarios reflect “old power values” such as managerialism, institutionalism, exclusivity, competition, authority, and limited overall participation (Heimans & Timms, 2014, diagram under “A World of Difference”) as well as bureaucracy and commercialism. They also illustrate the logical consequences for open education of a regulatory environment which prioritises these old power values over openness and collaboration. In any of these situations, it would not be surprising if some academics concluded that open education was not worth the struggle. In his aptly-named book, *The Battle for Open*, Weller (2014) notes that even where open education appears to be taking place – for example, as more MOOCs, OER and open access research repositories are produced – this openness is very often subject to the terms and conditions of commercial platform providers or publishers, resulting in educational offerings that are no longer fully accessible, reusable or repurposable – in other words, no longer truly open. For as long as institutions prevent academics from engaging in open educational practices or enable them to do so only for the organisation’s commercial gain, the battle for open will continue.

Comparing the Discourse of the knowledge economy vs open education – three questions

This study explores the challenges faced by practitioners and advocates of open education in English HE institutions through a critical discourse analysis. It first examines the view of HE as part of a knowledge economy in which providers must “compete” to ensure that students, as “consumers,” get the best value for their money. It then compares this view against that of HE as needing to open up to provide a better service to a greater number and diversity of learners. It addresses the following research questions:

- i. To what extent does the Discourse of policy makers pursuing a market-driven approach to HE overlap with, or diverge from, that of groups who are advocating open education?
- ii. What can be deduced from the answer to (i) about how close or how far apart these different players are in terms of their underlying values and assumptions?
- iii. What can the open education community learn from this analysis to strengthen its position within HE?

The author’s own standpoint as a proponent of open education will already be clear from the introduction and research question iii. One strand of this study is therefore, that as a contributor to many publications on open educational practices (including the EU’s OpenEdu series of reports), the author is subjecting her own use of language to critical self-reflection.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Higher Education

The term Discourse with a “big D” is used here to distinguish between two recognisably different types of language, following Gee’s conceptualisation of Discourses as distinctive ways of speaking and listening (or writing and reading), which are coupled with distinctive

ways of acting in the world “in the service of enacting specific socially recognizable identities” (Gee, 2014, p. 183). Each Discourse reflects people’s values and beliefs, and the identity they are assuming or choosing to portray through the language they use. This includes considering the unspoken “figured worlds”, i.e. meanings that the speakers/writers see as so obvious that they do not need to be stated. Critical discourse analysis seeks to uncover the underlying ideologies at play, following Eagleton’s (2007) depiction of ideology as possessing “affective, unconscious, mythical or symbolic dimensions” (p. 221) and as being

an organizing social force which actively constitutes human subjects at the roots of their lived experience and seeks to equip them with forms of value and belief relevant to their specific social tasks and to the general reproduction of the social order. (Eagleton, 2007, p. 222)

Foucault (1988) also urged his readers to interrogate taken-for-granted norms and make people aware of the “intolerable” ways in which power is exercised through such norms: “The source of human freedom is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious or immobile” (p. 1). The following discourse analysis shows how the language we use is consequential for our students’ and our own experience of HE.

In Fairclough’s 1993 analysis of the shift towards “marketisation” in British HE discourse, he concluded that staff members of HE institutions felt helpless to resist the “distasteful, highly promotional, highly marketized” new discursive practices in HE at the time (p.159). He gave examples of how the wording of academic recruitment advertisements and university prospectuses had changed since the 1960s, from a blandly descriptive and genteelly authoritative tone towards a more entrepreneurial, advertorial or “promotional” language. Academics experienced a sense of alienation, he suggested, because of the absence of discursive practices “through which authority relations and institutional and professional identities different from either traditional or marketized forms [could] be constituted” (p. 159). He exhorted readers to use critical discourse analysis in the struggle to develop a new “language” as a key means of building such resistance.

Subsequent work by Trowler (2001) argued that, within the English university context, four ideological stances could be discerned among academics: in addition to the enterprise and traditionalist stances mentioned by Fairclough, he identified progressivism, focusing on the personal development of individuals; and social reconstructionism, focusing on social change. Trowler thus demonstrated that staff were not necessarily “captured by the discourse” of managerialism in HE, and that there was indeed a “language” (or two, even) for resisting the polarised extremes of traditionalism and neoliberalism. However, he cautions that these alternatives do not emerge automatically, and that, in order to resist a dominant Discourse, people may need to be “captured” by an alternative one.

Since the publication of Trowler’s paper, government policy and regulatory frameworks for HE in England have continued to construct HE institutions in managerialist terms, branding HE with the same neoliberal stamp that is used in the governance of other facets of public life such as health and welfare – not only in the UK but also in many other Western countries (Ball, 2012; Czerniewicz et al., 2018; Marginson, 2012; McLean & Ashwin, 2017). At the same time, a new Discourse has arisen within the HE sector globally – that of open education challenging traditional structures and values of HE and potentially being transformative for the sector (see for example Bozkurt et al., 2015; Bulfin, Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2014; Smyth, Bossu, & Stagg, 2016; Wiley, 2010). Sometimes these two Discourses overlap, with open education being portrayed as serving neoliberal market interests (e.g. Deimann, 2015; Munro, 2018); however, as Weller (2014) points out, the appropriation of open education for commercial gain is fundamentally at odds with the essential values of openness.

How Critical Discourse Analysis was Applied in this Study

This study used critical discourse analysis as a qualitative methodology, starting from the assumption that insights into the multiple realities experienced by different individuals or groups can be gleaned from the language they use to talk about those different realities. The study draws on critical literature on both sides of the “Conversation” (Gee, 2014), including critiques of both neoliberalism and open education in HE.

Selecting Texts

The texts selected for analysis, reflecting the Discourses of English HE policy and opening up education respectively, are:

- *Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice* (BIS, 2016) - the White Paper explaining the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for England, which will be now be referred to as the TEF White Paper;
- *Opening up Education: A Support Framework for Higher Education Institutions* (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016) - an advisory report by the European Union’s Joint Research Centre aimed at governments and HE institutions in Europe, which will henceforth be referred to as the OpenEdu framework.

Both these documents present frameworks for enhancing HE and are intended by their authors to facilitate a transformation of practices in HE for the benefit of students. Both need to be considered in the context of other related texts (a concept known as intertextuality in discourse analysis): while the TEF White Paper is part of a growing body of official guidance around the Teaching Excellence Framework (e.g. HEFCE, 2016; HEFCE, 2017; HEFCE, 2018), the OpenEdu framework is the culmination of a series of reports with research evidence, which led to policy recommendations for the European Union (Castaño Muñoz et al., 2016; Lažetić et al., 2015; Souto-Otero et al., 2016; Witthaus et al., 2016), and two follow-up reports (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2017a; Inamorato dos Santos, et al., 2017b).

Some important differences between the two sample texts should also be noted:

- The TEF White Paper is aimed at HE institutions in England (with possible future participation by HE institutions in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (BIS 2016, p. 46)) and has a regulatory purpose and a concomitant hegemonic status. The OpenEdu framework, on the other hand, is aimed at academics and policy makers in 28 countries; its purpose is purely advisory, as the EU operates on a “subsidiarity” basis for education (UK Parliament, n.d.).
- The process for the development of the TEF White Paper was “extremely opaque,” with no mechanism for sector-wide discussion of its principles (Ashwin, 2016), whereas the OpenEdu framework represents the culmination of an extensive and transparent consultation process.
- Although both documents were almost concurrent in their publication date, the OpenEdu framework had a longer gestation period than the TEF White Paper, and also took a longer-term view than the TEF White Paper, which was intended for immediate implementation.
- The documents were developed in different political contexts – the TEF White Paper in the context of a Conservative national government trying to claw back public funding from HE; and the OpenEdu framework in the context of a European policy agenda focused on reducing or removing barriers to education, the modernisation of HE in line with the advance of digital technologies, and the desire to bridge formal and non-formal education through accreditation mechanisms. These different contexts necessarily have their own discourses associated with them, none of which is entirely distinct from the others – this concept of blurred boundaries between discourses is known as interdiscursivity and implies that it is never truly possible to isolate a single discourse from a “representative” text.

Despite these differences in scope and purpose, and bearing in mind the limitations imposed on any analysis by interdiscursivity and intertextuality, there are grounds for treating these documents as typical of their respective genres: the language used in the TEF White Paper is reminiscent of neoliberal discourse in HE management internationally (McLean & Ashwin, 2017), and the OpenEdu framework can be viewed as a reflection of the discourse of academics in the open education movement globally, as it includes an amalgamation of experts’ voices from over 40 institutions/ organisations in 17 different countries in and beyond Europe (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016). Academics in England who wish to be open education practitioners are likely to seek guidance from the OpenEdu framework and the other documents in the EU’s OpenEdu series, whilst simultaneously being subject to institutional policies and practices that have emerged in accordance with the TEF White Paper.



Figure 2. Word cloud for the OpenEdu framework

A quick glance at the word clouds gives one a flavour of the two Discourses, with “open” and “education” unsurprisingly writ large in the OpenEdu framework, and “providers” and “students” given the greatest emphasis in the TEF White Paper.

Refining the Word Lists

The next step was to transfer all the words from the word clouds into a spreadsheet (final version provided in appendix), and to search within the source texts to ascertain the word count of each item for each respective document. Words which were morphologically and semantically close were stemmed (e.g. collaborate/ collaborative/ collaboration – expressed as “collaborat-”). Words naming administrative bodies or geographic regions intrinsically related to the domains or projects addressed in each document were removed (for example, “UK” was removed from the TEF White Paper’s list, and “European” from the OpenEdu framework’s list; also “Office for Students (OfS)” and “OpenEdu” respectively). Several words from the TEF White Paper list misleadingly appeared as high-frequency in the Wordle simply because they were in the document title, which was repeated on every page, but when computed as the word count minus the number of pages (84) yielded an insignificant number, and so these words were removed. (Ironically, this deprived the TEF White Paper’s list of several terms – “success,” “knowledge,” “economy,” “excellence,” “social,” and “mobility” - that would appear from the title to be key.) The top 50 remaining lexical items/ phrases for each document formed the final lists, and these can be seen in the appendix, with the 13 common words shaded. These lists informed the selection of extracts from the texts for analysis.

Analysing the Texts

For the discourse analysis proper, Fairclough's (2010) heuristic categories of the ideational ("the representation and signification of the world and experience" (p.94)), the interpersonal ("the constitution... of identities of participants and social and personal relationships between them" (p.94)) and the textual (the distribution of given versus new and foregrounded versus backgrounded information) - were used as a conceptual framework.

The TEF White Paper: Analysis

In this section, the TEF White Paper is considered within Fairclough's three categories.

Ideational Features of the TEF White Paper

Several high-frequency words in the TEF White Paper reflect the general market orientation of the document, for example "providers", "funding", "choice" (of students in deciding which institution will best "meet" their "needs"), "fees", "delivery", "market" and "finance." This worldview is clearly spelled out in Clause 7 of the Executive Summary: "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" (BIS, 2016, p. 8). In this extract, providers (universities) are seen as businesses competing in the HE "market", offering "products and services" to their "consumers" (students). This statement reflects the "figured world" of the TEF White Paper authors – in other words, what they think of as normal or typical. By using this "marketplace" terminology throughout the TEF White Paper, the policy makers are setting a normative tone for the way HE is both talked about and practised, while at the same time excluding other potentially valid views and practices. The framing of HE as a regular business (which it is not, as it is subsidised by loans to students underwritten by the taxpayer, as the TEF White Paper itself is at pains to point out) leads, within this figured world, to a certain unquestionable inevitability about the need for "market" type forces to regulate the quality of "products" and "services" offered.

The following extract from point 5 of the Executive Summary outlines the problems that the TEF White Paper is seeking to address:

- access remains uneven,
- courses are inflexible, with insufficient innovation
- many students are dissatisfied with the provision they receive,
- employers are suffering skills shortages, and
- around 20% of graduates are in non-professional roles three and a half years after graduating. (pp. 7-8)

This is followed immediately by point 6: "At the heart of this lies insufficient competition and a lack of informed choice" (p. 8). As Eagleton (2007) notes, where the rhetorical force

behind a statement carries an implication that a particular action is the best action to take, drawing apparently logical conclusions on the basis of evidence that is not demonstrably related, the discourse betrays the unspoken values of the authors. The lapse in coherence between the scenario of deficit, insufficiency, dissatisfaction and suffering painted in point 5 and its confident diagnosis in point 6 belies the authors' neoliberal ideology.

Interpersonal Features of the TEF White Paper

An attempt to unpack the identities of author(s) and readers, and the posited relationship between them, leads to different conclusions depending on which section of the TEF White Paper one reads. The first paragraph of the Executive Summary appears to set the tone for the rest of the TEF White Paper:

Our universities have a paramount place in an economy driven by knowledge and ideas. They generate the know-how and skills that fuel our growth and provide the basis for our nation's intellectual and cultural success. Higher Education in the UK enjoys a world-class reputation, with globally renowned teaching and cutting-edge research and innovation. We have maintained our position as a world leader, with continuing success in education exports in the face of increasing international competition. But we must be ready for the challenges of the future. (BIS, 2016, p. 7)

One element of this paragraph that strikes the reader is the apparently inclusive, and almost rather cuddly, use of the first-person plural pronoun – “our” universities; “we” are a world leader; but “we” must be ready. This gives the impression that “we,” the readers (many of whom might conceivably be fee-paying students), share in the ownership of the nation's universities. However, just half a page further on, after a brief discussion about the increased proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE, the limits of this shared ownership become apparent:

In 2010, we took steps to enable England's higher education system to adjust to these new demands. In 2012, 13 years after tuition fees were first introduced, we took the decision to put higher education funding onto a more sustainable footing. (BIS, 2016, p. 8)

The situated meaning (Gee, 2014) of “we” in this section is clearly different from that of the “we” in the first paragraph. This is an authoritative “we,” a “we” that isn't afraid to make harsh decisions for the good of the nation – the “we” of a government that tripled university fees for students in 2012 and labelled this a “progressive” reform (Coughlan, 2010).

Another view of the identities of the intended audiences of the TEF White Paper, and their relationship to the authors, is offered via the repeated sports metaphor. The government is depicted as the disinterested referee, whose role is to set a “high quality bar,” “ensure a level playing field,” and monitor the “track records” of providers, who are, by implication, the

players. The lapse into colloquial phrasing here invites a temporary camaraderie between reader and writer – this could be an excerpt from a dialogue between mates at a pub while cheering on their team on the telly. However, the reader should not get too comfortable, because the relationship soon reverts to “us” and “them”:

But we must accept that there may be some providers who do not rise to the challenge, and who therefore need or choose to close some or all of their courses, or to exit the market completely. The possibility of exit is a natural part of a healthy, competitive, well-functioning market... (BIS, 2016, p. 10)

There is a tension throughout the TEF White Paper between the term “providers” (meaning all providers) and “incumbents” (meaning existing providers). Incumbents are repeatedly contrasted with “high quality new providers” (BIS, 2016, p. 9), suggesting that established universities are like sports veterans who cannot (and should not) be protected from the competition of a new generation of rising athletic stars. “Exiting the market” is a euphemism for a kind of Darwinian institutional extinction, as the newest, strongest, fittest and richest institutions are expected to win out in this now no-longer-friendly competition for survival.

The word “student/s” has the second highest frequency count after “providers.” Students are unambiguously positioned as consumers – individuals who “pursue” higher education as a “sound financial and personal investment” (BIS, 2016, p. 7). Students are constructed as rational decision-makers, whose primary need is to make the “right choices” between an array of different “product” and “service” options, on the basis of “information” provided, “pursuing” their own best interests in a linear fashion. As consumers, students need to not only be “supported,” but also “protected” (from institutions that “choose” to “exit” the “market”). Through this language, the relationship between provider and student is reduced to one of a mere commercial transaction in which the student’s primary responsibility is to make informed choices about the provision they require.

Textual Features of the TEF White Paper

There are three significant omissions in the TEF White Paper. Firstly, a search within the entire TEF White Paper for the term “teaching excellence” yields no definition – the paper is loudly silent on its nominal topic. The whole universe of learning and teaching, with all its attendant complexities, is parsimoniously and conveniently encapsulated in the notion of a one-way commercial transaction between a supplier and a consumer.

Secondly, academic staff are all but invisible in this HE policy document, in keeping with Sabri’s (2010) work on the “assumptive worlds” of policy makers. Indeed, academics receive only three mentions in the entire TEF White Paper – and in one of those instances they are referred to as being “distracted”: the TEF White Paper cautions against allowing the development of a “crafty mutually convenient disengagement contract among distracted

academics and instrumentalist students,” as has reportedly been seen in the American higher education system. As noted by Sabri (2010), this lack of connection between HE policy and the lived experience of academics, who ultimately are responsible for carrying out government policies on behalf of their institutions, unsurprisingly results in many academics disengaging from national policy debates.

A third omission from the TEF White Paper is any mention of open education, even though the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) invested government funds in the UK OER programme from 2009 to 2012 (Jisc, 2013). This omission stretches beyond the White Paper to UK policy for HE in general – the EU’s report on policy approaches to open education observes that “open education is hardly mentioned in policy circles in England” (Inamorato dos Santos, et al., 2017, p. 132).

To summarise, the TEF White Paper has set out a policy context that depicts students as consumers who enjoy HE as a private good, that omits any reference to academics as the main actors in students’ education, that encourages fierce competition between HE providers, and that disregards the legacy of open education in the UK HE sector built on previous government investment. As will be seen in the next section, a very different picture emerges in the Discourse of open education.

The OpenEdu framework: Analysis

This section considers the ideational, interpersonal and textual features of the OpenEdu framework.

Ideational Features of the OpenEdu framework

The word cloud for the OpenEdu framework contains two strikingly large key words: “open” and “education,” illustrating the exceptionally high frequency with which these words occur (959 and 615 respectively, including 371 instances of the collocation “open education”). This indicates a consistent focus on the central concept of “opening up” educational practices. The following is offered by way of definition:

In the OpenEdu project, open education is seen as a way of carrying out education, often using digital technologies. Its aim is to widen access and participation to everyone by removing barriers and making learning accessible, abundant, and customisable for all. It offers multiple ways of teaching and learning, building and sharing knowledge. It also provides a variety of access routes to formal and non-formal education, and connects the two. (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016, p. 5)

Here, open education is presented as a universal good (for “everyone” and for “all”), facilitated by digital technologies. As the referent of “Its” and “It” in the above extract, open education is positioned as an agent with superhero properties, belying the fact that open

education is itself a social construct, with no earthly agency to achieve the aims described. Hidden or assumed within this statement is a not insignificant number of human actors with very particular skills, with access to technologies and digital capabilities that are not readily available to all HE learners and academics (even in relatively well-resourced European countries such as the UK), acting with intent within a range of institutional and political contexts, and most likely sharing the belief that open educational practices can become, in the words of the OpenEdu framework, “a strong tool for social and economic development” (p. 6). The term “open education” is being used in a situated way as a kind of shorthand for the wider scenario just described.

The depiction of open education here is heavily dependent on intertextuality, in that it alludes to the other texts produced within the OpenEdu project which explore the details of implementation in different contexts (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2017a), and emphasise the need for a change of mindset in the HE sector (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2017b). Nevertheless, this text indicates how idealistic the Discourse of open education may appear to be to newcomers who do not share the same background knowledge and vision for education as the authors. Ironically, use of this Discourse could reinforce the perception of the open education community as being isolated and marginal to mainstream HE, rather than the open, welcoming, inclusive and ubiquitous community it seeks to be.

The quotation above from the OpenEdu framework is just one instance of many manifestations of this overstatement of the hoped-for benefits of open education in the wider literature on openness in HE. Bayne, Knox and Ross (2015) note that openness “has become a highly charged and politicised term...” which “has acquired a sheen of naturalised common sense and legitimacy and formed what seems to be a post-political space of apparent consensus.” They further argue that:

It is precisely this view of openness – as a virtue of natural worth – that is problematic, not only because it masks alternative perspectives, but also because it does so with an apparent moral authority that renders the critic at best a technophobe and a cynic, and at worst an elitist and a champion of the status quo. (p. 247)

At the time that Bayne et al. (2015) wrote this critique, the OpenEdu series had not yet been published, and the discourse they were referring to centred mainly around OER, where this kind of romanticisation of openness was particularly prevalent. While the OpenEdu framework expands the concept of openness to ten dimensions (of which only one, content, is specifically about OER), the basic tenet of openness as being an unquestionable moral good is nevertheless deeply embedded in the ideational features of the text.

Interpersonal Features of the OpenEdu Framework

In the OpenEdu framework, the authors use a rather formal academic tone, which would fit comfortably within the genre of articles in social sciences journals. This may be a consequence of the fact that many of the authors and named contributors are themselves academics who publish regularly in such journals. It is possible that readers with a background in the social sciences will find this Discourse more “natural” than will those in STEM fields and other disciplines.

The first half of the OpenEdu framework is essentially a research report, and readers are referred to in the third person. The intended audience for the OpenEdu framework is described as:

university management and decision makers, that is, anyone who is in charge of open education or who can propose it as an important part of the overall institutional strategy. The report is also directed at those staff members of HE institutions who actually design educational strategy. (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016, p. 6)

Despite this spelling out of the audience, a repeated feature throughout the first half of the document is the personification of institutions and states, which sometimes makes it hard to discern who the intended recipients are in human terms, for example: “If a university were to decide” (p. 8); “institutions should consider” (p. 30); and even “*Europe* should act now providing the right policy framework and a stimulus to introduce innovative learning and teaching practices in schools, universities, vocational education and training” (cited from an EU Communication – emphasis added) (p. 30). The effect of this conflation of individuals and groups with vastly different viewpoints into a single entity in each instance is to homogenise the readers, obscuring many a heated debate and glossing over much unresolved conflict within academic teams who might be attempting to simultaneously fulfil the requirements of market-oriented policies/ regulations and implement open education. The second half of the report remedies this situation, as it contains two annexes with templates to support the application of open education in institutions, along with guidance for the use of the templates, where the reader is addressed in the second person. This shift from readers as an unspecified “they” to “you” serves to mark the transition from reporting to advising, and to narrow down the target audience to those staff who “actually design educational strategy.” The tone is tentative here, with frequent use of the modal “may” (as in “you may wish to refer to...”) successfully positioning the authors as friendly advisors rather than authority figures, in keeping with the purpose of the document, the principle of education’s subsidiarity within EU policy, and the general ethos of collaboration that characterises open education.

Textual Features of the OpenEdu framework

Any discussion of textual features in a document that is part of a series, such as the OpenEdu framework, needs to be undertaken with the caveat that the foregrounding or omission of certain elements cannot be fully evaluated without taking the other texts into account. The OpenEdu series of reports on opening up education includes concrete examples of practices, beliefs and strategies around the implementation of open education (Castaño Muñoz et al., 2016), case studies (Lažetić et al., 2015), and detailed proposals for enabling the accreditation and validation of open learning (Witthaus et al., 2016); however, as the OpenEdu framework is the final document in the series and contains summaries of the other studies, it is likely that some readers will read it without referring to the full set of texts.

What is foregrounded in the OpenEdu framework is open education in its many manifestations, implying that there is another kind of education which is “closed,” and which by definition suffers from a lack of all the benefits attributed to open education, such as those outlined in the following extract:

Through open education each and every individual, at every stage in their lives and career development, can have appropriate and meaningful educational opportunities available to them. These include access to content, courses, support, assessment and certification in ways that are flexible, and accommodate diverse needs. Barriers, as regards for example entry or cost, are reduced or eliminated. (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016, p. 5)

This statement contains an implied false binary (Oliver, 2015), which may appear extreme to some academics. For example, in a recent study in an Irish HE institution, academics identified open educational practices as any and all “collaborative practices that include the creation, use, and reuse of OER [open educational resources], as well as pedagogical practices employing participatory technologies and social networks for interaction, peer-learning, knowledge creation, and empowerment of learners” (Cronin, 2017, p. 18). This definition includes aspects of education that are not necessarily “open,” such as closed social networks and collaborative practices between staff in a single institution.

An omission from the language of the OpenEdu framework (and many other texts written by proponents of open education) is any explicit discussion around the difficulty readers may experience of finding a balance between open education and traditional (“closed”) education, arising out of the fact that any form of open education that fulfils all the functions described above can only succeed as one aspect of a wider HE system in which mainstream, formal, education remains strong. The OpenEdu framework advises readers to integrate their open education strategy into their overall institutional mission and vision, and yet the inevitable tensions and contradictions that this must lead to – for example, fears that open education will

“cannibalise” mainstream provision (Miao, Mishra, & McGreal, 2016, p. 132) are not addressed in the document. Dilemmas and drawbacks to opening up education are, however, extensively discussed in the OpenCases report (Lažetić et al., 2015), again drawing attention to the importance of intertextuality.

Similarities and Differences between Discourses of the TEF White Paper and OpenEdu framework

This section returns to the first two research questions of the study: Firstly, how far *does the Discourse of policy makers pursuing a market-driven approach to higher education overlap with, or diverge from, that of groups who are seeking to open up education?*

It is clear from the above that the two Discourses reflect vastly different worldviews and value systems. The analysis has shown that neoliberal Discourse is replete with deficit notions of all the key actors in HE: we have “distracted” and mostly absent academics; students who are “instrumentalist” and narrowly focused on the commercial value of their education; and providers that need to be monitored, regulated and “stimulated” by manufactured “competition” who will be somehow motivated by the expectation that those who are not able to “raise their game” sufficiently will have to “exit the market.” Open education, by contrast, offers a resoundingly optimistic and positive alternative way of framing HE, promising amongst other things, abundance, inclusivity, transparency, universal access and collaboration.

Further to these observations, Figure 3 provides a comparative look at the use of some of the other high frequency words and phrases that are common to both texts:

TEF White Paper	OpenEdu framework
The market needs to be opened up (to new providers)	Education needs to be opened up (to more, and more diverse, learners)
New entrants (i.e. institutions) need access to the market	Learners need greater access to education
Consumers (students) primarily need protection from institutions that may fail them, as well as support to succeed	Learners (students) need support to succeed
Widening participation means bringing more young people into HE	Widening participation means bringing more people into lifelong learning
Consumers (students) require information about the content of courses - in order to be	Learners (students) should have access to openly-licensed content (materials and

able to choose the “best” institution to enrol at	resources for learning, including research outputs)
Recognition of new HE providers will help to stimulate competition (between institutions) in the sector	Recognition of prior learning is an essential element in opening up HE to all
High quality research as an indicator of the reputation and competitiveness of an institution	Openly published research as a way of removing barriers to access to knowledge, and broadening participation in research

Figure 3. Comparative meanings of some high-frequency words in TEF White Paper and OpenEdu framework

From Figure 3, it is clear that, even when the same vocabulary is used, the TEF White Paper consistently depicts a closed, competitive and consumer-focused model of HE as the goal, while the OpenEdu framework consistently expresses a vision for an open, inclusive model. While the TEF White Paper Discourse is hierarchical and sometimes condescending, the OpenEdu framework Discourse reflects the ideal of a collaborative, mutually supportive world.

The second research question – *what can be deduced from the above about how close or how far apart these different players are in terms of their underlying values and assumptions?* – is addressed below.

Both texts address many of the same issues, such as the need to “widen participation” in HE, and to provide learners with the best quality education possible to enable them to be active citizens in 21st century work and social life. However, the positions of the HE-as-market-economy Discourse and the opening-up-education Discourse differ substantially in their views of the nature and purpose of HE. To the extent that the two Discourses reflect mutually incompatible standpoints and value systems, it is worth pointing out the obvious, that (in England at least), the TEF White Paper Discourse represents social and legislative power, and so academics and institutional leaders who want to both open up education and be “winners” on the “level playing field” of the TEF will have to find creative ways of doing so – as will be illustrated by a return to the original scenarios in the next section.

Considerations for the Open Education Community

The third research question for this study provides the frame for its conclusion: *What can the open education community learn from this analysis to strengthen its position within higher education?*

The foregoing discussion shows that while the TEF White Paper is preoccupied with fees, finances and funding within the parameters of a perceived competitive financial market, the OpenEdu framework is more focused on distributing the social benefits of HE throughout society. Financial sustainability is included as an element in the OpenEdu framework; and return on investment is discussed in terms of “revenue by commercialising specific parts of the open education offer to specific types of audiences, such as assessment or credentials, or more registrations for paid-for courses) or indirect (e.g. increased reputation and enhanced internationalisation)” (Inamorato dos Santos et al., 2016, p. 62). The critical difference between the proposed commercial activity within the OpenEdu framework and that within the TEF White Paper is that, in an open ecology, any exchange of money would take place between individuals or groups who perceive themselves to be part of a networked community collaborating for the common good, as opposed to the principle of individuals paying fees for which they will reap private benefit. This has fundamental implications for all aspects of the HE “marketplace” which can be illustrated by reimagining the three scenarios presented in the introduction:

- At Institution A, academics in the business school who wish to publish their own teaching materials as OER are supported to do so by an intellectual property clause in their employment contracts that encourages the collaborative development of teaching resources as OER. The school management believes that creation and reuse of OER will drive up the quality of materials in the sector, and are therefore reallocating finances to the production, sharing and reuse of openly licensed resources instead of the ongoing development or purchasing of copyrighted ones – as recommended by Weller (2016).
- When a senior academic at Institution B, who teaches a popular but highly specialised elective module and is close to retirement, proposes that students should be offered the option to choose from a range of relevant MOOCs, the dean examines this idea in detail. After much deliberation and discussion with the senior leadership team, the dean concludes that offering a wide range of MOOCs taught by experts from all over the world as new elective modules would not only fill the gap left by the retiring academic but would also contribute positively to student recruitment and retention. The dean therefore initiates a dialogue between Institution B and the MOOC-providing institution about ways of formally embedding the MOOC in Institution B’s programmes, with a commensurate fee to make the partnership mutually beneficial. Similar partnerships with other MOOC providing institutions are envisaged for the future.
- At Institution C, the head of department decides not to commission the development of another MOOC but rather to ask an academic course team to repurpose a MOOC that they had developed last year, in order to embed it into a module for on-site, fee-paying students. The rationale for this is to provide the in-house students with a global body of peers with whom to collaborate on assessed projects, so that they can learn the skills of virtual teamwork, which is an intended learning outcome of the

course. The students will work in virtual teams to co-create online resources as an assessed project. Future cohorts will edit and add to this body of resources. The head of department wants students to be encouraged to publish the resources as OER, partly because of the opportunity this affords the students for skills development, and partly to showcase Institution C's excellence in teaching to the world. The role of the academic team is to facilitate the development of these OER by the students, ensuring that they follow rigorous peer feedback procedures for quality assurance purposes.

These reimagined scenarios could be further developed with reference to the strategy advice contained in the annexes of the OpenEdu framework. They all demonstrate “new power values” (Heimans & Timms, 2014), such as open source collaboration, crowd wisdom and sharing, as opposed to the “old power values” illustrated in the original scenarios described in the introduction. They reflect some of the possibilities for opening up HE in practice, while still meeting institutional needs for reputation management, responsible use of resources, and student recruitment and retention.

In conclusion, while academics may be put off by the hegemonic Discourse of government regulation and attracted by the positivity of the Discourse of open education, more work is needed to develop the language of openness in such a way that it speaks to the lived reality of academics. The tangible meanings of “open” need to be explored with colleagues in concrete contexts related to their practice, being careful to avoid implying the inherent superiority of openness. Proponents of open education in English HE institutions should inform themselves of the many ways in which open education is being practised in institutional contexts elsewhere (for example, Cannell, Page, & Macintyre, 2016; Inamorato dos Santos, et al., 2017; Ossianilsson, Williams, Camilleri, & Brown, 2015), to help them argue for a review of outdated institutional policies which hinder or prevent openness in practice.

Open educators would also do well to interrogate their own use of language for signs of acceptance of (and possibly resignation to) a world in which they “package” education and “deliver” it to students in ways that reinforce closed practices, or celebrate their institutions' successes in terms defined by legislators who would create classes of “gold,” “silver” and “bronze” performers competing for resources and students, rather than an open, collaborative community of HE educators working for the common good. As Foucault said, in a debate with Chomsky in 1971:

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them. (Foucault & Chomsky, 2006, p. 41)

This is as true today as it was then. The learners for whom openness matters most – the disadvantaged, the mature working students with families to care for, and all those targeted in

the “widening participation” agenda – need academics now more than ever to watch their language – and to push the boundaries in practising open education to show that there is another way.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Andreia Inamorato dos Santos and David Hawkrigde for their comments on an early draft of the paper. The author also acknowledges the support of academic staff of the Doctoral Programme in Higher Education Research, Evaluation and Enhancement at Lancaster University from which this publication has arisen:

<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/phd/phd-in-higher-education-research,-evaluation-and-enhancement/>

Thanks also to Dianne Conrad and Paul Prinsloo for accepting a later, peer-reviewed version of this paper as a chapter in the book, *Open(ing) Education: Theory and Practice*, released by Brill in 2020. The full book can be accessed at: <https://brill.com/view/title/56897>.

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APPENDIX: 50 most high-frequency words in TEF White Paper and OpenEdu framework

TEF White Paper			OpenEdu framework		
No.	Word	Count	No.	Word	Count
1	provid-/provision	430	1	open- (openness/opening)	959
2	student/s	354	2	education-	615
3	research	250	3	institution-	437
4	higher education	232	4	learning	227
5	quality	188	5	learner/s	166
6	able	152	6	technolog-	161
7	funding	140	7	strateg-	160
8	innovat-	140	8	content	157
9	Year	128	9	dimension/s	145
10	institution-	127	10	access	141
11	system	126	11	practice/s	140
12	sector	116	12	research	135
13	teaching	115	13	quality	128
14	work	113	14	collaborat-	122
15	new	106	15	recognition	112
16	part	101	16	support	112
17	university/ies	96	17	framework	103
18	time	94	18	course/s	100
19	ensure	92	19	offer/s	98
20	access	89	20	OER	97
21	DAPs	88	21	part	95
22	level	86	22	policy/ies	93
23	need	85	23	MOOC/s	91
24	high	81	24	university/ies	85
25	review	79	25	assessment/assess	77
26	support	78	26	free	76
27	Choice	76	27	different	74
28	take	76	28	staff	69
29	set	75	29	online	68
30	compet-	74	30	member/s	64
31	current-	74	31	use/ used/ uses	63
32	data	73	32	higher education	62
33	future	69	33	formal	58
34	fee/fees	63	34	leadership	57
35	meet	63	35	resources	55
36	assess-	60	36	provide	54
37	full-	58	37	pedagog-	53
38	approach	57	38	design	52
39	power/s	57	39	make	49

40	information	56	40	study/ies	49
41	first	56	41	data	48
42	participat-	55	42	process	47
43	function-	55	43	plan-	45
44	deliver-	54	44	knowledge	44
45	number	52	45	non-formal	39
46	consult-	51	46	main	38
47	make	51	47	new	38
48	outcomes	50	48	mission	36
49	market	50	49	programme/s	35
50	financ-	46	50	science	35