



**MONASH** University

**The Impact of Massification of the Higher Education  
Sector on the Idea of a Degree in the UK**

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## **Abstract**

Since the mid-1970s the higher education system in the UK has massified. Over this period, the government policy drivers for higher education have shifted towards a homogenised rationale, linking higher education to the economic well-being of the country. The massification of higher education has involved a widening of participation, from traditional cohorts of students to new and diverse elements of the population.

The primary research problem for the thesis asks whether the messages sent by institutions about the motivation for undertaking a degree have changed during the recent period of massification of UK higher education. It asks how such changes are reflected, overtly or in coded form, in the institutional pre-entry documents aimed at students during the student choice process. The research problem is explored through two research questions, firstly how has the idea of a degree been constructed and the macro discourses varied in the period of massification? Secondly, how have these macro discourse changes impacted on the micro discourses in prospectuses of institutions over the period?

In this context, the study investigates whether the messages about the idea of a degree sent by institutions in their core marketing materials, the prospectuses, indicating and implying why students should undertake a degree, have changed over this specific time period.

The thesis explores how macro discourses impact on the micro discourses that operate within the student choice process through tracing macro discourses over the massification period within the institutions' prospectuses. The thesis does this work by undertaking new research identifying key policy shifts relating to the idea of a degree over the past forty years. It then undertakes a close reading of prospectuses to establish discursive practices which construct rationales for undertaking a degree that have been invoked by institutions of different statuses.

It employs an approach based on critical discourse analysis, originating from Fairclough's work on marketisation of higher education materials (1993) and draws specifically on the discourse-historical approach of Reisigl and Wodak (2009). In this way, the thesis investigates whether macro discourses impacted by policy shifts are traceable in the texts as discursive events (Jager & Meier 2009) and how these can be seen in the changing discursive practices of the institutions.

The study concludes that the major change in marketing materials over the period is an increase in the homogenisation of vocabularies of institutions and proliferation of discourses about the idea of a degree. It also finds that there is a concordant concealment of the differential status of the institutions, alongside an increase in the functional importance of the coded signalling power of the differential prestige of undergraduate degrees within the UK.

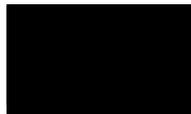
... you could well ask 'Why are these things being written for me, and are they being written to me or to some category of people I am supposed to represent?' The truth is that I don't know, because I cannot as I write know who you are or when you will be reading this or how you will be feeling when you do. (UEL, 1977)

Director's foreword for students in 1977 Prospectus for North East London Polytechnic, now the University of East London.

## Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and I declare that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:



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Date: 26/09/2017.

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## **1. Introduction**

This introduction will consider the background to the study and provide a rationale for the research approach of the project. It will present the justification for undertaking the research, introduce some key concepts used in this thesis, and highlight the thesis's main contributions to the student choice area of research within the higher education field.

The research problem of this thesis asks whether massification of the higher education system in the UK has impacted on the messages about the idea of a degree identified as in use in the selected period. Through its two primary research questions it explores whether the rationale for taking a degree has varied and whether this has been reflected in the institutions' materials which prospective students can access. It looks at whether UK higher education, when it was an elite, formally stratified, system at the beginning of the period of study in the mid-1970s, portrayed other rationales for undertaking a degree than those offered when it has become, at the conclusion of data collection for the study in the mid-2010s, a massified and diverse system. It considers this from a concern that although more students than ever are entering higher education, there are indications that contemporary students are gaining different returns from their studies. That is, the students are now entering different kinds of educational institutions with different benefits and graduate outcomes, and this stratification has apparently increased over the period of massification of the UK higher education system.

The thesis focuses on the purposes and rationales for taking a degree, considerations termed in this thesis the idea of a degree. It investigates how these messages have been expressed by institutions in their marketing materials and whether they differ between institutions of different status. This research also questions whether institutional materials have become more complex over the period of massification and marketisation. This is of particular concern in the light of equity issues over access to information within the student choice process. The interest originates from my position as a careers counsellor involved in assisting students with transition into higher education, and transition after graduation into employment.

The first section of the Introduction details my position in commencing the research, and the origin of the research problem. The second section details the research problem and the third section discusses briefly the approach taken in this thesis. The final section outlines the thesis by explaining the key content of each chapter.

### **Researcher position in the research**

I commenced and conducted this research over a six-year period while a careers counsellor in Australia, working primarily within a tertiary setting. I completed the thesis while working in a professional role managing strategic aspects of Australia's National Career Information Service, the myfuture.edu.au website. The website provides occupational information guidance and tertiary course information (vocational and higher education course listings) as a service for Australian state and national governments.

However, I conceived an interest in the topic much earlier. It arose from my commitment to equity of access to information in the admissions process. In 2009, I left my role as a higher education senior registry administrator dealing with course admissions, validation and examinations within a UK university registry department in order to re-train as a careers counsellor in my home country of Australia. This career change was based on my interest in transition to and from higher education, with the intention of progressing towards researching how institutions provide information to students before they enter higher education. The interest arose from my own previous study into widening participation in higher education during my Master of Arts (Higher and Professional Education) at the Institute of Education in London where my dissertation was a discourse analysis of

the 2006 UK higher education institutional Access Agreements, and this interest deepened during my work as a careers counsellor.

This thesis uses approaches that draw on the practice-oriented nature of my original interest, as the research seeks to generate understandings that can help practitioners understand more about the student choice process. This work seeks to look at a part of the process of student choice which has been little researched, that of the pre-entry materials published by institutions, which can be consulted by students in their choice of higher education course. This aspect of the student choice process is of professional concern to me and has been of long-standing interest. Further, the idea of a degree is interesting to me as part of my practice as a careers counsellor draws on narrative counselling techniques and an important part of that practice is the story of beginnings and the motivation for transitions. In my career counselling practice, in which I have worked primarily with students in higher education or about to start higher education, I ask them to tell me the story about how they found and selected the course and institution they are enrolled in or they are interested in attending.

In their diverse stories there are recurrent themes of what the courses are, which institution they chose and how they found the information. In the narratives they tell, few students were advised to apply for a specific course at a specific institution. They recount that their families, their teachers and other contacts talked to them about a field of education (e.g. Law, English or Engineering) and often an institution, but few were directed to a specific course of study for which an application could be made. Even those students who have significant access to experience about higher education often referred to the finding of their specific courses in the marketing materials of higher education, and saw this selection as a moment of discovery.

In my work as a careers counsellor, the reading of institutional marketing materials of higher education institutions have been observed to be a significant step in the process of student choice. How the materials support students in developing their educational decision-making is critical. A core part of the decision-making process seems to relate to the students' understanding of what the institutions offer and what they believe the courses offer; and their understanding is often based on the institutional texts. The messages institutions send to students about what the idea of a degree means generally, and what each course can offer specifically, was observed in my practice to be of real importance, and that is the focus of the study. My research's analysis is based on the examination of the messages related to the idea of a degree in marketing documents produced by institutions. As will be discussed later in the thesis, I have chosen to use unobtrusive methods and undertaken documentary analysis of the pre-entry materials of higher education institutions.

I believe the viewpoint of my professional role informs my position in this research. I view my career counselling practice of supporting students as academic-related but not purely academic work. It is also further influenced by my work in institutions of different status within the higher education system. My role, interacting with employers and preparing students for graduate employment, and my current position, working across all states and territories of Australia with school careers counsellors and university student recruitment teams, provides a useful praxis perspective. In my current role, I develop the National Career Information Service to give information about higher education and vocational education transition and deliver training to practitioners on its use. I am interested in understanding the complexity of the internal workings of higher education institutions, and remain intrigued how formal published information constructs an understanding of the implicit concerns and interests of the institution.

I begin in both my academic work and professional careers counselling work from a position which comprehends the world as socially constructed, where power relations are multi-faceted, themselves socially constructed, and largely formed through and by language in use (Foucault 1972), an approach which I believe aligns with my practice of using narrative counselling techniques. Through narrative work, I see that elements relating to affect, history, policy analysis and language are

at once individually significant, and intertwined. This approach draws me to textual analysis and qualitative research, as discussed more fully in the Methodological Framework chapter. Qualitative research focused on text-based discourse analysis can be seen as rarefied (Apple 1995), and distinct from the realities of practice, which are both complicated and complex, but aligns with my practice as a careers counsellor. However, in this thesis I stay within a framework that seeks to show how texts work with power constructs, or sometimes conceal an understanding of social reality and meaning. This research is text-based and relies on thematic analysis with an understanding of discourse. In particular, it draws on critical approaches to discourse analysis, such as Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach, which is designed with an orientation towards practice.

My Doctoral research followed on from my Master's dissertation in the UK which examined the introduction in 2006 of institutional Access Agreements using a discourse analysis approach. The work reviewed institutional reactions to the introduction of variable fees and the establishment of a formal department to oversee widening participation to higher education, the Office for Fair Access [OFFA]. These Access Agreements from each provider set out how institutions would meet requirements for widening participation, but I was puzzled about the institutional messages given students about undertaking a degree. I believed the messages were opaque and hard to understand, and varied significantly depending on the status of the institution. During that research, which concluded in 2006, I was drawn to two pieces of research that related to the pre-admissions information offer. Norman Fairclough's 1993 study used prospectuses of three different periods, among other institutional documents, to trace the increase in marketisation of the universities while Louise Archer's work in 2003 on the value of the degree examined the choice processes of non-traditional students. Her research generated findings on the value of a degree drawn from participant research on the different rationales for undertaking a degree (Archer 2003). This thesis draws broadly on the methodologies used in Fairclough's work (1993), further discussed in the Methodological Framework chapter. Archer's study (2003) is contextualised in the Literature Review chapter, particularly alongside more recent research, and her findings on participants' value of a degree form the structural basis for the framework for the macro discourse topics of the idea of a degree, as discussed in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, which is then used in the close reading of the institutional materials.

In earlier stages of my thesis, this work was conceptualised as a comparative study of the UK and Australian higher education sector's different paths over the period of massification in both countries. However, undertaking comparative analysis over such a broad span of time and place, using the detailed methods chosen for this study, was not feasible. A factor in choosing which country to focus on was that I found there were no descriptive whole institution prospectuses published in Australia until 2000. The Australian practice was for courses to publish individual marketing flyers and include information in the state-wide admission centre booklets, which held details for all institutions. In Australia before 2000 if whole institution pre-entry materials were consulted as part of the student choice process, students were directed to the university handbook, which was designed for students already enrolled on the course and could be extremely technical in content. Therefore, the research data over the span of the period in focus for the study in the UK was richer, particularly in the early periods of massification, and the decision was made to complete this thesis based on the UK data. Although my careers counselling practice has been in Australia, my previous research through my Master's study was based on discourses at work in the UK higher education sector and I remain interested in the development of discourses within the higher education sector in the UK, as well as elsewhere.

## **Research problem**

This thesis's research problem investigates the idea of a degree in the UK and how the messages about it have changed in the period of massification of the higher education system. It seeks to investigate the idea of a degree starting with a period where universities and other higher education

institutions were sites of elite education in the UK (Trow 1970), both in curricular nature and student numbers (Thomas 2001). It traces changes to the present day where there is a massified system in place (Trow 2000). It asks whether the messages about the idea of a degree as constructed by institutions have been fundamentally altered within a massively expanded system, or not. The focus of the thesis is particularly on the impact of massification on students' experience of applying to university. The thesis contends that significant questions exist regarding messages about the idea of a degree and that these have changed during the phenomenal expansion of the universities in the UK over the last forty years. The questions are presented as part of the student choice process. The thesis is driven by a desire to investigate how changes in the nature and size of higher education have impacted on the universities' presentation of the degree in their prospectuses. This research is transparent about the ideology that motivates it, which is rooted in a desire for fair access to higher education; the aim of the research is to understand how the massification of higher education has impacted on issues of equity within the higher education sector, as it relates to access to information for educational decision-making. My work is particularly driven by the question of whether the massification of the UK higher education sector has increased the social justice of the system, or whether, as some argue, it has entrenched social reproduction and obscured the mechanisms of elite reproduction (Naidoo & Whitty 2014).

Looking closely at how institutions present the idea of a degree is meaningful as there is little understanding of how the presentation of the idea of a degree in marketing materials has changed over the period of massification. There is also little research on how young people interpret the purposes of a degree as it is constructed in the materials of higher education student choice (Brooks 2001). My research feeds into the wider debate about the purposes of higher education and the images higher education institutions have about themselves in the world (Saichaie & Morphew 2014; Symes 1996). Further, undertaking this project explores the UK universities' approach to explaining the purpose of degrees for those entering higher education. That there is no existing critical research on the idea of a degree as transmitted by universities to prospective students is a significant lack. The thesis indicates that these explanations are not neutral – without social or political meaning – but are ideological in their nature and impact. The officially published prospectus documents can be for some opaque in their meaning and leave information gaps, which can be heightened by language use, jargon and unexplained concepts (Biber 2006; Naidoo & Whitty 2014).

The huge global expansion of the higher education system and massification of higher education institutions has had varied and wide impacts. Changes related to massification can be seen to be closely linked to political and economic globalisation (Cranmer 2006); the effects have been in play everywhere but this research is focused on their touchdown in the UK. Whether, over the period of massification, the messages about the idea of a degree have shifted and changed is the main question for this thesis.

As discussed in the previous subsection, the interest that commenced this research was to investigate how the idea of a degree is represented to prospective students by institutions, and it was perceived that the idea of a degree has been impacted on by the massification of higher education in the UK. In order to gain understandings of how this has developed, a historical orientation was felt to be important and therefore this research also looks at how the idea of a degree has changed due to and during the massification of the system. It does this by looking at the institutional side of the student choice process and by analysing the texts of institutions to trace the deployment of discourses of the idea of a degree during the period of massification.

The interest in student choice is topical as there is in the UK an increasing government policy focus on what students know before they choose their institution. Publishing information for prospective students is changing, with most students making their first interaction by reading online material on the university website (Saichaie 2011); the inclusion of internet-based marketing for higher education has changed the process, and, from the academic year 2014 onwards, many UK

institutions ceased printing prospectuses that contain all course details. However, the messages, in whatever form, remain of high importance to analyse.

Increased pressure on the outcome of undergraduate degrees being value for money (Alderman & Palfreyman 2011; Morley 1997) and questions about the quality of degrees (Tomlinson 2012) have influenced recent UK government policy, which has raised issues about information given by institutions on undergraduate degrees through pre-entry materials (Browne et al. 2010). This concern is also significant for those interested in the equity of higher education, as there are indications that high-status institutions such as Oxbridge and the Russell Group (Chevalier & Conlon 2003; Chevalier 2014) and higher-paid discipline and subject areas, such as Medicine and Law (Bratti, Naylor & Smith 2008), have student demographics with statistically significantly higher socio-economic status than institutions and disciplines with a broader or more representative mix of socio-economic status (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015). There are also significant cost implications to taking an undergraduate course, with an average three year course cost in 2013 of £9,000 per year, a total of £27,000, when the median graduate starting salary at the time was £21,000 (HESA 2016).<sup>1</sup>

The policy shifts in the UK which have increased costs and impact on the idea of a degree are explored in this thesis, as well as the various communication strategies by institutions that construct the idea of a degree. How the idea of a degree operates in the student choice process has been little explored (Tomlinson 2016), neither is very much data available on how the idea of a degree has been constructed through history. Therefore, a study of prospectuses is both timely and period-specific, as practices of marketing by higher education institutions are changing radically with the 'emergence of the Internet as a dominant communication for IHEs [higher education institutions], as well as for prospective students' (Saichaie & Morpew 2014, p. 504). However, although there is limited research literature about prospectuses it is evident they remain central to the process, as indicated by my professional practice. Contemporary studies show that institution-produced pre-entry materials retain a core place in the application process. There are a number of studies that examine student choice of UK institution and although none make prospectuses the core interest, these materials are recognised as forming part of the student choice process (Briggs & Wilson 2007; Davies et al. 2010; Davies & Elias 2003; Dunne, King & Ahrens 2014; Harding 2012; Maringe 2006; Moogan & Baron 2003; Winter & Chapleo 2015).

There has been a concern that the available materials are not giving clear information on issues such as the outcomes of degrees, leading to the accusation that 'students may have been recruited under something akin to false pretences' (Hesketh & Knight 1999, p. 153). This is a critical issue in this research and suggests a theme to be considered in any analysis of prospectuses: the persuasions, even pretences, under which students are being recruited, and how institutions are constructing the idea of a degree in order to recruit students. Marginson, writing from Australia in 1997, notes a recent global trend alongside marketisation relating to the requirements of students and what they need in order to make informed choices:

Increasingly, university advertising provided less information to aid student choices, and more statements about positional value. Some institutions began to claim that not only did they provide career opportunities, their graduates had an advantage over graduates from elsewhere (Marginson 1997, p. 9).

The trend noted by Marginson (1997) of increasing focus on the positional value of the degree has been taken up in this research as a central theme of policy orientation towards the information

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<sup>1</sup> The cost of the fees that are to be paid back through the tax system is at a rate of 9% of funds over the threshold for graduates when they earn £17,495 (Student Loans Company 2016a). At a median graduate starting salary of £21,000 the repayment for 2016 (when first year graduates commencing in 2013 would have finished a three year program) is £26 a month (Student Loans Company 2016a). Therefore, if the graduates' salary did not increase it would take them 1038 months, or 86 years to pay back the loan, although under the current arrangements a loan is cancelled 25 years after it was taken out (Student Loans Company 2016b).

requirements of prospective students. Szekeres claims that in writing marketing materials 'institutions are so intent on managing their image this conflicts with the students' needs for extensive and reliable information to inform their choice' (Szekeres 2010, p. 436).

The possible misreading of market-speak as reliable information is another barrier between those who have the right kind of cultural capital, the 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent 1998) to crack the codes of the marketised language and read between the lines of the documents, and those who do not and cannot. The varied status of universities, as codified by the plethora of league tables, is 'cold knowledge' (Ball & Vincent 1998) at best, in effect knowledge that freezes out all but the initiated, as it appears in rarefied publications using complicated and inaccessible language. For prospective students without easy access to the 'hot knowledge' of trusted family members and friends with first-hand experience of university and familiarity with status structures, help with such a major decision from reliable institutional cold knowledge texts on what the courses can offer during and after a degree is of great importance (Briggs & Wilson 2007).

This work comes at an appropriate moment when the prospectuses have themselves become historical artefacts, as higher education marketing moves to the internet (Saichaie & Morphew 2014). There is evidence that the marketing of courses is becoming increasingly complex through the use of social media (McNeill 2012), and marketing for courses is now routinely focused on websites (Simões & Soares 2010) and mobile marketing (Zinn 2015). Inequality in publicly accessible, reliable information, advantaging those with the cultural capital to be able to use the hot knowledge on which institutions deliver the most return, is described by Ball in class terms:

The particular policies of choice and competition give particular advantages to the middle class, while not appearing to do so, in the way that selection policies did in a previous policy era (Ball 2003, p. 26).

An information gap between students who have cultural capital and those who do not is a key inequity that drives the research questions of this thesis; if these documents, open to all and apparently read by all, do not offer a clear description of the differentiated nature of provision, there is an inherent problem. However, as this thesis is grounded in a theoretical understanding that all texts are discursive it is hard to see how any text can be totally open; instead it is suggested that texts that expose more openly the rationales for choosing different degrees or institutions would support a more accessible reading of these institutional texts.

It should not be assumed that in this thesis the impression is given that if prospectuses and admissions documents were made easier to read, then equity or fair access will be delivered. This argument is not the aim of the thesis, nor indeed a realistic or rational hope. In this I agree with Brooks' position (2001) that it is important not to overlook the complexities of access to information nor diminish the power of structural inequalities, and this research seeks to add to this work. A passage from Brooks' research is here quoted at length because of its importance:

Many of the studies discussed in this review are underpinned by an assumption that if young people's access to information improves, they will make 'better' decisions about their futures and, as a consequence, social inequalities will be reduced ... in reality, the picture is rather more complex. First, improving access to information is no easy matter. Several of the studies outlined above emphasize the socially embedded nature of decision-making and indicate that young people's access to information is often patterned by their gender, ethnicity and, in particular, their SES [socio-economic status]. Secondly, these studies suggest that even if young people are able to gain equal access to information, there are enduring differences in how such information is interpreted and in 'dispositions' to HE which are not easily removed. Research thus needs to move beyond absorption with sources of information to explore the construction of these 'dispositions' (Brooks 2001, p. 225).

Drawing on Brooks' work (2001) this thesis argues that providing a discourse analysis could help practitioners and institutions to support students in their tertiary choice processes as well as assist the students themselves to become more knowledgeable (and so powerful) readers of the institutional

texts. This thesis acknowledges that while making clearly accessible information from universities available would be desirable for prospective students in the student choice process this is, as Brooks (2001) argues, very difficult to achieve. Although discourse analysis work would not change the institutions' role in constructing knowledge which excludes some readers of the texts, it can change the way readers perceive the institutional constructions. In an increasingly commodified higher education sector, recent calls in the UK are for the purposes of the degree to be extensively explained to all prospective students, viewed through their position as consumers (Tomlinson 2016). In order for the purposes of a degree to be explained, they need to be better understood. Therefore, this research seeks to understand how the changes to the nature of the higher education system have shaped the messages the universities send about the rationales of degrees in order to support a greater understanding of the nature of the student choice process.

The two overarching research questions are specified in the following Literature Review chapter and take a two stage approach. The first develops an analysis of how the macro discourse of the idea of a degree has changed over the period of massification of the higher education sector in the UK and the second applies the analyses of the macro discourse changes to the prospectuses of selected UK higher education institutions' prospectuses over the same period, by undertaking a close reading.

## **Research approach**

This section explains the research approach that this thesis takes: this discussion is developed further in the Methodological Framework chapter, the Research Design chapter, and the Data Selection and Preparation chapter.

This thesis uses a discourse analysis approach, with the aim that a close reading of the prospectus texts as proposed by MacLure (2003) will identify how the discourses of the idea of a degree have been deployed in UK university prospectuses over the past forty years. This thesis will generate understandings about the current practices of institutional materials produced for student choice of higher education institutions. However, the purpose of this close examination of the texts is not 'exposing the ideological distortions wrought by powerful elites upon a real or innocent world' (MacLure 2003, p. 102); instead it seeks to unsettle the texts to, as Reisigl and Wodak explain, "'demystify" the hegemony of specific discourses by deciphering the ideologies' (2009, p. 88).

I have drawn on literature which utilises the conceptual framework of Bourdieu (1977; 1984), seeing higher education as a field where different forms of capital are used and reproduced, as explained by Davey:

What Bourdieu describes as the practical logic that generates behaviour is encapsulated through the relationships between individual and field. Without exploring what is valued by a particular field, and how institutions are positioned within its hierarchy, we are provided with only a partial account of practice (Davey 2012, p. 514).

In the context of what is described by Ball et al. (2002) as the 'generative moment' of student choice of higher education, they argue: 'choice of university is a choice of lifestyle and a matter of 'taste', and further that social class is an important aspect of these subtexts of choice' (Ball et al. 2002, p. 52). In the student choice process students rely, to varying degrees, on the information presented by the institutions in their printed materials. As will be shown, within the materials of higher education, the prospectuses have major impact. Through them the institutions construct the idea of the purposes of a degree, to appeal to prospective students and also to condition them to the changing nature and concept of the degree.

Therefore, as was discussed earlier, my work is driven by a professional interest in making the choice of a university more transparent for prospective students. This interest developed as I noted the specific knowledge required to evaluate the choices available for transition to tertiary level and the differential impact of the noticed information deficit on diverse groups. Drawing on my individual career counselling work in practice, it seems that the orientation of much research towards the

individual students omits the key role of universities to make information about their courses easily comprehensible.

I have chosen not to undertake work talking to students or institutional staff, but have instead chosen an unobtrusive method of documentary analysis. I believe that by exposing the discursive constructions at play in the texts, a discourse analysis of the idea of a degree can help those supporting students in their choice and prospective students themselves to be better placed to read the constructions in texts in order to make more informed choices. The orientation of the widening participation and fair access agenda that contemporary UK government documents use is focused on enhancing student choice. But it is also an equity issue, as fair access to information would support all students, irrespective of privilege or background, to make career choices which are right for them at the moment of choice. Therefore, although this thesis has a political motivation that supports higher education as a site of social justice, and I believe fair access is a realisation of that social justice, I also believe that exposing the messages in these documents is helpful for all students' experience and for the institutions themselves.

This thesis takes a historical position on the idea of a degree as it argues that discourses are developed over time. and that this viewpoint is a useful dimension to understand what is happening in the present day (Campbell & Sherington 2002). It is important to look at the historical perspective: as discourses never remain static, the historical perspective becomes primary. Reading these changes should enable policy-makers and researchers to analyse the processes involved, and even predict how they may vary in the future.

The thesis engages with the ideas of a degree generated from the extant literature on the meaning of degrees, and then undertakes a 'close reading' (MacLure 2003, p. 69) of UK prospectuses to trace discourses of the idea of a degree in the period 1976-2013. It is an inquiry that wishes to contribute to future institutional practice of information provision, and in order to do this looks to the past to understand how practices have developed, using a history of education approach to 'justify and explain the present' (Campbell & Sherington 2002, p. 50). The messages presented in higher education marketing materials are an under-examined and under-theorised area (Saichae & Morphey 2014; Tomlinson 2016), and this study will generate insights from prospectus texts to support understanding different rationales of the idea of a degree.

## **Outline of the thesis**

This subsection explains the structure of this thesis. This introductory chapter is followed by the Literature Review chapter, the Methodological Framework and the Research Design chapters. It continues with the analysis chapters. The first of these analysis chapters, the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree, works on the first research question about the historical development of the idea of a degree and includes a focus on establishing and differentiating the messages of the idea of a degree. There is then a short chapter explaining how these established messages have been applied to the analysis of the prospectus data, the Data Selection and Preparation chapter. This is followed by the chapter entitled Detailed Case Studies which examines each selected year of prospectuses. The findings of the two parts of the analysis, the first about the macro ideas of a degree and the second as the micro application of the analysis, are brought together in the Discussion chapter and the ultimate findings arising from the research problem are addressed in the final Conclusion chapter.

### **Literature Review**

The chapter discusses the research literature on student choice from which this project develops and the theoretical knowledge that influences the area of research. It examines the field of student choice research, locates where this thesis sits in the literature, and establishes the gap in the literature that is being addressed: the identified gap forms the basis for the overarching research questions.

## **Methodological Framework**

This section outlines the conceptual framework for the research, establishes the context of the research, and outlines the approach of the research. It engages with the conceptual basis for a study based within the critical discourse analysis method and explains the chosen approach of a discourse – historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak 2009). It is an approach with multiple iterative stages and it involves further analytical work with the extant literature in order to determine important contextual considerations and data selections.

## **Research Design**

This chapter implements the methodological choices made in this research, drawing on Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) second stage in research, the stage allotted to the systematic collection of data and context information. It considers the criteria for selection of cases in the study, using information-oriented selection (Gerring 2007) based on the context of the data and the research question. It engages with the literature on institutional differentiation in the UK to explain the rationale for selecting the case study institutions. It then details the rationale for selection of the genre of the texts for close analysis, the prospectuses.

## **Discourse of the Idea of a Degree**

This is the first analysis chapter and addresses the first research question. This analysis chapter generates understandings of the discourse topics at work in the idea of a degree, based on a review of literature relating to the idea of a degree. It develops the analytical themes that underpin the idea of a degree, and draws on literature on the rationale of the idea of a degree to inform the application of the research questions to the prospectus data. It then undertakes a secondary historical analysis of the development of the idea of a degree in the last forty years in the UK. It undertakes this to establish key moments in which the macro discourses of the idea of a degree within the UK shifted over the period of study. It traces the different rationales of the idea of a degree through the period, identifies their presences and silences, and seeks to understand these within the policy contexts in order to frame the close reading of the prospectuses throughout the forty-year period.

## **Data Selection and Preparation**

This chapter briefly explains the work undertaken as part of research question two. It specifies the data selection and preparation of the prospectuses and follows a stage of Reisigl and Wodak's discourse–historical approach (2009). It works closely with the prospectus data to identify differentiation between the discourse topics identified as relating to the idea of a degree. It explains the selection of the specific parts of the texts which are to be studied. It also details the scope of the data selection and how the texts were prepared for analysis. It details the close work undertaken by describing the data procedure, and explains the use of research coding, including using NVivo software.

## **Detailed Case Studies**

This chapter undertakes the analysis of research question two, each period within the study being looked at chronologically. There are six sections, one for each period of study established as policy moments or eventemes, and each presents a narrative about the prospectus texts thematically within the historical time phases. Within each time phase, the discursive constructions of the idea of a degree are located in the texts of the case study institutions.

## **Discussion**

This chapter interprets the results of the analysis using a chronological and thematic narrative form based on the discursive constructions identified in the research. It contextualises the research within the context of the student choice literature and traces the development of the discursive constructions through the time period.

## **Conclusion**

In this section the problem being addressed by the research is considered by synthesising the themes from the findings sections to answer the overarching research questions. The thesis concludes by addressing the contribution to the literature that this thesis makes, drawing on the findings and applying the detailed analytical results. There are suggestions for further study and potential practical uses for the research.

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter undertakes a literature review of the student choice research area and will help locate and clarify the focus of the current study. The aim of the thesis is to investigate how institutions have presented the idea of an undergraduate degree to prospective students and explore how the messages in the documents have changed over the period of massification in the UK.

The focus of this study is on the discourses of the idea of a degree that are drawn on and disseminated by institutions. The rationale of this focus is that looking at institutional deployment of discourses will help generate understandings of the impact of massification on the variations and developments of the idea of a degree at higher education level across the last forty years in the UK. During this period, extreme growth in the UK higher education system has meant that more students, from more diverse cohorts, accessed higher education. Research indicates (Whitty & Clement 2015) newer and more diverse cohorts of students are entering institutions which have statuses different from those receiving more traditional cohorts. The status of institutions has been shown to provide different benefits arising from graduate outcomes in terms of salary and status of work (Tomlinson 2012).

The literature review works from the broad to the narrow in relation to literature that informs the research area. This first section identifies the literature relating to student choice. The second section considers theories drawn on in the student choice literature that are pertinent in conceptualising this study. In the third section, the research on student choice from an institutional perspective is reviewed. The fourth section provides an overview of the student choice literature as it relates to the student-oriented materials produced by institutions. The final section engages with the reviewed research and identifies the gap in the literature. It considers approaches to the research problem, which asks whether massification of the higher education system in the UK has impacted on the messages sent by institutions as part of the student choice process: the section uses the literature reviewed to refine the research problem, and also to define the overarching research questions.

### **Student choice literature – Brief overview**

This study's research problem concentrates on one particular aspect within UK higher education institutions: domestic students leaving full-time secondary education and entering higher education full time. The literature selected follows the focus of the study. However, I also seek to acknowledge and consider to some extent the other cohorts that use prospectuses and are potentially excluded by them, and also by research that focuses on younger entrants to higher education. Much of the literature used in the research relates to the transition from school to university of traditional age domestic students (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015) and there is relatively little treatment of other cohorts.

Student choice research is often focused on the perspective of those applying for university entry (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015). The field of student choice research is suggested by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka to be overwhelmingly related to young school leavers (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015). Brooks' findings indicate the mature students' choice process is more complex, as they 'acknowledge that they are likely to be influenced by a number of different factors' (Brooks 2001, p. 218). Hagel and Shaw (2010) argue there are similar complexities within the student choice process for those not considering full-time study. Studies are frequently based on interviews with prospective students, either within the educational institution preparing them for tertiary study such as school, sixth form college or further education college (Forsyth & Furlong 2003; Reay 1998), or in the transition to higher education in their tertiary institution, when the students are in the first year (Brooks 2003; Byrom 2009; Mangan, Hughes & Slack 2010; Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller 2013; Slack et al. 2014).

There are also several studies within this student-focused perspective which included those who chose not to attend higher education (Archer 2003; Ball, Macrae & Maguire 1999; Fuller et al. 2008). There are studies that look at higher education choice from the specific angle of disciplinary entry (Briggs & Wilson 2007), access to elite institutions (Christie 2009; Crozier et al. 2008; Whitehead, Raffan & Deaney 2006), access through further education or Access routes (Burke 2002; Busher et al. 2014; Reay, Ball & David 2002).

As the majority of studies relating to higher education student choice are viewed from the student perspective and their decision-making processes, there is relatively little research that investigates the specific messages institutions embed in the literature (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015). There is limited literature which concentrates on the institutional interactions in the student choice process and less which looks specifically at the messages sent in institutional materials, and this is identified as a gap in the literature.

It is important for the understanding of the extant research findings on the marketing of higher education to define firm boundaries of enquiry, as in other country contexts the marketing of higher education relates to national markets with very different structural bases. Within the UK there are only a few private institutions of higher education, such as the University of Buckingham, which receive no public financing and operate on a very different model. Within the publicly funded institutions there are diverse strategies in operation. For example, the market for domestic students is added to the global market of international students (Shah & Nair 2013). This research makes clear the origin of all literature used and draws firstly on literature that relates to higher education in the UK or that has been widely applied in that context. There are studies referenced here which work from national contexts other than the UK, that look at international students or that analyse postgraduate studies, but these differences are signalled.

## **Theorising the student choice process**

This section supports the refining of the research problem by taking a theoretical orientation to the literature, generating an argument of how theoretical understandings have been used in the conceptual framing of this thesis's research questions. In order to investigate the research problem of whether massification of the higher education system in the UK has impacted on the messages sent by institutions as part of the student choice process, the student choice process needs to be examined in the light of theoretical understandings available in the extant literature. Sociological theory drawing on Bourdieu (1977; 1984) is a frequent theoretical basis for the studies in this research area.

The interaction point which interests this thesis is the institution trying to influence the students' choice. Therefore, the gaze analysed is not that of student's experience but rather the gaze of the institutions upon the students. However, the review of the literature on student choice from the student's viewpoint is still useful to gain understandings of how institutions are involved in this process.

The examination of heretofore accepted practices relating to student choice is critical for this thesis. The production of pre-entry materials by universities could be taken neutrally as a routine practice but it is by drawing on literatures informed by sociological theory that such ordinary university practices can be seen as ideological. To uncover these ideological elements in routine practices and to theorise how this process works, Bourdieu's writing (1977; 1984) on how power operates within such a field is useful. As Bathmaker explains, the use of Bourdieusian understandings helps to 'uncover the workings of power and inequality in particular social spaces' (Bathmaker 2015, p. 65).

Particularly important to this study is the use of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1977), a symbolic form of capital that involves the accumulation and activation of different levels of knowledge about specific things, including entrance to higher education. The concept of cultural capital helps to

explain how ideas presented from the institution to the prospective student could be read differently by people with varying kinds of cultural capital, and the concept is used frequently in the theoretically-oriented literature on student choice.

The idea of cultural capital and the deployment of middle-class taste markers is discussed by Maguire, Ball and Macrae (1999) specifically within the context of marketing materials for post-compulsory higher education. They use the concept of cultural capital to explain how people know which institutions will help them advance in middle-class positions (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 1999). Further research draws on Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, such as the work of Reay, David and Ball (2005) which explores how students choose institutions, and also how different markets targeted to different groups of students are set up in higher education. An inequality in publicly accessible, reliable information advantages those with the specific type of cultural capital that enables them to judge which institutions deliver the most return. The problem is described by Ball in class terms: 'The particular policies of choice and competition give particular advantages to the middle class, while not appearing to do so, in the way that selection policies did in a previous policy era' (Ball 2003, p. 26).

How cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) operates within the process of student choice is not the question that this thesis primarily pursues, but it is an issue that informs the process of the use of the institutional marketing materials by prospective students. There is an interplay between these two forms of access to knowledge in the research on student choice. Using a Bourdieusian lens, researchers in the field of student choice suggest codes within prospectuses about the value of the degree can be unlocked by those who have the requisite cultural capital (Reay 1998). They argue the codes replicate and protect institutional habitus and defend institutions' places within the field in order to recruit students with a similar habitus (Crozier & Reay 2008). Reproduction of these social codes is undertaken through signalling messages by institutions (Brown & Bills 2011).

In this thesis Bourdieu's (1984) use of his idea of distinction is also important in order to understand how institutions deploy these messages in their prospectuses and their implementation of distinctive practices:

Struggles over the appropriation of economic or cultural goods are, simultaneously, symbolic struggles to appropriate distinctive signs in the form of classified, classifying goods or practices, or to compare or subvert the principles of classification of these distinctive practices ... 'Distinction', or better 'class', the transfigured, misrecognized, legitimate form of social class, only exists through the struggles for the exclusive appropriation of the distinctive signs which make 'natural distinction'. (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 249-250)

As Bourdieu outlines here (1984), using his concept of distinction, it is the codes used within social, or in this instance cultural, capital to delineate field boundaries that construct the institution. These messages draw on cultural codes to reinforce institutional identity and delimit what type of students fit the institution, and effectively define its position in terms of specific cultural capital. Bourdieu (1984) writes about the socially recognised hierarchy of the arts and the symbols that denote high culture as distinct from popular culture, which is a distinction this thesis will draw on in order to explore the messages institutions use in their prospectuses to signal their place in hierarchy. He writes that: 'this predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'. The manner in which the culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 2).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) is useful for conceptualising the motivations for students' choice of university, in that the student choice process is not a neutral choice. As Naidoo explains in her research on the connection between higher education, inequality and society:

The higher education system thus acts as a 'relay' in that it reproduces the principles of social class and other forms of domination under the cloak of academic neutrality (Naidoo 2004, p. 460).

The fallacy of neutrality is active in the pre-entry materials: the research of Dunne, King and Ahrens shows that application to university is itself a site of struggle for the field of education (Dunne ,

King & Ahrens 2014). The messages that documents send are important; Maguire, Ball and Macrae argue that 'market tactics do semiotic "work" as class-taste markers' (1999, p. 291). Ball, in his study on education uses Bourdieu and Passeron to explain that different capacities are necessary to make a free and fully-informed choice:

The education market presupposes 'possession of the cultural code required for decoding the objects displayed' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990, pp. 51-52). The ideology of the market actually works as a mechanism of class reproduction in several interrelated ways ... it assumes that the skills and predisposition to choice, and cultural capital which may be invested in choice, are generalised (Ball 1993a, p. 13).

Much of the student choice literature draws on Bourdieu's theories of field, habitus and capital (Ball 1993a; Bowe, Gewirtz & Ball 1994). This literature provides theoretical tools to discover how markers of the idea of a degree, which require use of prospective students' resources of cultural capital, are transmitted to the students. Ball and Vincent's influential work (1998) drew on Bourdieusian theory and established that the access to knowledge about how to make choices about higher education is multi-faceted. They argue that choice of higher education institution is different for those with specific kinds of cultural capital and for those who lack it. Ball and Vincent's (1998) major contribution was the establishment of an understanding of how education choice operates, and for the introduction of the terms 'hot knowledge' and 'cold knowledge' (Ball & Vincent 1998). Hot knowledge is highly valued information gained from social networks to inform educational choices (Reay, David & Ball 2005) and is set up in opposition to cold knowledge, the formal information offered by education institutions, government sources, is less valued:

'Official' knowledge is 'cold' knowledge, normally constructed specifically for public dissemination. The form it takes is abstract – examination results, lists of school activities, outlines of school policies, etc. 'Grapevine' knowledge is 'hot' knowledge, based on affective responses or direct experience (Ball & Vincent 1998, p. 380).

This division between hot and cold knowledge has been used successfully in considering higher education, including by Ball and Vincent (1998), and by Reay, David and Ball (2005) in *Degrees of Choice* which traces the use of these terms and confirms their usefulness in the field. The types of knowledge have been called a 'crucial starting point' for many students (Moogan & Baron 2003), and they play a key part in the data available to students before they make their university choices. As Reay, David and Ball (2005) explain, the search for information by prospective students is a key strategy in the procedure of making university choice: Reay, David and Ball establish distinctions between the 'hot knowledge' that students and their parents and supporters gain through cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977), especially from knowledgeable family and friends, and the 'cold knowledge' to be found in institutional materials. Using Ball and Vincent's (1998) concepts of hot and cold knowledge, research by Archer (2003), Bowl (2003) and Thomas (2001) indicates that the level of knowledge students have when reading these texts is impacted on by socio-economic class. Class difference and access to cultural capital appear in the ways in which the institutions construct the notion of their ideal reader (and ideal student) through the discourses identifiable in the institutions' documents. This is a critical point for this thesis as it explains why the marketing of higher education institutions is not neutral and deserves exploration.

There is a perception in the policy of institutions and government, which Tomlinson (2008) critiques, that casts students as skilful, empowered consumers, in a position of making 'autonomous, careful and deliberate choices, weighing up the perceived benefits of participation [in higher education] against the perceived costs' (Tomlinson 2008, p. 50). But as prospective students involved in choice of institution have unequal level of access to information about their choices, the differential impact of graduate outcomes depending on the status of the institution is a significant concern. There is also a concern that the differential results of higher education have not been acknowledged and the impact of real inequality is obscured (Ball et al. 2002).

Further, there have been studies that specifically engage with the specific cultural capital required by prospective students to access and understand institutional materials; Burke and McManus establish how information should be presented in order to be non-exclusionary:

... such information must be made as accessible to candidates as possible, and must not rely on prior knowledge or understanding of asking the 'right kinds of questions' (Burke & McManus, 2009, p. 47).

As Baker and Brown discuss, institutions are writing in coded terms which are elaborated in their attempts to distinguish themselves within the field of higher education:

Bourdieu adds that competitors in political power struggles often seek to appropriate 'the sayings of the tribe' (doxa) and thereby to appropriate 'the power the group exercises over itself' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 110; Wacquant 1999). Hence universities in their advertising promote themselves as 'leading', 'excellent', 'quality' or, even more demotically, offering a 'brilliant student lifestyle' (Baker & Brown 2007, p. 380).

These power struggles between the competitors have impacts upon the experiences of prospective students. Leading from these theoretical ideas, evidence can be found showing the cultural capital of students will influence decisions about whether to, and where to, study at a higher education level. Reay's examination of ten prospective student case studies views them engaged in 'highly differentiated, unequal processes' of choice (Reay 1998). Processes differ depending on the amount of hot knowledge to which the student has access. There are clearly inequalities that flow from this for those who only have access to cold knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998).

The decision to undertake a university degree is one that is taken alone by few students – the majority are supported in the process by either a family member, or an education professional either within their education institution of origin or of target (Ball & Vincent 1998). However, these processes of choice are strongly class-based and it has been demonstrated that class makes a significant impact on the decision to participate in higher education in the UK (Reay, David & Ball 2005). It is suggested that not having access to close connections who have experienced the process of higher education application will impact on choice, as Adnett and Tlupova discuss:

Non-traditional student families have parents with little prior experience of the application process and fewer friends, classmates and siblings attending higher education or facing the same application process (Adnett & Tlupova 2008, p. 250).

In contrast, some research based in the UK asserts that for the middle-class, university education is no longer a choice, but an assumed pathway: it has become the norm, as demonstrated in the report by Clegg, Stevenson and Willott (2008) to the UK Higher Education Academy on students' engagement with extra-curricular activities. Such normalisation of higher education as a pathway for those of higher socio-economic status excludes those from non-traditional groups or without familial experience of higher education. Therefore, it makes those from a working-class background less likely to have access to hot knowledge and likely to rely on cold knowledge: 'without knowing the ropes'. This 'knowing the ropes' is shown to be critically important, and encompasses use of information material (Whitty & Clement 2015). The non-traditional student is likely to be less prepared to know how to read the discourses of institutional materials. This situation makes it critical therefore that the cold knowledge of institutional documentation is useful and accessible to enable transition information to be understood. Although this thesis does not research what would make this cold knowledge more accessible, it seeks to understand what messages are sent in institutional documentation. This work aims to develop the analysis of institutional documentation in an understanding that making 'hot knowledge' less important could be further liberating and enable fairer access to education.

Evidently the hot knowledge of cultural capital not only helps inform choices but eases the fear around the selection process and the absence can generate uncertainty. Archer reports that one of the factors for working-class students is the hope to find others like themselves at the institution and

'fitting in' is a much more important factor for students from lower SES backgrounds (Archer 2003). Archer's study indicates that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds also have a particular anxiety of underemployment and lack of return from the investment in higher education; the research suggests these concerns are a larger factor in student choice from low SES groups than with traditional HE users (Archer 2003). Archer and Hutchings' discussion-group research, based on young Londoners not participating in higher education, describes the view of a degree affording a 'chance not to be stuck' (Archer & Hutchings 2000, p. 564).

This view of the purposes of modern university degrees is echoed in Archer's article on *The Value of Higher Education* (2003), on which this thesis draws for initial identification of discourse topics of the idea of a degree. In this article Archer (2003) uses Bourdieusian theory in her research with young people in London, investigating their ideas prior to entry to higher education about the purposes of higher education. Within the article she proposes categories of valuations of higher education that impact the student choice process (Archer 2003). She finds in this study that the valuations about higher education are impacted on by the socio-economic status of the young people, and that valuations are strongly linked to cultural capital (Archer 2003).

How institutions engage with the student choice process is examined in the next subsection which investigates research which has dealt with the marketing of institutions and how it influences the student choice process.

### **Institutions' engagement with student choice**

The literature on how institutions are responding to marketisation of the sector, particularly as it relates to the production of prospectuses and pre-entry course materials, is somewhat limited. This subsection investigates the literature related to institutional strategies and marketing related student choice. Although Ramachandran (2010) finds conventional marketing frameworks cannot be applied directly to the complex student choice process, this subsection draws from business research disciplines to understand some of the points impacting institutions' preparations of marketing materials in the student choice process. 'Supply side' is the term used to describe the practices of institutions in student choice by Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995). Research on student choice on the 'supply side' is most often concentrated on what Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe call the 'extrinsic rather than intrinsic' (1995, p. 8). That is, most research focuses on the processes that take place, not necessarily the values that are being expressed by institutions in the presentation of their prospectuses. This is a gap that this thesis aims to engage with.

The marketing of tertiary education is complex and should be thought of as an intricate form of services marketing (Newman & Jahdi 2009): they also comment that standard marketing frameworks cannot be used as HEI marketing is based on subtleties that indicate a more complex arrangement than is useful.

Price discusses the shift towards an 'admission market' in his article supporting the debate for post-qualification admission in the UK (2002), suggesting that institutions consider carefully their images and try to position themselves advantageously in the market. Hemsley-Brown and Oplata (2006) have described the pre-entry materials such as prospectuses, handbooks and online university information as part of multiple business practices known as 'above the line' marketing, which are used as well as 'below the line' practices of reputation and brand (Hemsley-Brown & Oplata 2006).

Branding is seen in some parts of the literature as all-important when it comes to attracting and retaining students at a particular higher education institution, as Ivy, looking at the UK and South Africa, explains in his work on institutional image differentiation (Ivy 2001). Chapleo's marketing-oriented chapter on the branding of institutions based within the UK found that some were responding to UK government drivers to use branding to show a unique, clear position in the market (Chapleo 2010).

In another article, the idea of branding was found by Chapleo to be both controversial among internal audiences (particularly academics) and complex (Chapleo 2011). Hesketh and Knight note that postgraduates choose universities where 'management of image can conflict with students' need for extensive and reliable information' (Hesketh & Knight 1999, p. 152). Reasons for the resistance to branding (and by extension all forms of marketisation) by academics are linked with the remaking of higher education as a form of the economy which, as explained in Slaughter and Leslie's concept of academic capitalism, reduces and minimises the place of knowledge for its own sake (Slaughter & Leslie 1997). In later work, Slaughter and Leslie write about the actions of institutions which:

... began to sell higher education as product and service to students and parents, who were conceived as clients and customers. Within student service areas, marketing budgets (direct mail brochures, 'view books', school site visitations) were generally favoured (Slaughter & Leslie 2001, p. 157).

Within this context, research has found that the marketing of any institution cannot be too explicit, as it could undermine the branding of the degree as a product (Maringe 2006). Therefore, the marketing needs to use a subtle branding based on tradition, reputation and position in a status hierarchy: this means branding especially benefits higher status institutions (Chapleo 2010). The means of marketing in higher education is linked to the intrinsic messages being conveyed, and is suggestive of the values sought by different groups in the student choice of degree, as found by Saichaie and Morphew in their study of institutional websites:

Sample IHEs [Institutes of Higher Education] made clear that they understood prospective students were looking for a college or university that could provide them with a credential and collegiate experience that would be of significant exchange value upon graduation (Saichaie & Morphew 2014, p. 524).

Further, Saichaie and Morphew found that in the websites they studied there was a homogenisation of texts within the genre and a specific style of promotional discourse is used which does not make the institutions easy to differentiate:

This study suggests that IHEs [Institutes of Higher Education] ... utilize promotional discourse en masse to market rather systematic representations of higher education despite the fact that they vary widely in a number of institutional characteristics (Saichaie & Morphew 2014, p. 523).

A further impact of the move to marketisation in practice was explained in educational research by Naidoo and Whitty (2014), who have written about resistance to marketisation of courses (explained by them as consumerism). The authors also argue that the hierarchical structures within the field of higher education govern the impact of marketisation on an institution:

While all universities will be influenced by consumerist mechanisms, their position in the field of university education will determine how quickly and to what degree the former penetrate and restructure core university cultures and practices (Naidoo & Whitty 2014, p. 217).

On the side of the institutions, branding is exacerbated by the difficulty institutions have in emphasising quality against others in a quasi-market, and particularly their limited capacity to state the market value they add. What this means for the idea of a degree as presented in the prospectuses is the need to become marketised. Nevertheless, it has been uneven, with institutions lower in the hierarchy of universities experiencing the impact of marketisation in a stronger form (Naidoo & Whitty 2014).

As Coates and Adnett discuss, the hierarchy of universities is very stable and 'market success may be much less dependent on quality or relevance than on history and regional location' (Coates & Adnett 2003, p. 215). Therefore, newer universities which cannot rely on long-standing reputations might succeed by emphasising the extra services they provide to students' university experience (Szekeres 2010) and the 'added value' that the institutions may offer (Briggs 2006). The concept that marketisation impacts on the sector unevenly has implications for this research into how the idea of a

degree has changed since the period of massification, and this informs the refining of the research questions later in this chapter.

## **Institutional materials in the student choice process**

This section of the Literature Review chapter has a specific viewpoint, which is to establish for the purposes of this thesis how the extant research tells us institutional materials are used in the student choice process by prospective students. The materials produced by higher education institutions in the student choice process have not been a major focus of study. This dearth of information is of long standing, as Moogan, Baron and Harris (1999) highlight in their research on marketing materials of higher education, quoting literature from the late 1970s: 'Little is known about the underlying student buyer behaviour and how they select a college' (Punj & Staelin, 1978 cited in Moogan, Baron & Harris 1999, p. 211).

The research by Moogan, Baron and Harris (1999) suggests the needs of prospective students of information in prospectuses:

... the prospectus is the first piece of tangible evidence but in many cases it does not seem to be serving the students' information needs ... A gap seems to exist between the provision of accurate and detailed information from the institutions and the demand for user friendly prospectuses by the students ... The perceived and sometimes actual absence of such information creates anxiety for the student. The prospectus is often the first main contact. Consequently, it needs to be a professional document containing realistic and relevant information (Moogan, Baron & Harris 1999, p. 223).

The onus in Moogan, Baron and Harris's research (1999) falls upon the institution, whereas the UK government's Schwartz Report on Fair Admission to Higher Education shifted responsibility to the student and found

... applicants must become informed consumers. They need to know how to compare institutions and courses and how to interpret a prospectus (Schwartz 2004, p. 15).

A growing body of literature originating from the UK, Australia, Canada and the US calls for more detail in the information students are presented with when evaluating their options and making choices about higher education (Smyth & Banks 2012; Szekeres 2010; Tomlinson 2016; Whitty & Clement 2015). Interest in research in this area also arises from government-driven policy agendas, which are particularly related to increases in domestic student fees (Foskett, Dyke & Maringe 2008; Maringe 2006); such discussion was taken up by government through a 2010 commissioned independent review on Higher Education Funding and Student Finance undertaken by John Browne. The Browne review (Browne et al. 2010), which is a government document, not based on academic research, makes specific mention of a need for increased information relating to employability and graduate outcomes of degrees.

Browne et al.'s (2010) review recommended improving the transparency of the pre-entry materials related to degree outcome to enhance the sustainability of current higher education arrangements. The review emphasised it was an issue of consumer rights for the nature of the outcomes of the product of a degree to be clearly explained in the course information (Browne et al. 2010). A key finding of Browne's review was linked to the pre-entry information provision to students on degree outcomes:

Students need access to high quality information, advice and guidance in order to make the best choices. Improvements are needed. Providing students with clearer information about employment outcomes will close the gap between the skills taught by the higher education system and what employers need (Browne et al. 2010, p. 28).

The Browne review also found that the information through which prospectuses and other pre-entry materials described degree outcomes was overly complicated. How prospectuses can help prospective students become better informed about the meanings of different institutions is also

discussed by research which details requirements of prospectuses. Fairclough's important engagement, nearly twenty-five years ago, with the marketisation of universities includes prospectuses, and in it he explains the tension in the application of marketisation by describing them as 'new hybrid partly promotional genres' (Fairclough 1993, p. 141). That is, they are engaging with principles of marketisation, but still maintain the informational role required by governments.

Briggs and Wilson's research suggested areas that could be usefully enhanced in pre-entry materials: the content of the course, work placement opportunities, employment opportunities for individual courses and likely skills outcomes for graduates (Briggs & Wilson 2007). Moogan, Baron and Harris identified the various needs for increased information on the learning environment, programmes of study, as well as 'optional subjects, methods of assessments, field trips and work experience modules for all years' (1999, p. 224). Moogan, Baron and Bainbridge also put forward a question against which prospectuses should be measured:

Is there sufficient course specific information (not just course content, but other key details such as grades/points requirements) in the prospectus and on the Web site? Is the information easily accessible (readable, informative and understandable)? (Moogan, Baron and Bainbridge 2001, p. 185)

The issue of the accessibility through readability of prospectuses is an important consideration, and this question is informed by Biber's study of university registers of language, which shows the language of writing for prospective students is critical, and sometimes exclusionary in itself, even though it is not viewed as academic language (Biber 2006). Moogan and Baron confirm this in their UK-based research, saying prospectuses are 'written at a reading level that is inappropriate and unclear' (Moogan & Baron 2003, p. 274).

The question of readability goes further than the level of language used and the links to the cultural capital required by the students. The literature on how students make decisions has shown potential for misunderstandings about the nature of what the courses offer when the student does not have access to insider information (hot knowledge, access to a certain type of cultural capital). The problem of students being able to 'read' the prospectuses and understand what institutions are offering is identified by slightly older research in Australia (Gatfield, Barker & Graham 1999) and the UK (Hesketh & Knight 1999). This is also an issue for universities operationally in studies such as those reviewed in an Australian context by Szekeres in her research on competition within the Australian system (2010). She analyses the evidence on literature about student choice and shows that when students are a 'poor fit' to institutions because of a lack of useful information – which is predominantly hot knowledge – there is a real risk of failure of one kind or another.

In the UK, Purcell et al. (2008) studied this area in their longitudinal study of students' experiences in higher education and note that choices made about higher education can be based on 'inadequate information' (Purcell et al. 2008, p. 165). Briggs and Wilson's study on Scottish students reported that 'Respondents commented that [prospectuses] had too much information – little of which is relevant' (Briggs & Wilson 2007, p. 64). This worry about the risks of not having useful information was also found in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2015) synthesis of the literature. They argued in their research that it is critically important applicants are able to make well-informed choices:

Another key reason for supporting research in the field of higher education choice is the concern for effective decision-making at all levels, and there is general agreement that it is critically important that applicants are able to make well informed choices (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015, p. 256).

When analysing the offer of journalism courses in the UK, Connor and Dewson (2001) also found issues with lack of information in prospectuses, while Cullen and Callaghan specifically raised the issue of the match between courses and employment in their Australian research. They found that

'there is a very real risk students will misinterpret or overestimate the power of a particular course to deliver employment in a given field' (Cullen & Callaghan 2010, p. 121).

In the UK, a key finding of Browne's review was that better information provision must be available to prospective students about employment outcomes (Browne et al. 2010). This need is echoed in research in Australia by Szekeres, who observes:

... documents like the Admissions Guides are the most important sources of information students use and communications need to be clearer about possible career and job outcomes (Szekeres 2010, pp. 429-30).

The student-facing research undertaken in Scotland by Briggs and Wilson on the students' choice making processes added the student voice to these calls for greater information (alongside calls for more on course content), saying 'employment opportunities for individual courses and likely skills outcomes for graduates would aid the choice decision' (Briggs & Wilson 2007, pp. 64-65). It is notable that these survey responses originated from Scottish students in accountancy and engineering disciplines, two courses often understood to be vocationally oriented in nature. There is a reluctance by prospective students to engage with formal institutional documentation (Shaw 2012), seen as high risk for students in the choice process, as they cannot validate the claims of the institutions (Foskett, Dyke & Maringe 2008). Low trust of formal institutional documents is generally shown in the UK (Dyke, Foskett & Maringe 2008; Slack et al. 2014).

Despite the finding in significant numbers of studies that cold knowledge of institutional documentation is not trusted (Ball & Vincent 1998), the research agrees this form of information about courses plays a key role in all student choice. That is, the prospectuses are core to the student choice process in all segments of the market: the longitudinal UK study into student outcomes, Futuretrack, found the majority of students had consulted prospectuses and found them helpful (Purcell et al. 2008).

Frequently, in the process of student choice, the prospectuses form the most consulted mode of information, as indicated by a number of studies which focus on UK higher education (Harding 2012; Maringe 2006; Moogan & Baron 2003; Winter & Chapleo 2015). Later research often does not differentiate between websites of universities and prospectuses (Davies et al. 2010).

Harding argues (2012) that the issue with the preference of students for institutional information sources is that suppliers of services providing information become 'a barrier to the effective exercise of choice in public services' (Harding 2012, p. 178). Maringe's work on choice and branding suggests that institutional positioning engages with the needs of students in making their choice of institutions:

Understanding choice and decision-making of applicants feeds into this institutional positioning strategy through a clear identification of both the reasons for purchase behaviour of applicants (Maringe 2006, p. 469).

The interplay between institutional positioning strategy and student choice is another indicator of the complexity of the process and supports Marginson's argument that a fully-realised neo-liberal market mechanism is not in operation for domestic students in the UK (Marginson 2013).

Although prospective students in a number of studies (Briggs & Wilson 2007; Davies et al. 2010; Harding 2012; Maringe 2006; Moogan & Baron 2003; Winter & Chapleo 2015) did not rate the prospectuses as the most useful form of information, they have been shown to 'form a key part of the evaluation process by shaping initial impressions of an institution' (Winter & Chapleo 2015, p. 6). This factor is explained by Moogan, Baron and Bainbridge, who describe student choosers as so keen to 'make the best possible choice [that] they will research the "educational-market" by whatever means present. Consequently, they will rely on promotional materials such as prospectuses' (Moogan, Baron & Bainbridge 2001, p. 179).

Hesketh and Knight's study illustrates the concern of people relying only on prospectuses: 'some of the stuff you want in a prospectus isn't necessarily the sort of stuff the people that design the

prospectuses are in the business to give you' (Hesketh & Knight 1999, p. 157). The tension between what prospective students want to find out and what information universities want to give, as indicated by Hesketh and Knight (1999), is critical for this study and its relation to the usefulness of institutional materials as a part of the student choice process.

As students become better informed and more able to make judgements on the range of potential 'suppliers', it has been posited that those judgements will be increasingly focused on the 'added value' a university can offer (Briggs 2006). Newer universities which cannot rely on long-standing reputations might succeed by promoting the extra services they can provide to students' university experience (Szekeres 2010).

The literature reviewed in this section raises questions about what the purposes of prospectuses are and what kinds of idea of a degree are constructed by institutions for prospective students. There are studies which show what governments think should be included in prospectuses (Browne et al. 2010; Schwartz 2004), what students have said they require in prospectuses (Briggs & Wilson 2007; Moogan, Baron & Harris 1999; Moogan 2011), and what institutional actors feel are their duties in terms of honesty about graduate outcomes (Cullen & Callaghan 2010). There are no studies which investigate what institutions are saying about the idea of a degree, although there is significant research relating to the idea of a university (Rothblatt 1997, Silver 1990, Silver 2003). Neither are there any studies that discuss the idea of a degree within student choice relating to the period of massification, nor how the idea of a degree, as constructed in the marketing materials, has changed over time. The lack of research into the changes related to the idea of a degree, as presented by institutions in their documentation over the period of massification, a period in which more people are entering university and gaining degrees, is marked, particularly in the context of understandings that inequalities still persist (Burke 2013; Whitty & Clement 2015) – this is a gap in the literature.

Even though prospectuses may be to some degree poorly regarded by students, the research makes it clear they are documents worthy of study and analysis. Others have asserted that the discursive practices of prospectus content are important as they are more than a 'harmless genre' (Askehave 2007, p. 740); this thesis agrees with this, which prompts further investigation into the messages that are sent in the prospectuses. The prospectuses' place within the student choice process is real, central and important; they provide a foundation of information that is built on by the student choosers of information, dependent on their access to other forms of knowledge.

There is little research on the place of marketing materials of institutions as part of the student choice process, therefore this thesis identifies two areas of research to be expanded. These two areas relate to deeper investigation of the marketing materials. The first area of research is the place of these materials by students in the student choice process, which this thesis does not investigate as this does not relate to the stated research problem. The second area of research identified as having potential for expansion relates to the understanding about the messages which are sent by institutions, which is the work this thesis undertakes

## **Research on prospectuses**

The literature search found just a few peer-reviewed studies in English which consider student entry materials including prospectuses, and as a result generate understandings about higher education and engage with the student choice process (Askehave 2007; Fairclough 1993; Graham 2013). These writings look at the UK along with other country contexts variously, as will be detailed. There is also one article from Australia (Symes 1999) and two from the US (Hartley & Morpew 2008; Saichaie & Morpew 2014) which undertake similar research. The more recent of these studies use university websites as well as texts (Askehave 2007; Graham 2013; Hartley & Morpew 2008; Saichaie & Morpew 2014). As the approaches looking at the websites use discourse analysis in the same way, these studies have been included here. That these researchers have used prospectuses as the main item of investigation is noteworthy for this research, as it indicates their usefulness as a

representation of the internal discourses that institutions present to the world. Fairclough (1993), Symes (1996) and Askehave (2007) used their analyses of the prospectuses to produce findings about how marketing has changed the student choice process. Hartley and Morphew (2008), Graham (2013) and Sachaie and Morphew (2014) examined institutional prospectuses to generate ideas about how institutions dealt with privatisation of higher education (Hartley & Morphew 2008), widening participation (Graham 2013) and purposes of higher education espoused by institutions (Sachaie & Morphew 2014).

To look at the studies in detail, the first, and most widely cited, is Fairclough's work in the early 1990s which theorised the marketisation of higher education in the UK. Fairclough (1993) included a major section looking at the pre-entry materials at his own institution from two different time periods: he also studied job adverts, academic conference programmes and the use of the curriculum vitae for academic promotion, but these are inherently not pre-entry student materials.

Askehave's text also investigates marketisation and does so across four different countries, Australia, Finland, Japan and the UK, analysing prospectuses and providing a comparative critical discourse analysis (2007). She interrogates how the texts represent the universities and the students; she also draws on Fairclough's 1993 method and shows how it might be used in different contexts. Askehave's work offers a multi-modal analysis and contributes understandings of how institutions construct prospectus texts: 'we write texts which draw upon textual, visual and design features widely used in advertising and promotional material' (Askehave 2007, p. 725).

The final UK-based work is Graham's journal article (2013). It is based on her doctoral research, and looks primarily at prospectuses (and additional interviews with institutional staff) to establish how the UK widening participation agenda is represented in them (Graham 2013). This study is pivotal for this research as it too draws on the methods described in Fairclough's 1993 article to analyse the prospectuses, and so broadens his work beyond the study of marketisation and prospectuses.

The Australian-based work by Symes (1996) uses discourse analysis to understand how marketisation has impacted on the higher education sector within an Australian context. He draws on Fairclough's work to analyse the prospectuses of a number of institutions and draws conclusions about the impact of the market on higher education. Symes makes important contributions to the usefulness of the documents as analytic tools: 'The prospectus as a genre is an important "literary" form in the life of the university, halfway between an advertisement and a handbook' (Symes 1996, p. 139). His work also indicates the replicability of Fairclough's model in a varied context.

Within the US context Morphew and colleagues use the promotional materials of institutions to understand how higher education is being explained to prospective students. The first article is a discourse analysis of forty US college prospectuses – called 'viewbooks' – investigating the content themes used and their variation, and analysing 'what messages (if any) are communicated to students about the academic purposes of higher education' (Hartley & Morphew 2008, p. 672). This is a significant study as it provides evidence that the prospectuses can be analysed successfully to understand the messages constructed about the idea of a degree.

In follow-up work there is a recently published article by Saichaie and Morphew (2014), based on Saichaie's doctoral research (Saichaie 2011). Their article investigates the marketing materials of higher education through discourse analysis to establish the discourses being transmitted in the websites (Saichaie & Morphew 2014). Although based on the analysis of websites, it draws on Fairclough's (1993) marketisation article and again shows how ideas about degrees can be assessed through the analysis of pre-entry materials.

This section's specific focus on research using prospectuses as the main data source and exploring their contributions to the understanding of higher education's place in the world shows that research

of this nature on documents for entry into these environments is valuable, and can contribute to understandings of the student choice process.

## **Summary**

This subsection draws together the review of the literature on student choice. As signalled in the Introduction chapter, this thesis extends Archer's work (2003) which originated in the student choice literature and analyses the value of a degree as discussed by participants and non-participants of higher education as part of their choice of degrees. There is, however, a gap in the literature in that no research found to date examines how the idea of a degree has changed over the period of massification in the context of student choice.

In this literature review, the first subsection introduced the field and showed there are two concerns about equity raised by this literature: firstly, what information are students receiving, and is there equitable access to desired information, and secondly how the existing varied access to higher-status institutions and discipline areas impacts on outcomes?

The second subsection reviewed work that used Bourdieu's (1977) theory to understand how student choice operates. The subsection examined the theorising of the student choice process as a differential process between those with hot knowledge which is related to cultural capital and those without this who rely on institutional and other documentation, termed by Ball and Vincent (1998) cold knowledge. Within this subsection of the literature review, an argument was made as to why Bourdieu's works (1977; 1984) are important for developing this thesis's reading of the student choice literature. The thesis uses Bourdieu's theoretical concepts which account for interaction within the field of higher education as a theoretical frame to understand literature on student choice, and to enable comprehension of the theorising of the discursive constructions of the idea of a degree within the pre-entry materials of higher education. Recognition that an ability to understand cultural codes is necessary before students can gain specific knowledge underpins the rationale for analysing the cultural codes in prospectuses. The decision to use Bourdieu in supporting the analysis of the literature was prompted because his conceptual idea of field, along with the associated and indivisible ideas of habitus and cultural capital, helps to uncover and challenge practices which are taken for granted (Bathmaker 2015). In this research, these concepts help to understand how to read the literature about the messages that institutions send to prospective students in their institutional materials.

The third subsection examined the literature on institutions' engagement with student choice and drew mainly on texts from business research fields. Research reviewed argued that institutions carefully manage their image (Price 2002) and draw on branding practices to support the cultivation of institutional image (Chapleo 2010; Ivy 2001). It is also argued in the literature that the marketisation of institutions has been both performed and experienced differently within institutions of varied hierarchical status (Naidoo & Whitty 2014). Naidoo and Whitty's work (2014) investigates the contemporary period and does not seek to look over a longer time span, nor does it consider how the messages that institutions send within the student choice process are represented in their marketing materials. The subsection reviewed research which suggested that marketisation had impacted on the process of student choice of higher education. It found that general marketing theories are not sufficient in understanding how students choose higher education, as student choice is a complex decision which involves more than just institutional characteristics. The research reviewed in this section is used in this thesis to argue that the marketing of higher education institutions is an area of research that is important and under-theorised in educational research literature.

The fourth subsection reviewed the research on institutional materials within the student choice process. The previous subsection's review of the literature established that the cold knowledge of institutional materials (Reay, David & Ball 2005) is understood differently and that there can be a lack

of ease of understanding by prospective students (Bowl 2003). The fourth subsection established that there is a need for more research into how institutional materials are used by students to make choices and how massification and increased marketisation has impacted these choices (Smyth & Banks 2012; Szekeres 2010; Tomlinson 2016; Whitty & Clement 2015). This lack in this area was examined in this subsection with reference to UK government reviews such as Browne (2010), which call for more information. Certain areas of need for further study were identified as including attention to language use (Biber 2006), issues of content (Briggs & Wilson 2007, Hesketh & Knight 1999) and relating to graduate outcomes (Cullen & Callaghan 2010, Purcell et al. 2008). Research in this subsection was included both to justify the close work of this study on the institutional marketing materials and also to provide a context for the refining of the research questions.

The fifth subsection examined the previous research which used prospectuses as primary sources. The existing research on prospectuses shows that as data items they can be used to produce understandings about higher education. The analysis of marketing materials to generate knowledge about how institutions send messages is demonstrated particularly relevantly in Graham's (2013) work tracing the messages institutions send about widening participation and Saichaie and Morphew's (2014) research investigating the purposes of higher education. Both these studies use discourse analysis to work with the marketing materials. The Methodological Framework chapter in this thesis will explain how this thesis will use a discourse analysis approach to understand messages about the idea of a degree. Saichaie and Morphew's US-based work (2014) on how the purposes of higher education are expressed in their marketing materials is important in this thesis and considers the differentiation between institutions of different status. However, Saichaie and Morphew's (2014) work looks at a different national context from the UK and is based within a contemporary time period. Therefore, their research does not consider how these messages about the purposes of higher education have changed in time.

The research reviewed in these subsections reveals a difference between students who have the requisite cultural capital generated by and valued in higher education and those who do not have access to this specific kind of cultural capital. The reading of the research in this literature review has generated understandings and a definition of recognition of hot and cold knowledge and has identified the potential inequalities arising from processes of student choice. This literature review has argued, drawing on literature in the field, that inequalities within access to the higher education system impact on certain groups significantly, as those with fewer specific kinds of cultural resources or specific cultural capital rely on cold knowledge (Ball 2003). The tension between students' positions on cultural capital is critical for this study and its relation to cold knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998). The literature reviewed supports the central research problem of this thesis, which is motivated by the concept that transmission of the idea of a degree in a clear and widely accessible way is of major importance to the equity of access to higher education, and the lack of it is a substantial and important inequality.

### **Refining the research problem and defining research questions**

This final section considers the gap identified by this Literature Review chapter and describes how this study poses research questions which will illuminate the research problem. The originating research problem of this thesis was to understand how the idea of a degree has changed over the period of massification within the student choice process. This review of the relevant literature has led to an understanding of the existence of gaps in the literature related to this subject; this research also illuminates some aspects of practice by identifying the messages institutions send in student choice materials. This work will support improvements in practice and understanding of the changing discourses of the idea of a degree as presented in the prospectuses. The literature review establishes that there is little extant literature that investigates how messages about the idea of a degree operate within marketing materials, and none that take a historical view. Therefore, this is defined as the major gap in the literature, and what this thesis has chosen to focus on.

However, drawing on Brooks (2001), quoted at length in the introduction to this thesis, I agree that access to information about higher education will not simply solve inequalities in the higher education sector. As she suggests, the sources of information in terms of where and how to look for information are not a means of generating sources for improvement of these problems (Brooks 2001). What is needed is a remaking of the structural inequalities in the system, some of which are intensified by unequal access to information about higher education and so entrench conservative social reproduction within the system, which is replicated and relayed by the student choice process.

This thesis does not aim to provide a solution to any of these problems; however, it seeks to contribute knowledge about how the idea of a degree is transmitted to prospective students by institutions. Further, it seeks to uncover understandings about how the higher education information provided before entry sends messages to students about the idea of what a degree is, and whether and how these messages reflect the differentiation in the UK higher education sector. Its analysis is based on teasing out from the prospectuses, which are often seen as neutral parts of the student choice process, the discourses which are constructed by the institutions, and it aspires to analyse these texts to contribute to an understanding of how student choice operates and is influenced in discursive terms.

In this Literature Review chapter, it was established that materials produced by higher education institutions, such as prospectuses, form a significant part of the student choice process; research finds that these pre-entry materials are seen as cold knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998), and are not well regarded in contrast to information from more informal sources (Reay, David & Ball 2005). These informal sources of information, such as from family and friends, are termed hot knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998). This disparity in esteem of sources of information poses an equity problem for the sector, as not all prospective students have access to hot knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998). Therefore, the materials institutions provide directly are important steps in many students' student choice process. Further, it is understood that the student choice process is influenced by, and can reproduce, deficits in equity (Ball et al. 2002). There is a recognition in the literature that cold knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998) is not well trusted in the student choice process (Briggs & Wilson 2007), nor are the products of cold knowledge (university marketing materials) well theorised.

This concern about prospective students receiving different levels of information during the selection process has intensified as during massification increasingly diverse groups of students enter higher education (Whitty & Clement 2015), and has intensified as age participation rates now rise (Carpentier 2005). Massification through engaging new cohorts has meant prospective students are drawn from wider groups of the population in terms of socio-economic status and familial experience of higher education. This, alongside changes in the career development education provided by universities (Farenga & Quinlan 2015), and the increased positioning of students as consumers by higher education institutions (Naidoo & Whitty 2014; Woodall, Hiller & Resnick 2014), means it has become more challenging to obtain specific, personalised advice about the student choice process. In this Literature Review chapter it was established that there is little research analysing the messages found in UK pre-entry materials provided by higher education institutions in the choice process which focuses on the rationale for undertaking degrees. Archer's work (2003) on *The Value of Higher Education* provides a foundation for this research by mapping prospective students' perceptions of the reasons they might consider undertaking higher education. However, Archer's study (2003) is orientated from the students' perspective and does not operate from the position of the institutional invoking of a rationale for undertaking a degree. Further, there is no study that has been found in this research on how the rationale for undertaking a degree has changed over the period of massification.

Therefore, here I list in broad terms the multiple questions emerging from the review of the literature which I have reflected on and refined into two overarching research questions, which are specified at the end of this chapter: What are the topics of the discourse related to the rationale for taking a degree? How has the rationale for taking a degree been constructed in the UK in the current

period and has it changed over the period of massification? How have macro policy discourses impacted on the marketing materials of UK institutions? Has the massification impacted in traceable ways on the idea of a degree? Has the change in structure of the UK higher education field, as a binary system which has been unified, had impact on the idea of a degree in prospectuses? Has the establishment of (quasi-)markets based on market principles (Marginson 2013) impacted in traceable ways on the idea of a degree? How do the universities' messages seem to expect their students to understand the inner workings of higher education in order to understand the prospectuses? How much do institutions' messages require an understanding of how degrees work within the university and on the job market? Who are the messages aimed at – that is from reading the discourses, who can be constructed as the institutions' intended audience?

These specific questions arising from the literature are based on the understanding that exposing the dominant discourses at work within higher education can, in and of itself, be a liberating move and lead to wider change. If the sector has the resources to understand the messages it sends, especially their restrictions and limitations, then it is possible that more equitable forms of higher education information can be provided for the full range of potential students. Further, the thesis understands that generating a piece of research investigating the construction of the rationale of a degree in itself creates greater understanding of how institutions interact with students in the process of student choice.

Prospectus documents form a recurrent part of the student choice decision (Harding 2012), and there is an inherent inequity if they do not offer a clear description of the differentiated nature of provision. Non-traditional and non-elite students tend to lack access to hot knowledge and so rely heavily on informational provision in cold knowledge form. While there are many routes to support identified non-traditional students to enter higher education, in order to support all prospective students in the choice process it is important that the messages are better understood both for students and for those who support students.

In finalising the overarching research questions it was important to consider whether or not differences in the status of institutions, as established by Cullen & Callaghan (2010), appear within the prospectuses in the construction of the messages about the value of the institutions' degrees. It is also important to ask how these differences appear and if these processes have changed over time. This is especially relevant given that over the period of massification many more potential students from increasingly diverse backgrounds are reading these texts and may not be able to deconstruct complex messages of institutional branding.

In summary, although the research on student choice shows clearly that formal institutional documents offering cold knowledge are not for potential students the preferred method of gaining information on courses, they are a core institutional process and therefore it is of value to understand them better. What has been found in this chapter is that there is to date little research on how student choice engages with what the idea of a degree is, and how the idea is transmitted in higher education materials and how it has changed over the period of massification. Therefore, this is the space in which this thesis aims to operate.

There was little literature explaining the idea of a degree at the start of the massification period (Trow 2000), nor how it has changed alongside the higher education system. To compensate for the lack of commentary, this thesis takes a historical view. Campbell and Sherington hold that in order to explain the present, particularly in regard to changes over time, the historical perspective is necessary (Campbell & Sherington 2002). Further, Fairclough's (1993) work on prospectuses explains it is only through reading through time that discourse shifts can be properly observed.

Tracing the meaning of the degree is undertaken in this thesis through documentary analysis, a principle regarded as a valuable part of research in that looking at documents can produce insights into changing ideas, as explained by McCulloch:

... a single document, or a set of documents from the same source or author, might well be valuable to the researcher in that it helps to reconstruct the experiences and changing ideas and practices of one particular individual, or family, or party or other entity, however typical or atypical it may be (McCulloch 2004, p. 38).

As McCulloch (2004) argues, there is value in examining documents as artefacts to understand changing ideas over time. This is useful as there are complexities around the recent constructions and variations of the idea of a degree within the UK and this research seeks to interpret and trace how these ideas have arisen in both historical and cultural terms. McCulloch and Richardson discuss the introduction of 'quasi-historical research methods' (McCulloch and Richardson 2000, p. 15) which use some techniques of documentary analysis along with other approaches, which as I will argue could include discourse approaches. A discourse orientation is used to 'open up well-worn educational topics to new questions and directions' (MacLure 2003, p. 68) in the examination of the prospectuses. It does this by focusing on the language used, drawing on the work of Downs, who in her UK-based work on the value of education writes about the critical importance of language:

This becomes apparent in the kind of language used in political rhetoric about the value of higher education ... It is audible even in statements that purport to transcend the economic and the instrumental. There is reference for example to the 'rich cultural scene and social scene' (Directgov, 2012) ... The use of 'rich' rather than say 'diverse', 'fertile' or 'expansive' is telling, as are references to 'realising one's potential' because of the primacy of investment value over other values (Downs 2015, p. 7).

The question of how the messages about the idea of a degree are explained in the marketing materials is important as a topic for research, as understanding the messages that students receive from institutions could support a greater understanding of the student choice process. This research seeks to inform the literature on student choice about how the conceptual ideas of a degree are presented by institutions.

In order to undertake this work, this thesis recognises that the discourses of the idea of a degree are fed into a complex web and network of policy positions on a national and global level, as explained by Ball (2012). Therefore this thesis seeks to analyse the discursive practices relating to the idea of a degree in the UK in the recent period. This thesis explores the idea that the analysis of the prospectuses, while multi-layered, is central to the understanding of the social practice of institutions and provides another 'perspective on the changing context' (Symes 1996, p. 145) of higher education. Analysis of documents such as prospectuses to understand the link between the past and present needs to be interpreted in relation to the 'historical context in which they have been produced' (McCulloch 2004, p. 5). However as there is not an established literature on the development and changes to the idea of a degree this thesis will have to generate new knowledge about this as a first stage. This thesis aims to generate understandings of how messages have been impacted by policy changes over the period of massification, in order to be able to give an understanding of how policy impacts the messages within higher education institutions.

The originating research problem expressed in the Introduction chapter of this thesis was how has the idea of a degree as expressed in the marketing materials of UK institutions been changed by massification over the last forty years? Having synthesised this research problem into specific questions as elaborated earlier in this chapter, this chapter concludes by condensing these questions into two main overarching research questions. The research questions that this thesis pursues are:

- Research question 1 [RQ1] - How is the idea of a degree constructed in the UK, and has it changed over the period of massification?
- Research question 2 [RQ2] - How have the messages about the idea of a degree in institutional materials changed in line with shifts in macro discourses about the idea of a degree over the period of massification? Are the messages different depending on the status and type of institution?

### **3. Methodological Framework**

This chapter discusses the methodological framework for the thesis and establishes the context for research design decisions made. The chapter engages with the research problem and draws on the literature review to explain the methodological choices made. It explains the position taken in terms of the theoretical tools the work will rely on, and outlines the epistemology, ontology and the theory of language adopted for this thesis.

The first section details the approach adopted to address the research problem and discusses key methods chosen for this study. The second section outlines the position taken and establishes the epistemological and ontological frame in which it operates. The third section reflects on the various methods of critical discourse analysis and defines the chosen process for working with the data.

#### **Approach adopted to address the research problem**

The research problem identified has been the need to generate understandings of institutional messages to prospective students within the higher education sector, and the need to investigate how these have changed over the period of massification. The problem has been contextualised within the research on student choice explored in the Literature Review chapter, where a gap in the literature was identified in the lack of detailed research looking at the development of the idea of a degree, and particularly the messages about the idea of a degree that institutional pre-entry materials send. This chapter details the choices made in the research, how the methodological framework was established and explains the conceptual positions. These positions are implemented and discussed in more detail in the following Research Design chapter and in the Data Selection and Preparation chapter which explains the application of the macro discourses to the close reading of the prospectuses.

This research takes a historical position in order to understand how the idea of a degree has changed over the period of massification. It adopts Trow's (2000) framework (developed for the US context, but also widely used to understand the UK higher education sector) to trace the change from an elite to a mass higher education system and dates this change as having commenced from the 1960s and 1970s (Trow 2000). His work (1970) on the early phase of massification in the US raises questions about what the increase in student numbers means for the purposes of a degree. Trow outlines (1970) what he calls the traditional university commitment, in terms of its education purposes, to the transmission of high culture, the selection, formation and certification of elite groups, and he raises questions about how these can be continued in a mass system. Following Trow's (1970) identification of the potential issues related to massification of the higher education system, this research seeks to pursue the impact massification has had on higher education institutions' interactions with undergraduate cohorts. To undertake close work on prospectuses tracing messages about the idea of a degree within them, this thesis must first generate an understanding of the development of the idea of a degree as a discourse.

As detailed in the Literature Review chapter, there are numerous studies which look at aspects of student choice through qualitative methods of study, but few which concentrate solely on the cold knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998) the institutions produce through their publications. This study's core interest relates to tracing the changes in the messages that institutions send to students as they choose institutions. Institutional marketing materials are a central element for this research. The messages that institutions send to prospective students in the transition to higher education student choice process will be examined closely with the aim of exploring how they become represented and coded in institutional materials during the period of mass expansion of the higher education sector in the UK. While there is a substantial amount of literature informing this area, it is contended there has not been to date any specific study on the relation between student choice and the idea of a degree, especially from an institutional perspective – in other words, on how the changing relationship

towards the idea of a degree has influenced the marketing of these institutions with the entrance of the market into higher education.

The study arises from my professional role as a careers counsellor supporting students in higher education entry transitions. Due to my work in practice I have a strong desire to ensure there is a pursuit of equitable sources of information available for all students considering higher education transition, and note the research in the Literature Review chapter that establishes that higher education institutions are often sites of reproduction of privilege (Ball et al. 2002). Therefore, this research's position is driven by a desire to understand how the materials produced by higher education institutions, which are described in the research on student choice as cold knowledge, after Ball and Vincent (1998), have reflected the significant changes to the higher education system since the beginning of the massification process. It was also established in the review of research that there remain significant differences in the status of institutions (Whitty & Clement 2015), that the provision of pre-entry materials to prospective students has been impacted by marketisation (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006), and that marketisation has operated differently depending on the institutions (Naidoo & Whitty 2014). Therefore, this research seeks to look at how massification has changed the messages institutions send about the value of their degrees and whether this has happened differently in institutions of different status.

In research of this nature, based on documentary analysis, the processes that led to the methodological decisions must be made transparent, not only for procedural reasons, but to ensure the analysis takes account of the rigour needed in research to distance itself from descriptive stances, as Ball explains (1990). To work with these documents this thesis draws on MacLure's view of a discourse-based educational research which should concern itself with 'taking that which offers itself as commonsensical, obvious, natural, given or unquestionable and trying to unravel it a bit – to open it up to further questioning' (MacLure 2003, p. 9). The documents produced by institutions as part of the student choice process are seen by this thesis as a set of unexplored data which has not been substantially explored in this way. To undertake this work, I have chosen to employ techniques which support the unravelling of discourses and seek to understand language and how it operates within texts to exert power.

In the choice of discourse-based educational research this thesis follows Wodak and Meyer (2009) in choosing to name the techniques it will use as critical discourse analysis. The research embraces their definition of critical discourse analysis [CDA]:

CDA is therefore not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex (Wodak & Meyer 2009, p. 2).

The research problem of this thesis does not pursue the production processes that institutions undertake, nor how students use and understand the documents within the student choice process, but instead seeks to trace the development and flow of discourses relating to the rationale for students undertaking a degree. This thesis investigates the discourses of the idea of a degree that operate in the UK policy context within higher education institutions and within the higher education field (Bourdieu 1977), which this thesis will call the macro discourses. The thesis traces how these macro discourses play out within the materials of the institutions; it also looks at what Williams calls a 'narrower but equally complex set of discourses: those within higher education institutions' (Jenny Williams 1997, p. 87). This research does not seek to explain and give an account of the institutional actions, nor provide definitive answers to the question of how students choose universities, as neither of these would support the chosen research questions.

The research is interested in how the institutions deploy discourses in their materials, the prospectuses, which are named in this thesis as the micro discourses. As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, Bourdieu's (1977) work provides a theoretical base for much of the extant research material drawn on in this research and supports the development of a framework for the research problem. The framework used in this thesis sees higher education as a 'field' within Bourdieu's terms,

and students' choice of higher education as a 'generative moment' of social reproduction (Ball et al. 2002). As a result, Bourdieu's work on distinction (1984) is also critical in understanding how institutions are presented within their prospectuses and other pre-entry course materials, as discussed in the Literature Review chapter. Over the period of the study, institutions struggle to distinguish themselves within an increasingly competitive market (Hemsley-Brown 2011), and these struggles impact on the constructions of the idea of a degree that are presented in the pre-entry materials. This thesis understands the field of critical policy sociology as described by Ozga, in that it is 'rooted in the social science tradition, historically informed and drawing on qualitative and illuminative techniques' (Ozga 1987, p. 144).

It has been important for this thesis to understand the policy environment in which the institutions have operated over the period of massification. Within the policy domain relating to higher education, the way structural relationships between individuals, education and work are viewed by this research as neither neutral nor static. That is, the unspoken messages and coded discourses about entry to and the purposes of higher education have been formed over time by policy drivers with specific contexts and functions, although they may seem at any given moment obvious, commonsensical and timeless.

Gale's theoretical findings on the field of critical policy analysis (2001) have been important in the development of this thesis and its structural underpinnings, which seek to contrast the macro discourses that operate in a policy context with how they are used on a meso, institutional level as deployed in the micro discourses of artefacts of the student choice process, the prospectuses. In following the development of the discourses it is important to be able to show that transitions have consistently been political and not necessarily simply a 'consequence of "progress"' (Gale 2001, p. 386). In this thesis, registering the historical view of discursive changes forms a key part of framing and understanding the research problem.

The focus of this research is not on the individual institutions but on the higher education sector's deployment of discourse as a set of messages within institutional documents relating to the rationale for undertaking a degree, and observed shifts in this process over the period of massification in the UK. Discourses are themselves in their social worlds mobile, shifting and time-specific. Reviewing them through history develops knowledge of changes throughout the selected period, and how those discourses came into being. Fairclough suggests the historical perspective is critically important in discourse analysis:

... the relationship between discourse and other facets of the social is not a transhistorical constant but a historical variable, so that there are qualitative differences between different historical epochs in the social functioning of discourse (Fairclough 1993, p. 157).

Emphasising discourse and drawing on Fairclough (1993) assumes discourses are historically situated: 'Historical change ought, in my view, to be the primary focus and concern of critical discourse analysis if it is to be relevant to the great social issues of our day' (Fairclough 1993, p. 137). Therefore, this thesis seeks not only to look at how the discourse of the idea of a degree operates in the contemporary field of higher education, but also wishes to trace how these changes have developed over time. Further, it seeks to trace how varying and competing discourses of the idea of a degree have developed over time in institutions of different status.

In order to establish the flows of policy it is necessary to contextualise the prospectuses in their era. The topics of the discourse of the idea of a degree which play out at a macro level are traced through secondary historical analysis over the period of massification. To understand these macro level discourses and establish key turning points within the discourse of the idea of a degree, the research draws on Goodson's historical periodisation approach (2005). Goodson argues there are long waves of educational reform which coincide with economic reform and within them there are various policy developments which he calls eventementes, or what he refers to as individual events or reform initiatives, short term actions that should be contextualised within the long wave of reforms in order

to be best understood (Goodson 2005). The term 'eventementes' is taken from the social history practice of a group known as Annalistes, mainly from France during the 20th century, who advocated long term historiography (Goodson 2005) to make sense of short term change. In Goodson's work on eventementes he draws upon the work of the French historian Braudel who explained the cyclical nature of history in terms of the 'longue durée' through which 'regularities and continuities of systems' (Braudel and Wallerstein 2009, p. 180) can be understood.

The long wave of educational reform for the purposes of this thesis is seen as massification within the time period between the 1970s and 2013. Therefore, the period was interrogated for indication of change in the nature of the discourse about the idea of a degree, as signalled by eventementes. As a result of this analysis, six periods that either heralded changes in the macro discourses or resulted from changes in the macro discourses were identified through the analysis of the discursive development of the idea of a degree in the UK. Unlike Goodson (2005), this thesis is interested in not just the historical long wave of change of massification but instead a specific discourse that operates at macro, meso and micro levels over the long wave of change, the idea of a degree. Thus, there are differences in this thesis's application of the technique of establishing eventementes, in that the thesis selects not the biggest change within the period in terms of massification but the one that is analysed to have most altered the discourse of the idea of a degree.

This thesis acknowledges, however, that Goodson (2010) warns of the theoretical and methodological limits of historical periodisation; it should be noted this work is not trying to be an exhaustive history, but instead follows Goodson's suggestion that 'definition of periods allows us to define the possibility for professional action and professional narratives at particular points in historical time' (Goodson 2010, p. 768).

Goodson's writing on historical periodisation (2005; 2010) has been essential to the conceptual design of this research and also as part of the preparation for the data selection detailed in the Research Design chapter, relating to the time phase selection of major eventementes in the UK. Jager and Meier (2009), in their work deploying Foucauldian critical discourse analysis, introduce a conceptual tool of discursive events. They explain discursive events as differentiating between major events which do not change the public discourse or discourses of texts and those that do effect some identifiable change. In stating this, Jager and Meier (2009) use a contrast between the impact of the similar nuclear events of Three Mile Island, which was not made public, and that at Chernobyl, which was highly public. Their claim is that Chernobyl was a discursive event as it changed public discourse on nuclear energy but the comparable accident of Three Mile Island was not. Jager and Meier's concept does not relate to high level macro discourses only, but can be applied at other levels of analysis (Jager & Maier 2009), such as the micro discourses of the prospectuses. This concept of discursive events can then be used, alongside the eventementes identified as having changed national governmental policy discourse, to trace whether the discourses of the prospectuses were impacted on by the eventementes. Therefore, for the analysis of the data in this thesis, the concept of discursive events becomes an analytical tool to use in assessing change within the prospectuses against the major events which form the structural basis of the thesis's analytical frame.

Attempting to trace how each institution within the higher education sector, defined broadly, has responded to major discursive events is not within the scale and scope of this present research. Such an attempt would require that the thesis look at all the institutional materials from the entire higher education sector and this would lead to significant data overload, particularly given the historical orientation of the thesis, and not necessarily generate any extra insight in relation to the research questions. In this thesis, a major aim is tracing the impact of macro level changes in the discourse of the idea of a degree and understanding how they seem to have played out in meso level discourse as indicated by the micro level texts, not studying the effect of the events on each institution. Flyvbjerg (2011) suggests that the case study method is suitable when research is seeking to understand deeper reasons in research, such as the impact of macro level changes to the idea of a degree. As the insight

sought by the overarching research questions for this thesis relates to the impact of macro changes in the discourse of the idea of a degree over the period of massification, and not the frequency of changes to prospectuses, the case study method is suitable, as Flyvbjerg has noted (2011). Therefore, the research chooses to identify cases to examine the effects over time. Case study design can offer a solution to the problem of data overload and still produce meaningful understandings and answer the research questions. Therefore, this research will use the case study technique, which is described by Gerring:

A case study may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population) (Gerring 2007, p. 20).

This research selects a sample of institutions and engages with the prospectus documents in order to extrapolate on a larger set of cases, the UK higher education sector. The details of how the case studies were selected, based on contextual information, are given in the Research Design chapter of this thesis, which explains the implementation of the research approach discussed here.

## **Conceptual frameworks used in the research**

This section identifies the conceptual ideas central to this thesis and indicates their position in approach to the research problem. Further, I explore my stance in relation to the epistemological and ontological positioning of the study. Due to the nature of the research problem, which is historically oriented and based within a critical discourse analysis framework, it is necessary to also pay attention to and involve the theory of language. The epistemological approach I adopted drew on Usher's (1997) description of a starting-point which:

... recognizes that all knowledge is produced out of a relationship between human thought and human existence: that in producing knowledge one cannot make a distinction between objective and subjective knowledge; that all knowledge is shaped by a mixture of historical and cultural influences ... (Usher 1997, p. 43).

This comprehension of the position of knowledge production informed my epistemological position, that no absolute truths are to be found, and research may only reach towards illuminating aspects of the world and practices within society. In a broad framework of post-structuralism, a rejection of a grand narratives approach to ontology is proposed here. However, that is not to reject recognising the operation of grand narratives. As Apple states it is important to remember that 'in the rush to post-structuralism and post-modernism, many of us may have forgotten how very powerful the structural dynamics are in which we participate' (Apple 1995, p. xi). For me, this thesis stems from a commitment to a student choice process which is characterised by fair access and enhanced by widening participation. Therefore, it focuses on a research problem relating to the messages that institutions send to prospective students.

Since this research into prospectuses is practice derived, and politically motivated in terms of desire for social justice, it is appropriate to adopt critical discourse analysis. Reisigl and Wodak stress the priority of making 'the analyst's own position transparent and justify theoretically why certain interpretations and readings of discursive events seem more valid than others' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 88). In seeking to explain the messages within the often overlooked texts that institutions produce for prospective students, the thesis is underpinned by my own professional experience and knowledge of the structural dynamics that operate within the education sector and my previously expressed concern for equity. In my research, I begin from a position which sees the world as socially constructed, where power relations are multi-faceted, themselves socially constructed, and formed through and by language in use (especially as developed by Foucault (1972) in his work on power relations and discourses). Further, this understanding is informed by work within the fields of sociology and cultural studies regarding education (MacLure 2003) and its purposes, operations and action by theorising about the manner in which social structures are reproduced within institutions of education (Bourdieu 1979; 1984).

Although the study does not analyse the reception of the institutional texts by students, an underlying concern is to acknowledge the importance of class structures and differing access to information. Therefore, it is critical at the start to express agreement with Apple that there is more to structural relations than texts:

... it is important to remember that the world inside and outside education is not only a text. There are gritty realities out there, realities whose power is often grounded in structural relations that are not simply social constructions created by the meanings given by an observer (Apple 1995, p. xiii).

It is important to be aware of this, as this research operates at a level removed from these 'gritty realities' and direct individual human actions. This thesis works from a qualitative paradigm, which believes research is interpretative and exploratory, not solving nor resolving problems neatly (Holliday 2002), and from an epistemology that sees discourses and constructs as being important and worthy of study. In exploring how the institutions present messages about the idea of a degree to prospective students, discourse analysis is used. How discourses are operating and the importance of the idea of discourse within this context is clarified by Trowler:

Discourse means language as social practice conditioned by social structures. The word 'discourse' thus places the emphasis on the structurally conditioned character of text ... (Trowler 2001, p. 188).

This thesis, while not being a work of policy analysis, seeks to follow understandings generated by Ball's work on policy enactments where he also investigates discourses at work (Ball 1993b;2015). In this thesis's intent to track discourses through a close reading of the texts (MacLure 2003), engagement is made with the varied approaches of critical discourse analysis and this thesis follows MacLure in trying to see how 'educational research can engage with the unavoidably discursive nature of educational realities' (MacLure 2003, p. 4). It seeks to take a historical view of the production of the discourses around the idea of a degree, but it also reflects the decision to not undertake a descriptively historical account, but rather look critically at how the messages encoded in the prospectuses have changed across a range of phases.

In explaining which aspects of theory I am using for the analysis of the data, I need to make clear at this point that the main analytical work of the thesis is neither based on policy analysis nor activates Bourdieu's theories (Bourdieu 1977; 1984), although these theories have influenced the conceptual framework. Critical policy analysis is drawn on for the historical secondary analysis that provides a background for the analysis of the data, and Bourdieu's work, as discussed in the Literature Review chapter, is being used as a frame for the literature, but neither are activated in the analysis of the texts.

Ball (1993b) argues in his work on policy texts that a text does not 'arrive "out of the blue" but has a interpretational and representational history' (Ball 1993b, p. 11). This concept underpins the resolve in this research to undertake a historical analysis able to expose the trajectories of the idea of a degree in the prospectuses. The choice of using a discourse analysis approach as a method to combine with a context of policy analysis is explained by Ball in the same article, using Ozga's (1990) work, calling for macro-level analysis along with 'micro-level investigation' (Ball 1993b, p. 10). The context Ball and Ozga are discussing for micro-level investigations is one which 'takes account of people's perception and experience' (Ball 1993b, p. 10). However, as discussed, I do not wish to look at individual reception and experience of the texts by students but rather at the messages encoded within the texts that are the production of institutions: this is where I differ from the accounts of Ozga (1990) and Ball (1993b), by using unobtrusive methods.

'Unobtrusive research' of the kind in this study, also known as non-reactive research, has no interaction with the actors involved in the area being researched (Bessant & Watts 2007). The decision to undertake documentary analysis has a major impact on the method and signifies there will be no engagement with any of the writers of the prospectuses, nor potential or actual readers of the

pre-entry course materials. There are benefits to commencing a project that does not involve live subjects and instead concentrates on the by-products of action and the artefacts of the action being investigated. These benefits include the lessening of ethical dilemmas for the research, which obviates the need for human ethics approval.<sup>2</sup> However, this lessening does not mean there are no questions of ethics in conducting this type of research and a cautious approach has been taken in relation to ethical and legal issues that could arise in relation to discussion of the case study sites and, above all, in my work I endeavoured to do no harm. Above all, the reasons for choosing this style of research are linked with my understanding of knowledge generation, that is that discourse analysis can explore the impact of macro discourse changes through tracing institutional practices of presenting pre-entry course materials (Fairclough 1993). Not involving human subjects means the possible issues of reactive error and guinea pig effects (Brewer & Hunter 2006), should prospective students or other actors be interviewed, are avoided.

McCulloch, in his book on documentary research, explains the fall from favour of unobtrusive research and the reputation it has gained as being 'esoteric, dry and narrow' (McCulloch 2004, p. 23). However, he defends the method of analysis and explains it should be seen as offering users the ability to develop different perspectives and make it necessary to have a robust framework for data investigation (McCulloch 2004). It should be noted that the methodological choice in this thesis to use critical discourse analysis means that the approach differs from more conventional historical documentary analysis. However, as McCulloch notes in order to continue to engage critically it is important for historians of education to embrace new theories and methodologies (McCulloch 2011).

Therefore, the use in this thesis of critical discourse analysis techniques provide this conceptual framework for this research and this is supported by the central analytic device in this research, which identifies the macro level discourses of the idea of a degree over the period of massification and compares the identified macro level discourses with the discourses that are deployed in the institutional artefacts, the prospectuses. This thesis in its central analytic device aligns with Fairclough's book (1995) in his statement that "'micro" actions or events, including verbal interaction, can in no sense be regarded as of merely "local" significance to the situations in which they occur, for any and every action contributes to the reproduction of "macro" structures.' (Fairclough 1995, p. 35). This argument supports the construction of analysis which traces the discourse of the idea of a degree over the period of massification to establish the macro level discourses and then applies these as research question two to the analysis of the prospectuses (the micro) in order to better understand what impact massification has had on student choice as represented by the institutional materials.

## **Critical discourse analysis**

The overarching research questions of this thesis seek to investigate firstly how the idea of a degree has changed over the period of massification and secondly how the changes in the macro discourse have impacted on the construction of the idea of a degree within the institutional pre-entry materials. It uses a technique for gaining insight into how messages about the idea of a degree have been constructed in the meso level of institutions as represented in the micro level discourses traceable in the artefacts of prospectuses. Critical discourse analysis, as signalled earlier in the thesis, has been chosen as the technique to analyse the messages both in the macro level policy texts and also in the micro level artefacts. However, the nature of critical discourse analysis is, as MacLure explains, subject to some 'fuzziness' (2003) and what this thesis means by critical discourse analysis needs to be clearly stated. MacLure describes the term critical discourse analysis as an approach as 'applied to the work of a group of linguists who emphasize the social and institutional dimensions of discourse, and attempt to relate these to the textual fabric of everyday life.' (MacLure 2003, p. 186)

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<sup>2</sup> Monash University found in 2012 that an ethics application was not necessary for this research.

This thesis draws its conceptual research design significantly from the critical discourse analysis that Fairclough undertook in his study of marketisation within institutional materials and that work analysing prospectuses, is a key text for this research (Fairclough 1993). However, I recognise, as Van Dijk reminds us, 'there are many types of CDA, and these may be theoretically and analytically quite diverse' (2008, p. 87).

To explain my understanding of the shared development of critical discourse analysis [CDA] I will briefly review it here. The objective in terms of theory production of CDA was, as described by Rogers et al. in their major review of CDA within educational research (Rogers et al. 2005), to unite two somewhat disparate disciplines, one being discourse studies, arising from Foucauldian ideas of orders of discourse (based on post-structuralist work), and the other was systemic functional linguistics, where a key writer was the linguist Halliday (2007). A central idea was that in following Foucault (1972) by theorising social occurrences through investigating power dynamics, there is a crucial place for close linguistic analysis. Critical discourse analysis was designed to bring linguistic analysis to the investigation because Fairclough saw a crucial connection between 'language and power and ideology' (Fairclough 1989, p. 7). Fairclough takes as a principle that:

... we ought to be concerned with the processes of producing and interpreting texts, and with how these cognitive processes are socially shaped and relative to social conventions, not just with texts themselves (Fairclough 1989, p. 19).

However, Fairclough (1989) distances his methodology from Foucault's by highlighting the textually-oriented nature of his suggested discourse analysis (Rogers et al. 2005, p. 370), and he explicitly refocuses his interpretation of Foucault's central phrase when he says '[Foucault's] order of discourse is really a social order looked at from a specifically discursal perspective' (Fairclough 1989, p. 29). Although there have been many interpretations of the term critical discourse analysis, including a good deal of criticism, and also variations – such as that of Gee (1999) who works with a slightly different framework based in social linguistics, these two formative elements of critical social theory and linguistic analysis are the ones that Fairclough (2001) returns to in his later work.

Fairclough himself has been known to use different methods and methodologies, but in engaging with the concepts of CDA, this thesis follows the method Fairclough outlines in his 1993 article. In the following decades Fairclough's work has been wide-ranging, and recently he has used the dialectical-relational approach which draws strongly on systemic linguistics (Fairclough 2009); this later technique has not been adopted for this study as it moves away from Fairclough's work on historical analytical techniques of discourse, which is particularly important for this research, and also as it requires closer textual analysis on a smaller sample of work than was necessary to respond to the research questions.

Fairclough has written widely on CDA, but in this study I specifically refer to his work on the marketisation of prospectuses (Fairclough 1993). However, for this section discussing the broad conceptual framework I also draw on Fairclough's earlier work. In *Language and Power* (Fairclough 1989), he suggests that the study of language should interrogate those institutional practices so frequently seen as being universal and commonsensical, to demonstrate whether – or indeed, how – they are in his terms 'functioning ideologically' (1989, p. 33). Fairclough describes the basis for this process as:

Ideological power, the power to project one's practices as universal and 'common sense', is a significant complement to economic and political power, and of particular significance because it is exercised in discourse (Fairclough 1989, p. 33).

Fairclough's (1989) use of the phrase 'functioning ideologically' to show that discourses can seem to have become naturalised when they are often repeated by the dominant block in society is of high interest to this study.

Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) work on the discourse–historical approach [DHA] is important in this thesis, as will be explained later in this chapter, and is an approach which is particularly focused on the ideologies coded within texts:

One of the aims of the DHA is to 'demystify' the hegemony of specific discourses by deciphering the ideologies that establish, perpetuate or fight dominance. For the DHA, language is not powerful on its own – it is a means to gain and maintain power by the use powerful people make of it. This explains why the DHA critically analyses the language use of those in power who have the means and opportunities to improve conditions (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 89).

Such interest in demystifying language is shared by Fairclough, who is explicit about his desire to promote the concept of ideology in 'discussions of language and power within linguistics' (1989, p. 2). Fairclough (1989) advocates close attention to ideology in language production, the commonest form of social interactive behaviour. He further adds the ideas of intertextuality to CDA, seeing texts as socially situated and dependent upon each other.

The concepts explained by Fairclough (1989) of ideologies functioning within texts and texts being linked together is particularly relevant for this study, as this research explores how the idea of a degree has changed over the period of massification within prospectuses of institutions and how rationales for undertaking a degree can seem like common sense. This naturalisation of discourses draws on Gramsci's idea of common-sense (Gramsci 1991), where discourses become hegemonic by general acceptance. For Fairclough the idea of hegemony and the struggle of discourses to become hegemonic 'gives us the means by which to analyse how discursive practice is part of a larger social practice involving power relations' (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 76).

The article that provides the conceptual starting point for this thesis in relation to analysis of discourses within prospectuses is 'Critical Discourse Analysis and the Marketization of Public Discourse: The Universities' (Fairclough 1993). In the article, Fairclough draws on Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) to use discourse analysis to understand the social practice. Fairclough explains that discourse analysis:

... aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony ... In referring to opacity, I am suggesting that such linkages between discourse, ideology and power may well be unclear to those involved, and more generally that our social practice is bound up with causes and effects which may not be at all apparent (Bourdieu, 1977, cited in Fairclough 1993, p. 135).

This deployment of Bourdieu in Fairclough's (1993) article on marketisation supports the work of this thesis drawing on literature on student choice, which includes Bourdieu's theorising of relations within higher education, particularly those relating to field, habitus, and capital. Fairclough demonstrates how critical discourse analysis can be used to show the discursive practices of institutions in producing the texts for prospective students. These analyses of the discursive practices can be interrogated to show how the textual features of these texts engage with and respond to broader social practice.

This is the case even when they are produced by more than one author, or are institutionally authored – Van Dijk describes the 'social representations' which govern the actions of a group (2008). Although Van Dijk's (2008) method is not used in this thesis, his explanation of the method is helpful in order to explain how critical discourse analysis can bridge the gap between macro, meso and micro levels of actions. This operation is very important as it is the core analytical device in this thesis that links the first and second research questions. Van Dijk explains the different levels of operation of discourses and how critical discourse analysis (which he calls CDA) can be used:

Language use, discourse, verbal interaction and communication belong to the micro level of the social order. Power, dominance and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macro level of analysis. This means that CDA has to theoretically bridge the well-known 'gap' between micro and macro approaches, which is of course a distinction that is a sociological construct in its own right. In everyday interaction and experience, the macro and micro level (and intermediary 'meso levels') form one unified whole (Van Dijk 2008, p. 87).

Van Dijk's readings are particularly useful in establishing the parameters of this study. For this research, the two overarching research questions focus firstly on reading the discourses operating at the macro level over the period of massification, and then secondly tracing how these are deployed by the meso institutional levels. However, the impact on micro level of interaction in the student choice process is what will be revealed using critical discourse analysis of the prospectuses by interrogating the language use and other semiotic markers the prospectuses deploy.

Language can be regarded as chosen subconsciously or consciously, and exerts power through the selection of specific vocabulary groups, which will be interrogated in this study. In other words, vocabulary must be closely examined because, as Fairclough shows, words are chosen in clustered groups, all associated with specific meaning systems (Fairclough 1989).

In Fairclough's (1993) work he makes distinctions between post-structural macro analyses and CDA, and identifies his stream of CDA as centrally textually oriented, a process which privileges and draws heavily on linguistic analysts drawn from language theory and Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977). He criticises other post-structural analyses for frequently not paying attention to close textual analysis. Therefore, in this research it seems of value to make explicit the textual analysis that will be undertaken here. That is, stylistic choices by institutional writers of prospectuses hold ideological significance and exert power as described by Reisigl and Wodak:

Ideologies serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse: for example, by establishing hegemonic identity narratives, or by controlling the access to specific discourses or public spheres ('gate-keeping') (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 88).

Such exertion of power relations through discourse is significant while investigating written outputs of institutions for prospective students to read (Fairclough 1993); in writing pre-entry materials the institutions are creating and replicating ideologies of what a degree means. The unequal power relations between a higher education institution and a prospective student are great and the texts produced by institutions hold power, symbolically in terms of presenting a degree, and operationally, as a part of the process which determines access to the higher education institutions.

In reading the institutional texts in this thesis it is important to note the assumptions the institution makes about the readers as prospective students – what they know, and need to know – in making these critical choices, and what images the universities are wishing to portray or are trying to conceal. Absences from texts are as significant as what is present (Fairclough 1995), and can reveal underlying ideologies. As Bourdieu explained 'it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 79). He went on to link this unconscious action to the nature of habitus as secured by a consensus of meaning – or unquestioned commonsensical notions (Fairclough 1989).

This naturalisation of ways of thinking about the world in terms of ideologies of discourse types (orders of discourse) ensures that, as Bourdieu and Fairclough explain, the way of thinking ceases to be seen as arbitrary but instead as natural and legitimate, and crucially ceases to be questioned (Fairclough 1993). This idea of naturalisation links to Bourdieu's work on field, habitus and capital (1977), which informs much of the analysis of the literature of student choice drawn on in this thesis. The prospectuses Fairclough analyses, of his own institution Lancaster University in 1968 and 1993, show, as he states, 'a major historical shift in the nature and objectives of university prospectuses, in line with wider changes in higher education' (Fairclough 1993, p. 156).

This thesis undertakes Fairclough's technique of analysing multiple years of prospectuses, but broadens the time-span under consideration and widens the institutional scope in order to generate similar understandings to Fairclough (1993) about how texts within the study can show relationships between discursive practice and the wider changes within higher education. Fairclough's 1993 study undertakes historical analysis of prospectuses at one site and explains the examples used 'can hardly be said to be representative' (1993, p. 157). Therefore, it seems justified to make an argument for expanding substantially the small sample of prospectuses Fairclough used of one institution in two periods. This is especially as the analysis also used several other types of non-student-facing institutional documentation, including 'press advertisements for academic posts, programme materials for an academic conference, and academic curriculum vitae' (Fairclough 1993, p. 145). As the research questions of this thesis aim to generate specific understandings of how institutional production of prospectuses construct the idea of a degree and how this has changed over the period of massification, there was felt to be a need for a broader base of source texts for the empirical work. Therefore, the research design extended the number of prospectuses analysed by Fairclough (1993) in both the number of institutions involved and the time period.

Further, Fairclough in his 1993 work does not extensively show how these findings can be systematically drawn from the analyses, as he is pursuing a more theoretical purpose in his article to show how marketisation can be traced in a range of institutional documents. Other writers in the field have developed Fairclough's work in other directions. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) have been selected in this thesis as particularly useful in drawing together the design for the analysis of this thesis.

### **Discourse–historical approach**

Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) work has been selected as the main critical discourse analysis approach used in this thesis. It is a particularly suitable to address the research questions as it is interested specifically in how 'linguistic and other semiotic practices mediate and reproduce ideology in a variety of social institutions' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 87). Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) interest in the meso level of discourse production by institutions means that their approach supports this thesis's research questions, which seek to understand how macro level discourses have played out in institutional pre-entry materials on a meso level and support the study of the linguistic and semiotic practices as micro interactions.

Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) work was developed to undertake interdisciplinary work with attention to historical aims and interests in the context of research on racist discourses in Austria and it has an orientation towards the application in practice of the research. The practice oriented direction of Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) suits this project well, as it relates to the thesis's beginnings as a set of questions arising from my practice as a careers counsellor.

Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) approach to research is based in critical theory, as is underlined by their understanding of the workings of ideologies within texts, as detailed above. They suggest that ideologies work as a method of 'establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse' (2009, p. 88), and in this way control access to certain discourses or public spheres.

Therefore, their work has particular meaning in its application to the process of student choice, which is underpinned by unequal power relations between the institution producing the texts that are used by prospective students in choosing which institution and course they apply to, as well the texts being influenced by macro level policy discourses of higher education. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) activate their discourse–historical approach by establishing and using an understanding of critique which has three inter-related aspects. These dimensions of critique are:

*Text or discourse-immanent critique* aims at discovering inconsistencies, self-contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in the text-internal or discourse-internal structures.

*Socio-diagnostic critique* is concerned with demystifying the – manifest or latent –persuasive or ‘manipulative’ character of discursive practices. Here, we make use of our contextual knowledge and draw on social theories as well as other theoretical models from various disciplines to interpret the discursive events.

Future-related *prospective critique* seeks to contribute to the improvement of communication (for example, by elaborating guidelines against sexist language use or by reducing ‘language barriers’ in hospitals, schools and so forth) (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 88).

Further, Reisigl and Wodak’s approach is explicitly historically orientated and draws into its frame of analysis consideration of ‘intertextual and interdiscursive relationships’ (2009, p. 90) between organisations, institutions and situational frames. In explaining their approach Reisigl and Wodak outline their interest in ‘how texts change in relation to sociopolitical change’ (2009, p. 90). In this way this method seemed to present especially suitable suggestions on how to organise this research and conduct the analysis of this thesis. In addition, Reisigl and Wodak (2009), unlike Fairclough’s (1993) work on prospectuses, suggest specific steps to follow in order to draw findings from the analysis, and the eight stages as described by them are replicated in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Discourse–historical approach stages (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 96)

1 Activation and consultation of preceding theoretical knowledge (i.e. recollection, reading and discussion of previous research)
2 Systematic collection of data and context information (depending on the research question, various discourses and discursive events, social fields as well as actors, semiotic media, genres and texts which are focused)
3 Selection and preparation of data for specific analyses (selection and downsizing of data according to relevant criteria, transcription of tape recordings, etc.)
4 Specification of the research question and formulation of assumptions (on the basis of a literature review and a first skimming of the data)
5 Qualitative pilot analysis (allows testing of categories and first assumptions as well as the further specification of assumptions)
6 Detailed case studies (of a whole range of data, primarily qualitative, but in part also quantitative)
7 Formulation of critique (interpretation of results, taking into account the relevant contextual knowledge and referring to the three dimensions of critique [text or discourse immanent, socio-diagnostic, and prospective critique as detailed above])
8 Application of the detailed analytical results (if possible, the results might be applied or proposed for application).

(Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 96)

This thesis has adopted Reisigl and Wodak’s proposed ideal–typical list of eight stages of discourse–historical approach as a structural frame for this research

## Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework’s approach including the epistemological and ontological orientation of the research. It has justified the use of critical discourse analysis as an appropriate method to use with the stated overarching research questions. In this thesis, I also draw on discourse analysts who have developed Fairclough’s proposals, including MacLure (2003), as a key source informing the close reading, along with the methodology of Reisigl and Wodak’s discourse–historical approach (2009).

Reisigl and Wodak’s (2009) process as detailed has been followed relatively closely by this thesis and has provided a structure for the rest of the thesis. Throughout this thesis at appropriate points the discourse–historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) has been cited as a guide to the approach being taken. The links with the methodological stages of the discourse–historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak 2009) are detailed in each of the chapters of this thesis that follow.

This chapter has explained the methodological framework of this thesis within the context of the research problem, and the next chapter explains the research design, how the study was carried out and the decisions justified here.

## **4. Research Design**

This chapter describes the research design and specifically focuses on the process for collection of data used and how it was chosen in order to address the research problem, as defined in the Introduction and refined in the Literature Review chapter. The research problem is divided into two overarching research questions. The first research question [RQ1] requires a historical analysis of the discourse of the idea of a degree to understand how the macro level discourses have changed over the period of massification in the UK. The work relating to RQ1 was undertaken by a discourse-oriented secondary historical analysis using existing literature and policy documents relating to higher education in the UK. This work is presented in the first analysis chapter, Discourses of the Idea of a Degree chapter. Furthermore, in line with the research stages proposed by Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach some of the decisions related to research design for research question two are dependent on the analysis described in that analysis chapter.

The second part of the research problem relates to the application of the new knowledge generated in this thesis about how the macro level discourse changes established in RQ1 can be traced within the pre-entry documents of higher education institutions over the period. This second research question [RQ2] seeks to investigate the messages about undertaking a degree sent by institutions to prospective domestic students within the student choice process, over the period of massification in the UK. The second research question also has sub-questions which identify elements of enquiry relating to whether messages from institutions differ depending on the status of institution, and so this question seeks to understand further how the messages have changed in line with massification and with macro discourse changes. To answer the second research question a means to enable close work on institutional documentation had to be established. Case study methodology drawing on Gerring (2007) was identified in the preceding Methodological Framework chapter as a means to manage the data collection.

The preceding Methodological Framework chapter outlines a justification of why critical discourse analysis has been adopted for both questions and establishes the need for a historical approach. The critical discourse analysis method adopted for both RQ1 and RQ2 is based on an approach to establish how discourse topics operate and then how to trace them in key documents.

The first section of this chapter engages with Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) approach: the discourse-historical approach stage of systematic collection of data and context information, which consists of considering, collecting and applying criteria to the available data (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). The second section engages with the approach to data collection in this thesis and explains the basis for the data selection process undertaken. The chapter goes on to discuss in detail the application of the data collection process and how each of Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) criteria has been considered relating to institutional selection, time period selection, and genre of data selected. The final section of the chapter then summarises the data collected and outlines some issues raised in the implementation of the data collection process.

### **Context information for data collection**

This section outlines how the contextual information developed as part of the analysis of the discourse of the idea of a degree, research question one, informed the choice of case study sites to answer research question two. The discourse-historical approach adopted in this thesis emphasises the importance of the historical context in making data selection of texts and suggests that the approach requires researchers to 'necessarily move recursively between theory and empirical data' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 94). This approach, therefore, was very suitable for this study where research question two's tracing of the messages of the idea of a degree was dependent on the establishment of the messages and eventemes established by research question one, as discussed in the Methodological Framework chapter. This stage of analysis was necessary because as outlined in

the Literature Review chapter there was no established source which traced the discourse of the idea of a degree over the period of massification in the UK. Therefore, the selection of the case studies was a key part of the analytical work of the thesis.

For the first stage of the research relating to research question one, I undertook a secondary historical analysis which investigated the higher education sector in the UK and situated the research within the context of the research problem: a more developed version of this analysis is presented in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter. As established in the Methodological Framework chapter, the research problem takes a historical orientation to understand how massification has impacted on the institutional messages on taking a degree invoked in the student choice process.

The secondary historical analysis considered sources which investigated the meanings of massification of higher education (Scott 1995; Trow 2000), as well as primary sources of policy in the UK, such as government green papers, white papers, Acts of Parliament and formal government reviews. It also considered research and policy papers commissioned by government on the topic of higher education as well as transcripts of speeches by key politicians, government representatives and other stakeholders in the higher education sector.

### **Approach to data collection and selection**

The selection of data for analysis in case study based research is a crucial step (Gerring 2007): in particular, as detailed by Scott (1990), the representativeness of the data reflects directly on the validity of the research undertaken. This section lays out how the collection of data was approached, which is a significant issue, as too much or too little data could impede the consideration of the research problem. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) suggest the amount of data analysed in the proposed project is critical. For this thesis, data collection needed to be restricted to allow an in-depth analysis. A successful implementation of critical discourse analysis of the type outlined in the Methodological Framework chapter involved close work with the texts to generate meanings.

This section describes how the process of data collection was undertaken, drawing on case study methodology. Gerring suggests that the case study approach can be varied and deal with one or many case studies to produce different forms of research analysis (Gerring 2007). Gerring's work is a key source for case study methodology in this thesis. Gerring views all case study research design, whether one case or many, as using cross-case analysis: as even by choosing one case others have been rejected. Gerring states: 'To conduct a case study implies that one has also conducted cross-case analysis, or at least thought about a broader set of cases' (Gerring 2007, p. 13). Following Gerring, this thesis holds that in the selection of cases for close study it has been critical to understand the scope of the possible cases, and further to reflect and connect to the research problem to ensure the selection of cases fits the needs of the research problem. Gerring (2007) lists nine varied case selection techniques and this section will deal with those used in this research's data collection. When discussing case selection techniques for this purpose, Flyvbjerg (2006) outlines it is not a problem to use more than one technique – that they are not mutually exclusive.

In this study, the discourse-historical approach's (Reisigl & Wodak 2009) analytical technique of using criteria for the data was deployed as suggested, and was used to provide specific criteria for the case study selection. The structure of criteria provided by Reisigl and Wodak (2009) will be used with what Flyvbjerg calls information-orientated selection (2006). Flyvbjerg (2006) states that using this type of information-oriented selection can save both time and resources in research proceedings and produces more reliable research outcomes.

In seeking to understand how the higher education sector within the UK has responded to change across a period and produce findings that make claims about the impact of massification on the student choice process, examining a single case study institution would obviously be too limited. The decision was made to have several case studies and use more sites for analysis of the messages across

different institutions. This decision was particularly important because research question two asks how the macro policy discourses of the idea of a degree are seen in the marketing materials of institutions, and has a specific sub-question which asks whether these messages play out differently in higher education institutions of different status. Cross-case analysis theory has suggested the process for data selection, and Gerring (2007) proposes several techniques which can be used to activate this theory.

The first of these used is the diverse case selection technique, a collection of cases which have different values in one category to ‘illuminate the full range of variation’ (Gerring 2007, p. 90) within the available data through cross-case analysis. This was seen as a useful way of proceeding within the context of the research questions. For example, by selecting cases from institutions with different status within the sector it is possible to see the impact of the discourses across the diversity of the higher education sector.

The selection in terms of case study methodology is relatively straightforward and this section considers each of Reisiigl and Wodak’s (2009) criteria as categories. The discourse-historical approach requires the discourses and discursive events to be considered and ‘social fields as well as actors, semiotic media, genres and texts are focused on’ (Reisiigl & Wodak 2009, p. 96). There are subsections in this section which consider each of the criteria suggested by the data collection and context information step of Reisiigl and Wodak’s (2009) approach. These subsections which delineate the boundaries of enquiry to establish which texts are to be selected for the tracing of messages of the idea of a degree are informed by the analytical work of the discourse-oriented secondary historical analysis, which was carried out to trace the discourse of the idea of a degree to answer the first research question of the thesis. The substantive analysis of the tracing of the idea of a degree is presented fully in the first two chapters of the analysis.

The criteria suggested for data collection in Reisiigl and Wodak’s (2009) process are outlined in the table below and the justification detailed further later when discussing the application of data collection, these are Reisiigl and Wodak’s criteria which are used in this thesis and are presented below in Table 2:

*Table 2 Reisiigl and Wodak’s (2009) criteria for data collection used in the research*

Specific political unit (e.g. region, nation state, international union)
Specific periods of time relating to important discursive events
Specific social and especially political and scientific actors
Specific discourses and specific semiotic media and genres

(Reisiigl & Wodak 2009, p. 98)

Taking the four criteria for case selection proposed by Reisiigl and Wodak (2009) above, the first subsection of this chapter delineates the political unit in which the research problem operates. The second subsection explains how data collection for this thesis relates to time period of data and asks what the discursive events were present over the period of massification in the UK. The third subsection deals with Reisiigl and Wodak’s (2009) criterion of social actors, interpreted in this piece of research to mean primarily institutional selection for the purposes of data collection. The fourth subsection discusses Reisiigl and Wodak’s criterion of specific semiotic media and genre, and establishes what elements of the institutional materials will be collected for this study. It also explains why Reisiigl and Wodak’s (2009) criterion relating to data collection by specific discourses is not relevant in this case. The final subsection summarises how Reisiigl and Wodak’s (2009) criteria have been applied in this thesis.

## **Political unit**

This subsection considers Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) criterion of the political unit as a way of establishing where the political boundary of the data collection would be. Within this study, the research problem is framed by the national context of the UK; this is considered in order to define the boundaries of the analysis, particularly as the UK comprises different countries with different higher education policies and histories.

The methodological question arising from cross-case analysis which needs to be addressed here is: what political unit of study is being seen as the context in which cases are chosen in this cross-case analysis? Reisigl and Wodak define the political unit in the following way: 'the "Field of action" indicates a segment of social reality which constitutes the "frame" of a discourse' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 90). Even taking into account the research problem which looks at the impact of massification in the UK and how it impacts domestic students, the political unit still requires further definition.

Massification of higher education has occurred internationally (Trow 2000), and a driver for this has been the rhetoric of the knowledge economy, which has engaged higher education on a global basis (Morley 2001). Although this research is focused on the UK it is important to acknowledge the impact of the international flows of policy (Deem 2001). The discourses that operate within the sector, while influenced by other countries and global context, operate specifically in the national theatre of the UK.

While it seems justified to look specifically at the UK, the concept itself has implications, having changed over the period of massification. After 1998, since devolution of education policy to the Scottish Parliament, and also the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly, these home nations have administered higher education funding differently. As the devolution of education powers does not specifically interact with the research problem, it was decided that data be collected from institutions in England only, because these did not come within the remit of any of the devolved governments, namely Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. At the beginning of the period of study in the 1970s the UK was the political unit that decided policy and the term the UK is used throughout this thesis, although it might be more precisely called England after 1998.

## **Time period selection**

This subsection explains the data collection undertaken in this thesis which applies two criteria, those of time periods of data collection and of field of political action, drawn from Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) approach. The criterion which seeks to establish the time periods in focus seems for this research to be substantially linked to the field of political action, given the first research question of this thesis which seeks to establish the macro discursive events over the period of massification.

As a key part of the conceptual framework of this thesis was to seek to establish whether discursive change could be traced in institutional marketing materials, the publication year of the materials had to be after the discursive shift had been identified. The time periods of collection of the documents were the publication year following the discursive shift. Within this section, I do not identify the years of collection (they are identified in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter later in this thesis) but instead explain how I established the key discursive shifts drawing on history of education methodology. This subsection explains how these historical epochs were identified for the purposes of data collection of prospectuses.

Fairclough's (1993) identification of historical epochs has been interpreted in this thesis and used alongside the concept of eventementes as described by Goodson (2005). Therefore, as signalled in the Methodological Framework chapter the selection of these historical epochs for study is informed by Goodson's (2005) work on historical periodisation, which establishes that there are long waves of change characterised by certain milestones or policy shifts. Goodson (2005) says that while these can

be associated with specific events, the events can either signify the beginning or the solidification of a policy change.

Each of the eventementes corresponds to a time related to policy events which is judged to stimulate or respond to a discursive change in the macro discourse of the idea of a degree. An approximation has been taken to establish the dates of the discourse change, or eventemente. This is particularly important for the events which are linked to the passing of acts of UK Parliament where White Papers will have been read beforehand and in many instances the policy change has been signalled in several stages of consultation: Green Paper and White Paper. The selection of eventementes is explored later in the thesis through analysis in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter which discusses the policy narratives linked to the idea of a degree.

The second of the two research questions asks whether these changes in the discourse about the idea of a degree are traceable in the institutional materials of universities in the UK over the period of massification. This question seeks to understand whether the macro discourses have impacted the micro discourses and whether the eventementes act as discursive events in prospectuses, as explained by Jager and Meier (2009). Therefore, in order to ensure there was not an overload of data, each annual publication of marketing materials from each of the institutions would not be looked at. Instead specific publication years of prospectuses, linked to the eventemente, were collected for analysis in which all institutions in the study had their prospectus collected. The approach to not look at documents from each year, but periodically, is justified because, as Fairclough notes in his study of the Lancaster University prospectuses, institutional marketing materials do not change each year and he suggests that 'historical epochs' are an appropriate time period (Fairclough 1993, p. 138).

### **Social actors – Institutional selection**

The process of choosing case study institutions was understood in the research design of this thesis, drawing on the approach of Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) suggested criteria, based on the selection of appropriate social actors. Selection of possible cases was made using Gerring's (2007) diverse technique, with the decisions based on selecting diversity. This was expressed through the category of the institution's status as a university or not before the end of the binary divide in the UK in 1992. There are significant questions about the selection process, due to the length of the period in focus: how the units of actors are established, what constitutes an institution, and what makes a case study? That is, whether each institution studied, as recognised in the current period, should be seen as one case throughout the time period studied – e.g. University College London throughout thirty-seven years is one possible case study. Alternatively, is each case study actually the institution's issuing of prospectuses within the time period selected – e.g. University College London in 1992 is one case study? The approach has been adopted in this research to identify the institutions as case-studies which then are 'constructed diachronically (by observing the case or some subset of within-case units over time)' (Gerring 2007, p. 21). This decision is important, as several institutions have changed their name and status over the period of institution and have effectively morphed into new ones. In this thesis the institutions are treated as one case study over a period and their most recent nomenclature is used throughout the thesis's analysis chapters.

Research question two of this thesis seeks to generate understandings of how the macro discourse as messages of the idea of a degree have been represented in the institutional pre-entry materials, and RQ2 has a sub-question that relates specifically to whether the messages play out differently in institutions of different status. The sub-question of RQ2 was essential, as the literature relating to student choice tells us that in the UK (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015; Whitty & Clement 2015) there remains differentiation between the old and new universities.

To study the differentiation in the system, the category of old and new universities was used to ensure a diversity of cases. Although I reject the negative associations of these terms old and new, they are for convenience used throughout this thesis as markers of terms within the discourse. As the

materials providing data used in this thesis, the prospectuses, are of public record the names of the institutions have been used throughout this thesis.

This selection by variation relates to whether the institution is a new or old university, that is, held university status before or after the ending of the binary divide in 1992 in the UK. This seems like an obvious category upon which to base the first cut of selection. Flyvbjerg (2006) discusses the nature of decisions that may seem, externally, to be potentially intuitive. He emphasises that where choices seem sensible to others immersed in the discourse (as I feel confident a categorical sampling of this kind would be) then they are strongly defensible. Also, in terms of sampling on the esteem and status of institution, using other publicly available frameworks may not be as desirable. One could be the entrance ranking of students based on school leaving results (published as A Level points for the UK), but this would be similar to the groupings that the institutions self-select, and also would be complicated by a decision of where to split groupings in terms of entry scores, and the variation of scores by discipline could be problematic. It is meaningful perhaps at this point to reflect on Croxford and Raffe's (2014) assessment of the UK. They argue that although the formal status of universities is similar there is significant informal variation, and describe the UK as being the most differentiated of systems (Croxford & Raffe 2014).

Due to the great extent of the higher education sector in the UK, as well as diversity of institution, further variables needed to be established for the institutional selection to keep the data collection to a manageable size. The location of institution was decided on as the variable to determine selection; this was justified as an appropriate variable, firstly in order to limit choice to institutions to England, the political unit chosen in this thesis, as explained earlier in this chapter. Additional justification was drawn from the research literature on student choice, where there is evidence that there is a significant impact from where the institution is based. The region affects students in a variety of ways, such as deciding on individual basis to be closer to the home of parents, a friends' institution, to towns known as being rich in social life (or party schools as described in US research by Parker (2009)) but there is little that the institution can do to alter this in its prospectus. The research questions within the thesis do not specifically require a range of regional institutions and therefore a variety of locations is not needed.

Gerring (2007) suggests that keeping one variable the same in case study selections allows other variables to be studied in more depth and is known as the most similar technique. Therefore, this technique of matching on a specified variable which does not have causal significance has been adopted for the selection of case study institutions. The use of the most similar technique in this thesis, by picking cases in one region, was chosen as there is no obvious other variable to use in choice of institutional cases that would be significant, without using an institutional characteristic that would influence the data which is being studied.

In terms of common student choice-making decisions, marketing materials are written within the UK knowing that the hegemonic view is that the majority of students (particularly middle-class students who are full-time) will move geographically to attend most universities (Coates & Adnett 2003). Greenbank and Hepworth explains that moving for university is strongly class-based (2008). A lack of mobility is marked in four areas of the UK: Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and London.<sup>3</sup> So, in terms of the UK, it is appropriate to note that students tend to move away to study when their home is in England but outside London, and this has socio-economic markers of difference with prospective students from lower socio-economic groups tending to stay closer to home (Callender & Jackson 2005). That students in London have had a wide range of institutional choice and have not moved very frequently is well understood by the institutions (Singleton 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> The regions that are newly affected by this moving locally only are: Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In those regions, devolving educational policy means, for example, that fee regimes make it more attractive for Welsh students to stay in Wales financially.

Because moving location to attend university is common in the UK, particularly within England, many institutions advertise their region in their prospectuses. By choosing one region using Gerring's (2007) most similar technique, this element of variation in the institutional materials could be reduced. Therefore, the decision was made to narrow the possible cases by selecting a single region, however, this does mean that the findings in any regional sample can not necessarily be extended to the whole of the English higher education system, and this is acknowledged. There is significant research on this factor as being one that impacts the course choice process in the UK (Greenbank & Hepworth 2008), and also that it happens less frequently in London. Beyond the capital city, institutions have been shown to respond to the moving-away factor by advertising their locations, either city or country, as a persuasion factor, and location has been found to be a key factor in student choice (Brooks 2001). In London, however, students much more frequently live at home, as so many universities lie within easy commuting distance. Therefore, limiting the locational siting of institutions to London lessens the effect of any regional variable. Although this research has been clearly delineated to deal with the domestic student market, it is notable London is also a significant area of international student participation in higher education. In the London region, there are fifteen UK universities, which is too many for the detailed analysis proposed: these are detailed below in Table 3 along with their self-selected grouping at the time of the 2012 publication of prospectuses:

*Table 3 London-based institutions*

<b>Old or New</b>	<b>Grouping</b>	<b>London-based institutions</b>
Pre-1992	Russell Group	Imperial College London King's College London London School of Economics and Political Science Queen Mary, University of London University College London
Pre-1992	1994 Group	Birkbeck, University of London Goldsmiths, University of London Institute of Education, University of London Royal Holloway, University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Post-1992	University Alliance	Kingston University
Post-1992	Million+	Middlesex University University of East London University of Greenwich University of West London

From this list it was possible to make the selection of one institution in each group. Kingston was straightforward as it was the only London institution in its group. For the other groups, further decisions had to be made. Some of the institutions in the above list are specialist institutions that operate either in only a restricted discipline field (Goldsmiths, Imperial, LSE, SOAS and IoE) or operate

with very different types of students from the mainstream (Birkbeck); these have been excluded as their range of courses is limited and the special purposes of the institutions could impact the degree messages the institutions send. Therefore, in the 1994 group, only Royal Holloway, University of London, is a multi-disciplinary institution: and was selected. Then there were choices to make in the two other groups as there were several in each of the old (Russell Group) and new (Million+) university categories. Some investigation with archivists at each institution was undertaken about the availability of documents, which seemed a practical way of moving forward in the selection. University College London and the University of East London from the respective groups seemed to have the most accessible documents (and their archive departments responded promptly to enquiries) and so were chosen. Table 4 shows the chosen institutions:

Table 4 Case study institutions

Old and new institutions	London-based
Old universities	University College London
	Royal Holloway, University of London
New universities	Kingston University
	University of East London

### Sketches of case study institutions

The next part of the chapter is provided to describe the case study institutions. It should be noted that this was undertaken from the viewpoint of the last collection of the prospectuses in the research, 2013. The section provides support for the reading of the data in the later analysis chapters and necessary, as the research relies on information-orientated selection of the case study as described by Flyvbjerg (2006). Tables 5-8 below provide sketches of the chosen case study institutions;

Table 5 University College London case study sketch

<b>Title</b>	<b>University College London, University of London [UCL]</b>
Grouping	Russell Group
Old or new	Old university, pre-1992
Chronology	1826 – University College London
QS 2013	7th in the world, in the QS university league table (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited 2013) <sup>4</sup>
Narrative	Based on utilitarian principles, UCL was established in 1826 as London University to provide secular degrees for a modern world. It describes its founding as ‘to open up university education in England to those who had been excluded from it’ (UCL n.d.); it is a research university offering mainly full-time degrees to a traditional elite cohort. It is a major political force in the higher education sector, and is centrally based near Russell Square. It is at the heart of the Russell Group (which is the most elite grouping of higher education institutions in England, apart from Oxford and Cambridge). It consistently ranks within the top three institutions in the UK. Its 2013 tagline was London’s Global University [UCL 2013].

<sup>4</sup> Although I have used league tables as an indicator of relative international esteem this use of the rankings is intended neither to embrace the methodology used in any of the rankings nor to agree to their use further than for relative comparison purposes, but it is included as an indication of the sectoral position to help with the understanding of the data.

Table 6 Royal Holloway case study sketch

<b>Title</b>	<b>Royal Holloway, University of London [RHUL]</b>
Grouping	1994 Group
Old or new	Old university, pre-1992
Chronology	1886 – Royal Holloway, University of London
QS 2013	231st in the world in the QS university league table (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited 2013)
Narrative	Founded by an entrepreneur in 1886, in the (then) green-field outskirts of London, with a strong campus-based model of accommodation and studies, the university’s marketing emphasises the beauty and heritage of the campus and foregrounds traditional three-year degrees to a ‘traditional’ university student audience. Royal Holloway is part of the 1994 group which was for small, research-intensive universities (and disbanded in November 2013 after a number of members left to join the more prestigious Russell Group). Reflecting changing market circumstances for higher education, in 2009 Royal Holloway signed a major agreement with the private education provider Pearson Education to validate their online degrees.

Table 7 Kingston University case study sketch

<b>Title</b>	<b>Kingston University [Kingston]</b>
Grouping	University Alliance
Old or new	New university, post-1992
Chronology	1899 – Kingston Technical Institute 1977 – Kingston Polytechnic 1992 – Kingston University
QS 2013	500-550 band in the world, in the QS university league table (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited 2013)
Narrative	Originally founded as Kingston Technical Institute in 1899, it merged with the Kingston College of Art in 1970 to become Kingston Polytechnic and then became a new university in the 1992 reforms. With limited onsite accommodation, Kingston University markets to a domestically commuting audience. It is a member of the University Alliance group, which regards higher education participation as a democratic entitlement and focuses on access to the professions (University Alliance n.d.). The university now has an international reputation, ranking in the top 500 universities in the world, particularly in areas such as Education Studies (top 200) and Social Sciences and Management (top 400) (Kingston University 2013).

Table 8 University of East London case study sketch

<b>Title</b>	<b>University of East London [UEL]</b>
Grouping	Million+
Old or new	New university, post-1992
Chronology	1898 – West Ham Technical Institute 1970 – North East London Polytechnic 1992 – University of East London
QS 2013	Not ranked in world, in the QS university league table (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2013)
Narrative	With a long history as a regional college and then a polytechnic, becoming a new university in 1992, UEL draws from a regional base in East London and is known for providing pathways from further education institutions, part-time and mature options. Funding cuts and closure of struggling universities below it have left it in a weak position. Its co-location with the London 2012 Olympics site has boosted its reputation and buildings, but in the recent period it has suffered in league tables and press reports, and is near the bottom, or at the bottom, of the national league tables ( <i>The Independent</i> 2014).

### Genre of text

This subsection details the specification of the genre of the texts that were collected for critical discourse analysis. The specification of genres was an important step in the data collection process specified by Reisigl and Wodak (2009), not only to limit the boundaries of enquiry and make the process manageable but also to ensure that there was some degree of similarity between the texts in order for the messages across the time periods to be traced. The nature of this research, as established by the research problem, sought to investigate the pre-entry materials of institutional marketing materials. As established in the Methodological Framework chapter, this research conducted critical discourse analysis and close work with the selected discursive artefacts. The institutional materials which were available to be selected as part of this study included prospectuses, course materials from institutional departments, welcome letters sent by institutions, submissions by institutions to third party admissions platforms such as the UK University Course Admission Service [UCAS], open day artefacts, and documents that form part of the admissions process. As undertaking such close study on all the institutional materials would have produced too much data to analyse manageably, particularly if a historical perspective is taken into account as well as a comparative context, there had to be selection of what to examine, as advised by Ruane (2004), who cautions against time and information overload when undertaking case studies.

Arising from the review of the literature on student choice and engaging with the second research question, which seeks to trace how the idea of a degree played out in the marketing materials of case study institutions, the genre of texts to be selected was decided to be prospectuses, which operate as a key part of the student choice process. Further, there is an established, if small, literature that investigates these documents (Askehave 2007; Fairclough 1993; Graham 2013; Saichaie & Morphew 2014; Symes 1996). This decision is supported by the understanding from the literature that prospectus documents still occupy a position in the modern digital student choice process (Dyke, Foskett & Maringe 2008; Slack et al. 2014).

There are many markets operating within higher education and an important one relates to the difference between domestic and international students (Marginson 2013). This division influences the marketing materials produced for students in these different markets and there has been previous discourse analysis focusing on materials for international students (Askehave 2007). As the research

problem is particularly directed at domestic students, the prospectuses collected are those for domestic students, where there is a division between prospectuses: prospectuses which are simultaneously directed to domestic, European Union and international students were not excluded if there is no specific domestic student prospectus for those institutions. Equally, as the research problem particularly refers to the massification of undergraduate programmes and prospectuses often are available specifically for postgraduate students, the data collection specifically targeted the undergraduate prospectuses. This is supported by research by Hesketh and Knight (1999) which establishes that there are specific marketing strategies and concerns related to postgraduate students that are different from those aimed at undergraduates.

There is also the question about whether the prospectuses collected should be only the printed prospectuses or whether analysis should also examine online website entries about courses. Online information has been available since 1998, and online e-books have gained popularity in 2013, the most recent period. There are considerable difficulties, and some impossibilities, in collecting historical website information about courses beyond the front page of a website (which is accessible through the internet archive <https://archive.org/web/>). Therefore, given the historical orientation of the research time periods of interest in this study, this research concentrates on the printed prospectuses of the higher education institutions. This is justified not only because of the lack of comparability of online pre-entry materials from the early periods within this study, but also because of the divergence in use of online and printed materials for information gathering. Dobler and Eagleton (2015) explain the nature of web-reading:

When working individually, Web readers spend much of their time trying to find their way around and only a small amount of time actually viewing or processing information (Walraven et al., 2009). Instead of reading, they tend to skim, scan and squirrel [away or] (hoard) information to be processed later (Rowlands and Nichols, 2008) (Dobler & Eagleton 2015, p. 4).

Drawing on Dobler and Eagleton's (2015) research, this thesis understands that the way people read on the internet means that web-writing is different, and many of the prospectuses appear differently on the web. Due to the nature of this variation in treatment of the sources, this research seems justified in concentrating only on the printed materials, and therefore the physically printed prospectuses are what were collected. This work is aimed to capture a moment in time where the printed issuing of prospectus documentation can be reviewed across a significant period in the same form: to see change over a historical context.

## **Summary of application of criteria**

This chapter has outlined the design of this research and explained the choices made in its data collection and where data collection was based on analysis it has justified this technique. This section summarises the above work which considered Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) suggested criteria for collection of data and presents the categories selected in Table 9 overleaf:

Table 9 Summary of criteria for data collection

<b>Reisigl and Wodak's criterion (2009, p. 98)</b>	<b>Categories selected for this research</b>
Specific political unit (e.g. region, nation state, international union)	UK and England after devolution of education policy to the home nations of Scotland, Ireland and Wales
Specific periods of time relating to important discursive events and specific fields of political action	Time periods selected by consideration of political actions as detailed in the analysis chapter Discourse of the Idea of a Degree
Specific social and especially political and scientific actors	Institutions selected, with their 2013 titles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kingston University</li> <li>• Royal Holloway, University of London</li> <li>• University College London</li> <li>• University of East London</li> </ul>
Specific semiotic media and genres	Printed prospectuses published directly by institutions for domestic undergraduate students entering their first year of study

The next chapter undertakes a secondary discourse-orientated historical analysis to develop a narrative of the idea of a degree. It addresses the first research question of this thesis which seeks to establish how the idea of a degree is constructed in the UK over the period of massification. This part of the analysis required a discourse-oriented secondary historical analysis to establish how the idea of a degree was constructed and varied over the period as discussed in the following Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter.

## 5. Discourse of the Idea of a Degree

This chapter analyses of the idea of a degree in UK higher education over the period under study. It does this to construct a historical narrative as the first stage of analysis, in order to contextualise the close reading (MacLure 2003) of the prospectuses, and to generate appropriate periods to collect and analyse the prospectuses of the case study institutions. In constructing this narrative the chapter also undertakes an analysis of the discourse of the idea of a degree and identifies and considers four topics of the discourse which will support the tracing of the discourse of the idea of a degree through the prospectus materials. The chapter is divided into two major sections after this introductory part, which explains how the chapter sits within the wider framework of the thesis.

The first major section considers the idea of a degree and draws on literature to analyse its development. Its first subsection provides an overarching context for the idea of a degree and then the section identifies and discusses four discourse topics of the idea of a degree.

In the second major section the tracing of the idea of a degree over the period in view of this study is undertaken. The section commences with explanation of how the thesis uses the conceptual idea of eventementes and justifies the approach of the discourse-oriented secondary historical analysis. It then traces a history of the beginnings of the idea of a degree, considers the origins of higher education, and contextualises the recent development of the higher education field to establish eventementes that mark changes in the macro discourse which were used as markers to collect the prospectuses. As part of this chronological review the section suggests how the main discourse topics have been deployed over the time periods.

The central research problem of this thesis seeks to understand how massification of the mainly English higher education system impacted on messages sent via university prospectuses. The research problem is historically oriented, justified by an understanding that discourses can be read meaningfully in a historical manner (Fairclough 1993). The Literature Review chapter demonstrated that although the idea of a degree was significant to the student choice process, there was little analysis of the discourses involved. Further, material that traces the development of the discourses constructing the concept over the period of massification is scant.

Two overarching research questions orientate the work of the thesis and divide the analysis into two stages, the second dependent on the first. The first question asks how the idea of a degree has changed over the period of massification: this question begets the first stage of analysis undertaken in this chapter, the identification of the macro discourses of the idea of a degree and a narrative of discourse changes theorised. The analysis is necessary to understand how the macro discourses have operated. The second research question considers how changes to the discourse of the idea of a degree over the period of study have impacted the marketing materials of higher education institutions. The understanding of the macro discourses identified in the first stage of analysis and their development is applied to the institutions' marketing materials of higher education institutions to investigate their impact on the student choice processes. This second stage of the analysis is used to see whether there has been a concomitant difference in macro discourses of the idea of a degree and in the micro level discourses in the prospectuses.

This approach has been chosen, as explained in the Methodological Framework chapter, as this thesis understands that messages encoded in discourses in prospectuses have been developed over many years: the prospectuses, like other texts, do not arrive 'out of the blue' (Ball 1993b, p. 11). In order to read and understand the messages in the prospectuses and see how they have been changed by massification it is important to construct a narrative of the discourse of the idea of a degree throughout the period of massification in England.

This research is grounded in critical discourse analysis within a framework using Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach. However, as Fairclough (1993, p. 135) advises,

discourses must be understood in their social worlds and are themselves mobile, shifting and time specific : a historical review clarifies shifts and changes throughout the period analysed and sets out how those discourses came into being.

This chapter offers a non-exhaustive, purpose-focused secondary historical analysis looking at higher education sector events which formed the policy context in which each of the prospectuses were published. It develops a reading of the historical context of the higher education sector related to each period in which the prospectuses were collected, and considers the policy and public influences which impact on the discourses of the idea of a degree from secondary rather than primary data sources. The purpose is to provide a background for the Detailed Case Studies chapter, and also to engage with Ozga's (1990) advice to examine macro-level structures that impact micro-level actions, as deployed by Ball (1993b) in his critical policy sociology work.

The chapter is informed by McCulloch's (2004) work on historical documentary analysis and provides an overview of the deployment of the identified main topics of the idea of a degree by considering the historical developments of the discourse of the idea of a degree, and tracing them within the specific field of political action (Reisigl & Wodak 2009) in England, where the texts are located. This is not to exclude global policy flows impacting on the UK higher education sector over the period, but the discussion aims to present a 'first impression' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 102) of the discourse intersections in the prospectus texts from the UK.

An understanding of the context in which prospectuses are operating is needed to contextualise the messages contained and is explained by Reisigl and Wodak in their description of the discourse-historical approach [DHA]:

The DHA considers intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses, as well as extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, the history of an organization or institution, and situational frames. While focusing on all these relationships, we explore how discourses, genres and texts change in relation to sociopolitical change (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 90).

Although micro level data reviewed will be of the contemporary period, from 1976 to 2013, it is valuable to understand and examine, through secondary sources, briefly, the earlier history and progress of higher education in the period which led to the modern system. This analysis will then establish the key chronological markers, key themes and discourses for data selection purposes, and contextualise this area of research.

## **Construction of the idea of a degree**

This first major section analyses the idea of a degree and based on a synthesis of published literature draws out the overarching themes of the discourse of the idea of a degree. This work is necessary as there are no other accounts that review the idea of a degree over this historical period. This first part of the section provides a context for the identification of the discourse topics of the idea of a degree.

The public discourse around the idea of a degree, understood as the messages about the impact on an individual of a higher education, has evolved and expanded along with the size of the system within the massification process. The section will show that study of how the idea of a degree is understood remains under-researched and the key concepts and ideas that inform the discourse of how a degree is understood, theoretically, in practice, and in terms of its mechanisms, will be examined here.

Writing from a UK position but using a global comparative lens, Cowen suggests (1996) the current era is a time where the very nature of what universities do is being reviewed. However, he also cautions that this is not the only instance of this questioning throughout the history of universities: there have been, and no doubt will continue to be, many reinventions of what universities mean to society, and indeed what society means to universities. Scott (1993) argues that

from a historical perspective, there has been great change in the relationship between society and the universities. He marks the period from the 1960s as a time where 'a direct link between higher education expansion and economic growth was routinely assumed' (Scott 1993, p. 18).

This change in the nature of the university system through industrialism and globalisation (Jarvis 2000) is of core importance in this research. In previous times universities had been a site of elite education in both their curricular nature and student numbers, but with a massively expanded system the students' experience at university has been fundamentally altered (Scott 1993). It cannot be an expanded elite system and therefore in the massification of the higher education system the construction of the degree's purpose has become crucially re-formed.

The re-conceptualising of purposes since the 1960s (Scott 1993) also has implications on the nature of the product of the universities in the context of students, and the idea of a degree has shifted and changed along with the nature of universities. There is a certain understanding of mass systems which is negative, as Williams argues:

... the notion of 'mass' within this position resonates with labels of 'cheap and nasty', with a cultural discourse within which the masses is a term of denigration and mass production cannot be equal to quality production (Gareth Williams 1997, p. 31).

The question of the quality of the degree is a recurring one that influences the idea of a degree. Debate about universities has always been present, according to Moodie and Eustace in their 1974 book on the history of British universities, where they quote the chancellor of the University of Paris in 1218 comparing the then current system of universities unfavourably with the 'good old days' of universities (Moodie and Eustace 1974): change is a constant feature of university structures.

The massive global expansion in higher education has been welcomed by many uncritically and with wide and diverse justification, as Tomlinson argues: 'the advantages of mass higher education have been framed in terms of both economic efficiency and social justice.' (2007, p. 59) This broad framing of the benefits of the purposes of a degree has been attractive to governments, and the link between expansion of higher education and increased economic return for the country has become a hegemonic discourse which has formed the basis of much of the policy within the last forty years; the core theory behind this linking of higher education and economic efficiency is human capital theory (Becker 1964). Human capital theory has had a strong influence on the policy-formation process of massification and was an underpinning justification for modern massified higher education (Ball 2009). Therefore, for this research it can be seen as driver of the macro discourses over the period. Human capital theory has been a key underlying tenet of this massification and recognising its move to the position of an unspoken but understood core reason for taking a degree is a central feature of this research. Human capital theory has been very important for higher-education policy-makers as it holds that there is a 'clear, direct and linear relationship between the expansion of educational credentials and economic development' (Tomlinson 2007, p. 50), and therefore how it is constructed in the prospectuses is important to consider.

Education developing human capital is far from a new concept (Ball 2009), nor does it date only from the period within view of this study. Hayward and Fernandez say linking human capital with higher education can be traced all the way back to Pigou's 1912 work in economics on improving the efficiency of government by emphasising generic skills (2004); Boden and Nedeva link the idea to Colin Clark's important 1930 article on the 'Economic Effects of Education' (Boden & Nedeva 2010).

The modern idea of human capital as a concept was used most influentially in terms of skills and education by Becker (1964); it casts individual labour as an economic resource which can be harnessed, invested in and harvested. Becker describes the core of the argument: 'Individuals are deemed to participate in lifelong learning according to their calculation of the net economic benefits to be derived from education and training.' (Gorard & Smith 2007, p. 144) However, questions are raised by authors such as Coffield (1999), querying why the interpretation of the human capital theory that

is in current use for policy formation does not recognise the reservations expressed by Becker and economists before him. Coffield (1999) argues that a 'degraded version' of the original human capital theory has become conventional wisdom.

The human capital theory in use is rarely if ever identified as a theory, but has for a long time been transmitted as an unquestionable truth in governmental statements: as explained by Cohen, 'through the process of hegemony, majority discourses become normalised as "common sense", rendering alternatives "unthinkable"' (Archer & Hutchings 2000, p. 558).

Human capital theory in its most common, or, to follow Coffield (1999), 'degraded' interpretation, which privileges the economic effects of education, has become hegemonic (Ball 2009). It is dominant in modern social discourse, and has overpowered other discourses about the purposes of higher education (Ashe 2012; Meek & Wood 1997; Taylor 1998). In a contrary, and ironic, position Simister suggests that true human capital theory would perhaps call for universities to be closed down as they keep students out of the labour market and that other sorting mechanisms are possible (Simister 2011).

Educational researchers have challenged the validity of the currently used human capital theory (Brown 2013), alluding to issues of lack of evidence, misunderstanding of productivity and human capital as a normalising discourse which shun differences (Morley 2001; Tomlinson 2008). Morley further discusses the nature of the change: 'the central legitimating idea of higher education in Britain is changing. Increasingly, it is being viewed as a sub-system of the economy' (Morley 2001, p. 131), and it is this shift that sets the context for this research.

The shift can be seen to be aligned with the introduction of the term 'knowledge economy' which is based on there being a need to increase the orientation of higher education to the needs of industry (Ball, 2009). But the idea of the knowledge economy, can be, according to Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003), treated with caution and even contested on the grounds that it 'ignores differences in the power of individuals and social groups to enhance their employability at the expense of others' (Brown & Hesketh 2004, p. 22). It has been also argued that it is not new: 'There has been a recurring argument about the purpose and practice of education, and its relation to employment, since the 1880s at least' (Ball 2009, p. 44). This view has some force, particularly with regard to the industrial sources of funding for the early northern civic universities in the UK.

While the discourse of a knowledge economy may not be new, its dominance is relatively modern, and it has become the hegemonic position. The discourse of higher education being for the economy has been strengthened and legitimised and, more importantly for the purposes of this research, has been institutionalised (with some dissent). This idea that the educational purpose of universities is tied to the needs of economic pressures in the country means that the universities have become interested in what happens next to their graduates, and how much the universities help the economy.

Government increasingly resists being the major funding site for the universities. Although it was previously a well-regarded position for government to fund tertiary study, modern requirements are for robust justification by universities for receipt of their public funds (Deem 1998, p. 48). Marginson and Rhoades summarise neo-liberal positioning towards higher education: 'The neo-liberal pattern is to reduce state subsidization of higher education, shift costs to "the market" and consumers, demand accountability for performance, and emphasize higher education's role in the economy' (Marginson & Rhoades 2002, p. 285). They go on to explain in their comparative essay that, particularly in the UK and Australia, governmental actions to establish and also attempt to control the market were set up as a 'a neo-liberal paradox of "steering from a distance"' (Marginson & Rhoades 2002, p. 285).

According to Holmes (2011) the desire by governments to use the higher education system in its educational purposes to produce more highly skilled workers has led to concentration on what happens to students in their lives after graduation outcomes (Holmes 2011). Further, the process of educating students has become industrialised, and as Morley states 'production metaphors, borrowed

from industry, are now central to higher education discourse' (Morley 2001, p. 131). With this industrialisation there is a requirement to quantify and measure the productive power of institutions. Any measurement of the educational and institutional impact on a group of universities is likely to be abstract at best and painful at worst, and in any case this is very hard to measure. This leads governments and institutions into a position where they use small quantities of data to prove that their degrees are useful to the national economy and seek ranking and rating measures about the process of employability from higher education.

This difficulty with measurement is important (Tymon 2011). It situates the proof of the worth to the economy of a university in a context where proofs cannot be empirically made, but instead it causes the offering of alleged proofs which themselves are based within the discourse – universities issue statements on their websites about the idea of linking to industry within their institution, about their links to the economy and the employment-generating worthiness of their degrees. By measuring post-graduation outcomes universities purport to be able to prove the worth of their degrees (Tymon 2011, p. 3).

The market also primarily evokes ideas of natural selection (Adam 2012, p. 76), and as this suggests that the best will survive, the idea of a university being subsidised is regarded as out of date and interfering. As Berman et al. explain, economic growth is a 'determining factor in all public policy decisions, including those affecting education' (Berman et al. 2007, p. 217). This, as attested by Walker, seems a significant shift away from the institutions' previous place in society as providing 'traditional liberal learning, about the role the humanities and social sciences play in society, or about higher education's contribution to democratic life, social well-being and the public good' (Walker 2008, p. 268). A negative but increasingly common notion is repeated by Eagle and Brennan when they report that some claim that 'students are simply in the higher educational system to acquire a qualification and that any education picked up along the way is incidental' (2007, p. 44).

The importance of future employers of students to higher education has been heralded as having been introduced in the recent period, as training is seen to be needed to ensure a workforce which can meet the demands of a challenging technological future. In this context, as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka explain, there is a question about who is the primary consumer of this education:

... students can be either considered as customers (with courses as the higher education products) or as products with the employers being the customers ... (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006, p. 319).

The ongoing policy narrative of this long wave of educational change (Goodson 2005) since the 1970s, as identified in this thesis, is the bringing together of the aims of the government towards supporting the economy and the higher education sector. The desire to connect the economy and higher education was a driver in the massification of higher education globally, and a key question throughout has been the government proportion of funding for higher education (Carpentier 2005). Since the 1970s, there has been an aspiration by government for cost reduction and encouragement of a market for student choice within higher education, but also maintenance of control by central government to, as Tomlinson suggests, 'exert pressures on the system to enhance its outputs, quality and overall market responsiveness' (Tomlinson 2012, p. 408).

This subsection has surveyed the macro changes over the period of massification and the next section takes a topic-based orientation, looking at the varied discourses of the idea of a degree in a thematic way, and works through these to create a frame for close reading of the prospectus texts.

### **Identifying discourses of the idea of a degree**

This subsection introduces the topics of the idea of a degree discourse, in order to develop the analysis and understanding of the macro discourses. Before commencing the analysis of the prospectus texts, an important analytic step is for the thesis to detail further the topics of the macro

discourse, as detailed in the Methodological Framework chapter. The topics of the discourse of the idea of a degree are seen in this research as useful heuristics not as absolutes. The analysis of the discourse topics is useful to aid the greater understanding of how the idea of a degree has been impacted by massification. There are difficulties in attempting to define the topics of any discourse, as Reisigl and Wodak explain:

The question of delimiting the borders of a 'discourse' and of differentiating it from other 'discourses' is intricate: the boundaries of a 'discourse' ... are partly fluid. As an analytical construct, a 'discourse' always depends on the discourse analyst's perspective. As an object of investigation, a discourse is not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 89).

For this thesis, the starting point of the identification of the discourse topics of the idea of a degree is the text by Archer (2003) on the value of higher education, as signalled in the Introduction chapter and discussed in the Literature Review chapter. Archer's work (2003) analyses the value of higher education as discussed by participants and non-participants of higher education in the context of the UK. This thesis engages with Archer's findings on participants' perceptions of values of higher education:

... it is suggested that the value of higher education, as perceived by actual and potential participants, is cross-cut by three general themes: the hierarchy of universities; issues around retention; and graduate employment/employability (Archer 2003, p. 119).

This thesis aims to expand Archer's work on the idea of a degree in which she identifies perceived values of a degree as hierarchy of institution, retention and graduate employment/employability. However this thesis takes a different perspective, not that of students but that of the institutions' production of documents which invoke relevant messages, the pre-entry materials for higher education.

Though Archer's work (2003) conflates the idea of graduate employment and employability – and they are very similar in many uses – this thesis develops this idea and divides the two concepts. It does this by drawing on the work of Clegg which separates them (2010). This division is based on the idea of employability being significantly related to generic work-readiness skills, which are discussed in the UK as an important part of the offer of higher education (Hillage & Pollard 1998). This differentiates employability from the notion of graduate employment as the transition to a graduate level role after the completion of higher education (Tomlinson 2012). This thesis treats Archer's (2003) value of retention as part of the completion of the course linked to the transition into graduate employment. Archer's (2003) value of the degree as indicated by hierarchy of the institution is understood in this thesis as the prestige of the degree drawn from the hierarchical status of the institution.

Further, in undertaking this analysis of the history of higher education it seems that there is an additional discourse topic which was not mentioned in Archer's (2003) research on the value of a degree. This is the view of education as an elite environment for learning, a concept of expansion of the mind which appears in other literatures about the value of education (Downs 2015) and therefore is included as a topic of the discourse in this study, named in this thesis as the traditional liberal idea of a degree.

In summary, this narrative reading of the literature identifies four discourse topics of the idea of a degree, these main topics of the discourse of the idea of a degree are established as:

- Traditional liberal purposes of education
- Prestige of a degree drawn from the hierarchy of universities
- Graduate employment
- Employability.

The discourse topics specified here are those used in the critical discourse analysis of the institutional texts and are further specified drawing on research literatures in the next section.

## Traditional liberal purposes of education

The traditional liberal idea of a degree's presence within the discourse is established in the main by policy drivers that seek to move away from it. Callaghan's important Ruskin Speech (1976) is seen by this thesis as the initiating move in the modern period's redevelopment of the idea of a degree and in the speech, the traditional liberal idea of a degree was constructed as the hegemonic idea which new policy should turn away from. The speech argued that tertiary education should turn towards a skills-focused and vocational purpose for tertiary education (Ball 2009). That the traditional liberal idea of a degree is somewhat silenced in the modern policy and research discourses does not mean that it is not of interest for this study. Ball (2009) in his article tracing the development of employability speaks of the lessening of the power of traditional liberal education, to the benefit of the economic reasons for higher education. He puts forward the argument that in his 1976 Ruskin Speech Callaghan changed the national discourse about the nature of higher education, away from the traditional liberal idea of education. Ball identifies the mid-1970s as the turning point between what he calls a liberal-humanist account of the purposes of higher education and a more instrumentalist one. For Ball (2009), the liberal humanist view was defined in the following way:

In broad terms this argument has been between a liberal-humanist perspective, which saw education as an entitlement that enabled individual fulfilment and personal empowerment, and a more narrowly instrumental perspective that gave greater emphasis to education as preparation for employment (Ball 2009, p. 43).

Clearly for Ball (2009) the markers of liberal humanist purposes included education for its own sake and deep engagement in learning. Others concurred with this analysis that the instrumentalist view of higher education moved away from an idea of a 'more liberal, general "education for life"' (Boden & Nedeva 2010, p. 43). Downs' work (2015) calls the instrumentalist view an unspoken and unchallenged assumption about the purposes of higher education and argues that the assumption is very powerful, citing the press reaction to Wolf's (2002) work, *Does Education Matter?* Wolf's work questioned both the idea of traditional liberal idea of education and the human capital argument (Becker 1964) for education. An argument which clarifies the discourse of the traditional liberal idea of education and deals with the difference between higher education for traditional liberal and for other purposes is developed by Washer, who sees the 'instrumentalist' view of the idea of a degree as education, and training for jobs as 'a "real" education' (Washer 2007, p. 59) as having been constructed against the traditional liberal idea of education. Such views define the traditional liberal view of education negatively as not real-world focused.

The traditional liberal idea of education is often set in opposition to the human capital idea of education. In the UK, the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s the encounter between this traditional liberal idea and the first signs of human capital (Becker 1964) impacting on the idea of a degree became evident. The debate was framed by the publishing of five manuscripts in the late 1960s and early 1970s called the *Black Papers* which supported 'traditionalism' in the UK education system. The early ones were written in the time of student political activism and profess concern for the state of civilisation and the institution of universities (Laing 1994). The most often quoted of the early *Black Papers* was the first published (Amis 1969). Amis wrote against the introduction of what he felt were non-academic subjects (for example sociology) and the massification of higher education. He originated the idea of 'more means worse' and, crucially for this research, criticised what he saw as a creeping vocationalism that was infecting the higher education institutions (Amis 1969). Amis saw the liberal-humanist tradition as worth defending and its heritage arising, among other sources, from the nineteenth-century writing of Cardinal Newman (Newman 2010). Amis's criticisms exemplify the traditionalist position of the higher education establishment: the editors of the *Black Papers*, Cox and Dyson, were not right-wing, they were Labour voters, but were very concerned, they said, about the changes to higher education they could see on the horizon (Laing 1994).

In modern research on the value of higher education there are traces of the traditional liberal idea of a degree, as an element that constructs 'elite higher education' (Pring 2001). Downs, in her work on the value of higher education, suggests that the idea of a degree being for the 'formation of a "well-rounded citizen"' (Downs 2015, p. 4) is strongly class-laden. She suggests the traditional liberal idea of a degree is constructed by cultural codes based on middle-class ideas of citizenry (Downs 2015). As discussed in the literature review looking at student choice, Bourdieu's (1984) writing on distinction explains how the appropriation of 'distinctive signs' is a critical part of the struggle of class.

Marginson (1999) links marketisation and massification in the UK but he raises a question about the nature of the value of education. He says that it is 'impossible to gauge' the extent to which educational producers engage with ideas of the function of education being for economic production (Marginson 1999, p. 232), or still hold other perspectives of education, such as goals and practices of 'pastoral care, the liberal formation of personality, the creation of cultural artefacts or the reproduction of civilisation' (Marginson 1999, p. 236). In other words, he suggests that the liberal values of the idea of a degree, such as viewing university as a rite of passage which expands the mind, may be present in a marketised and massified system.

However, there is another view, which is that the traditional liberal idea of education was essentially an elitist luxury (Thomas 2001, p. 31). This links to another traditional UK idea, that of a degree being also the start of adulthood, leaving home, and being seen by the middle-classes as a 'a "rite de passage", a process of identity shift' (Bligh 1999, p. 142) – and it might seem that massification of higher education would change that (Evans 2004). Marginson's (1999) point is that the idea of a traditional liberal education may be embedded deep within the academy; this view agrees with Downs' much later perception (2015). However, Bourdieu's (1988) writing on *Homo Academicus* suggests that the nature of the academic faculty is changing perhaps moving away from the traditional liberal idea of a degree, albeit slowly, and in generational waves.

The traditional liberal idea of a degree is judged for this purpose to be a largely silenced macro discourse in policy texts in the UK since 1976 (Walker 2008). However, there is an indication of the continuing influence of the traditional liberal view of higher education (Downs 2015) and Scott (1995) argues that the period of massification has resulted in a nostalgia in public narratives related to imagined past values of higher education, invoking the traditional liberal idea of a degree. Drawing on the arguments of these authors, this research identifies the idea of a degree for traditional liberal learning as a substantial macro topic of the idea of a degree. Therefore the traditional liberal idea of a degree is an important idea to trace in the institutional materials.

### **Prestige of a degree drawn from the hierarchy of universities**

The second topic of the discourse in the idea of a degree relates to prestige of the degree based on the status of the institution drawn from the hierarchy of universities. It is a complicated marker and engages with the idea of a degree as a commodity which is differentiated by the nature of its producer. With a mass system, the credentials produced are no longer elite by definition and are tempered by what Tomlinson, after Bourdieu, terms 'institutional capital' (Tomlinson 2008, p. 57). Leathwood in her article investigating differentiation in the UK higher education system proposes that 'despite the commitment to widen participation, it appears that the divisions between universities are further entrenched' (Leathwood 2004, p. 39). Degrees no longer stand in their own right; they are modified by their characteristics – most notably by the awarding institution's placement in the hierarchy of the higher education sector (Brown & Bills 2011). As Evans considers in her book on the changing relations for academia:

In the modern world there continue to be two complementary elements making up the credibility of a degree. One is the giving of the degree by a recognized institution. The other is its acceptance as a 'degree' not only within the body awarding it, but in the country as a whole and internationally, on the basis of the reputation (rather than the mere formal recognition), of that institution as a university (Evans 1999, p. 145).

Naidoo argues that theory and policy work errs by constructing the idea of a degree as a product of a homogenous higher education system (Naidoo 2003). She argues that the idea of a degree is differentiated in terms of the institution that awards it. This is due to the complexity that the stratified nature of modern higher education imposes upon its flagship commodity, a degree (Naidoo 2003). To understand the stratified nature of modern higher education she draws on Bourdieu's use of field:

Bourdieu's concept of a 'field' of university education may be applied to conceptualize individual universities as existing at different levels of hierarchy in relation to other universities and with greater or less autonomy from the state, civil society and the market (Naidoo 2003, p. 256).

The hierarchy of individual institutions within the field is transmitted through the prestige of the idea of a degree, as can be seen by Archer's student respondents: she noted that when analysing the idea of a degree 'all our respondents (both participants and non-participants [in higher education]) were aware of some sort of hierarchy of institutions' (Archer 2003, p. 128). In her research, Archer found that the lower status of some institutions was a strong disincentive to apply to the institution and if one of the lower status institutions was the only option, then the option to not attend was considered (Archer 2003). That research indicated the very idea of the worth of a degree at certain institutions was impacted on by the poor reputation of an awarding institution.

This finding echoes Liu's work on meritocracy in the US, where she finds that the system has diversified to such an extent that: 'In the US mass higher education system, an opportunity exists for nearly every student who wishes to pursue higher education' (Liu 2011, p. 6). Liu discusses the concept of meritocracy within this context and explains that the increasing diversity of the higher education market has led to rigid stratification and the necessity for elite universities to fight to maintain their distinction.

However, previous notions of a degree being the link to a professional future have over the period of massification become less assured. The links between a degree and a middle-class lifestyle are different depending on which university is attended, as Brooks made clear:

Within many of the middle-class families in her study, success was defined in terms of going to what was perceived as a 'good' university and both parents and children were aware of a three-tier hierarchy of universities and colleges (Brooks 2001, p. 221).

This was discussed by Rustin in his book, *The Perverse Modernisation of British Universities* (1998), which argued that a driver to protect elite provision has meant that the greatest expansion has occurred in non-elite mass provision (Rustin 1998). This means the difference in universities has become greater (Leathwood 2004), so degrees no longer stand in their own right; they are modified by their characteristics – most notably by their prestige, drawn from the awarding institution's placement in the hierarchy of the higher education sector (Brown & Bills 2011).

There are indicators of prestige, worth and status determined by which awarding institution the degree is from, as explained by Brown and Bills who discuss: 'hierarchy of prestige in types of qualifications and also institutions' (Brown & Bills 2011, p. 134). This prestige is overtly, and apparently unproblematically, codified, using league tables which abound after 1992. Included are employment rates which appear in the league tables four months after graduation (Morley & Aynsley, 2007).

Arkes in his economic based text evaluating degrees (1999) notes that the degree communicates to the labour market (and also to one's own social group) complicated indicators about the owner's productivity and ability – a degree 'talks' (Archer & Hutchings 2000) – but also Arkes notes that it can only be an initial indicator (1999). This difficulty in understanding arises as there is so much going on in the degree process. The judgement about employment rates as measures of the degree quality overlooks the selection implicit in higher education. The overlooking of the differences in selection of students is important, as Morley argues in her work on employability as a performance indicator in league tables in higher education: 'universities, particularly the elite, are already selecting the most

“employable” sections of the community and so employability indicators, in the form of graduate employment figures, are misleading’ (Morley 2003, p. 133).

The idea of a degree is viewed as being a product with different power depending on its provider: Power and Whitty write in their UK Economic and Social Research Council funded review of returns on degrees that ‘some degrees are clearly worth far more than others’ (Power & Whitty 2008). The worth of the signalling value of a degree has altered generally (Liu 2011), and the symbolic value, as described by Tomlinson (2008), of the ‘good’ of the degree has been lowered with the massification of institutions producing these formal credentials. As Pring advances: ‘It has been right to expand higher education. What has been wrong was to imagine that all students could be given a Rolls-Royce higher education’ (Pring 2001, p. 11). Brown and Bills suggest that currently the degree is only a paper-based credential being offered to the masses in previously excluded communities, not the full benefits of ‘social ascent’ which previously came from higher education (Brown & Bills 2011). This failure to match quality in parallel to rising numbers is linked with being low on the league tables, and so possibly indicates one of Reay’s ‘failing universities’ (Reay 2001). There is also a real fear of some degrees being ‘pale imitations’ as Meek and Wood suggest in their Australian-oriented review of the marketisation of higher education, and they further propose there are ‘ghettos’ where students from community sections which had not previously accessed education were being educated (Meek & Wood 1997).

How the prestige of the idea of a degree drawing on the hierarchical nature of the higher education system is transmitted to students by institutions has been little interrogated in the research literature from the institutional perspective, and will be traced through the prospectuses, especially the more recent ones.

### **Graduate employment**

The purpose of graduate employment is the third discourse identified in the literature on the idea of a degree and is identified alongside employability in Archer’s work (2003) on students’ perceptions of the value of a degree. Although the idea of a degree for graduate employment in the policy discourse is presented as a new and important focus, it is a long-standing feature of the nature of higher education. The earliest ‘modern’ institutions were founded for medical and legal training, with explicitly overt vocational purposes (Forbes 1933).

However, the literature indicates (Ball, 2009) that within the period of massification there has been a significant shift from the training for vocations, which were seen as ‘the professions’ and associated with specifically named degrees such as medicine and law, to the concept that all degrees should have a core purpose of graduate employment (Morley 2007). This shift equates the idea of a degree as central to developing human capital in all degrees for the purposes of the economy, embracing Becker’s (1964) position of humans as economic beings, making the purpose of higher education a part of the economy (Morley 2003). It is a position expressed by many writers that other discourses of higher education have become overpowered by the human capital argument (Ashe 2012; Meek and Wood 1997; Taylor 1998).

The knowledge economy theory holds that a central purpose of degrees is as currency for the labour market (Ball 2009). This concept is based on a premise which is simple: being able to prove that one has been awarded a degree has power relating to the placement of individuals with employers, as discussed by Baker (2011) in his US-based study of educational credentialing. Baker goes on to explain that the specifics of the degree content matter less than the holding of the degree testamur (Baker 2011). There is a significant literature about these ‘sheepskin’ properties of a degree, which holds that if two people have the same amount of schooling they should be equally skilled, as explained by Dutch writers Bol and Van der Werfhorst in their comparison of qualifications in Europe: ‘Educational qualifications are held to represent “sheepskins” that are rewarded for reasons other than skills learned in school, for instance because of selection and sorting happening in the

educational system.’ (Bol & Van de Werfhorst 2011, p. 120). Thomas stresses that for some people the impetus to engage in higher education comes from a different driver: ‘People from higher socio-economic classes (who are generally the more affluent) are likely to wish to preserve their status in the labour market and to send out appropriate signals to employers.’ (Thomas 2001, p. 26)

Bol and Van der Werfhorst go on to clarify the sheepskin theory as using the degree as a signal in the labour market (Bol & Van de Werfhorst 2011). The idea of the use of a degree as a signalling tool (Liu 2011) is a popular description, as is the simile between a degree and currency, particularly expressed by Bankston in his US research on credentialing (Bankston 2011). This metaphor views the labour market as needing a currency, and perhaps this idea of one’s learning achievements being equivalent to the amount of money one has to spend is at least easy to understand, if an oversimplification (Brown & Bills 2011).

There are indicators in longitudinal studies such as that by Bratti, Naylor and Smith that the UK graduate premium, which indicates the financial benefit gained from undertaking a degree, is falling (Bratti, Naylor & Smith 2008). Although the ‘graduate premium’ is a complex marker, the idea of a premium is a commonly held concept. It has been shown that credentials have always been used as a signal, as is discussed by Arkes, who states that in terms of recruitment ‘firms reward educational attainment in part because a higher education signals qualities that are initially unobservable to employers and that indicate greater productivity’ (Arkes 1999, p. 134).

The impact of this instrumentalist view of education will be traced in the historical development of higher education as the UK government has sought to have the system function as a part of the economy to support labour market growth and counteract worries about a ‘skills shortage’ (Ball 2009). However, as Holmes explains, all the government can do is exert pressure on institutions to ensure they ‘take steps to promote the likelihood that their graduates will gain what may be deemed as appropriate employment’ (Holmes 2011, pp. 3-4). By the early 1990s, the purposes of higher education are being presented as synonymous with human capital development, and the concept of the purpose of the degree is beginning to shift to the post-graduation period. This developed further in the late 1990s where the institutional practice across the sector was to provide more generic job outcomes for the universities. This observation adds to Holmes’ comment that the

... desire by governments to use the higher education system in its educational purposes to produce more highly skilled workers has led to concentration on what happens to students in their lives after graduation outcomes (Holmes 2001, p. 1).

There is a view that any undergraduate degree had previously been the pathway to white-collar roles, as Jarvis argues: ‘Undergraduate education has become the end of initial education for those who were about to enter the knowledge-based occupations’ (Jarvis 2000, p. 55). However, this understanding of higher education being the link to a professional future seems now less assured and more linked to which university has been attended (Chevalier 2014). It is a matter of prestige linked to which university has been attended, showing that these discourses have significant overlap and interplay.

As has been shown in studies of students’ perspectives on institutions, a degree is now being seen as Liu indicates in her US-based study of meritocracy in higher education to operate to ‘improve the chances of moving up the income ladder’ (Liu 2011, p. 10). Warmington’s research with mature UK Access students reported that higher education is seen by students as an ‘escape from little jobs’ (Warmington 2003). In the UK single-institution student-survey-based research of Glover, Law and Youngman, 80% of their respondents sought a ‘better chance of employment’ (Glover, Law and Youngman 2002, p. 298), emphasising the strong conceptual link between education and employment.

This point is developed by Purcell and Elias in their British government funded report surveying graduates seven years after completion; they show there is huge growth in both new graduate occupations and also growth in occupations which need a degree (Elias & Purcell 2004). Green and

Zhu (2010) in their study of graduate perceptions of their post-graduate employment report that formal over-qualification has increased – where the degree is asked for but the skills needed are not of degree-level (Elias & Purcell 2004).

Some concerns are expressed about these transformations by Moreau and Leathwood in their critical analysis of graduate transformations:

In relation to these transformations, graduates have become more likely to initially enter jobs not considered to require a degree and/or jobs characterized by ‘non-standard’ forms of employment (e.g. non full-time or employment with long contracts) (Moreau & Leathwood 2006, p. 306).

Warmington’s data suggest this insecurity of employment is exactly what many students are seeking to escape in gaining a degree (Warmington 2003). It is clear that, especially for non-traditional students, the choice is not as simple as whether to engage in higher education or not, and to enjoy the benefits of higher education or not, as the benefits of education can depend on fluctuations in the economy.

Although graduate employment is a major topic of the discourse of the idea of a degree, it has proven difficult for governments to measure it and advance it in theorised terms (Brown & Hesketh 2004). So, another concept has been introduced, that of employability – although, according to Tymon (2011), it can be equally hard or even harder to measure, as will be discussed more fully in the next subsection.

### **Employability**

The final discourse identified in the literature on the idea of a degree is employability, and this discussion will consider whether it is a separate discourse topic or is actually a sub-topic of the idea of a degree for graduate employment. Although writers such as Louise Archer in her work on the value of higher education (2003) conflate the two ideas of graduate employment and employability, the research by Clegg (2010) suggests that there is sufficient substantive difference between them to consider them separately. An ambiguity in the discussion on graduate employment is the concept of employability, and whether it is not the same idea as graduate employment. Employability is for the future, Clegg (2010) theorises, quoting Yorke, who explains that ‘Employability cannot be equated with actual employment, since employment opportunities are determined by factors at the macro-economic level outside the control and capacities of the individual’ (Clegg 2010, p. 351). Brown and Hesketh view the growth of the use of the concept of employability as arising from governments of a neo-liberal persuasion seeking to shift the responsibility from the state and institutions onto individuals (2004). They say this is because degrees do not guarantee employment, as employment increasingly is insecure (Brown & Hesketh 2004) and depends on a greater range of factors as there are so many more graduates.

Employability as a concept required universities to discuss and provide opportunities for students to improve their skills, though employability was said by governments to be measured through graduate outcomes surveys such as the Destination of Leavers to Higher Education survey (Tymon 2011). Writers such as Clegg would contest that graduate outcomes only measure graduate employment and contend that this differs from the more holistic idea of employability (Clegg 2010). The research literature on graduate employment and employability deals with the two ideas substantially separately (Boden & Nedeva 2010). Therefore, though the concepts can be seen as significantly linked, this thesis follows Clegg (2010) and identifies two discourses: graduate employment and employability.

The concept of employability is a relatively recent concept among universities and in government. This specific concept has been traced at least to the early 1980s (Holmes 2011), though Ashe (2012) states that the concept emerged over one hundred years ago. Adding confusion, Steur, Jansen and Hofman (2012) suggest that employability is frequently confused with what they call ‘graduateness’

and say that a struggle to define gradueness has existed since the early 19th century, as in von Humboldt's work from 1809 on self-cultivation (Humboldt 1968).

Boden and Nedeva (2010) explain that understanding employability is a core purpose of higher education. They quote a Department for Education and Economy report which states: 'enhancing the employability of graduates is a key task for higher education' (Hillage & Pollard 1998, p. 40). In response to the policy discussion about a skills shortage in the late 1990s, discussed later in this chapter, the idea of a degree for graduate employment morphs into a competing account in public discourse, including in government policy, that a degree should develop graduate employability. Ashe (2012) suggests that graduates require practical skills for work as well as their degree, and this topic has become commonly known as 'employability'.

There are problems expressed in the research literature about the definition of the term. McQuaid, Green and Danson eloquently introduce the topic: 'employability remains a contested concept in terms of its use in both theory and policy, and throughout the past century has been used as both a predominantly labour supply and a labour demand concept' (McQuaid, Green & Danson 2005, p. 191).

Boden and Nedeva (2010) trace this new understanding of employability as a discursive shift and as part of the neo-liberal impact on higher education. As they describe it, employability enables the situation that 'neoliberal regimes are legitimised as moral and democratic because choice allows individuals, via their exercise of agency, to determine their own lives and identities' (Boden & Nedeva 2010, p. 39). This is imparted by Brown, Hesketh and Williams in their article examining the conceptual nature of the term employability, arguing that 'in many neoliberal states long-standing contributions of universities to the development of citizens' knowledges and skills have been re-badged as "employability".' (2003, p. 122)

Although the idea of employability may seem an innocuous addition to the debate, as Taylor (1998) notes in her Canadian article criticising the use of the employability concept to bend higher education to industry's whims, it is a significant change of focus. It references the responsibilities of educational institutions to train people for the workplace. What conflicting market pressures seem to have produced with the term employability is that there are now many more requests for skills above and beyond the degree requirements, and for demonstration of the students' general employability (Liu 2011) – beyond solely the formal achievements of higher education (Tomlinson 2008; Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003). This must be seen as a devaluation of the value of a degree and is a distinct change in the idea of a degree, because in the past elite degrees were viewed as representative of the general and also discipline-specific skills of the bearer (Boden & Nedeva 2010).

The position of the UK Department for Education and Employment is made clear in an influential Institute of Employment Studies Research Brief issued the year after the Dearing Report (1997). This is a key document for the establishment of employability, and the report says that employability 'is central to the strategic direction of the Department' (Hillage & Pollard 1998, p. 1). Hillage and Pollard's government document (1998) constructs employability as an individual concern and Moreau and Leathwood's analysis of the document argues it suggests that skills are seen as assets (2006).

Universities are exhorted to concentrate effort on graduates developing "key", 'core', 'transferable' or 'employability' skills' (Ashe 2012, p. 130) to improve work readiness. Busch, in his discourse-based study of the constructivist processes that surround the employability concept, highlights the humanities subjects which are 'criticized for neglecting students' future employability' (2009, p. 429). Holmes echoes this by criticising such initiatives, primarily in the UK: 'Much of the institutionally based initiatives to promote graduate employability appear to have little or no direct evidence base' (Holmes 2001, p. 2). Holmes has worked further on employability, classifying three 'competing perspectives' of employability, the idea of possessional employability (where skills are collected), positional employability (related to a specific kind of cultural capital), and processual employability (where employability is developed over time in relation to learning) (Holmes 2011).

Linked to Holmes' work on the idea of positional employability are suggestions that the term is in fact a class marker operating in the graduate labour market. A possible link between this ability to speak in acceptable registers, as acculturated by middle-class education and upbringing, and to discuss employability skills is evidenced by Davies and Durden's report (2010). They find that graduates who were able to talk about their skills fared better than students who were not able to do so, and this idea is emphasised by Devlin, writing in the Australian context:

They argue that, whatever a student's actual capacity, their background and cultural capital affect their ability to understand tacit requirements and appropriately perform a university student's role and thereby demonstrate their capacity (Devlin 2013, p. 3).

It is a critical point for identifying discourse markers to note that the skills debate assumes students' need for employability to acquire additional and extra language, which in turn requires that students who can 'master this cognitively dominated curriculum are defined as being "smart and accomplished" even before any post-educational achievements' (Baker 2011, p. 12). In a UK-based Higher Education Academy guide published in 2012, Pegg et al. (2012) commented that there has been a move away in employability thinking from the skills lists and explicit terminology for skills. This is echoed by Moreau and Leathwood:

Equating skills and power fails to recognise that skills are socially constructed, and valued and rewarded in different ways by employers depending on workers' identity markers and educational path (such as the type of university from which individuals graduate) (Moreau & Leathwood 2006, p. 310).

Scott explains this further: 'Individualised lifestyles, admittedly with many echoes of bourgeois culture, may have replaced class- or gender-determined life chances as the prime determinants of identity, status and power' (Scott 1995, p. 178). Smart et al. speak of this in operational terms when investigating the processes around an elite UK graduate scheme (Teach First), where applicant graduates 'implicitly positioned themselves as middle-class ... through their descriptions of shaping and managing their careers and selves' (Smart et al. 2009, p. 39).

Brown and Hesketh, discussing the concept of employability, state 'the self is now a key economic resource; "who you are" matters as much as "what you know".' (Brown & Hesketh 2004, p. 35) Morley and Aynsley's research agreed (2007), and they see this as an inherent problem with the concept of employability.

The move towards employability as an important element of the idea of a degree is a major reconstruction and a shift in the idea of a degree, for labour-market practices as well as tertiary education. It is a change 'from an individual getting a job to a definition that places at its core the individual acquisition of a set of attributes that makes one appealing to a heterogeneous range of employers' (Boden & Nedeva 2010, p. 42). The focus of this idea of a degree has turned now to the graduate, who is made responsible for developing the attributes or characteristics to become employed, and those attributes bear the markers of class.

## **Summary**

This section of this chapter has identified and detailed four discourses that the research literature has discussed, each focusing on a different idea of a degree. The purpose of this thesis is to take the discourse topics about the idea of a degree and explore the macro discourses at work during each event to see whether and how these four different ideas of a degree are traceable in the institutional materials. The four constructions of the idea of a degree drawn from my reading of the literature (traditional liberal, prestige, graduate employment, and employability) are important to contextualise within the period of the research.

The next section undertakes a narrative account of the period in which these identified and specified discourse topics of the idea of a degree will be traced.

## **Macro discourse of the idea of a degree in the UK**

The purpose of this section is to consider time periods in which to frame the data collection and analyse the prospectuses: this section of the chapter considers how the discourses of the idea of a degree identified in the first section of the chapter relate to the specific shifts in politics and the economy. It develops an understanding of the socio-political context of the periods when the eventements are identified. Eventementes is used as a term drawing on, but not following exactly, Goodson's (2005) work on long waves of historical change. It is used here to help identify the moments of shift, milestones that indicate a change in the macro discourse of the idea of a degree. While they are not necessarily the first instances of the macro discourse, they are discussed in terms of markers for collection of the prospectuses for academic years when it could be said that there was a majoritisation in the change in the idea of a degree. The years denoted in this long wave of change are used as sampling points for the collection points of prospectuses and are therefore central to the second part of the analysis in this thesis.

This research casts the period since the 1970s to 2010s as a long wave of change related to massification (Goodson 2005). It is chosen because at the beginning of the selected period, policy shifted under James Callaghan as UK Prime Minister, from viewing degrees as a personal privilege, to degrees becoming elements in a nation-building objective (Coombe 2015; Marginson 2002) and this shift influences contemporary educational policy.

Massification of the higher education sector commenced in the period of the early 1970s (Trow 1972). It was driven by policy changes such as the adoption of human capital theory (Becker 1964), and another shift which has been traced to this period is the marketisation of higher education. This development from the late 1970s and early 1980s to mid-2000s has been noted by Brown (2011) and Naidoo (2011).

In Goodson's work (2005) on historical periodisation, he describes how long waves of educational reform coincide with economic reform, and within them policy developments which he names (after the Annalistes) eventementes (Goodson 2005). He warns of the theoretical and methodological limits of this approach, and this thesis neither tries to be an exhaustive history nor an unbiased one. Instead, it follows Goodson's suggestion: 'definition of periods allows us to define the possibility for professional action and professional narratives at particular points in historical time' (Goodson 2010, p. 768).

This chapter establishes a narrative account of the changes, sketching key moments in recent history to present the modern discourse of the idea of a degree, and undertakes a discourse-oriented secondary historical analysis to establish concepts, events and policies that have been influential in their development. It uses the idea of intertextuality to suggest the invoking of discourse topics as explained by Reisigl and Wodak:

*Intertextuality* means that texts are linked to other texts, both in the past and in the present. Such connections are established in different ways: through explicit reference to a topic or main actor; through references to the same events; by allusions or evocations; by the transfer of main arguments from one text to the next, and so on (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 90).

In this way this chapter will trace the development of the discourses. This tracing is drawn from the idea, as outlined by McCulloch, that it is of great significance to understand documents such as the prospectuses 'in relation to their milieux, or in other words to relate the text to its context' (McCulloch 2004, p. 6). Just as discourses cannot operate without texts, texts and discourses do not operate in a vacuum without historical events, policy shifts, and as so frequently in this context, funding arrangements and requirements.

### **Historically orienting the idea of a degree**

Universities have varied substantially over time both in their structures and their inherent idea of a degree. Higher education in the classical world was generally educational and non-professional and

aimed at the ruling elite (Lowe & Yasuhara 2017). For over a millennium, higher education was in the hands of the Catholic Church and offered young men of ability, potentially from all social levels, a career in the church. Bologna was founded in 1088 and the schools of Paris and Oxford emerged in the twelfth century as quasi-civic universities. Professional subjects like Medicine and Law were taught, and the processes of clerical education also trained administrators. After the Reformation in England and Germany, universities were focused on professional training and general education for an elite, a system which flourished, with strong German influence, in America. From the founding of University College London in 1826 (UCL n.d.), a rationalist and professional basis was seen for the degree (Rothblatt 1997), with a largely elite student intake, a pattern which was adapted in some northern English universities towards some engagement with industry (Sanderson, 1972). As English universities grew in number in the twentieth century, there was some expansion of the student base and some discussion of the purposes of higher education. Silver argues that the question of the purposes of higher education was in the middle of the twentieth century 'translated into attention to the curriculum' (2003, p. 134) which eventuated in a strong move towards science as a major subject for teaching and research.

A significant departure including debate into curricula purposes of higher education characterised the post war period (Lowe 2011). The beginning of the modern system, started with the Robbins report (1963) which promoted the idea of a unitary system, with no separate technical colleges, which should be open to all who were qualified (Jarvis 2000), suggested expansion to 15% of the age cohort. This did not of itself break with the existing elite structure (Ansell 2008), and Burke sees the motivation for change was to 'expand the supply of university-trained professions' (Burke 2013, p. 13). Although the Robbins report was a key driver in expansion of the system, Carpentier suggests the major expansion in numbers started earlier: 'Enrolment rose threefold until 1967 and its share of the 18-30 year old age group rose from 2% to 6%' (Carpentier 2005).

Mayhew, Deer and Dua's research analysed the Robbins report for its understanding of the purposes of higher education and found it identified: '(a) instruction in skills; (b) promotion of general powers of the mind; (c) the advancement of learning; (d) the transmission of a common culture' (Mayhew, Deer and Dua 2004, p. 58). These mixed purposes are interesting to read in the context of the identified discourse topics of the idea of a degree; it seems from this reading that in the period of Robbins the traditional liberal idea of a degree was still important, as well as graduate employment. Although instruction in skills was so prominent in the Robbins report (1963), it is not clear whether technical discipline-skills or transferable generic skills were meant: it seems likely discipline specific skills were meant, rather than the modern general skills for 'employability' (Hillage & Pollard 1998) as were discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

The Robbins report's (1963) recommendations to transform to a unitary system were not followed. There was a formalisation of the binary system with the creation of the Council for National Academic Awards, which would award degrees from the existing advanced technology colleges, the future polytechnics. The next era marked a massive expansion of the higher education system, when twenty-three institutions were founded in the 1960s as a consequence of the Robbins report (Mayhew, Deer & Dua 2004). There were also many new polytechnics across Britain, with a final total of thirty, usually developed from earlier institutions and the polytechnics and other non-university sector providers increased their share of full-time higher education (Parry 2014). However, the expansion in the tertiary system was not supported by all and there were 'concern about the components of standards, as a result of diversification and growth' (Silver 1990, p. 39), and there were vociferous opponents (Amis, 1969).

The establishment of the binary system after the Robbins report (1963), although it was against Robbins' recommendations, was crucial for the development of the idea of a degree as a prestige symbol indicated by the institution's status. The creation of the binary system and establishment of polytechnics created institutional differentiation and hierarchies but also possibilities for higher

standards in some areas of teaching (Silver 1990). It is explained by Croxford and Raffe as an important moment in development of the modern higher education (Croxford & Raffe, 2014).

The age cohort percentage was only 8-10% in the early 1970s (Jarvis, 2000), an elite system, and a key tenet of the Robbins' report (1963) was that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (Robbins 1963, p. 8). Therefore, the scene was set for massification which would mean the age cohort would rise to nearly 25% by 2002 (Carpentier, 2005), with Blair's 1997 Labour government seeking a 50% age cohort in tertiary education (Lunt, 2008). This immense increase in scale was a greater change to the nature of higher education than in any previous era. The impact of the Robbins report (1963) can be seen as a pivotal commencement point in the long wave of change relating to the massification of higher education. This thesis sees the Robbins report as a key shift, when the funding, status and naming of institutions was brought in this period of the early 1970s into more serious focus, at the beginning of the massification era where this project commences. It was not chosen as the first point of collection, instead as a point of departure after which to mark the first macro discourse change in the UK, which as is discussed in the next section was selected as after the Ruskin speech of 1977. The next subsection commences the identification of each of the eventements chosen for data collection.

### **1977 academic year eventemente**

The first eventemente established for this study was the change in the macro discourse of the idea of a degree towards an understanding of degrees as primarily being linked to human capital theory (Becker 1964). This change can be seen in Prime Minister James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, in October 1976. An impetus for economic strengthening through increased education led to a desire to massify the higher education systems (Ball 2009), drawing on the Robbins report (1963) as interpreted by the government of the time. The late 1976 timing of the speech is the commencement point of this research project. Callaghan strongly linked employment and education for the first time, and launched a skills language into the mainstream education discourse:

There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills (Callaghan 1976, n.p.).

Callaghan's statement can be seen as invoking and critiquing the traditional liberal idea of a degree by casting the education system (his speech covered schooling as well as higher education) as having previously serviced social and not economic needs, and supporting the idea of a degree for graduate employment. Ball describes it as making public previously internal debate as to the purposes of higher education and notes the speech and its link to industry 'signalled the success of the instrumentalists' (2009, p. 44) in winning the argument about the purposes of higher education.

The Ruskin speech of 1976 also formalised a new discourse of social justice, in considering who should have access to higher education to combat disadvantage, which can be seen to be a commencement of the idea of widening participation agenda in higher education. This was indicated by Callaghan's (1976) focus on the skills that should be gained from schooling at different levels and the importance of education to expand to promote social justice. Perhaps this originated from Callaghan's Labour Party ideology, informed as a result of the Robbins report's (1963) inclusion of equity as a driver – the concept of expansion of the higher education system being good for the economy is often linked to ideas of, even aspirations for, social mobility. That is, there is underlying the majority discourse about the economy, a secondary suggestion that degrees, as part of their labour-market purpose, have a strong influence towards social mobility for students (Parry 2006).

The purposes of higher education were becoming seen as a part of the national economy, and this shifted the public discursive practice relating to the idea of a degree within the UK: Callaghan's speech also linked the importance of higher education to industry:

... parents, teachers, learned and professional bodies, representatives of higher education and both sides of industry, together with the government, all have an important part to play in formulating and expressing the purpose of education and the standards that we need (Callaghan 1976, n.p.).

By mainstreaming the discourse of the economy as the main purpose of education, a new discursive era was commenced, moving towards a vocational, economically central view of the sector (Ball 2009). In considering the specific public discourses at play in this era, Lingard and Rizvi agree with Hobsbawm that the globalised world economy 'came into being' in the early 1970s (Lingard & Rizvi 1998, p. 63). Its introduction can be seen to be contemporary with the increasing focus on the human capital arguments of education and the importance of increasing participation in higher education for the benefit of the economy. Both of these new factors foreground and mainstream the discourse of the economy as the chief purpose of education: as Jarvis describes it, universities needed to become efficient wealth-producers to maintain their relevance (Jarvis 2000), and this engulfed the universities in the wider economy.

The repositioning of universities in relation to the economy was in part due to the necessity of funding the expansion. Carpentier's work tracking expenditure per student across the twentieth century indicates that there was the beginning of the first fall in expenditure after the 1973 oil crisis (Carpentier 2005). He calls this the beginning of the period of control of public expenditure. The need for resources to fund an expansion, recommended in the Robbins report (1963), is viewed as one of the drivers for the market for education from this period onwards. Pring (2001), looking at how the idea of a university changed over the period of massification, explores what happened alongside the expansion from the early 1970s further:

As the university population expanded ... so the 'elite nature' of university education diminished but the elite nature of certain universities increased – the small group of high status, highly selective institutions, from which students graduated to high status jobs (Pring 2001, p. 4).

Massification raised questions relating to the equity of status of degrees and there emerged a voicing of the view of higher education as a positional good, which would itself invoke the idea of a degree as a prestige symbol. When there was an elite system, the implicit assumption of degrees was that they were a currency shared between universities and the labour market and awarding of a degree conferred elite status. There was also a structured division within higher education institutions after the introduction of the binary system in the implementation of the Robbins report (1963), with universities seen as providing an elite education while other higher education institutions like the polytechnics provided work-related training. The binary division that existed between types of UK higher education institutions denoted a division of purpose. When this study commences in 1976, a polytechnic degree and a university degree would be seen as both from higher education, but not both of elite standing:

What influences elite recruitment is not that the aspirant recruit possesses a degree in physics or in engineering, but that that degree is conferred at Oxford or at Harvard ... ownership, wealth and property continues to play a fundamental part in facilitating access to the sort of educational process which influences entry to elite positions (Giddens 1973, pp. 263-64, cited in Archer 2003, p. 201).

The 1970s were not a period of significant tertiary structural expansion in the UK, but rather saw an ontological repositioning of the degrees, as will be examined in this thesis. The importance of the Ruskin speech as a discursive change, is that in this argument the idea of a degree can be seen as having shifted away from a hegemonic idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes towards, as established in the Mayhew, Deer and Dua (2004) review of the Robbins report, a degree for graduate employment, understood as vocationalism (Ball 1990). However, traces of a traditional liberal view of higher education were still evident and the binary structure maintained existing institutional hierarchies and a structural divide that enhanced the prestige value idea of a degree.

In this period the introduction of the ‘vocational instrumentalist’ (Ball 2009) discourse contrasted to the previously dominant idea of a degree as synonymous with traditional liberal learning. There were still structural and cultural distinctions between degree providers, with the idea of a degree remaining intertwined with the prestige of the institution which granted it. Although Callaghan (1976) discussed skills, he was not invoking an individual concept of adaptability for employers but invoking an older idea of preparedness for work, and therefore it is considered that employability as a discourse was silenced in this period as Table 10 below summarises.

*Table 10 Macro discourse topics identified in 1977 eventemente period*

	<b>Traditional liberal</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
<b><i>Macro discourse topics identified in 1977 eventemente period</i></b>	Majority	Minority	Emerging	Silenced

### **1984 academic year eventemente**

The next eventemente in the discourse of the idea of a degree is a shift in the macro discourse away from its wider social and economic purposes and towards viewing the degree as having individual benefit. This was initiated by the discussion of individually paid fees in the UK, though the eventemente of this period was neither the passing of legislation nor a specific change in policy but a discussion of possible policy which changed the ontology of higher education within the UK. The government’s policy interest in fees for higher education was prompted because funding the 17% expansion of higher education proposed by the Robbins report (1963) was causing financial pressures. These pressures brought about robust policy debates questioning the idea of the purpose of the degree – who was benefiting from the degree, and who should pay for it. The debates put focus on the individual benefit gained by students, in line with the political doctrine of the then Conservative government, and was concentrated on the idea of a degree for graduate employment (Parry 2003).

In the 1970s, after the nominal fees paid by the local education authorities for students had been abolished by the Callaghan Government, there were discussions in this period by the Conservatives, under Keith Joseph as Education Minister, about introducing fees for all students. The major change of the early 1980s was that it was proposed that students (and, more often, their parents) pay for university fees, constructing the degree for the first time as a product: Carpentier describes this period as the beginning of private expenditure expansion (2005), though the 1983 Education (Fees and Awards) Act only introduced fees for international and European students.

Enrolment figures and the proportion of the population at university were at the beginning of the 1980s at levels which indicated the system was still elite, in Trow’s terms (1972). The system then moved during the 1980s to a participation rate of over 15%: to be classed as a mass higher education system (Trow 1972). The early 1980s saw slow steady growth with a contraction in student expenditure and a rise in the ratio of students to staff (Carpentier 2005). This position corresponded to a situation where government contribution to higher education was at the absolute high point on a span between 1939-2012 (Norton 2014). The financing of public services became a key issue in this period and by the early 1980s, as Morley explains, the idea of the market in higher education had become mainstream:

... the market has become a policy alternative to public monopolies. By 1983 universities were beginning to be perceived, by the government, as offering poor value for money, being too distant from the wealth-creating sectors of industry and commerce, and being too dependent on government funding (Morley 1997, p. 233).

The idea that university education was not doing enough for the wider economy played out in the UK where there was a strong sense students were not contributing within a climate of recession – as indicated by the popularity of ‘The Young Ones’, a television series on the BBC (a mainstream public broadcaster) about exceptionally decadent university students, which ran from 1982-1984.

In the early 1980s neo-liberalism was beginning to have force in local policy-making contexts under Margaret Thatcher’s government, as described by Gareth Williams:

Nowhere in the Western world was this new ideology taken up more enthusiastically than in the U.K. where the Conservative government, elected in 1979, viewed all public provision of services as undesirable, on grounds of both efficiency and democratic principle (Gareth Williams 1997, p. 279).

This globalised agenda was based on neo-liberal thinking and was impacting on policy-making in education (Lingard & Rizvi 1998): primarily it promoted a desire to reduce the state subsidisation of higher education and desired to foster markets in higher education. The competitive positioning of universities against each other, as a policy discourse, began in this period and can be seen as engaging the institutions in a competitive market which made the idea of a degree relate to the prestige of the awarding institution important. This was the point in the early 1980s when the grants council cut funding to universities that accepted large numbers of non-traditional students (that is, without A Levels) (Davies, Webb & Williams 1997). The move can be seen as another marker signalling the importance of who should enter university and the government using funding to steer institutional behaviour guarding prestige of elite degrees.

Within policy discourses there was a shift towards the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment within higher education during this period. The growing importance of the employment outcomes of a degree was related to the efficiency of the university, both in terms of cost and in terms of productivity and quality (Lingard & Rizvi 1998).

Barnett, writing about the position of higher education in this period, marks it as a significant moment and mourns that the ‘historical conception of higher education as standing for intrinsically worthwhile ends – essentially the idea of liberal higher education – is being lost from sight’ (Barnett 1990, p. x). The diminution of the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes can be traced to this period, and it has less influence in higher education policy from now on.

In contrast is the increase in the development of a functional, graduate employment oriented idea of the purpose of the degree. Linked to this view and the discourse of the idea of a degree, and also to contemporary government policy relating to the place of universities in the world, is the concept of employability, and this specific concept has been traced at least to the early 1980s (Holmes 2011).

In the UK, during the Thatcher government years there was generally a policy silence relating to widening participation for social justice. However, there was also in this period continuing impetus given to the social mobility aspect of higher education, both despite and because of the increasing financial pressures of higher education. There were moves towards social justice and attempts to dismantle barriers to higher education, which were beginning to be supported by grass roots action to aid widening participation in the form of the Access movement (Burke 2013), which provided or facilitated courses for students with non-traditional entry routes. However, there were funding council actions which made the climate more difficult for students from non-traditional entry routes and the institutions that sought to help them such as clawing back funding for institutions who over-recruited (Davies, Webb & Williams 1997). Although the polytechnics were allowed to expand significantly beginning in this period (Parry 2006) there was still significant differentiation in the idea of their degrees.

In the period that preceded the academic year 1984 the idea of a degree had shifted from the previous eventemete and there was in the macro discourse much more concentration on the individual benefits of higher education, discussed in terms of graduate employment, not

employability. The idea of a degree as marked by the prestige of its awarding institution was still an important part of the construction of the idea of degree and the government of the time undertook steps to reinforce differentiation. The traditional liberal view of education as a positive factor was silenced. Table 11 overleaf summarises these discourses during the 1984 eventemente.

*Table 11 Macro discourse topics identified in 1984 eventemente period*

	<b>Traditional liberal</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
<b><i>Macro discourse topics identified in 1984 eventemente period</i></b>	Silenced	Minority	Majority	Silenced

### **1992 academic year eventemente**

The macro discourse of the idea of a degree changed in this period in relation to significant contextual changes to the higher education system. The change was as the type of the degree could no longer be differentiated by its structural position as being awarded from a university or a polytechnic (Rochford 2006). The eventemente of this period was the ending of the binary divide by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

The act, which converted the polytechnics to universities, generated a subsequent, modestly funded expansion to the system (Mayhew, Deer & Dua 2004) and meaningful steps (Scott 1995) towards a participation rate above 15% which Trow (2000) calls a universal system of higher education. After 1992, there was in total a very large number of British universities, and Bathmaker casts the expansion as the impetus for the Further and Higher Education Act, as institutions were not 'achieving the efficiency goals that the Conservative Government wanted' (Bathmaker 2003, p. 177).

Although the Act abolished formal differentiation, the idea of a degree as marked by prestige, as Davies, Williams and Webb explain with regard to the ending of the binary divide, 'has not abolished past differentiation but provided the opportunity for a reshuffling of the hierarchy' (Davies, Williams & Webb 1997, p. 5). This was explained by Wagner:

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act removed the binary divide between polytechnics and universities. Halsey concluded that the British binary line has lost its official status and a post-binary system has begun. Mass expansion appears to be reinforcing the hierarchical structure of higher education: a vice-chancellor of one of Britain's new universities commented: 'It is those who restrict access by accepting only students with the highest traditional qualifications which receive status, privilege, honours and resources' (Wagner 1989, p. 36).

McCaig and Taylor found that although the structural differentiation ended in the UK in 1992, this was the beginning of informal differentiation because of, as they describe it: 'the need to establish a place in the crowded market and encourage diversity' (McCaig & Taylor 2015, p. 3). Previously, much was implicit in the statement that a degree was from a university or from a polytechnic., The Further and Higher Education Act eroded the division between higher education institutions and made more distinctive the differences between further and higher education (West 2006). Thus even if the idea of a degree was not necessarily changed dramatically by the ending of the binary divide, the previous defining characteristics of institutional status on which degrees could be judged were made implicit. Instead there was a focus on increasing provision as a means to enhance social mobility and reliance on the market to ensure that all students who could achieve entry to higher education had a place. This market-orientated consumer view of higher education overlooked structural barriers to access to higher education (Gareth Williams 1997).

There is evidence that the previous difference between the old and new university had since 1992 been transformed into a quality indicator and helped publicly codify what Leathwood describes as the 'extended hierarchy of universities' (Leathwood 2004, p. 41). That the major structural change of the binary system did not end the hierarchy of institutions but instead made their status in the market more coded is critical for this research, particularly in light of a crucial impetus of the change, which introduced a market into the system.

The hierarchy of universities was entrenched in this period by public questioning of the quality of the new institutions, which reverberated for years. There are elements of what Morley in her UK-based book on quality regimes in higher education calls 'a moral panic over standards and "dumbing down"' (2003, p. 130). The journalist Brockes, writing in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, quoted the well-known UK-based historian David Starkey saying: 'There are Mickey Mouse students for whom Mickey Mouse courses are quite appropriate' (Brockes 2003, n.p.). Cranmer agreed that employers are concerned 'about the "quality" of graduates from certain universities and departments' (2006, p. 173), citing Brown and Scase's (1994) study of employers of graduates. The idea of a degree for employability was introduced in this period, with the exhortation to the universities to do more to provide transferable skills such as leadership skills, interpersonal skills and creativity being linked to concerns about quality of graduates from polytechnics (Brown & Scase 1994).

The reorientation of policy and higher education practice towards the competitive nature of the graduate labour market heralded the sedimentation within the public view of the idea that a degree was for graduate employment, that degrees helped individuals to get ahead, and access to degrees was important for individual success in the labour market. However, the idea of success within the labour market was assessed in Elias's report in 1999, based on 1995 graduates' outcomes: it proposes that degrees should be looked at not by their absolute employment rate (e.g. working in any job) but at their employment rate in terms of traditional graduate or new graduate roles (Elias 1999). Clearly, evidence was emerging that had begun to question the discourse of graduate employment and pave the way for a discourse of employability.

The drivers of policy in the early 1990s were heavily influenced by the neo-liberal free-market ideology of Thatcher. This was continued by John Major, the succeeding Conservative Prime Minister, and in effect meant universities were selling undergraduate degrees (Gareth Williams 1997) to the government, which acted as a proxy customer: a full market was not in effect due to the student number controls (Marginson 2013). This, combined with an increase in numbers, was impacted on by the structural changes in the system: in the period, the age participation ratio<sup>5</sup> more than doubled between 1988 to 1992 from 15% to 33% (McCaig & Taylor 2015, p. 2), with some institutions increasing their enrolments '25% per year for 2 or 3 years' (Gareth Williams 1997, p. 281).

The ending of the binary divide did not silence the discourse topic of the idea of a degree as marked by the institution's prestige and the introduction of calls for more transferable skills, understood as employability, did not end the focus on graduate employment aspects of the degree. In this period the discourse of the idea of a degree was composed of more components than before, adding to the complexity of student choice, while structurally the ending of the binary divide seemed in theory to simplify higher education. Table 12 below summarises the discourse topics identified during this period.

*Table 12 Macro discourse topics identified in 1992 eventemete period*

	<b>Traditional liberal</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
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<sup>5</sup> That is, the proportion of 18 year olds in higher education.

<b><i>Macro discourse topics identified in 1992 eventemente period</i></b>	Silenced	Minority	Majority	Emerging
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## **1998 academic year eventemente**

The year preceding the introduction of student fees for domestic students in 1998 marked a change in the macro discourse of the idea of a degree, and coincided with the election of a Labour government for the first time in 18 years. The eventemente identified for this period was the introduction of direct payment of fees for undergraduate domestic students in the academic year beginning in September 1998. The introduction of fees was justified in 1997 by the publication of *The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*, known as the Dearing report after the Chairman of the Inquiry, Ronald Dearing (1997). By the later 1990s there had been a significant expansion of higher education in the UK. Barr and Crawford (2005) write that in 1995 the same number of people were gaining degrees as those who took A Levels in the mid-1960s. The increase in student numbers caused the overall cost to spiral for the government (Gareth Williams 1997), therefore in 1994-95 there was a total freeze on the number of student places that the government would fund and the Dearing report (1997) was commissioned to seek recommendations about what to do about funding university teaching.

The higher education system led by the old universities was seen to be ‘a traditional elite system under pressure’ (Bligh 1999, p. 146) and the funding implications of expansion were great. Taking on extra students at the marginal funding rate was the only route for universities to increase funding and mitigate the loss of the block grant which had been being reduced steadily throughout the term of the Conservative government: which was in power until May 1997 (Gareth Williams 1997). The institutions continued to be funded on the basis of their student numbers, but the increase over the capped places was only at a marginal cost – each extra student gained the institution more funding, but this did not cover the full cost of teaching. As Benn and Fieldhouse explain, the policy-makers had become consumed by ‘bureaucratic notions of “widening the market” where students become consumers’ (Benn & Fieldhouse 1996, p. 31). This rhetoric and how it is linked to the introduction of fees is explained by Williams:

... many of the benefits of higher education accrue to private individuals, so criteria of both efficiency and equity are served if students or their families make some contribution toward the costs of obtaining the benefits (Gareth Williams 1997, p. 179).

This rhetoric also explained why fees were justified in terms of widening participation in order to fund an expansion on a large scale which could not be achieved without a significant financial restructuring of the system, which was still elite in nature. Dearing’s report investigating expansion within the context of funding was completed in 1997 but held back by the Conservatives to avert the announcement of fees before the 1997 election. After the Conservatives lost the election, the report was released in the early months of the new Labour government. Social justice as a driver for higher education change had been a key part of the 1997 Labour Party manifesto. However, this social justice agenda was framed in terms of its benefits to the economy, focused on graduate employment and itself marked a significant change in the idea of a degree and the shift in responsibility to individuals, institutions and employers for the benefits of higher education (Warren & Webb 2007). Boden and Nedeva (2010) identify the Dearing report (1997) as a key turning point in the understanding of employability as a core purpose of higher education: quoting a UK government report where a key line is ‘enhancing the employability of graduates is a key task for higher education’ (Harvey 2000, p. 40).

The requirement to pay fees was a central part of the wide-ranging report, a practical manifestation of the neo-liberal idea that individuals should pay for the improvement in skills gained from higher education. The government would lend students the amount of their fees, and they would

pay it back after graduation, when they earned a stipulated salary. Within the Dearing report there was also a significant concern for widening participation and fair access to higher education: the family income of individual students was means-tested and some students did not pay. Mayhew, Deer and Dua's work (2004), previously referred to in this chapter relating to their analysis of the Robbins report (1963), identified the purposes of higher education and also looked at the Dearing report (1997) finding the purposes to be:

(a) to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to highest potential levels throughout life, so that they can grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment; (b) to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels; (c) to play a major part in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society (Mayhew, Deer and Dua 2004, p. 58).

Dearing's report, even though its first purpose, as expressed by Mayhew, Deer and Dua (2004) invokes the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes, was seen to formally mark the end of the traditionalist period that Amis (1969) and colleagues tried to defend in the *Black Papers* of the 1970s (Boden & Nedeva 2010; Arora 2015). The Dearing report's core discourse was that higher education was a part of the economy and should serve it, and be served by it. The 1997 report, while upholding the importance of the idea of a degree for graduate employment, also made the shift to the concept of employability by including a requirement for universities to focus on skills development for the workplace, not just transition to work; it was a significant turning point (Arora 2015).

From 1999 graduate employability became a new idea of an outcome of a degree and another requirement for the universities to discuss and provide for, which was to some extent measured through another idea of a degree, that of graduate employment, through graduate outcomes measurement (the survey Destination of Leavers from Higher Education [DLHE] was already in operation by 1997). The outcomes measure could now feed into the league tables and was often called the employability rate, confusing the two ideas which were both present in this period. As a result of increasing the numbers of people gaining private returns from higher education, as Coffield expresses it in his major research funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council's Learning Society project, 'the value of educational credentials begins to fall as a higher percentage of each generation achieves graduate status, when there is no corresponding expansion of elite jobs' (Coffield 1999, p. 485). In other words the importance of markers of prestige for the idea of a degree and significant differentiation of institutions was present in this period.

Concern was voiced about quality, as institutions were having to teach more students for less money: the emergence of a newly massified system provoked what Jenny Williams called a 'moral panic around standards' (Jenny Williams 1997b, p. 31), which added to calls for a review of higher education. There was a concern for widening participation and fair access, a theme which developed over the term of the new Labour government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, though tempered by quality regimes and market policies (Doyle 2003). The relationship of the idea of a degree and a labour market became at this point ambiguous, with contradictory ideas at play in public discourse – that a degree is essential for a professional career, and also that it has less impact than before on professional success (Moreau & Leathwood 2006). That is, the idea of a degree is being conceptualised as being essential, although also being worth less.

Within this period there was a linking of the idea of a degree for graduate employment and employability in public policy statements, but there were measures put in place to make universities focus activities to promote graduate employment. Those measures were spoken of at times as for employability but there was no incentivising of increased focus on transferable skills by the universities. The discourses of prestige and employability to a certain extent clashed as standards were brought into question and degree quality in some institutions was questioned (Brookes 2003). Despite this the traditional liberal idea of a degree did not re-emerge in this period in the macro discourse. Below Table 13 summarises the discourse topics identified in this period:

Table 13 Macro discourse topics identified in 1998 eventemente period

	<b>Traditional liberal</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 1998 eventemente period</b>	Silenced	Minority	Majority	Minority

## 2006 academic year eventemente

The next change in the macro discourse of the idea of a degree during the long wave of change in the process of massification of higher education was the idea of differential value of the degree depending on the institution, enhancing the importance of the discourse topic of prestige. This thesis argues that the ability of the system to charge substantially different fees depending on the institution was a loosening of regulation of the system to create a quasi-market (Marginson 2013), based on perceived market value for courses. Therefore, the eventemente for this period was the introduction of 'variable fees' for the 2006 UK academic year, which had been approved in the 2004 Higher Education Act. This period was also one in which the higher education arrangements of the home countries of the UK began to vary significantly, with Scotland and Wales pursuing different policies with their devolved governments. The introduction of variable fees was a significant move in the marketisation of higher education (Brown & Carasso 2013) and an indicator of the manifestation of market forces entering English higher education (Bowl & Hughes 2016).

The Leitch report, commissioned by the UK Government to look into the skills needs of the knowledge economy, was published in 2006 (Leitch 2006). Boden and Nedeva comment that this report was commissioned with the understanding that employability was a core purpose of university education, and therefore it was unsurprising the Leitch report recommended employers became a stronger voice in the skills agenda: and Boden and Nedeva identify this shift as a change from the traditional independence of the universities. (2010)

By 2003, the Labour government had recognised that massification could not be paid for by state funds alone (Boden & Nedeva 2010) and though the government expected that institutions should commit to widening participation, it must be within the context of charging increased fees (Ansell 2008). For the 2006 entry year, the Higher Education Act in 2004 allowed institutions to charge up to £3000 per student per year if their proposals to support widening access had been approved by the new director of the Office of Fair Access (Bowl & Hughes 2016).

There were still controls on student admission numbers by the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], and on the amount of fees that could be charged, and this is the first eventemente in which the policies impacted only English higher education institutions directly. The fees were to be regulated by the newly created Office of Fair Access [OFFA], and these were conditional on efforts being made by the higher education institutions to support widening participation, linking marketisation of higher education with a desire for an equitable system (Bowl & Hughes 2016).

When the prospectuses for 2006 were written there was a lack of certainty about how much each institution would charge and how the institutions would position themselves (Knight 2006). There was an intention in the charging of fees that institutions would set their fee level and the differences would enable the hierarchy of universities to be codified. The fact that almost all institutions charged the maximum (Bowl & Hughes 2016) meant this effort by government to expose the hierarchy of universities by having degrees' prestige signalled by the price point of the fees was not successful. The sector-wide increase in fees did not provide a new signalling of hierarchy of institutions nor remove the inherent competition.

Despite fees being set at the maximum amount of £3000 for the 2006 academic year by all but a handful of institutions,<sup>6</sup> there are clear indications that in this period intense marketisation increased the diversity of English institutions and especially increased the strength of the macro discourse invoking of the idea of a degree as a symbol of prestige conferred by its awarding institution. A contemporary international study found that the UK had the largest diversity of provision (Huisman, Meek & Wood 2007), bolstered by the introduction of the complicated process of opening up the application for Degree Awarding Powers to any organisation or company which could meet the standards, not just existing universities.

The discourses of a global market were influential in a British policy context in the later years of Blair's Labour government, 1997-2008 (Shattock 2008). The concept of education in the period was to bolster 'The Learning Society' within what was called 'Third Way' politics, influenced both by Anthony Giddens' sociology and by neo-liberalism: this could be described as marketisation with some attention paid to social justice. There was no real consensus about the core idea of a degree, although education for traditional liberal education was silenced in policy drivers and the idea of a degree for both graduate employment and employability was in evidence (Brown, Hesketh & Williams 2003). The links to widening participation and the importance of social justice as a function of higher education are described by Archer, Hutchings and Ross:

Widening participation was thus widely regarded as potentially dangerous, creating an overcrowded graduate market. This was closely linked to hierarchy of universities, through which working-class students risked being the first to get squeezed out in a competitive graduate job market (Archer, Hutchings & Ross 2003, p. 134).

The concerns about the competitive job market for graduates came alongside funding concerns driven by the massification of higher education. The complexity of the forces at work in higher education were being driven on the one hand by a desire for less government control and on the other hand by a need to activate and promote a regulation of the higher education sector by the use of market-orientated systems (Berman et al. 2007), as also identified by Hemsley Brown and Oplatka:

In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in the governance of the HE system throughout the world and marketisation policies and market-type mechanisms have been introduced in countries previously characterised by a high degree of government involvement (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006, p. 317).

Boden and Nedeva identify a change from the traditional independence of the universities and suggest the UK government was seeking to 'supplant the labour market as the mediating mechanism in the tripartite relationship between universities, students and employers' (Boden & Nedeva 2010, p. 44). The desire by the government was also complicated by the devolution arrangements where the UK government only had authority over fee-setting in England but had a purview over quality and the statistical agencies that covered the whole of the UK. This engagement of the government in the market led to discussion about the consumable product of higher education, the undergraduate degree.

The idea of a degree was most often discussed during this period in terms of its purpose for graduate employment, but the idea of a degree to develop employability and as a signal of prestige was also present. The idea of a degree as being related to its awarding institution was enhanced in this period and became linked with the graduate employment discourse, with an increased focus on graduate employment by elite firms who concentrated on the most prestigious institutions (Morley 2007). Table 14 below summarises the discourse topics identified in this eventemente.

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<sup>6</sup> Anglia Ruskin University and a few of the university colleges did not charge £3000.

Table 14 Macro discourse topics identified in 2006 eventemente period

	<b>Traditional liberal</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 2006 eventemente period</b>	Silenced	Majority	Majority	Minority

## **2013 academic year eventemente**

The macro discourse of the idea of a degree is judged by this thesis to have changed in 2012 with the changing of funding arrangements for students the 2013 academic year to give the highest achieving students a higher capacity for movement through the system, so emphasising the extra worth of a degree in signalling the value of those who are the highest achievers. As there is a policy assumption that the highest achieving students attend the most elite institutions this can be cast as a strengthening of the idea of a degree as marked by the prestige of its institution.

The eventemente of this period was the suite of measures in July 2012 which, as well as raising fees, introduced a new focus on standardised performance indicators of higher education institutions. The policy that was identified as the key change in this period was the introduction of a market-driven system delivered by the uncapping of places for high-achieving students for the beginning of the UK 2013 academic year, which indicated an intensification of marketisation of the UK higher education system (Brown 2011). Bowl and Hughes (2016) write that in this period, in the UK the tensions around exposing higher education to market forces were heightened, following the election of a Coalition Tory/Liberal Democrat government in 2010. The Global Financial Crisis in 2008 was responded to with austerity measures by the Coalition government, exerting pressure on all public funding and adding focus to the importance of graduate employment. The financial crisis exacerbated tensions related to the massification of higher education and generated questions about the purpose of degrees, and so created an increased focus on the idea of a degree for graduate employment and employability (Boden & Nedeva 2010).

The reforms for the 2013 academic year to embed a market-driven system were underpinned by three key reforms to the structure of the sector (Brown 2011). The first, widening the market to enhance competition, was aimed at making it easier for private providers to enter and engage in the market by strengthening the incentives for teaching-only institutions (Brown 2011). The second was changing the structure of the student fee into what Bekhrandia and Massy (2009) describe as a voucher system where institutions received almost all the fee through the individual student's contribution, heightening the position of the student as consumer (Naidoo & Whitty 2014). The third structural change was described by Brown as aiming 'to introduce fee competition between providers, on top of competition on quality and availability' (Brown 2011, p. 18). This vying in terms of quality was fostered by making students with the highest grades the prized consumer in the market, for whom the government's controls on numbers did not apply – that is, applicants who were high-achieving (those with A Level grades AAB or above) no longer had to be counted towards the HEFCE-implemented number controls (McCaig & Taylor 2015), which benefited the elite institutions, reinforcing the differentiation in the system.

A key tenet of the Coalition government's market-driven system for English higher education was the concept of the student as a consumer, and Naidoo and Whitty suggest that this desire to unsettle the power relations in the higher education sector is 'an attempt to maintain quality as higher education moves from an elite to mass system' (Naidoo & Whitty 2014, p. 213). The focus on quality explains the government's aim to support the market competition by providing more information for prospective students (McCaig & Taylor 2015). The development of the UK's UNISTATS website was

brought together as Key Information Sets (Diamond et al. 2014). Data on the student experience from the National Student Survey included entry requirements and course completion data: and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education [DLHE] data included survey information on graduate destinations of leavers, including salaries and industries (Brown 2011). The aim of the quantitative indicators was to enhance competition and enable students to compare options and, as Naidoo had explained previously, such statistics 'operate as powerful market currencies' (Naidoo 2008, p. 17).

The provision of statistics in this manner constructed the idea of a degree in a specific way, invoking the prestige of the institution as a key item of importance in the student choice process. The compilation of statistics reinforced the hierarchy and competition of the system and confirmed the importance of hierarchy to the UK higher education sector (Brennan & Shah 2011). As the rate of graduate employment was included prominently in the published statistics, as measured by the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education [DLHE] survey carried out by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the importance of graduate employment to the idea of a degree was consolidated.

Concerns persisted about graduate employment (Brown, Hesketh & Williams 2003) but they are not easy to identify in the statistics, as the DLHE data use rates of employment which do not indicate if the level of education is required for the role (Elias & Purcell 2004). This concern about graduate employment was because there was a perception that some institutions' graduates were not achieving employment in graduate-level roles, and this was supported by graduate underemployment surveys (Purcell & Elias 2013). The concept of underemployment impacted on the idea of a degree for graduate employment and implied that undergraduate degrees had been devalued by massification, a concern that is indicated by ministerial statements relating to enhanced quality regimes (Johnson 2015).

The Coalition government's rhetoric in these policy documents (Johnson 2015) suggested that education was mere training for work, and rejected the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes. The logic of this idea of a degree for graduate employment also weighs non-attendance at university as an option to be considered (Burke 2013). There was policy concentration on the idea of a degree for graduate employment (Brown 2013), whereas employability itself was less prominent as a discourse topic in this period. The focus of the government towards quantitative means to measure performance causes the concept of employability's intangible product to have limited impact, as there are no readily available metrics for employability (Tymon 2011).

Stevenson (2010) describes a striking addition to the discourse on higher education when he reports that in the UK there is a strong influence of an individualist, competitive discourse. The individualist competitive discourse relating to students was entrenched by the freedom of movement that students with the highest A-Level points had within the system. Although widening participation was part of the debate since the introduction of variable fees in the 2006 academic year, the 2013 reforms re-conceptualised these efforts towards widening participation in terms of consumer rights (Naidoo & Whitty 2014) and reframed higher education away from original requirements for equity for all. Along with the structural alignment of the higher education sector, as now fundamentally marketised, a competitive environment was created for both institutions and prospective students. These moves have implications for the equity of the system and means that there are barriers to entry and implications for graduates as Tomlinson warns: 'Mass HE may therefore be perpetuating the types of structural inequalities it was intended to alleviate' (Tomlinson 2012, p. 411).

This period can be cast as one in which in the UK during an austerity period there was an increased focus on the output of higher education being of great value. This meant that the importance of a degree paying for itself was enhanced and the graduate employment discourse of the idea of a degree was central. However, there was also an increased focus on supporting the elite institutions through a number of policy means including the uncapping of places and the then proposed Teaching Excellence Framework which was introduced to gather data on quality of teaching in universities

(Johnson 2013). The pursuit of higher education for traditional liberal reasons was not much voiced in macro discourses, but nor was the idea of employability in terms of generic skills. Table 15 overleaf summarises the discourse topics identified in this eventemente.

*Table 15 Macro discourses identified in the 2013 eventemente period*

	<b>Traditional liberal</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 2013 eventemente period</b>	Silenced	Minority	Majority	Silenced

## Summary

The analysis in this chapter has shown that the macro discourses in all six periods included the idea of graduate employment. The continuing idea of the system being hierarchical and marked by prestige at the top end, is present, but the idea of a degree’s purpose being for personal development for its own sake (the traditional liberal idea) was only present (in policy narratives) in the 1977 period and the 1998 period. The concept of employability emerged in the eventemente for 1992 and only lasted as a macro discourse until 2006.

The chapter analysed the historical development of the idea of a degree to answer the first research question of this thesis: what were the macro discourse changes to the idea of a degree over the period of massification? The analysis of the eventementes has confirmed that the four discourses of the idea of a degree have been employed at the macro level across the period 1976-2013, albeit variously. Below are the six academic years which have been identified as eventementes which were influenced by the changes in the discourse of the preceding period. These years of entry are judged to have been changing points in the development of the macro discourse of the idea of a degree that impact domestic undergraduate student choice relating to higher education in the UK (and after 1999 England). As discussed in the Research Design chapter, these periods have been identified through the first stage of analysis of this thesis in order to identify years of change in the macro discourse of the idea of a degree, years from which it was decided to collect prospectuses to analyse are displayed in Table 16 below:

*Table 16 Data collection year*

<b>Academic year of entry</b>
1977
1984
1992
1998
2006
2013

This chapter’s analysis will be helpful in the close reading of the prospectuses and justifies the analysis coding using these four discourses as a basis for discussion. It is important also to reconfirm the equity and social justice driver that commenced this research enquiry. Although this research does not investigate what could make prospectuses easier to understand, it is hoped that this work unpicking the discourse and, as MacLure suggests, ‘trying to unravel it a bit – open them up to further questioning’ (MacLure 2003, p. 9) is helpful in order to support and develop the close reading of the texts which institutions produce.

## **6. Data Selection and Preparation**

The work in this chapter explains the preparation for the analysis of the prospectuses which were published in the selected time periods of the institutions identified in the previous Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter. This chapter on Data Selection and Preparation forms the third step of Reisigl and Wodak's discourse-historical approach, which is the 'selection and preparation of data for specific analyses' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 99). Although this is normally undertaken earlier, Reisigl and Wodak (2009) make clear that the order of the stages are not mandatory and the data should be worked on recursively as suits the research questions. Therefore, as the first research question required historical analysis in order to work up the discourse topics it is more appropriate to explain the data selection at this point in the thesis. In the description of their approach the authors argue for data to be downsized according to specified criteria which align with the research questions, and this criterion can include 'frequency, representativity, (proto)typicality, intertextual or interdiscursive scope/influence, salience, uniqueness and redundancy.' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 99).

This chapter is divided into two sections to explain the process of selection and preparation of prospectuses for analysis. The first section describes the prospectuses in material terms. It explains how the specific data for analysis was selected, since the prospectuses are large documents and their study needed further selection and refinement. The second section describes the process undertaken to prepare for the analysis, and explains the building of the code book.

### **Process of data collection**

This subsection gives a brief account of the process of data collection, based on the criteria applied as discussed in the Research Design chapter. Having established which time periods and institutions to include for the analysis of the development of the historical idea of degree in the cases studies selected, the process of how to collect these texts for analysis was commenced. An initial understanding that the prospectuses for institutions would be kept by the British Library in the UK proved to be false, since the British Library collections were found to be incomplete.

Therefore, the four institutions in the study were individually contacted and the documents requested. This was usually from their institutional archive, although it was necessary at times to deal with the publicity department or library. Prospectuses are written the year before their title date, for that year of academic entry. The year after the period's established eventement was chosen in all cases as it was felt important to pick the first available prospectus after the macro discourse change occurred.

There were problems with the collection of some of the texts, as it was often a single copy that was being dealt with and staff at the institutions were unwilling to part with it, so photocopying and scanning had to be undertaken: payment for this was often required. All the prospectuses at the institutions were available apart from the 1992 academic year of entry for University of East London. The previous incarnation of the Polytechnic of East London produced the prospectus but it was not archived in their records nor in the University of East London's records. Therefore, only 23 out of the requested 24 prospectuses were received. The next section details the specific selection and preparation of the data for analysis.

### **Process of data selection**

Procedurally, dealing with each prospectus necessitated a selection system for each text, as some were hundreds of pages long with much repetition. In order to select the specific data for analysis within the prospectuses I revisited the few sources identified in the Literature Review chapter which had worked with prospectuses or other pre-entry materials as the core data. Although five sources

(Askehave 2007; Fairclough 1993; Graham 2013; Saichaie & Morpew 2014; Symes 1996) used the prospectuses and other entry materials as primary data sources only Askehave (2007), Graham (2013) and Saichaie and Morpew (2014) addressed the structure of the prospectuses.

Three pieces of research referenced (Askehave 2007; Graham 2013; Saichaie & Morpew 2014) also studied the use of online materials displayed on institutional websites alongside paper materials. This was due to the recent time periods their research involved, but as discussed in the Research Design chapter section on selection of genres for this research, the online materials produced in the later time periods with which this study is concerned were not used as data sources in this study.

Looking at prospectuses from four different countries, Askehave (2007) identifies a number of sections that all the prospectuses have and some additional sections that only some contain. From this structural analysis Askehave (2007) argues there is an established genre of prospectuses. Her research looking at varied sections in texts within her study to provide common ground was useful for this thesis in determining which sections of the prospectuses to conduct a close reading of, and the choices made draw on Askehave's (2007) structure.

In Saichaie and Morpew's (2014) study, key areas of interest were identified to consider their own research problem. Saichaie and Morpew (2014) linked their areas of interest to the sections within online areas of the materials they review in their twelve US-based institutions. Saichaie and Morpew (2014) drew on content analysis methodology within a conceptual framework of discourse analysis based on Fairclough (1993; 2001), and visual elements drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), in their study of online course pre-entry materials. Although this thesis does not specifically concentrate on the visual aspects of prospectuses, as the prospectuses are designed and typeset as well as containing text, the research by Saichaie and Morpew (2014) provided an important example of how the visual and written words constitute the texts.

Graham's (2013) research was based in the UK and specifically analysed the prospectuses of six institutions to investigate how discourses of widening participation were being expressed in institutions of different status. She looked at two different time periods, 2007 and 2011, and used online materials in her second period of data collection. Graham (2013) did not map the specific sections of the prospectuses being analysed; she looked at the sections in functional terms, using a series of questions applied to each prospectus, treating them as a whole document for examination. However, Graham (2013) specifically examines the Welcome sections of each of the prospectuses for the messages relating to widening participation contained in them.

The varied approaches by these previous studies on prospectuses support this thesis's selection of which parts of the prospectus would be closely studied in the research analysis. The sources provide the structure for the design of the selection of the specific content to be analysed in the prospectus, with Askehave's (2007) work showing that specific sections can be looked at successfully to draw conclusions, Graham's (2013) work indicating that the introductory or welcome sections are particularly important for reading the discourses within a prospectus, and Saichaie and Morpew (2014) demonstrating that to read marketing materials the visual representations as well as words used are important.

Having reviewed the collected prospectuses, I drew on previous research to review the materiality of the prospectuses and assess what data could be selected and analysed for the research. This high-level initial analysis concentrated the selection of data on three key sections:

1. **Introductory pages** – these contained in all cases a welcome address, sometimes in the form of a letter to prospective students from the vice-chancellor, provost or director of the institution. In some instances, the introduction section explained how the prospectus was to be used.

2. **Course pages** – in all prospectuses there was a key section that catalogued and listed the courses and provided course descriptions and detail. Often split into subsections, these pages were of key interest as part of this research enquiry.
3. **Careers development services information** – in many there were specific sections or areas that detailed support for career development available as part of the institutions' provision – this was also information of key interest.

The areas selected are those to be used for the analysis and have been identified on the basis that they are likely to be the areas in which the most meaningful tracing of the messages about the idea of a degree can be found. This is supported by the previous research on prospectuses, and an initial scan of the data.

## **Description of prospectuses collected**

With regard to the materiality of the prospectuses collected, it is important for discourse analysts to be aware of the format and presentation of their materials. Nevertheless, the approach to the research problem in this study does not activate visual means of discourse analysis. The holdings of the data were in various formats in the institutions, as detailed in the Research Design chapter, and were sent to me in a variety of forms and states of completeness. Some actual artefacts were sent by generous archivists at the institutions because there were multiple copies. Some were full colour scanned versions, others were photocopied black and white versions. In summary, the original presentation of materials varied between institutions and also within institutional collections, and the artefacts I had to analyse also varied. The documents had varied practices in terms of use of page numbers and in several prospectuses these did not include the course listings pages. Therefore, as these prospectuses are being treated as data items, page numbers are not used in the Detailed Case Studies chapter.

The prospectuses confirmed the initial idea drawing on Fairclough's (1993) work on prospectuses that the structure of these type of documents does not necessarily change substantially over time. The structures of the prospectus and its sections of introduction, course description and external information were the same from 1977 onwards, including the 2013 set. There were only two prospectuses out of four institutions in the study for 2013, and for those institutions that was the last academic entry year a full prospectus was produced and printed. Innovations in print-on-demand services and digital publishing technology meant from the 2014 academic entry year (the year after the last collection of prospectuses for this research) some institutions (Kingston and University College London) sent printed information only about the courses in which students had indicated online they had interest. The documents had been digitised and students were not expected to access the whole document of courses at the institution.

In terms of the materiality of the prospectus documents, another shift which relates to modernisation is linked to digitisation and printing technology. The prospectuses produced in 1976 were black and white with photos clustered together to save costs in old-style printing. In the 1980s a couple of prospectuses included colour, with it often involved in highlighting information. By 1993, the prospectuses were all full colour publications, with many photos and design embellishments, though they were still mostly typeset in standard ways: that is like a text book for reading. In 1998, however, they had become like glossy magazines, with pull-quotes of information, sidebar texts and heavily designed layouts. This pattern, with some design updating, continued in the 2006 prospectuses. The major structural content addition in all the prospectuses in the early 2000s was an increase of 'customer' testimonials, first person accounts from students on how the institution aided them in their career; this trend has increased in the final stage of the prospectuses analysed in the study, with full pages being taken up by student testimonials.

The next stage of development of the materiality of the prospectuses in the 2010s was where the texts became inter-textual with websites, with links to extra web-based content for prospective

students to browse. There was also an increase in material on the general content and the external reputation of the institution in the 2013 prospectuses, with quotes from comparison sites such as the Good Universities Guide, a third party proprietary education guide to tertiary study.

### **Code book development**

This section explains the methods used to analyse the significant amount of data collected in a systematic way. It was important to interrogate the texts in a manner that ensured consistency. In this aim this thesis was informed by Saldana's (2012) work on coding in qualitative research. The decision to use a code book approach was made with an understanding that coding is analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and, following Saldaña (2012), that coding can be itself used as a heuristic.

As shown earlier in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, a macro review of discourses at play was undertaken in order to answer research question one. The key methodological implications of this analysis were discussed in the Research Design chapter, and as indicated before, this thesis works recursively by considering the macro discourses identified about the idea of a degree in answer to research question one, with research question two which analyses the micro by looking at the texts of the institutions over the same period.

The work of this thesis to an extent originates and develops the historical analysis that Fairclough undertook in 1993 looking at versions of the Lancaster University prospectuses, which he analysed as one set of texts among several to trace the marketisation of universities in the preceding period. This thesis, however, has looked at a broader sample of texts over a longer period. To keep the sample manageable and meaningful when working with 23 long texts of up to 200 pages each the challenge was to keep the data collection and analysis orderly. A key concern was to follow a bounded path in coding so as not to generate more material than could be managed meaningfully, and to ensure the coding and analysis was systematic enough to be possible to be followed and repeated by another researcher.

In Fairclough's later work (2001), to ensure that stages are recorded evenly between the cases a code book of data instruments is recommended, and in the book, *Language and Power* (2001), Fairclough proposes a model for such a code book. Though the analytical framework of this thesis is based on Fairclough's 1993 work, the code book from his later work in 2001 has been a useful inclusion to support the analysis of the empirical findings.

A code book approach was decided on to standardise the reading and coding of the 23 texts against set questions that could be then analysed together. The creation of the code book represented a significant step as the initial scan of prospectuses had clarified that not only do the prospectuses not necessarily change readily, but they also have much content which is somewhat repetitive.

In identifying categories of recording for the code book, the nature of the research being undertaken needed to be borne in mind. Fairclough (2001) argues that in this process the analyst's 'focus is constantly alternating between what is there in the text and the discourse type(s) which the text is drawing on' (Fairclough 2001, p. 92). Fairclough (2001) suggests ten model questions for critical discourse analysis which can be adapted and added to depending on the research being undertaken. These questions fall into three types: that of vocabulary related questions, grammar questions and textual structures (Fairclough 2001). The code book that was used in this thesis was designed to specifically help answer research question two which asks what are the messages about the idea of a degree that are traceable in the institutional texts, how these have changed over time and are related to the vocabulary used in the prospectuses. The type of analysis being undertaken here is a close reading (MacLure 2003) and follows Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach in order to generate understandings about how the idea of a degree discourse operates. Therefore, the thesis has used only some of Fairclough's (2001) questions, which were adapted for the purposes of

the code book to only look at the vocabulary of the texts. His grammatical and textual structure questions were omitted from this thesis's code book due to the nature of the research questions of this thesis.

The narrow focus in terms of critical discourse analysis is justified due to the nature of the research problem. The research problem seeks to answer questions about how the meso level practices of institutions are impacted by macro discourses about the idea of a degree. The micro level prospectus texts are used to generate understandings about the institutional messaging and are not in and of themselves part of the specific focus of the two research questions. Therefore the specific discourse analysis of grammar and sentence structure was not relevant to the research questions.

Reisigl and Wodak (2009) advise that mapping the main topics of the discourse is a worthwhile task, as is reflecting on how the discourses interact with and relate to other discourses and draw out interdiscursive links. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) advise that after the topics of a specific discourse have been identified, a following stage is to examine the 'specific, context-dependent linguistic realizations (as tokens)' (2009, p. 93). In order to do this they suggest analysis to pose questions about how the objects of the analysis are 'named and referred to linguistically' (2009, p. 93). For Reisigl and Wodak (2009) this is the sixth step in their model for discourse-historical analysis 'Qualitative pilot analysis (allows testing categories and first assumptions as well as the further specification of assumptions)' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 96). Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) intention for this step is to improve the analytical instruments to be applied to data, and to do this they suggest concentration on testing the categories used in the analysis.

As discussed earlier, Reisigl and Wodak (2009) suggest that their approach is oriented in a recursive manner, moving between the different levels of context of texts, macro and micro. This idea of moving between the macro levels of discourse, and then looking at the micro instances of discourse within texts was particularly suitable in this research. The first research question's identification of macro discourse topics was therefore used in the development of the code book to trace the messages in the prospectus texts themselves.

The markers, as this thesis calls Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) 'tokens' of the different constructs of the idea of a degree, are in general easy to differentiate, but there are at times challenging overlap points, notably between the discourse terms graduate employment and employability. Markers denote vocabularies that can be read as invoking the discourses of the specific topics of the idea of a degree. Understanding that discourse boundaries are fluid (Reisigl & Wodak 2009) and may change over time (Fairclough 1993) meant that the decision was taken to record excerpts of texts and keywords that could relate to these markers of the discourse. It was decided not to only collect keywords or excerpts that mapped to the list of vocabulary markers identified, but also to record broader categories of coding which could then be analysed and mapped to the discourse topics. The categories of coding that were drawn from the list of vocabulary markers of the discourse topics of the idea of a degree are presented here in Table 17:

*Table 17 Discourse coding*

<b>Discourse topic coding records</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context – Positioning of university regarding employment</li> <li>• Context – Projection of the university regarding student body</li> <li>• Keyword – Aspirational or academic language or innovative</li> <li>• Keyword – Careers markers</li> <li>• Keyword – Demographic markers</li> <li>• Keyword – Involvement in industry or economy</li> <li>• Keyword – Involvement of third parties in text – e.g. professional bodies or employers</li> <li>• Keyword – Skills</li> <li>• Keyword – Vocational markers</li> </ul>

The previous chapter's discussion has explored the development, variety and interrelations of the discourses employed in the period, and these features are summarised in the following table, so they can all be seen together and it can be seen how the complete list shown in Table 18 below reveals distinctions between topics and connections:

*Table 18 Markers of discourse topics of the idea of a degree*

<b>Discourse topic</b>	<b>Markers of the discourse topic</b>
Traditional liberal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning</li> <li>• Broad degrees</li> <li>• Broaden and deepen students' understanding</li> <li>• Scholarly distinction</li> <li>• Powers of the mind</li> <li>• Transformative nature of education</li> </ul>
Prestige	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distinguished</li> <li>• Established</li> <li>• Esteemed</li> <li>• Historic</li> <li>• Old, traditional, well-established</li> <li>• Recognition by external sources (e.g. academic elites, Royal Academy or industry and commerce)</li> <li>• Well-known</li> <li>• World-renowned</li> </ul>
Graduate employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree-related job</li> <li>• Graduate employment</li> <li>• Graduate outcome</li> <li>• Industry entry</li> <li>• Job</li> <li>• Pathway</li> <li>• Practical training</li> <li>• Related employment</li> <li>• Successful transition</li> </ul>
Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employable</li> <li>• Equipped</li> <li>• Problem-solving</li> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Skills-acquisition</li> <li>• Useful skills</li> <li>• Well-prepared</li> <li>• Work-ready</li> </ul>

### **Coding the institutions**

With the code book structure in place and a system established for coding, the initial coding was started as the first step of the analysis of prospectuses began. However, the work proceeded with an understanding, following Saldaña, that 'coding is only the initial step toward an even more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation' (Saldaña 2012, p. 8). The coding was done systematically, one institution at a time, and was undertaken from the earliest prospectus in an institution to the most recent. This chronological approach impacted on the data collection as the progression of themes could also be recorded, either, where appropriate, in the code book itself, or in the methodological notes. This was significant in itself as it indicated that each institution's prospectuses were more like each other through time than like those from other institutions in the same period – e.g. UEL 1977 and

RHUL 1977 were more different than Kingston 1977 and Kingston 1984. Although not a major finding of any note, this does reinforce work on an understanding of institutional culture over time, as explained by Greenbank (2007).

The initial data collection spanned 24 institutional prospectuses (four institutions over six periods), with 23 received (as noted earlier, UEL 1992 was not available). After collecting the data and storing extracts against the categories listed in table 17 I then went through the categories allocating markers as listed in table 18. Further, I analysed data by open coding to assess if further constructions arose from the literature. For the coding to be undertaken meaningfully, the thematic coding aim was to produce data to analyse.

To that end each prospectus was analysed against the thematic categories and comments and excerpts of text recorded. In some instances, there were no comments or excerpts appropriate, so these were left blank. The temptation in compiling the data was to try to and fill each category with text, but through the trial and error of the first few attempts this was eventually resisted as not appropriate. In this coding, as often in qualitative research, it is critical to acknowledge the coder's presence, and my reading of the institutions' language was obviously influenced by my own positioning as a researcher, which I have discussed in the Introduction chapter.

To make clear my position in orientation to the texts, I reflected on my connection with each set of prospectuses, following the exhortation (Reisigl & Wodak 2009) to reveal the analyst's place within the reading of the discourse. This position meant that for me the reading of the prospectuses through various periods felt very different, dependent on my personal and professional experiences of the higher education sector in the UK. A personal connection to the texts was unavoidable, and I hoped that through use of the code book I could look at the data without connecting too deeply with the institution.

The next stage was working with the NVivo 'Framework Matrix' to locate patterns and themes using the different filters available in NVivo. I was able to look at the coding of prospectuses at one institution across the periods or all institutions in one time period together. I was also able to look at all the items coded against specific keywords in any given time period. Looking at the keywords in a specific time period was particularly helpful for generating understandings of the messages within the prospectuses.

During this process it was important to keep analytically honest, as Miles and Huberman (1994) put it, and not elaborate too far from the sources. The attainment of rigour in the research was aided by the secondary historical policy analysis work undertaken in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter. The structure chosen to organise and present the case studies is as follows. Detailed case study analyses of a set of prospectuses for a specified time period as a whole presented and illustrated with evidence from specific instructions. This enabled an interrogation of the data for the constructions of the idea of a degree which arose from the literature: with attention to the discourses invoked. In the next chapter, detailed case studies analyses are presented of a set of prospectuses for a specified time period as a whole, but indicating which institution is being cited. As page numbers were not available for all prospectus and were in some cases available for only part of the document these have been omitted but the section is noted, which would enable finding of the cited material.

Each period is divided by the chosen eventemes and the first part of the subsections will summarise briefly the policy context of the historical period before looking at how the idea of a degree can be traced through the institutional prospectus documents of the period, with the discourse topics providing thematic division to the narratives.

The next chapter presents the final stage of the analysis, the close reading of the prospectuses as the Detailed Case Studies chapter.

## **7. Detailed Case Studies**

The work that is undertaken in this Detailed Case Studies chapter, investigating the practice of the prospectuses, focuses on investigating the textual features of the prospectuses in a thematic way to produce detailed case studies of the periods of time selected. This analysis chapter works through the data selected, using methods detailed in the chapters on research design and shaping the first stage of the analysis relating to the idea of a degree. This approach aligns with Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach and is at a level of detail manageable for a study which addresses the research problem over many periods and using several diachronic case studies of institutions.

The writing of this chapter was significantly influenced by Reisigl and Wodak's sixth step which aims to produce detailed case studies, which acknowledges the influence of the macro context on the production of the prospectuses and 'interprets the different results within the social, historical and political contexts of the discourses(s) under consideration' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 118).

In other words, the detailed historical case studies in this chapter are framed by the time periods under study, defined by the eventements identified as key moments of change in the long wave of change (Goodson 2005). This chapter views each period holistically, in order to address the second research question which seeks to generate understandings by looking at the messages in the prospectuses.

For each period a dominant discourse across the sector is suggested, although in some periods this is not possible as there is differentiation between the institutions. Each of the four identified topics of the discourse of the idea of a degree is discussed in the close reading of the prospectuses and it is indicated in the summary section whether the discourse is dominant, minority, emerging or silenced. These categories are defined in the sections and are used for ease of understanding the nature and development of the messages.

This is a pivotal chapter of the thesis: it takes the findings of the first research question and uses the identified macro discourses of the idea of a degree identified in the literature in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter and applies these readings to the texts. The macro discourse moments and topics are here used as the contexts for a critical discourse analysis reading of the texts as part of the exploration for the analysis of the second research question, which seeks to see whether the messages traced in the prospectuses have been influenced by the macro discourses. The data realised in this chapter will be considered in the Discussion chapter which follows.

### **1977 academic year entry – A close reading of prospectuses**

The first year selected for data collection in this research was of prospectuses published for the 1977 UK academic year of entry. The eventemente that prompted the collection of data in this period was the shift in the macro discourses about the idea of a degree to conceptualise them as including argument for the human capital purposes of education.

Whether and how the changes over time are realised at the institutional level is the second research question for this thesis. In order to discuss this, this chapter examines the prospectus documents to trace the messages present, and this tracing also draws on the analysis of the research literature which identified four discourses of the idea of a degree. This section dealing with the 1977 prospectuses published after the 1976 eventemente looks at texts from the selected four UK case study institutions. It will first discuss the study of the texts using the thesis's code book, which looked at the linguistic features of the texts to provide information about how the messages are being delivered. The second part of the section examines each of the four discourses established in this thesis as part of the discourse of the idea of a degree. In subsections discussing traces of each

discourse topic, based on the keywords identified and more general reading of the prospectuses, the chapter reports tracings of instances of the idea of a degree discourses through the prospectuses.

### **Description of the 1977 prospectuses**

The 1977 prospectuses are all printed and are bound as paperback books. All have some kind of graphic on the front page; only Kingston has a photo on the front which is of books with subject names on them (1977). The prospectus covers are coloured, but the internal pages are mostly black and white and they are all typeset as books, word-based with no graphics, and have lists of information rather than tables of data. There are in each prospectus a few photo sections which show in all cases campus images and pictures, presumably of students in university facilities.

The language use in the course details sections is voiced actively and describes what will be undertaken during the degree: the later prospectuses concentrate on a future employment linked period. The first person plural is deployed in describing the universities through the use of 'we', and many of the texts also use the second person, 'you'. Whether the pronoun 'you' is used or not the course descriptions are speaking directly to the student.

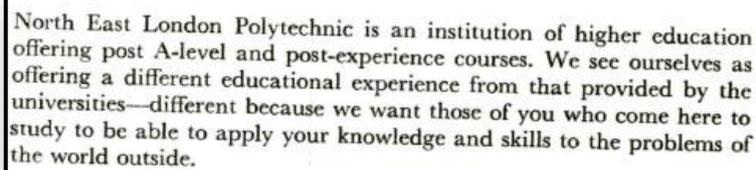
The language used, in terms of register of complexity and vocabularies drawn on, differs between institutions. UCL uses complex language deriving from academic discourses and complex sentence constructions. Both Kingston (1977) and UEL (1977) use the active voice in the main in their texts and a few highly technical insider higher education usages, such as 'research active' (RHUL 1977).<sup>7</sup> RHUL uses less complex language than UCL and is written in a less formal tone.

The institutions are present in the text, frequently using the first person plural as if speaking for their staff rather than the depersonalised and institutionalised third person singular. For example in UEL's prospectus the personal pronouns 'we' and 'you' are used throughout the introduction sections of the prospectus. The use of pronouns in the text, particularly 'we' and 'you', can be seen across all of the institutions, but this is often only in particular sections. The introduction section, including welcome information and admissions sections, as well as the careers information section which is usually found amongst other student support sections, are voiced informally in this way. Other parts of the prospectuses, such as the course listings providing detailed course descriptions, are formal and descriptive.

Within the texts at times there are explicit mentions of the people the institutions expect to be reading them. The institutions demonstrate their different missions by very different approaches in signalling through the texts what students are seeking in a degree – or what the institution's strength might be, differentiating their offer explicitly, and often identifying their audiences. UEL's prospectus (when the institution was called NELP as outlined in the case study sketches earlier in the prospectus) included a paragraph specifically on this, as shown in Figure 1 overleaf:

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<sup>7</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, most prospectuses have no page numbers so these have not been used in referencing of the data.



North East London Polytechnic is an institution of higher education offering post A-level and post-experience courses. We see ourselves as offering a different educational experience from that provided by the universities—different because we want those of you who come here to study to be able to apply your knowledge and skills to the problems of the world outside.

Figure 1 'What is NELP?' (UEL 1977)

Institutional identity and purpose is made explicit in some prospectuses, such as UEL's, which as shown in the figure above describes its institution as 'offering a different kind of educational experience provided by the universities' (UEL 1977). UEL's prospectus also states that it 'looks at the applicant as a whole' (1977), indicating its focus is broader than solely academic achievements, and perhaps making an early commitment to what would be later recognised as widening participation and fair access.

This is also seen in the prospectus from Kingston where 'together with younger students, the polytechnic welcomes older men and women on its degree and diploma courses' (Kingston 1977). This self-identification is aided by the structural differentiation in the system and the prospectuses, which reference the dissimilarities between polytechnics and universities.

The UEL prospectus also makes clear there are outside influences which impact substantially on the polytechnic, e.g. 'in the long term the Department for Education has directed ...' (UEL 1977). Such an acknowledgement of connection to the world of funding and admission of lack of complete control and power is unusual and is indicative of the different structural positioning of the then Polytechnic of East London, which did not have its own degree awarding powers.

The prospectuses of the four UK case study institutions show a diversity within the system, which would enable a prospective student or any reader to establish easily the differentiated missions of the institutions. That is, the prospectuses of this era seem to be aimed at specific audience segments.

### **Traditional liberal**

In this set of prospectuses the message about the degree being a traditional liberal form of education appeared strongly. There is to some extent a differentiation between the institutions' prospectuses in relation to the expression of the traditional liberal idea of a degree: RHUL suggests students are looking for a broad degree at a 'friendly' institution (1977); UCL speaks to students looking for deep academic learning in their first degree:

The scholarly distinction of the College, in a diversity of research activity that can be equalled in few other places, is reflected in the nature of its degree courses (UCL 1977).

As well as indicating the high value of the degree by citing the institution's position in terms of research, this excerpt also demonstrates a strong traditional liberal view of the idea of a degree drawing on the scholarly model. However, the traditional liberal model is seen right across the sector in all four types of institution in the prospectuses of this period. In the introduction to the UEL prospectus, a degree is described as for students to 'develop the general powers of the mind' (1977). This evocation of the traditional liberal idea of a degree conjures for a modern reader images of the personal development gained from elite education. However, as the excerpt introduces the prospectus of UEL, at the time a polytechnic with vocationally oriented degrees, this statement also indicates the widespread acceptance of the traditional liberal concept of a degree during this time period. The Kingston prospectus also mentions that the courses offer a broad education, but says that this broad education is 'directed at specific careers' (Kingston 1977). There is tension shown in the use by

Kingston of the term broad education juxtaposed with an affirmation of the importance of graduate employment.

The discourse of a traditional liberal education is also visible in the 1977 RHUL prospectus, and their document conjures images of a highly elite provision, differentiated from vocational degrees. Remarkably, the excerpt is not from a description of a classics degree, but from the narrative 'Welcome' section of the prospectus which outlines the purposes of all the RHUL courses:

... to broaden and deepen students' understanding of the language, literature and society of the Greek and Roman world; to prepare them for the University's examination but to do so in such a way that they will wish to continue their studies after graduating, whether vocationally or for pleasure (RHUL 1977).

What is particularly notable about this text is its description of the idea of a degree that RHUL offers. The institution in this extract does not seem to be employing language which engages with Callaghan's recently announced skills discourse (Callaghan 1976): instead RHUL is deploying hyper-elite cultural capital, that is, the view of a university as a protected area that could give distinction and distinguish people. This view is an invoking of the traditional liberal idea of education that associates the degree as having a social insurance or social ascent feature, as Bereday explains, writing at a contemporary time (Bereday 1973). It is this discourse of the traditional liberal idea of a degree that RHUL's text seems to be draw on, suggesting degree-holders will differentiate themselves as arbiters of good taste, based on what they have directly learnt or acquired through acculturation gained during their degrees.

UCL's prospectus also engages with the self-discovery and transformative nature of education:

We are one of the few universities in the country to have been founded by men who had a vision of our nation's future and who believed that it could be changed for the better if more people were educated (UCL 1977).

This language roots UCL's teaching within a traditional context of education, with a broad idea of the educated populace being a civilising force. However, it also links with a modern social justice agenda through UCL's nineteenth-century origins, and references its setting up as the beginning of higher education free of religion. The civilising nature of the university is connected to the traditional liberal idea of education and reinforces the elite nature of UCL. The discourse is identifiable in UCL's prospectus as something with which students can truly engage and aligns with aspects of the traditional liberal idea of a degree relating to the broadening of the mind. The discourse is that the degree is primarily for one's own interest, and that expansion of the mind, enjoyment or other purposes are in secondary place. This is in contrast to the degree being depicted as a stage in achieving the outcome of a professional future.

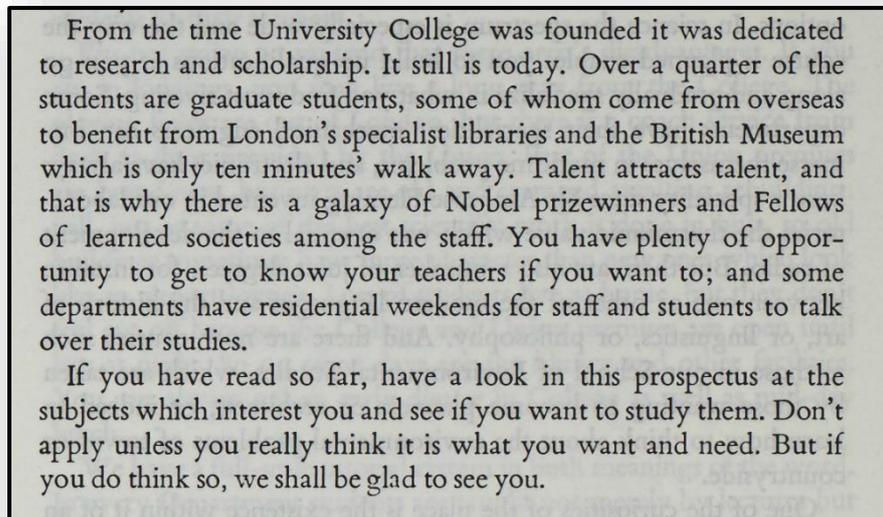
RHUL's prospectus is marketing itself with the understanding that the reader will be choosing between institutions, with its inter-textual references to unnamed other institutions. This early use of marketing by using competitive discourse is euphemised by an emphasis on a friendly atmosphere, saying 'in contrast with what happens in many larger universities, one can look around and put names to most of the faces' (RHUL 1977). This emphasis on the camaraderie on the campus where students would be taking their degrees identifies the focus in RHUL's prospectus as not being on post-graduation outcomes but on the student's positive experience during the degree. The discourse does not align with themes of employability or graduate employment or the post-degree impact, but evokes old ideas of a degree which focus on the actual experience. Referencing the Oxbridge colleges, Cardinal Newman, writing in the 1850s in on the *Idea and Nature of University Education*, explicitly mentions friendliness as a key part of the importance of higher education institutions (Newman 2010). This could also be read as expressing the elite nature of the education offered at RHUL, smallness and friendliness implying ideas of exclusiveness, as opposed to a mass experience which could be seen as

anonymous – with RHUL establishing this exclusivity as a positive feature that distinguishes the institution.

The traditional liberal idea of a degree is traceable in all four prospectuses in the period, but it seems to play out differently between the old universities, where it is of considerable focus in both introduction sections and in the course detail pages, while in the new universities it is only invoked in the general introduction sections.

### **Prestige**

The prestige of an institution's degree is traceable in the case study prospectuses examined here, and although there is evidence each institution was signalling its prestige, the signalling devices are different in the old and new sectors. UCL's 1977 prospectus invokes the prestige of their degrees by presenting the institution's lineage to the readers of their prospectus via their foundation history, with its established values. This was seen in the previous subsection on the traditional liberal idea of a degree, which included reference to UCL's 'scholarly distinction' of competition, itself invoking the prestige of the degree. Reflecting this strong position in the market, and a lack of need to persuade prospective students, is commentary such as 'Talent attracts talent' (UCL 1977). UCL's confident text implies that deciding on the institution and deciding on the subject/s are two different processes, and that after reading the quite detailed descriptions students will decide which subjects to apply for as shown in Figure 2 below:



From the time University College was founded it was dedicated to research and scholarship. It still is today. Over a quarter of the students are graduate students, some of whom come from overseas to benefit from London's specialist libraries and the British Museum which is only ten minutes' walk away. Talent attracts talent, and that is why there is a galaxy of Nobel prizewinners and Fellows of learned societies among the staff. You have plenty of opportunity to get to know your teachers if you want to; and some departments have residential weekends for staff and students to talk over their studies.

If you have read so far, have a look in this prospectus at the subjects which interest you and see if you want to study them. Don't apply unless you really think it is what you want and need. But if you do think so, we shall be glad to see you.

*Figure 2 'Talent attracts talent' (UCL 1977)*

The last paragraph of the above excerpt, juxtaposed against the significant claims of the previous paragraph, shows how UCL invokes the idea of a degree as signalled by prestige. The casualness of the comment, not simply inciting students to study with them, is markedly confident. Such possible lack of concern about competition is a position revealing UCL's supremacy in London and one that indicates that at this point in time the prospectus is not influenced by marketing practices. No engagement with competition indicates an apparent guilelessness about UCL's statement – suggesting students should not come there if this institution is not 'what you want or need' (UCL 1977). UCL's equanimity whether students apply or not represents the institution as above the need to market its degrees, a process which might seem distasteful and also even diminish the nature of its degrees. Here, courses are portrayed as attractive enough by their very status, reinforcing the idea of a degree as marked by

the prestige of the hierarchical status of the university. The wording in the prospectus assumes that prospective students have already chosen UCL as their institution, as part of their aspirations.

Within the prospectuses several institutions mention long-distant traditions. Kingston, not at this stage a university, speaks of its campus being sited at the home of the Saxon Kings, so establishing the importance of Kingston – though it is actually a medium-sized town and effectively a London suburb. This anchoring of its institution in a location that had past prestige aims to establish credentials of the institution within a public discourse that antiquity itself links to being elite. Heritage is also invoked at RHUL where the institution describes the history of the college and describes its disciplinary expertise in such terms as ‘music has played an important role in the life of the College ever since its foundation’ (RHUL 1977).

Kingston’s text also invokes elements of prestige related to the modernity and up-to-date nature of their institution. There are links to discourses of graduate employment as well as prestige in Kingston’s prospectus’s emphasis on their degrees as belonging to a polytechnic with solid links to industry and a modern focus: an inverting of the prestige, a manoeuvre which can be seen as a counter discourse.

UEL’s prospectus mentions the funding and oversight body of the Council for National Academic Awards [CNAA] as being ‘the largest degree awarding body in the country’ (UEL 1977) – which has marketing overtones – and is invoked to suggest how positive it is to have a degree from such a large institution. The mention by UEL of the CNAA may seek to enhance UEL’s status through its link with major institutions, invoking the idea of a degree as a prestige marked by its association. No other institution makes this kind of mention, not even Kingston, which operated under the same system, with CNAA-awarding its degrees.

The idea of a degree as marked by its awarding institution’s prestige is invoked in this set of the prospectuses in both the two old universities by drawing on the history of their institution. This aligns with Bourdieu’s idea of distinction and the benefits of ‘fidelity of a lineage’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 24). Kingston’s inclusion of its history indicates an attempt to establish that, aligning with Davies, Williams and Webb’s view that in the UK, the new is not as valued as the old (Davies, Williams & Webb 1997). The two new university case studies mention external reference points as markers of prestige of their institution – Kingston University refers to its links with industry and UEL to the validation of its degrees by the awarding authority. Therefore, although all four case study sites use the idea of a degree as marked by prestige, they do this in ways that are markedly different, depending on the nature of the institution.

### **Graduate employment**

The discourse of graduate employment was identified in all the prospectuses, but more strongly in the new universities. In the two new university prospectuses there is an increase compared to the old universities in vocationalism which explicitly differentiates and elevates degree level study above on-the-job training. Reinforcing the purposiveness of the degree and its use in graduate employment, UEL in the prospectus’s introduction explains that the Polytechnic links higher education and industry (UEL 1977).

Kingston’s phrase, a broad education, could be seen to link to the traditional liberal idea of a degree but its prospectus differentiates its degree offer as providing a broad education which is aware of the needs of industry:

... most courses provide a broad education, but it is a characteristic of them that they are directed towards specific careers, and staff are aware of the needs of the various professions and industries in which the students may expect to work (Kingston 1977).

In this extract Kingston indicates that the academic knowledge of the degrees is easily transformable to vocational, performable knowledge for 'specific careers', and by mentioning their academics as engaged with the professions and industries, it raises the idea of a degree for graduate employment. This phrasing by Kingston aligns with the discourses of the eventements put forward by Callaghan (1976) in the Ruskin speech about education engaging with industry. In suggesting the professional and industrial knowledge of their staff as valuable for the provision of a broad education, the idea of a degree is shown to link traditional liberal education with graduate employment.

There is no indication of a formal organised university link with industries, but Kingston makes mention of practical training in all their degrees and speaks of their courses preparing students for membership of professional bodies. There is no text about industry involvement in curricular design in the Kingston prospectus, apart from entry into professional associations gained from degrees, and so the inference relates more to staff (presumably academic) competence and understanding of the professions and industries. This trust in academics for future connections could be seen as a restrained assurance to students that their degrees will prepare them for work.

If Kingston's text associates the idea of a degree with preparing students for moving into industry or a profession, this approach is more clearly present in the UEL prospectus, where discourse relating higher education to graduate employment attempts to explain clearly what a degree is:

... a graduate qualification is nationally accepted as the mark of completion of a person's formal education and provides entry to all those areas of work in which a considerable measure of responsibility can be achieved (UEL 1977).

By conceptualising the degree as an entry to work of a kind involving a 'considerable measure of responsibility' (UEL 1977), the prospectus deploys the idea of a degree along the lines of Warmington's work in 2003 which quotes a participant as thinking of a degree as 'offering the means to escape the cul-de-sac of "little jobs"' (Warmington 2003, p. 99).

In addition to the work-related elements, UEL in its career section explains a degree can deliver 'a satisfying and rewarding future' (UEL 1977), apparently giving broader meaning to the vocational focus of much of the rest of the prospectus. The phrase advocates the future benefits of a degree, which by the use of the word 'rewarding' links with the discourse of the degree in connection with employment, but also the traditional liberal idea of a degree. The future focus, in concentrating on the student's later benefits, is unusual against the other prospectuses of 1977, which focus on the benefits of study experience in the degree.

The promotion of industry links in the polytechnic case studies continues in the course details sections, where UEL describes the involvement of professional bodies in several degrees, even including them among those who control the final exams and all rights of practice (UEL 1977). This idea of a degree as an entrée into a specific education with professional associations or bodies is also linked to post-graduation employment, through the mention of professional association membership and external recognition of the degree. This establishes the strength of the institutions for the reader of the prospectus, by showing their connections with other known organisations, boosting the institutions' status in the market by connection with other reputable bodies. As the external bodies are professional, the idea of a degree for graduate employment is endorsed.

In the old university sector, RHUL deploys its association with industry by implying its superior status position within the higher education hierarchy and invoking the prestige of its degree. RHUL's text describes teaching associates in departments who are also working in industry – such as the Thames Water Authority for Engineering disciplines – suggesting that academic research expertise is being shared with industry. In UCL's prospectus, external engagements of the institution with industry and professional associations are described as being at arms' length. The importance of graduate

employment to the idea of a degree is lessened by treating the graduate application for membership of a professional body as an external process which students could take up, as seen in this extract:

Examination qualifications entitling the holder to corporate membership of a professional body, or to appointments in comparable fields of public service, may be approved by the University as either complete or partial exempting qualifications from both General and Course Requirements (UCL 1977).

UCL's use of language here indicates that as degrees are awarded by UCL, it maintains ownership of the degrees, and UCL's prospectus does not here seem to be invoking the professional bodies' or industry groups' status to enhance UCL's image. In structuring the language relating to professional associations in that way, UCL seems to differentiate the core purpose of their degrees from graduate employment. That the UCL degrees are implied to be held above the level of industry could relate to the alleged threat of pollution from vocational courses, as described by Amis (1969). The differentiation is marked between UEL, which employs respectful language about industry, and UCL, which in the above extract exerts its higher status over industry.

The prospectuses other than UEL's include sections about their career services in their introductions – UCL and RHUL mention the umbrella University of London careers service to which students of both institutions have access and so sets careers as outside the degree program itself. This inclusion indicates the discourse of degree leading to employment is traceable in the institutions, if not a core focus.

Kingston's prospectus details their 'Careers Advisory Service', noting it is available for access at any point during students' courses, but adds 'it is an extension of the work that is carried out in Schools by designated staff members' (Kingston 1977). These staff members are not detailed in the prospectus, and it is therefore not clear whether they are careers specialists or, continuing the theme seen elsewhere in the prospectus, a suggestion that staff routinely have connections to relevant industry and professional bodies.

UEL, as noted above, is more focused than Kingston on graduate employment and so this discourse of the idea of a degree is traceable throughout in the two non-university higher education institutions that became universities in 1992. Noting that UCL and RHUL do mention industry and the careers of graduates, but in a secondary way, indicates that similar emphasis of the importance of graduate employment cannot be found in the prospectuses of the two old universities. This can be seen as establishing the differentiation within the sector at this point between polytechnics and universities. An original purpose of the construction of the polytechnics was to engage with industry and the professions (Ansell 2008), and the employment element in the construct of the idea of a degree is present here.

### **Employability**

Although Callaghan referred in the Ruskin speech (1976) to skills, it seems likely that he meant technical skills arising from disciplines and not generic skills. In the prospectuses of this period there is only one mention of any of the employability discourse markers to be discussed below as emerging in later contexts. This is at Kingston where the understanding of their staff about the needs of professions and industry (Kingston 1977) seems linked to employability, though at some distance. As it seems to be focusing on the specific needs of professions and industry and not generic, transferable skills, this has not been seen as invoking the employability discourse, and there is judged to be a silence in the texts related to employability in this period.

## Summary

This section, which has undertaken a close reading of the prospectuses of 1977, concludes by summarising the analysis which used the code book of the thesis to trace the delivery of the messages and the messages about the idea of a degree themselves.

The prospectuses in this set differ from later prospectuses visually, stylistically and in their use of language. Further, the register and complexity of language in the prospectuses vary. The new universities' prospectuses are primarily written in plain language which can be easily understood whereas the old universities have complex, high-level language. Biber (2006) discusses the language of academic institutions as being at times hard for readers to understand without significant knowledge of the higher education system: the old universities display this coded language.

The institutions' prospectuses of this period are markedly different from each other in their approaches and their offers to students. The documents explicitly explain their differences, such as UEL's reference to itself as a non-traditional institution (1977) and UCL as having 'scholarly distinction' (UCL 1977). The institutions were explicit about the audiences that they were targeting. They offered significant information about what each course contained and how the institution operated, particularly in the new universities. This catered to what Moogan (1999) described as the perceived need by prospective students for accurate information in prospectuses relating to assessment tasks and readings. The prospectuses gave significant information to prospective students about what the course would include and involve. This made the prospectuses easy to 'read' as Gatfield, Baker and Graham (1999) discuss in their critique of later prospectuses.

The prospectuses of this period can be said to be artefacts of a pre-marketisation higher education system: they routinely, as Fairclough puts it in his study of marketisation, give 'information about what is provided on a take-it-or-leave-it basis' (Fairclough 1993, p. 156). Compared to modern prospectuses, the lack of linguistic persuasiveness in the mid-1970s prospectuses is indicative of a period before marketisation became hegemonic and globalised. The lack of commodification of the degrees and stress on the elements of study may in itself suggest a lack of examination of, even consciousness of, the idea of a degree.

The close reading of the prospectuses identifies that all case study institutions allude to the idea of a degree as 'broad education', which is seen as invoking the traditional liberal idea of a degree. This phrase seems a powerful keyword in this period: the wording is found in all four prospectuses, even though the degrees offered are dissimilar. The way the four institutions described the 'broad education' varies in depth. The UEL and Kingston texts make passing references to 'broad power of the mind' (UEL 1977) and degrees providing a 'broad education' respectively, but do not refer to this in the course specific descriptions. However, RHUL and UCL hark back to earlier times and their own history in the role of educating and civilising people. In the two universities at that time, the degrees were more academic whereas in the two new universities, then non-university institutions of HE, there were more explicitly vocational applied degrees as well as general degrees in specific disciplines. Therefore, the traditional liberal idea of a degree is understood to be the dominant discourse within the old universities and a minority discourse in the new universities.

The discourse of the idea of a degree as marked by the prestige of the awarding institution is a discourse that would be expected to be found in the more elite old universities. However, the idea of prestige of the degree is still important to trace in all the prospectuses and its role in the discourse of the idea of a degree is necessary to consider. As these texts are little marketised, the prestige of the institutions is not seen as a central focus. However, there are traces of prestige in the old universities and an unexpected use by UEL to invoke the prestige of their awarding body, the CNA, as the biggest awarding body of degrees. Apart from a passing engagement with the history of the area, Kingston in this period works with the notion of prestige in terms of its links to industry. These differences

suggest the signalling position of the institution hierarchy and prestige of the degrees is constructed differently in the two types of higher education institutions old and new.

All four case study institutions also contain references of varying frequency to the careers possible after completion, which has been read as referencing the idea of a degree for graduate employment. However, the strength of this focus of graduate employment discourse varies by type of institution. In the UEL and Kingston prospectus, the focus is mainly graduate employment oriented and on the value of what students undertake within the degrees. The course descriptions of the old universities infrequently mention graduate employment, while it is more often found in the course descriptions of the new universities. This may be because the new universities degrees are more vocationally oriented and titled. However, it should be noted that in none of the texts are the career trajectories of graduates systematically listed against each degrees. This section finds that graduate employment is the dominant discourse of the new universities and a minority discourse in the old universities.

The discourse of the idea of a degree for employability is little present in this set of prospectuses, only possibly traceable in one instance in Kingston’s (1977) prospectus, and is therefore considered to be an emerging discourse there – but the idea of employability is silenced in the other prospectuses.

The following Table 19 displays the different institutions and the traced discourses of the idea of a degree as discussed in this summary:

*Table 19 Discourse topics traced in 1977 prospectuses*

	<b>Traditional liberal purposes</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
University College London [UCL]	Dominant	Minority	Minority	Silenced
Royal Holloway, University of London [RHUL]	Dominant	Minority	Minority	Silenced
Kingston Polytechnic [Kingston]	Minority	Counter	Dominant	Emerging
North East London Polytechnic [UEL]	Minority	Minority	Dominant	Silenced

There is no clearly dominant topic of the discourse of the idea of a degree across all institutions, although the institutions are differentiated between the old and the new in terms of their respective dominant discourses of the traditional liberal idea of a degree, their ideas of prestige and also their treatment of the idea of a degree for graduate employment. The second research question, whether the messages that have been traced in these prospectuses have been impacted by changes of the macro discourse, is discussed in the following Discussion chapter, where the interaction of these traced messages with the macro discourses is analysed.

### **1984 academic year entry – A close reading of prospectuses**

The first research question of this thesis exploring the discourse-oriented historical analysis identified key shifts in the macro discourse of the idea of a degree by the 1980s. The eventemete that signalled this period of data collection was the shift away from an understanding of higher education being a public service towards higher education as a private good.

In the first subsection which follows, the prospectuses that were published for the UK academic entry for 1984 will be discussed, drawing on the linguistically oriented part of the thesis code book. The prospectuses' form and function is analysed to provide a background for the tracing of the messages of the idea of a degree. The second subsection traces each discourse identified as a topic of the discourse of the idea of a degree, in turn. The third subsection summarises this section's analysis.

### **Description of the 1984 prospectuses**

The prospectuses published in 1983 for academic year entry in 1984 were analysed to trace the messages of the idea of a degree. To provide a context for this tracing of messages, the materiality and features of the text are discussed here. The texts show more engagement than the previous set with prospective students' needs in student choice in that they are less descriptive of the institution. The texts were more targeted towards what a prospective student might want to know, and this indicates a discernibly heightened marketing focus.

Significant in this period are changes in the presentation of prospectuses. These changes can be traced at a visual presentation level: the UCL prospectus of 1984 includes many more photographs, and they are of happy, young, able-bodied, white students in halls of residence and common rooms, mainly undertaking what seem to be non-academic activities. The personalised visual cues are a critical part of the new document and the shift from study areas towards wider experience than learning is an important change, although both visualisations emphasise the time spent at university, not time after graduation. This contrasts with the more formally academic visual focus of the previous materials such as from UCL, which had fewer humans in them. The images in UCL's 1977 prospectuses depicted buildings, facilities such as classrooms, and imposing shots of the library with students only peripherally in the picture.

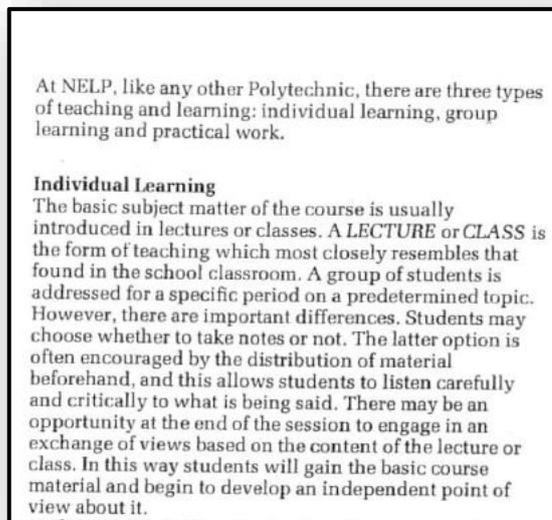
There are other modifications to be noted in the set of UK prospectuses from the early 1980s. Texts in all institutions demonstrate an increase in meta-information about the courses compared to the previous period, that is, information not about the course content, but about university processes. The detail is in some instances explicit, as in the RHUL prospectus where advice is provided about the annual returns about student enrolments that are needed to submit to the funding authorities by institution (RHUL 1984). RHUL (1984) also has a significant section about the many awards and scholarships that were available to students, taking up several pages in the prospectus. Showing the depth of information about study that prospectuses of this era held, the RHUL prospectus of 1984 has a bibliography of useful readings included in the introduction section. The prospectus of RHUL (1984) is very informative and it is the only one of this period and one of very few in any year to publish fees, in this case for international students.

Within the introductory texts there are signs of a more competitive tone and professional approach. In the UCL 1977 prospectus, the introduction appeared fairly informal and was written in the second person from the provost to the student; in the 1984 UCL text the introduction uses the same words as in 1977 but the verb forms change to the passive tense and also the student is removed as the addressee of the letter.

The Kingston prospectus of 1984 went further than in the previous prospectus in discussing who might apply. Within each of Kingston's course descriptions, there is text about who each course was aimed at. For example: 'the course is designed for mature entrants aged 30 or over' (1984) – while most prospectuses are written for full-time young entrants. Kingston seems to be responding to marketisation but in an unusual way. The Kingston prospectus for 1984 entry is the only one in the study of any year from any institution that includes paid advertising: on the second page there is an advert from NatWest, a large UK bank which markets strongly to students and advertises heavily in university publications for students who are already enrolled. This appears to be a trend that went nowhere: a modern view sees the whole publication itself as precious space to promote the

institution. In the previous set of prospectuses, Kingston used a fairly informal style of writing but in this edition the tone has become more formal. More complicated and abstract concepts are described in the course listing: in the course detail for the Applied Sciences degree, which would be thought to be practice orientated, the prospectus states 'the important interrelationships between traditional scientific areas of study are emphasized' (Kingston 1984).

There are also changes in UEL's text in this period. The prospectus from UEL is strong on clarity, laying out a table of information on the courses for comparison including admissions criteria, and calling itself a guide for applicants (UEL 1984). The informal tone throughout most sections using personal pronouns has been replaced. The institution no longer refers to itself as 'we', as in the 1977 prospectus, but as 'NELP' the acronym for North East London Polytechnic. However, there is still a focus in the prospectus on explaining how higher education works, and these sections are expanded in this period. UEL's prospectus gives under the heading 'Teaching and Learning' a glossary explaining terms, and provides easily understood examples. For example: 'a LECTURE or CLASS is the form of teaching which most closely resembles that found in the school classroom' (UEL 1984): the capitalisation is in the original as in Figure 3, below.



At NELP, like any other Polytechnic, there are three types of teaching and learning: individual learning, group learning and practical work.

**Individual Learning**

The basic subject matter of the course is usually introduced in lectures or classes. A LECTURE or CLASS is the form of teaching which most closely resembles that found in the school classroom. A group of students is addressed for a specific period on a predetermined topic. However, there are important differences. Students may choose whether to take notes or not. The latter option is often encouraged by the distribution of material beforehand, and this allows students to listen carefully and critically to what is being said. There may be an opportunity at the end of the session to engage in an exchange of views based on the content of the lecture or class. In this way students will gain the basic course material and begin to develop an independent point of view about it.

Figure 3 'Individual Learning' (UEL 1984)

That UEL's text includes this explanation indicates that the text may be aimed at prospective students without access to knowledge about how a university works. By describing how higher education functions, the text attempts to lessen the required cultural capital of prospective students to understand. Transparency such as this is a feature of the UEL prospectus. The clear explanations that follow in UEL's prospectus, including a definition of private study and of group learning would be valuable to break down barriers caused by lack of access to knowledge about how higher education functions.

Increased pressure to marketise is seen in Kingston's use of advertising within the prospectus (1984), but there are only limited instances of persuasive language. The prospectus documents do not at this point seem as if they are primarily marketing the institutions. That is, it is not apparent that the documents written in the early 1980s have marketing as a primary objective; they are written in the second person, talking to the prospective student through the text.

As in the discussion of the previous period, the next subsections present the instances of discourse topics of the idea of a degree that were traced within the set of the 1984 prospectuses.

## **Traditional liberal**

The idea of a degree as a traditional liberal pursuit was less traceable in all the institutions in this period, although it is still present in the old universities. However, whereas the details in the UCL course descriptions in the 1977 set of prospectuses were in depth, by 1984, examples of questions that are discussed in seminars from the courses are no longer present: only course information and growing reference to graduate outcomes. In UCL's prospectus the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes is still evident in the introduction and course details sections. There are detailed descriptions of the content of the degrees and scant reference is made to the graduate outcomes. The RHUL course details section stresses student learning by providing great detail about course delivery, even describing seminars and lectures. Space is afforded at RHUL to a process-orientated explanation of the internal aspects of the degree and what is being offered in the programmes is substantial, and distinct from today's prospectuses. The idea of a degree in this prospectus can be seen to be aligned with the traditional liberal idea: it is not focusing on the degree's transferability value after graduation. This concentration on what happens in the degree and what is studied is in significant contrast to the Kingston and UEL prospectuses, which focus on the pre-entry and post-degree period.

The traditional liberal idea of a degree engages with the notion of study for broadening the mind and in the prospectuses this marker of the traditional liberal idea of a degree was in the past often associated with text that stressed interest in learning for its own sake. Concentration on the contents of the degree and what is learned is a focus for RHUL and UCL, which have a clear emphasis on what is studied in a degree in this period: the prospectuses concentrate on the actual engagement with the student's learning at the institution. These two old universities differ from the two new universities in emphasising the three years of study at the institution. In terms of the idea of a degree, reading through the prospectuses of the two old universities one can perceive that they offer engagement with the idea of a degree as a learning experience and facilitating intake of information, which invokes the traditional liberal idea of a degree, whereas the new universities focus on what the degree can do in terms of graduate employment.

## **Prestige**

The notion of the degree as a marker of prestige drawn from the status of the institutions became more complicated than before in the 1984 eventement. As the UCL introduction is little changed from the 1977 prospectus, the vocabularies drawn on in the introduction still invoke the prestige of the institution in the same way. UCL's text describes the institution in terms of its importance and status and makes clear it is an elite institution. This period's RHUL prospectus has an increased feeling of being a marketing brochure, with romantic aerial photographs of the Founder's building that can hardly be needed for informative purposes. The photos entice students to come to this beautiful campus, see Figure 4 below:



*Figure 4 RHUL Founder's building (RHUL 1984)*

The increased emphasis on the visualised design of RHUL is a marked change, as in the previous period the only photos seemed unstaged and candid, but invoking prestige seems a purpose of this historicism.

That the front cover of UEL's prospectus of 1984 has changed since the previous prospectus, with the graphics of 1977 being replaced by a line drawing of a grand building of Victorian style, also suggests a claim to some prestige in the heritage of this institution. There are increased mentions in both UEL and Kingston of industry and more pictures that promote a counterweight to traditional views of prestige by showing in both prospectuses students in external workplace settings, linking the prestige of the degree to the links to industry and commerce. However, although Kingston maintains the strong industry linking of the previous prospectus it uses industry less strongly to invoke the prestige of the institution: it is more a functional link for specific degrees and is referenced less in the introduction section.

This set of prospectuses indicates that the marker of prestige began to be used more strongly by the elite old universities, but counter prestige markers which highlighted the value of industry are being suggested by the texts of the new universities.

### **Graduate employment**

The institutions in this set of prospectuses make significantly more claims about the usefulness of their degrees towards graduate employment than in the previous set of prospectuses. In Kingston's prospectus there are clear markers of the discourse of the idea of a degree being for graduate employment, and in the introductory pages the graduate roles of alumni are detailed, for the first time, using graduate job titles as indicators of the worth of the degree:

... former students now occupy senior positions in architecture, business, chemistry, design, engineering, geology, law, management, teaching and in many other fields (Kingston 1984).

The inclusion of a high level of detail in the introduction to the prospectus, talking about all the degrees, indicates that the institutional writers may have felt this overarching statement would be of interest and use to prospective students. Kingston's text foregrounds the graduate employment of their students and it moves away from the elite institutions' continuing concentration on the content of courses. Each course detail section in both the Kingston and UEL prospectuses mentions the graduate outcomes and jobs that graduates could move into. Within the then polytechnics, a marked orientation towards the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment is notable.

That it was felt necessary to provide detail at this level indicates Kingston's text signalling the usefulness of their degrees in future professions: it mentions many professional fields. This is in contrast to both UCL and RHUL's lack of emphasis on this point in their introductions. Those institutions concentrate elsewhere: on content of courses in UCL's prospectus and on the physical setting in RHUL's.

Within each listing of course details, the standardised entries in the Kingston prospectus focus on the entry to the degree by giving examples of what the course provides on completion, e.g.: 'aims to provide young people with a sound knowledge of the principles of chemistry and of their applications in the chemical and related industries' (1984). Referencing the course so closely with its industrial application indicates Kingston's commitment to relevance to industry. It is linked to its polytechnic identity, and also illustrates that it is engaged with the human capital development argument for education, particularly the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment. It also is a change and development of the more subtle links to industry within the 1977 Kingston prospectus.

For both Kingston and UEL, as polytechnic institutions, there is a noticeable hollowing out of the actual course detail provided in the text, by focusing on the entry requirements and exit outcomes of

students. There is a marked difference in these new university prospectuses from those published in the same period by the old universities of RHUL and UCL.

However, within the old universities' prospectuses there is during this period an increasing reference to external stakeholders, compared to the previous examples (although still relatively few compared to the 2013 academic year prospectuses). The professional bodies mentioned have varying engagement, depending on institution. UCL cites these in the same way as they did in the 1977 prospectuses, as external and possibly not helpful authorities: students 'are required to take the design and management courses to satisfy the professional institutions' (UCL 1984). This reserved language (e.g. 'required' and 'satisfy') is not visible in other prospectuses: it invokes the prestige of UCL's degrees, due to the institution's status in the hierarchy of universities. This invoking of prestige is similar to how it was deployed in the previous UCL prospectus analysed: with a sense of status superior to the professional associations. References to professional bodies are made in a hands-off manner, as if not a core part of the course but a possibly helpful addition, contrasting to the emphasis on validation and authority drawn by the polytechnics from the professional associations.

In this extract from the UCL's Faculty of Environmental Science courses description, such subtlety is visible in describing one course:

The management course is provided in the Faculty of Environmental Studies and brings students into working contact with architects and planners, two groups closely related to civil engineers in their professional lives (UCL 1984).

That the engagement with industry does not seem to be a core aim of the course, but is nevertheless referenced, is significant and amplifies the growing importance of graduate employment compared to the previous UCL prospectus. However, in this extract UCL constructs the professional identity of civil engineers on a wider basis than is detailed in the other institutions. In this text from an old university, the discourse of linking the idea of a degree to graduate employment can be identified, but is not central. There is a confidence in UCL's text about the standing of their qualifications, and indicates their status against the needs of professional associations, compared to the new universities.

RHUL's prospectus of this period does not have significant mention of graduate employment, and there is no systematic inclusion about work in the course descriptions. However, there are instances of markers which indicate the graduate employment discourse, inclusions of 'practical work' (RHUL 1984) and other details. RHUL's careers service entry for this year is quite long and states that the careers service is 'open at all times' (RHUL 1984), and it indicates the transition to graduate employment is seen as a pastoral rather than academic matter in this period.

Kingston emphasises its engagement with industry by listing the professional bodies in the early pages of the prospectus, and references to them appear through many course descriptors. Some excerpts are clear about the work-related importance of degrees: in the field of geology, a degree in the subject 'is the only recognized professional qualification' (1984). This is a strong invoking of the idea of a degree for graduate employment, but also an alternative indicator of prestige in the idea of a degree in that the status invoked by Kingston comes from industry.

The other polytechnic in the sample, UEL, highlights in each course the industry links and the specialised professionally oriented courses validated by professional associations. UEL's prospectus regularly states aims for their degrees and these sections within the course details had a very strong vocational orientation. Further, in UEL's prospectus, all courses have careers sections, with outcomes discussed in vocational terms: and professional association requirements tend to be spoken of reverently, for example the needs of the chartered accountancy associations are detailed in the course pages of accounting. The frequency of mentions of outcomes emphasises the importance of the idea of a degree as graduate employment. There is also inclusion of the longevity of the equivalent qualification, for example: 'the course's aim is to provide you with a long-term career in Fashion' (UEL

1984). This extract makes clear that the institution claims a degree is worthwhile and will deliver benefits on completion, as if it is aimed at non-traditional students to whom the case for taking a degree needs to be made.

Compared to Kingston's prospectus, UEL's text does not note in many course descriptions that UEL courses are validated by professional associations. Perhaps this content difference shows the different status of the two polytechnics – assuming UEL would mention their formal links with professional associations, if they had them. The UEL prospectus is firmly linked to industry in a wider sense, just as the Ruskin speech of 1976 sought to encourage, in that many if not the majority of its courses have some professional outcome in terms of language, if not actual links. This is most noticeable as all the visual representations of UEL's courses (notable also by having multi-age and visibly multi-cultural students) have industrial settings – e.g. engineering plants for the faculty of engineering and other matching of courses and industry settings. As in the previous prospectus of UEL, the links to industry are important enough for them to be frequently represented. This is replicated in Kingston's prospectus (1984), and may be due to the new universities' historical links with industry and the importance of graduate employment to the new universities. There is a marked differentiation between the pre-1992 (old) and post-1992 (new) institutions in the engagement with the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment.

### **Employability**

Within this period there was a macro discourse shift towards the individual responsibility noted in the macro discourse analysis in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, in this set of prospectuses the individual notion of employability is traced for the first time. The introduction to the UEL prospectus is generic and vague in its use of language and low on detail about the nature of the courses. However, at one point it describes its future graduates as being 'well-equipped' (1984), a new recognition of the importance of identifying the degree in the after-graduation period. The adjectival phrase 'well-equipped', used without a noun, works as a dangling modifier that does not specify what the graduates are equipped for, but it presumably is an early reference to general skills and the discourse of the idea of a degree as linked to employability. The lack of specific detail about what well-equipped graduates would be, and how they might reach this achievement, seems indicative of an increase in marketing language.

Through the 1980s, despite the different statuses in terms of degree prestige, the prospectuses contain little discussion of skills acquisition, whether course related or employability linked: the concept has not yet become part of the discourse of higher education materials. This is therefore an indication that none of the universities have yet engaged in detail with the discourse of the idea of a degree for employability in their prospectuses. There is mention in Kingston's 1984 prospectus's introduction of skills relating to a business course which will:

... equip potential executives with the skills necessary to make an immediate contribution to the organization which they join on completing the course (Kingston 1984).

This one example using skills-acquisition language (Brown & Scase 1994) as it is understood today (Holmes 2011), occurs in the industry-focused Kingston University within a business programme, whereas in contrast, many other references talk only of the holistic use of a degree.

There are no traces of the markers of the discourse of employability established in this thesis's code book in the prospectuses of the old universities at this point.

### **Summary**

This section summarises the analysis of the prospectuses published by the case study institutions in 1984. In this period of the early 1980s, efforts begin to be made in some of the prospectuses to

simplify the language and be understood by a wider audience, particularly in the future new universities' prospectuses, which even in 1977 explained clearly many of the concepts that are specific to higher education: the future new universities use a less coded account of the degree experience and provide more explicit explanations of the processes around a degree compared to the old universities. The higher-status old universities still concentrate on the content in a degree. They offer much information about degree content and what will happen during the degree, compared to the prospectuses of the last period of academic entry in this research, 2013.

Stylistic changes mean that reading the 1984 prospectuses seems much more formal: the institutions' texts seemed more like cold institutional knowledge (Ball & Vincent 1998). The de-personalisation of language to a more professional mode at UCL may in itself be indicative of an emergent commodification of the universities' product and a move to marketisation (Fairclough 1993), or in this case at least a retreat from an older more leisurely style. The persuasive language of university marketing seen in the later prospectuses is not yet present, and the emphasis of the document is still primarily informative, giving details to inform the student's choice, focusing on the area of study that would be undertaken.

UEL gives specific details relating to a wide range of student matters included within the prospectus. This extra information above and beyond the degree is mentioned in research by Briggs (2006) who finds that lower-status institutions focus their marketing on the added value they offer. The institutions of UCL and RHUL are still using an academic register of language. As described by Biber (2006), in the texts of these old universities there appears to be language which is culturally coded so that readers would need a significant understanding of higher education to grasp the meaning of their texts.

It is still very easy in this set of prospectuses to differentiate the institutions and identify the institutions' different audiences, which are explicitly mentioned in the introductions to the texts. Within these prospectuses, there is still a distinct difference between the elite approaches and the prospectuses of the new universities, which were at the time polytechnics. The segmented market that Hemsley Brown and Optlaka (2015) described was still explicit in this set of prospectuses. There is also acknowledgement within the texts that prospectuses are not the only source of information in the student choice-making process, with each institution inviting students to visit the campus on open days (Davies et al. 2010)

The messages of the idea of a degree in this set of prospectuses of 1984 year of entry have changed only a little since the previous set of prospectuses for the 1977 year. However, there are significant moves in traceable discourse topics. The traditional liberal idea of a degree in this set was only traceable using the code book categories in the old universities. They are not as present in the new universities as in the previous set. The old universities still had substantial traces of the traditional idea of learning in the introduction sections and course detail sections of the prospectuses. Although there were other discourses of the idea of a degree present, the traditional liberal idea of a degree is judged to be the dominant topic of the discourse within the old universities.

The idea of a degree as a marker of prestige based on the hierarchical status of the institution grew as a discourse topic in this set of prospectuses. The introduction of UCL's prospectus marks itself as an elite institution and references research prowess and external recognition. The other old university, RHUL, draws on less precise markers of prestige that appeal to middle-class 'taste markers' (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 1999), such as heritage of institution and enjoyment of the experience. Further, the highlighting of the physical attributes of RHUL in the campus location emphasises the history of the institution and the positive attribute of the heritage of the institution (Davies, Williams & Webb 1997). Within the 1984 prospectuses, prestige is seen to be a minority discourse within the old universities.

The new universities made little mention of their institutional status, perhaps as the marker of prestige is detrimental to them if judged based on a single hierarchy of institutions. Further, UEL has removed the references to the external powers that govern it. When in 1977, the prospectus mentioned both the CNA and the Department of Education's funding of specific courses, these mentions were judged to be invoking the idea of prestige in the previous set of prospectuses. However, within the texts of the new universities there is a traceable but also counter style invoking of the prestige gained from industry for the institutions. This was an appropriate marker, particularly given the structural position of the new universities, then still polytechnics, for whom industry links were an important marker of status. Within this thesis, the construction of the discourse topic was analysed in the earlier Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, which suggested that the marker of prestige is drawn from the hierarchy of the institutions' status. Therefore, although the future new universities seem to be using their industry links as a marker of prestige, it is a counter or alternative marker of prestige and has been denoted as such in the table on 1984 at the end of this section.

The markers of prestige in this set of prospectuses remain divided between the new universities which link to industry, and the value afforded the institution by its relevance to the workplace and the old universities which invoke their high status based on their heritage (RHUL) and elite status (UCL).

There was an increase in the mentions of the career trajectories of students after their degrees in all the texts. However, this is differentiated between the types of institutions. The future new universities invoke graduate employment throughout and as a central purpose, whereas for the old universities graduate employment is mentioned only in passing. The idea of a degree for graduate employment is judged to be a dominant theme in the new university prospectuses due to its appearance throughout each course listings, but only a minority theme in the old universities, even though it has grown in prominence since the 1977 prospectuses reviewed in this study.

The idea of a degree as a marker of employability is not a dominant topic of this set of prospectuses – the code book was used to check for markers related to skills against the established discourse topic of employability, word lists. There is a slight invoking of employability in UEL's prospectus in one instance and skills terms used in generic, non-disciplinary ways are occasionally evident in Kingston. Therefore, this discourse topic is judged to be a silence in the old universities and an emerging discourse in the new universities.

In the table following, each of the discourse topics identified as components of the idea of a degree is mapped against each institution and a judgement is made as to whether the topic is dominant, minority, silenced, emerging, or in one instance a counter discourse topic as shown in Table 20 below:

*Table 20 Discourse topics traced in 1984 prospectuses*

	<b>Traditional liberal purposes</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
University College London [UCL]	Dominant	Minority	Minority	Silenced
Royal Holloway, University of London [RHUL]	Dominant	Minority	Minority	Silenced
Kingston Polytechnic [Kingston]	Silenced	Counter	Dominant	Emerging
North East London Polytechnic [UEL]	Silenced	Counter	Dominant	Emerging

In its invoking different ideas of a degree, this set of prospectuses is segmented between the old and new universities. While for the old universities the traditional liberal idea of a degree is judged to be dominant, graduate employment is dominant for the new universities. As the idea of a degree for graduate employment also appears in the old universities, this is judged overall to be the dominant topic of the idea of a degree in this set of prospectuses.

Having sought to trace the progression from the previous period of collection of prospectuses and to analyse whether there were changes to the idea of a degree in these 1984 prospectuses, the next section of this chapter looks at the 1992 prospectuses.

### **1992 academic year entry – A close reading of prospectuses**

A significant change in the context in which the macro discourse of the idea of a degree operated occurred in 1992 when the government combined into one university system the two previously formally differentiated higher education systems (Hayton & Leathwood 2002).

The following section outlines the analysis of the marketing materials using the thesis's code book and makes suggestions about the dominant and the minority discourses and those that are silenced in the prospectuses published in the period in review.

#### **Description of the 1992 prospectuses**

Compared to the previous set of prospectuses of 1984, in the 1992 texts, the visual design of the prospectuses altered significantly. They look far less like information documents and more like marketing publications.

However, this was also a period of structural change in the sector which impacted on the data collected. The only prospectus in the whole set of twenty-four that was impossible to find was the 1992 University of East London prospectus. Neither the archives of the Polytechnic of East London, which would have produced the prospectus, nor the University of East London, the subject of the prospectus, have copies. The change in the structure of the university system and the shift from local authority control of the polytechnics had profound impact, and as Steedman explains, sometimes what is missing in the archives is as interesting as if it had it been found (Steedman 1999). It was suggested by the archivist at the University of East London that it was likely the prospectus was not archived by the Polytechnic of East London, as it was expected to be archived by the new University of East London, who, as they did not produce it, did not archive it either. Although this was something of a research problem, it is also indicative of the upheaval that the change in institutional status caused with processes, structures and established behaviour being changed across the sector.

Kingston's first prospectus as a university in 1992, having previously been in operation as a polytechnic for nearly 100 years (since 1899), has altered its tone significantly from earlier examples studied. The 1992 Kingston prospectus includes warnings and cautionary legalistic language which makes it much more like a commercial brochure than an informative document. In the introduction to all the faculties there are details of the development of courses – 'the courses offered by the school are the result of ...' and 'the faculty's educational philosophy is to develop ...' (Kingston 1992). Within the text there are acknowledgements of the difficulties that the changes to higher education have brought, as shown in Figure 5 overleaf which seems to try and establish Kingston's brand as a university with the benefits of the polytechnics:

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

## **MEETING THE HIGHER EDUCATION CHALLENGES OF THE 90'S**

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**I**t is important when considering which course(s) to apply for to think seriously about the type of higher education you will receive. Kingston University has developed a specific educational approach which has its history in the creation of the polytechnics at the end of the 1960s.

The polytechnics were set up by the Government in the late 1960s from existing institutions of higher education already providing a significant volume of advanced level work in Science, Technology, Art and Design and the professions. The aim was to provide a number of high quality institutions capable of complementing the existing Universities in the provision of equivalent standard courses which were vocationally relevant and suited to the needs of society and industry.



especially to develop alternative strategies of teaching and learning.

**...Kingston University has developed a specific educational approach which has its history in the creation of the Polytechnics at the end of the 1960s.**

Figure 5 'Meeting the Higher Education Challenges of the 90's' (Kingston 1992)

The text in the above figure shows that Kingston was proud of its history as a polytechnic and that its self-definition was based in its heritage. The Kingston prospectus implies there is an institution-based market already in existence. There appears to be an assumption from reading the Kingston texts that prospective students will browse through prospectuses from several universities. Therefore, it explains the course in comparative terms, anticipating that the students have already chosen the subject. For example: 'should you decide to study computing at Kingston you can be assured of a warm welcome to the school' (Kingston 1992).

The old universities showed a particular increase in a marketised tone in their prospectuses, for example UCL's prospectus now used headings which were more like persuasive slogans, not just introductory of the page's text e.g.: 'UCL as a place to learn' and 'Accommodation: a Variety of Choice' (UCL 1992). RHUL also used more persuasive text in their introduction in this 1992 edition, with the slogan 'the University of London's Country Campus' (RHUL 1992) prominently displayed in the first two pages of the prospectus. This increase in marketing language can be seen as a move responding to greater competition in the enlarged higher education sector.

In the next subsections of this analysis, the 1992 prospectuses are reviewed by discourse topic of the idea of a degree.

### **Traditional liberal**

There is little evidence in any of the prospectuses that aligns with the traditional liberal idea of a degree. UCL's prospectus markets itself to students with coloured pictures and slogans: 'UCL as a place to learn' (UCL 1992), which may invoke a traditional liberal idea of a degree, but not explicitly. The RHUL prospectus has a section which discusses the institution as a place of scholarship and promises that the course will be demanding, which seems to invoke the idea of a degree for traditional liberal

education. The same page discusses the quality standards from which RHUL gains confidence about their claims of excellent teaching as shown in Figure 6 below:

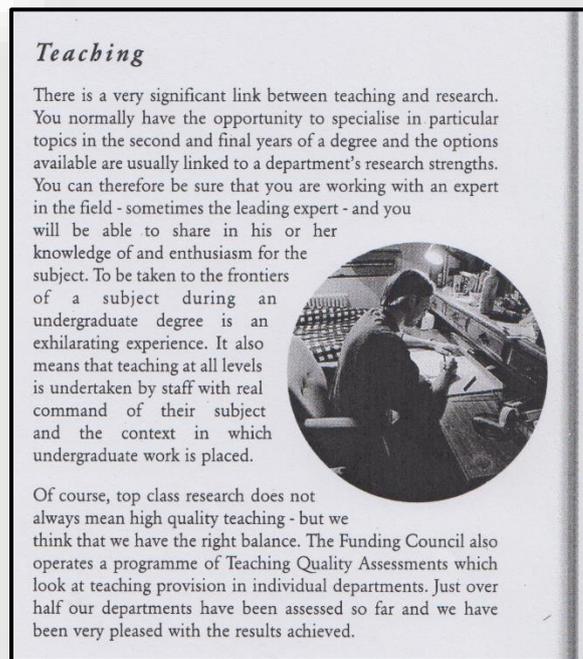


Figure 6 'Teaching' (RHUL 1992)

Despite this specific section in RHUL's introduction about teaching and research which invokes the traditional liberal idea of a degree, both old universities have changed the tone of their course listings pages. In the 1992 prospectuses, UCL and RHUL list less information about the specifics of course content and more about the future outcomes of the degrees. In Kingston's previous prospectuses there were very infrequent mentions of the traditional liberal idea of a degree and in the 1992 prospectus there was no indication of this discourse. Therefore, it can be seen that the traditional liberal idea of education was becoming a silenced discourse in this set of prospectuses, echoing its silence in macro discourses of the period.

### **Prestige**

This period includes a marked upsurge in instances of marketing language, which appears frequently in the prospectuses to be invoking the idea of a degree as enhanced by the prestige of the institution. In the first lines of the RHUL's college head's introduction the prospectus is said to help in 'choosing a university ... we aim in this prospectus to help you with these decisions by telling you, as clearly as possible [about the university]' (RHUL 1992). In this statement, it seems that RHUL's text assumes that students are comparing institutions in making their student choice decision, when previous prospectuses were more oriented to supporting students making a choice of course within the institution. This can be interpreted to link to the discourse of the idea of a degree being influenced by an institution's place in the hierarchy. This interpretation is supported in the later text in RHUL's prospectus which emphasises that the student's single decision is very important because 'choosing a university and a degree course are decisions which will have a major impact on your life and career' (RHUL 1992).

UCL, like RHUL, changes tone in this period's prospectus, linking the idea of a degree and the choice to be made more to an evaluation of the degrees of UCL than to which course to choose at UCL.

The tone is decipherable in a passage which refers to press coverage, comparing itself to Oxbridge. It is selling UCL the institution and implying the institution's prestige transfers to its degree:

... you may have seen references in the media to the international acclaim that UCL receives as a research institution. In a recent national survey of universities in the United Kingdom, UCL as a whole was rated third, with only Oxford and Cambridge doing better (UCL 1992).

This is different from previous prospectuses of UCL where its different courses were compared as if the necessary choice was between them, and the prospectus engaged only a little in selling UCL, the institution itself. In this way, the idea of a degree has in this period engaged with the market in terms of prestige. That the degree content is less visible than the awarding of a degree, and particularly the status of the institution, invokes the discourse of the idea of a degree as an indicator of prestige, as described by Baker in his work on credentialing (Baker 2011).

Another marker of this prestige discourse topic is the inclusion of league table references in the prospectuses of this period, explicitly alluding to the market and the institution's place in it. This introduction of league tables aligns with quality assurance regimes beginning to report metrics on research and graduate outcomes, and national research ratings provided for all disciplines in all institutions, although the prospectus of Kingston has no explicit mention of the league tables. That the use of league tables has entered these marketing documents in the same period as the system has become formally un-differentiated between universities and polytechnics is an indicator of the success of the policy strategy to introduce a market, and is also a new factor in prestige.

### **Graduate employment**

The discourse linking a degree with employment permeates the prospectus of Kingston University, with overt use of pseudo-economic analysis and data-free statements like 'demand for computing professional with immediately applicable knowledge and skills continues to increase as information technology becomes ever more important' (Kingston, 1992). The manner in which Kingston talks about employment prospects is as if the main reason for attending university is the subsequent initial career. Kingston states throughout that there are excellent opportunities arising from their courses, including – a little less optimistically – 'history graduates have a good record in finding promising careers' (Kingston 1992).

Whereas in the previous set of prospectuses only Kingston listed alumni job titles, this practice of mentioning areas of future work has now spread to all three institutional prospectuses that were available in this period. RHUL mentioned information about possible careers that graduates could go on to in course descriptions, but in narrative text these are only linked to the subject of the course, as are the fields of work of alumni.

UCL, for the first time in this study, lists job titles of their alumni, as seen in the next quotation, where even courses with a direct vocational outcome were presented as having broader significance in the labour market:

Recent graduates from the UCL Anthropology Department have obtained employment in such diverse fields as: journalism, publishing, international banking, museum curatorship, overseas development administration (UCL 1992).

This use of fields of employment that are not linked to the degree type, e.g. international banking for Anthropology graduates, indicates that there is a changing, less discipline linked, idea of a degree for graduate employment.

For the development of the idea of a degree this is a critical point. When the universities begin advertising their degrees as pathways to a range of immediate professional work, and ones not specifically linked to the content of the degree, this marks a distinct change, and shows a move away

from the specifics of course content and towards the awarding of the degree certificate as being the more important feature.

### **Employability**

In the prospectuses of the 1992 period, more than graduate employment is being highlighted: the discourse of employability gained from the degree is present for the first time explicitly. Generic skills are being mentioned as separate from the content knowledge of degree, e.g. explaining that critical thinking skills will be developed alongside the degree:

... skills in good communication and critical thinking, the ability to use language effectively and the capacity to interpret and present complex argument – all these are in demand in successful graduate careers and are developed within the degree program (Kingston 1992).

Within the course descriptions for Kingston, non-specialist skills are mentioned in a careers section – this contrasts with previous prospectuses, where occasional and specific suggestions of possible future job titles for graduates were presented with course details. It also deploys the discourse of employability, bound up with the idea of a degree focused on graduate careers. These ideas have not previously been seen within statements from Kingston, but now the prospectuses consciously emphasise them: ‘Special emphasis is placed on developing the range of skills you will need throughout your working life’ and ‘all these are in demand in successful graduate careers and are developed within the degree programme’ (Kingston 1992).

At RHUL this period’s prospectus also marks the first use of non-specific skills in the principal’s address – telling students about a special programme that will run alongside their normal degrees as a value-added co-curricular course, particularly on communication, computer and language skills. The Advanced Skills Programme page is shown in the figure overleaf, where it can be seen that the programme is laid out like a degree course as in Figure 7 below:



Figure 7 ‘Advanced Skills Programme’ (RHUL 1992)

The institution is trying to express the extra benefits of RHUL, a sign of commodification which invokes the discourse of employability as being important for the idea of a degree. A further discourse is first identifiable within this study period, the notion that a degree is not necessarily the end of learning. It seems in the extract below to be linked with the discourse of employability. This changes the idea of a degree preparing anyone in a completed way for life and work:

Teaching at UCL is not a static process. We expect that you will come here to learn new skills and develop your existing ones to prepare yourself for a career and for the fulfilment of your life in general (UCL 1992).

Although the first person plural was still used in this excerpt, the text is now more formal in tone and stresses the impact the degree will have on the person. It is notable that the statement from UCL does not confine itself to academic endeavours, recent or future, but broadens to deal with the

subsequent development of skills in both a specific disciplinary and also a more general employability sense.

The discourse of employability at this period is strongly aligned to what Holmes has called 'possessional' employability (Holmes 2011), that is about the collecting of skills. The concept of gaining many skills from a set list has been added to the discussion which forms the employability discourse. And it is the old universities in the sample which are responding to this – RHUL in its special course announced by the principal, and UCL also includes a similar course promoting non-academic skills. These concerns for employability now begin to appear in the prospectuses: UCL gives a formal and specific description of what it views such skills for students' careers to be:

These are all aimed at stimulating active interchange and reasoned argument in small groups, and developing self-confidence in verbal discussion (UCL 1992).

In UCL's text the language of non-specific skills emerges in the same way as represented in the RHUL prospectus, with the suggestion they be taught alongside rather than in the degree.

### **Summary**

This section concludes with a summary of the analysis of the prospectuses which were published by the case study institutions for the 1992 academic year of entry.

The form of the prospectuses and their layout, and on many pages the actual words, are exactly the same in the 1992 and 1984 prospectuses. Although Fairclough's (1993) work on prospectuses indicates that there can, at times, be little change between editions, there is strikingly minimal change here even though there are seven prospectuses between the two dates. However, there are some significant changes and additions; these have been traced through the discourse topics and the implications of the changes have been discussed in this summary.

The distinctiveness of the old universities' prospectuses in the study, with UCL and RHUL formerly written in high register academic language (Biber 2006), has lessened in this set of prospectuses. The differentiation between the three prospectuses is also harder to identify – albeit the UEL prospectus is missing from this period. As the vocational outcomes are increasingly expressed as job titles of degrees the course listings of different institutions sound more similar. As tertiary university prospectuses become at once themselves more similar, and also more competitive, the hierarchy of universities in the UK as seen in these institutions has become more culturally coded and harder to read.

Ball and Vincent (1998) in their article which proposed the terms 'cold knowledge' as institutional materials, and 'hot knowledge' the information gained from people, exemplified cold knowledge as abstract lists of information. The list of alumni job titles and fields of work in the prospectuses can be seen to be such a list of information, some of it abstract. For the information to be properly understood the structures around it have to be clarified – how an Anthropology degree leads to a career in international banking as detailed at UCL is not an intuitive process. The loss of detail about the nature of the courses in this set of prospectus and the reduction in detail provided in the cold knowledge place more emphasis on the need for hot knowledge. Thus, the new style of provision of information in this set of prospectuses increases the need for the reader to 'know the ropes' (Whitty & Clement 2015, p. 49)

The reduction in detail in the prospectuses makes them thinner and more streamlined and this is perhaps an attempt to make them seem more accessible. Moogan's research (1999) on prospectuses suggests this is a strategy to make marketing materials more user friendly. According to his research with prospective students, the reduction in detail also makes the information contained in the prospectuses less reliable (Moogan 1999).

Research suggests that this is the point at which the previous differences between the old and new universities is transformed into a quality indicator (Davies, Williams & Webb 1997), and this analysis of the prospectus materials supports this view. As the institutions speak in more similar ways, but are also more competitively market-oriented, elements of coded prestige and hot knowledge become more influential. This replays the same old and new divide, as what were called the new universities become separated in what Leathwood describes as the 'extended hierarchy of universities' (Leathwood 2004, p. 41), for those who understand the code.

The traditional liberal idea of a degree is largely silenced in these prospectuses, with only limited traces in the old universities and is judged to be a silent discourse topic in all four institutions in this period. However, in accordance with more marketing and less information, the prestige marker of the idea of a degree was traced as having significantly increased in this period, particularly within the old universities. The increased focus on league tables was a feature in the prospectuses of the old universities but not in the only new university text available. Unlike both previous sets of prospectuses the new universities' voice does not link their prestige to that of industry as strongly as before, a change which is happening at the same time as they ceased holding their polytechnic status. The idea of the prestige of the institution is invoked strongly in UCL's prospectus and can be seen to be the dominant discourse of the idea of a degree, while at RHUL the idea of prestige was present in 1992 but is not dominant in the prospectus.

The idea of a degree in all UK institutions in the study now becomes linked closely to the idea of graduate employment. Mention is made of other reasons students might undertake a degree but for the discourse relating to the idea of a degree for graduate employment is increasingly strong. For all institutions apart from UCL this is the dominant discourse topic of the period. All prospectuses link employment and career as the obvious selection consideration for a degree and for a university, rather than recommending students select the most interesting subject. This change moves the required navigational capacity (Gale & Parker 2015) of students from knowing about courses to knowing about how degrees operate within the labour market – this is a significant shift. The idea of a degree for graduate employment is clearly identifiable, with information offered about industry in graduate opportunities, and economic analysis now added, neither of which were present in the previous prospectuses of RHUL institution, for example, the Geology course guide which states 'employment within the hydrocarbon industry is still an important area of work' (RHUL 1992).

The idea of transferable skills as an accompaniment to a degree, not a by-product of it, is introduced in this period in the old universities and is of growing prominence in the new universities. This discourse of employability is deployed in a way distinct from the discourse of graduate employment and, as indicated in this thesis's code book, is denoted by use of vocabularies referencing generic, non-disciplinary skills. However, the discourse topic of employability is still a minority topic of the discourse of the idea of a degree.

The analysis of the prominence of the discourse topics of the idea of a degree within this set of prospectuses is displayed in Table 21 overleaf.

Table 21 Discourse topics traced in 1992 prospectuses

	<b>Traditional liberal purposes</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
University College London [UCL]	Silenced	Dominant	Minority	Minority
Royal Holloway, University of London [RHUL]	Silenced	Minority	Dominant	Minority
Kingston University [Kingston]	Silenced	Silenced	Dominant	Minority
University of East London [UEL] <sup>8</sup>	-	-	-	-

Notable in the analysis of this set of prospectuses was that the words used to invoke the different ideas of a degree in all the four institutions were becoming more similar. The ways in which the degrees were described in terms of employment and employability were drawing on the same vocabularies which had restricted words related to careers, skills and graduate prospects. The dominant discourse of this set of prospectuses was graduate employment.

### **1998 academic year entry – A close reading of prospectuses**

This period was chosen as a collection point for the case study institutions' marketing materials as it was judged that an important change in the discourse of the idea of a degree was detected in the period. Drawing on Goodson's (2005) work, the context of the change in the discourse, which is argued in this prospectus to be an eventement, was the enacting of individual contributions to degrees, which had been discussed previously. In 1998, domestic students had to pay for their courses for the first time, which was a significant policy shift in how the idea of a degree was constructed in the UK, as is more fully discussed in the Idea of a Degree chapter.

#### **Description of the 1998 prospectuses**

In the 1998 period, the tone of the prospectuses has noticeably changed: they are less formal and rigid but also less specific about the degree programmes and the processes of higher education. The tone has gone from using first person plural in the texts when discussing the institution, to referring to the institution in the third person singular, distancing itself from the reader. The texts have more similarities to advertising, as described by Fairclough in his review of prospectuses (1993). Their text choices are persuasive rather than informational, and include gimmicky inclusions written to amuse, e.g. UCL's use of the advertising-style slogan '72 departments ranging from Archaeology to Urology' (UCL 1998).

However, in this set of prospectuses, the language of the prospectuses becomes even more similar across the four institutions than it had been in 1992. For example the language register in Kingston becomes more technical, complicated and used specifically academic language without explanation. In UEL's text there is also more complex language which is not explained in the way it had been in previous prospectuses – in the 1984 prospectuses even the terms lecture and class are explained.

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<sup>8</sup> The University of East London's 1992 prospectus was unavailable for data collection.

In contrast, at the old universities it is noticeable that UCL's text is becoming less academic, more toned down and easy to read. RHUL's text changes little in this issue of the prospectus, but has for two editions been written in a friendly, non-formal tone.

The publications are also targeting specific audiences explicitly in the prospectus: the texts make clear who the institution thinks it is speaking to by naming the concerns of the prospective students. All four prospectuses in this period are offering many more images, including those with young people in them within the institution, presumably students.

The UCL text addresses students moving away from home for the first time: 'it may be your first extended period away from home' (UCL 1998). Following on from this, the concerns and the welfare information provided in the UCL prospectus (moving away from home, chance of getting a single bedroom) are very different from those in the UEL prospectus, which privilege not accommodation but child-care provision, using pictures of students with children and mature students. RHUL in its prospectus directly addresses the parents of the students who are presumed to be reading the RHUL prospectus. Addressing a specific audience of prospective students with parents engaged in their education, the RHUL text suggests students will be well looked after on campus. However, in order to sell RHUL's out of London location it makes the best of its situation as having London access, but not in the busy, costly centre:

... but perhaps the best thing about our location is that you can take advantage of all that is on offer in the capital and then return home to an environment which is free of the problems sometimes associated with living there (RHUL 1998).

Kingston also focuses on transport links, how prospective students will commute to the campus, and also reinforces its position as industry-linked by claiming 50% of the business school students are mid-career managers (Kingston 1998). Through these methods, the institutions characterise themselves and speak directly to their preferred audiences. The habitus drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concept as indicated in the student choice literature is established by these codes, the dispositions they invoke include and exclude different students (Bowl 2003), and the prospective students are likely to feel included or excluded by the documents.

This promotion of the university environment is echoed in the increased marketisation of UEL which specifically addresses its target audience. Unusually, in any of the prospectuses of this set and those previously seen, UEL specifically addresses temporary absences from study as a selling point of their course: 'this course is specifically designed for part-time students since credits for all units may be carried forward even if attendance is temporarily discontinued' (UEL 1998). This extract indicates the diverse student population that UEL's prospectus is aiming for, and addresses concerns about completing the course, which Archer (2003) found was a specific concern of students in her study of working-class students.

### **Traditional liberal**

The idea of the traditional liberal idea of a degree is not readily identifiable in this period, a significant shift, although it does remain in a new form, as a secondary benefit, as in this extract: 'University is more than a series of examination hurdles, and, as the following pages will demonstrate, at UCL it's very much more' (UCL 1998).

The phrase 'you can be certain that your degree programme will be demanding' (RHUL 1998) aligns with the traditional liberal idea of a degree as an intense but worthwhile pursuit for its own ends. However, RHUL mentions career opportunities in almost all degree descriptions, foregrounding the discourse of graduate employment as the idea of a degree, although for its History course description it harks back to the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes:

... the essential motive for studying History must be a genuine interest in the subject for its own sake. History encompasses every state of human life and form of action in the past (RHUL 1998).

This may be because RHUL cannot name employers who advertise for History graduates, therefore the prospectus emphasises other strengths for this degree. In general the prospectuses have shifted from the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes to the new focus on employment and graduate outcomes, even though study for its own sake at times is named.

### **Prestige**

The institutions use persuasive, as opposed to informative, language in these prospectuses and deploy the idea of prestige in different ways depending on the nature of the institution, with the differential branding of the institutions being clear in this set of prospectuses. This branding includes explicit linking to the discourse of the idea of a degree as a prestige marker, as in this extract from UCL:

By reading this Prospectus for University College London, you are considering one of the foremost universities in Britain and the world ... bear in mind that your degree, and the reputation of the university you choose, will stay with you for life (UCL 1998).

This is not only an invoking of the prestige of degrees and an addressing of marketing of institutions, but also espouses the concept of free choice in the market and that individuals must help themselves. For a prospective student who cannot attain the high grades necessary to access UCL, reading this prospectus could be demoralising, but for the student who can attain the grades the statement could make them feel more of the in-group, and suggest that they will fit in. Showing the change in tone of the documents from information to marketised document, this illustrates the contrast from the earlier prospectuses where UCL in its 1977 prospectus said, 'Don't apply unless you really think it is what you want and need' (UCL 1977).

RHUL's prospectus, however, has in terms of the idea of a degree as a prestige marker changed little since the previous set and is still subtly invoking the idea of its prestige as denoted by its heritage, using long passages of the prospectus to discuss the history and development of the institution. The other case study institutions in previous prospectuses had passages such as this but by the 1992 set, they include other information and have all, apart from RHUL, cut down their historical passages.

Kingston's prospectus includes more passages that are using persuasive selling language, but this increase in marketisation is different from the old universities in that the intensification is marked in the discussion of specific courses, not the institution. In one extract a course is described (illogically) as being the 'only similar course in the region' (Kingston 1998), promoting the scarcity of alternative courses as a reason to choose the institution. Kingston's prospectus also promotes the specialities of their tutorial system and mentions that their academic staff take a pastoral role advising on course and career options. However, the usage of the notion of prestige by Kingston described here does not align with the idea of a degree as marked by its prestige drawn from the hierarchical status of the institution.

The notion of the prestige of the degree has not substantially altered in this set of prospectuses; there are relatively few markers of it and none perceivable in UEL's prospectus alluding to the prestige of the institution.

### **Graduate employment**

This set of prospectuses invokes strongly the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment; the immediate graduate outcomes after the degree are emphasised through the inclusion of occupational titles of alumni of each course in each of the four institutional texts.

Institutions' texts prioritise students' immediate futures and strengthen their position by recommending they have relationships with businesses, such as Kingston's statement that 'we are proud of the good relationships we have developed with potential employers through our extensive industrial contacts' (Kingston 1998).

Kingston's mission statement, shown below in Figure 8, aligns with the idea of a degree for graduate employment in the description 'to provide career-related higher education, advanced training and research for the development of individuals and organisations in support of the economy and society' (Kingston 1998).



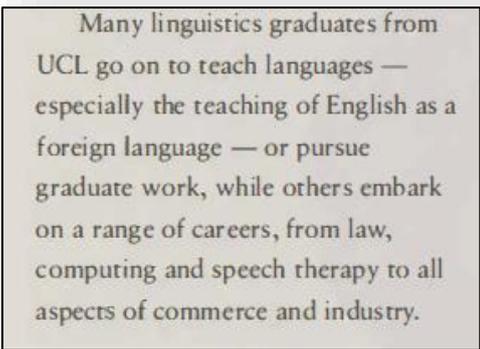
Figure 8 Mission Statement (Kingston 1998)

In this period, universities begin to stress through the texts a clear return for the prospective students' investment, as in this promise from UCL's prospectus:

Make no mistake, among your intake are some of the future international leaders in industry, commerce, government and education; it could well be you! (UCL 1998).

While earlier prospectuses concentrated on the period of study within the university with considerable detail on teaching and curriculum, the attention now rests solidly on the impact after degree completion. It is possible that the linking of the individual degree to immediate employment prospects responded to students then having to pay £1000 fees, and the need for there to appear to be a return on this expense. This was indicated in UEL's prospectus in which each course listing describing the course has a sub-heading 'professional careers' (UEL 1998); in RHUL's prospectus each course listing has a sub-heading 'career options' (RHUL 1998).

This is a significant change of discourse from the details of and depth of information on studying that is routine in the earlier prospectuses, including from the strongly work-oriented Kingston. Even in art practice, which would often be seen as not a vocational degree, work-based credentials have been boosted in the course description at Kingston by the inclusion of a unit that includes work experience: 'a professional practice module prepares you for future career choices' (Kingston 1998). The UCL prospectus also has none of the details of the topics that would be studied, which the same institution provided in prospectuses early in this study e.g. UCL's 1977 prospectus. In UCL's text, even in Linguistics, shown overleaf in Figure 9, a field hard to match with employers, there is a list of potential employers including translation businesses, government departments and banks (UCL 1998), together with details of postgraduate research pathways.



Many linguistics graduates from UCL go on to teach languages — especially the teaching of English as a foreign language — or pursue graduate work, while others embark on a range of careers, from law, computing and speech therapy to all aspects of commerce and industry.

*Figure 9 UCL Linguistics course description (UCL 1998)*

In UCL's text there is less on the studies themselves and less deployment of the previously dominant traditional liberal idea of a degree.

The change in tone identified reinforces Morley's view that the universities feel they have become responsible for employment potential (Morley 2003). The shift towards the idea of a degree for immediate and professional graduate employment is indicated by presenting career prospects of specific degrees.

### **Employability**

The texts build on the previous period's inclusion of references to student responsibility to take action above and beyond the degree, beyond finding the graduate employment related to their degree. In this set of prospectuses there are few discipline-specific skill references, and the course listings pages outline generic skills:

Most employers do not want narrow specialists; they look for a range of interests and experience. UCL sets out to maximise your potential and prepare you for a career... (UCL 1998).

The need to maximise potential is explained further in UCL's prospectus as the need to gain specific but also general skills, whereas previously, disciplinary skills were mentioned and most often linked to specific courses. The discourse of the idea of a degree as linked to employability is increasingly evident in this set of prospectuses. This can be seen from the introductory pages of the 1998 UCL prospectus, addressed to prospective students. It discusses their life as graduates and skills to be gained alongside their study, clearly referring to the discourse of employability:

Personal development is fundamental to university life and the generic skills needed in the personal and professional life of all UCL graduates – leadership, teamwork, self-reliance, communication and project management skills, etc. – are woven into academic programmes (UCL 1998).

The addition of the discourse of employability in part shifts responsibility for graduate employment away from the institution's degrees and onto the individual students. Thus, the idea of a degree as leading to employment is no longer a case of coming to university – students must do much more than complete a degree to uphold their end of the bargain. UEL's text constructs the idea of skills as something extra and additional to the degree and puts the content of the degree effectively in a deficit position:

Employers are not only interested in your academic history but also in other skills which you have developed through work, leisure interests or family pursuits (UEL 1998).

This quote from UEL suggests that academic study is not enough and invokes the action of the students; it does not necessarily deploy the idea of a degree as employability, instead it urges students to enhance their employability outside studies. Kingston's prospectus recurrently displays attention to general, non-academic skills in all the course descriptions, and this is in line with government policy drivers of the period (Boden & Nedeva 2010).

RHUL locates skill development at university and maintains the extra program begun in 1992, again with a deficit conception of a degree, and thereby implying the degree qualification itself lacks enough power to prepare the students for their future career:

Your time at university provides a unique opportunity to develop practical skills to complement your main studies and prepare for your future career. The advanced skills programme is designed to fulfil that opportunity (RHUL 1998).

In this extract, RHUL is explaining its claim to base skill-development at university, in addition to degree content. This deficit conception of a degree is a motif occurring many times in this period, re-directing the traditional liberal discourse of a degree with its aspirational 'it will change your life' (RHUL 1998) rhetoric into a more specific range of employment-oriented skills.

There are multiple instances of the idea of a degree as employability, particularly in the old universities, a clear sign of differentiation of the discourses over time. In earlier sets of UK prospectuses studied, reference to skills-based language could be found, but it was used differently; it related to discipline skills within the degree such as critical thinking (e.g. UCL 1992 and RHUL 1992).

## **Summary**

The prospectuses of this period have become radically more marketised compared to previous periods in this study. There are many more instances of persuasive text in the prospectuses and the visual style of the prospectuses has been redesigned to be more like brochures. The move to greater displays of market tactics, such as is seen in the 1998 prospectuses, are designed to appeal to the different tastes of the market. This strategy has been argued to be purposive and the different stylistic choices of institutions can be read as class-taste markers (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 1999).

All the case study institutions were actively competitive in this set of prospectuses. They distinguished themselves by citing unique selling points and referring to the league tables and external reference points. The hypermarketing discourse and use of the same lexical choices of quality and the idea of a degree makes the prospectuses almost indistinguishable from each other in terms of texts (not design) once the institutional names are removed.

In the prospectuses the institutions begin to give case studies of previous students and graduates. For example in the course details section of Kingston several, but not all, courses have a picture of a then current student or recent graduate with a photo and highlighting their experience on the course. The stories from the students include where the graduates undertook internships and where they travelled, and are framed like a customer story. The addition of these stories can be seen to attempt to synthesise hot knowledge as defined by Ball and Vincent (1998), which means information from people with direct experience of the institution with the more informational cold knowledge in the rest of the prospectus. That is, the case studies are designed to make readers feel like they are gaining the information from a contemporary not from an institution.

Further, the stories presented in this way invite readers to identify with the student or graduate: the importance of being able to relate to the person in the story and see similarities is substantial. These devices are designed to address concerns identified by Bowl (2003) that when students are choosing institutions, they do not see themselves as the right fit with the institution, and feel out of place. These problems are amplified perhaps by the introduction of images in the prospectuses and stories which either include or more clearly exclude certain types of students. In this way the

marketisation of the texts can be seen as functioning, as Ball (1993a) explains, as a 'mechanism of class reproduction' (Ball 1993a, p. 13).

The marketisation of the texts is also visible in the further professionalising of the language in this set of prospectuses compared to the previous one. Prospectuses reviewed in previous periods used different registers of formality and different types of academic coded language (Biber 2006), depending on the type of institution. These differences were visible in previously studied prospectuses between the complex constructions of language in the old universities and the simple, straightforward language of the new universities. Thomas (2001) indicates that the level of knowledge students need to be able to read the prospectuses is a differential marker of equity. There are growing instances of coded signals that are oriented to separate segments of the market, using persuasive language as explored by Baker and Brown (2007). These are codes that invoke the habitus of the institution and would be influential in student choice, which is likely why the student choice literature shows a fit between the habitus of the institution and the habitus and class of the student (Crosier et al. 2008).

In terms of the messages about the idea of a degree that are traceable in this set of prospectuses, the 1998 academic year saw institutions increasingly drawing on the same vocabularies to describe their offer although this is still somewhat differentiated by type of institution.

The traditional liberal idea of a degree, having been silenced in the 1992 set of prospectuses, is now visible again in this set of prospectuses within the old universities. It is however, only an emerging theme and does not have the breadth of impact across all the course details sections that it did in previous prospectuses. The traditional liberal idea of a degree is not traceable in either of the new institutions.

The idea of a degree as marked by its prestige, was in this set of prospectuses strongly present at the highest status institution, UCL, which explicitly invokes the idea of a degree as an indicator of status. At UCL, the prospectus now reads more like a marketing document and abandons the heretofore informative stance, and by use of many external markers puts forward the case why UCL, and not any other institution should be chosen. In RHUL the markers of various kinds of external prestige related to hierarchy of institutions were invoked as a minority discourse in this set of prospectuses. As noted in earlier reviews of prospectuses, Kingston's prestige is linked to its ties to industry and therefore is a counter discourse to that identified in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter. In UEL's text there was no reference to what had been judged in the thesis's code book as an indication of prestige of a degree.

The idea of a degree as valued by its use in graduate employment was intensified as the dominant discourse in these materials in this period. This intensification was indicated by all institutions mentioning graduate employment in all the course listings. Many institutions used job titles and alumni data taken straight from the UK graduate survey the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education [DLHE]. These were reproduced in the 1998 set of prospectuses at UCL even when the graduate jobs listed were neither discipline-specific nor required a degree to undertake them. There was in this set of prospectuses a presence on nearly each page of the idea of a degree for graduate employment. Researchers analysing the data from the DLHE survey indicated that jobs did not always initially require the level of education of a degree (Elias & Purcell 2004), and perhaps this led to the re-emergence of the traditional liberal idea of a degree in the old universities. The appearance of a newly rejuvenated discourse of the traditional liberal idea of a degree effectively offered some balance against the deficit conception of an academic degree and the negative message which represents tertiary education as mere training for future work.

In addition to the increased discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment there was also in all the prospectuses of this era a significant emphasis on the idea of employability. As defined

in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, this was distinct from graduate employment as it related to the skills gained on the course. The possible added value of generic employability skills is offered to the students through the degrees. The discourse of employability plays out somewhat differently in this period between the new and old: the new institutions urge students to look beyond the institution for work-based skills and the old universities add programmes of skills to learn employability.

In these documents the skills agenda was inescapable and the word ‘skills’ appears on almost every page, and the old universities, particularly UCL, emphasise the benefit of their degrees for employability. Further, in the course outline there were sections on transferable skills ‘the study of biochemistry requires the development of a high level of competence in the analysis ...’ (UCL 1998). In this way employability can be seen to be a discourse that is present in all the institutions in this time period, albeit not as the dominant discourse which remains for most of the institutions as graduate employment.

The tracing of the discourses in the prospectuses is indicated in Table 22, below.

*Table 22 Discourse topics traced in 1998 prospectuses*

	<b>Traditional liberal purposes</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
University College London [UCL]	Re-Emerging	Dominant	Minority	Minority
Royal Holloway, University of London [RHUL]	Re-Emerging	Minority	Dominant	Minority
Kingston University [Kingston]	Silenced	Counter	Dominant	Minority
University of East London [UEL]	Silenced	Silenced	Dominant	Minority

A key theme within this period is homogenisation of the institutional character as presented through the increasing similarities in the presentation and language of the prospectuses. Further, the discourses of the idea of a degree are increasingly spread across all the prospectuses, not segmented by old and new universities, although the markers of prestige and traditional liberal idea of a degree are differentiated by these markers.

Overall in this period the idea of a degree for graduate employment is dominant, but the idea of a degree as provider of employability is also very important and is now throughout all the prospectuses.

### **2006 academic year entry – A close reading of prospectuses**

This section undertakes a close reading of the prospectuses from the case study institutions published for the 2006 academic year. This academic year of entry was chosen as it was determined to be a significant moment of change in the idea of a degree, as was established by this thesis’s discourse-oriented secondary historical analysis of the macro influences on the discourse of the idea of a degree.

The significant change for this year of entry in the UK was that this was the first time that the structure of the system enabled undergraduate degrees to be priced differently per institution, as discussed in the preceding chapter of this thesis on the discourse of the idea of a degree. This change was identified as an eventement in Goodson’s (2005) terms.

There are three subsections in this section, the first of which describes the form of the prospectuses, the second of which undertakes the tracing of the discourses, and the final summary subsection.

### **Description of the 2006 prospectuses**

The marketisation of higher education can be seen clearly in this set of prospectuses and they are much more heavily designed than any previous set, with pull-quotes to draw the reader's eye to specific information, such as the focus on key highlights of Kingston's student experience.

The language used is very direct and easy to read, drawing the reader into the text through use of the second person directed towards the students, with informal language giving significant detail, rather than the harder to access instructions in early sets of the prospectuses, particularly in the old universities. For example, at RHUL the 'Welcome' letter suggests visiting:

I urge you to read this prospectus carefully, but better still, pay us a visit and talk to current students. We look forward to welcoming you here (RHUL 2006).

Although RHUL has in previous prospectuses emphasised the friendly nature of the institution as a marketing point, this extract seems to be taking this a step further in terms of persuasion. Kingston's prospectus explains that it aims to give information about its courses, but that is followed by a disclaimer that it cannot be held responsible for changes in courses, which is very legalistic language in a marketing document. This nervousness is also shown at UCL, where in marketing the courses the language is somewhat strained. The writing can still be formal and recall the old discourse of recruiting students who meet the requirements to be accepted by the habitus of UCL. However, this somewhat distant language tone can overlap with the newer marketing technique to persuade students: UCL is selective, as a mark of prestige of the degree, and hard to get into, and therefore will make more students likely to apply:

We therefore seek students who have a commitment to their chosen discipline, who are open-minded and possess a questioning attitude to knowledge, and who are challenging (and fun) to teach (UCL 2006).

This consumer-praising marketing approach is characteristic of the writing in this period and displays a very different approach from the initial UCL prospectuses reviewed. Although there is no mention in the prospectus about this, it seems likely marketing professionals were using UCL's exclusivity as a major strategy, deploying the discourse of the idea of a degree as a prestige marker, yet also suggesting UCL is available for entry to all – and for the first time at UCL, the whole prospectus appears themed and strategically determined, giving a more marketised feel to the document.

The prospectuses include many more figures and tables: the Kingston prospectus provides charts to help with the application process and guide the prospective student through the admissions process. The texts have become increasingly inter-textual, drawing on external sources and referencing the action that the prospective students should take, signalling that the prospectuses are written in the understanding that the students are choosing between institutions as part of a market.

### **Traditional liberal**

The traditional liberal idea of a degree is little in evidence in the 2006 prospectuses, however the lessening of its impact is addressed explicitly in the RHUL welcome. This is an unusual first-person letter from the student union president to all prospective students: in the prospectuses studied it is unusual to have the student voice authentically presented at length. In it the student leader engages with the unspoken assumed truth when addressing students directly, excerpt overleaf along with full Welcome page shown in Figure 10 :

... going to university is still seen by many as a simple 'means to an end' a method of acquiring a good academic qualification to better equip you for the world of work (RHUL 2006).



Figure 10 'Welcome', including Student Union president's address (RHUL 2006)

But, after saying this, the RHUL Student Union president goes against the prevailing discourse of graduate employment and exhorts the students to do more with their time at universities. UCL's text engages with the traditional liberal idea of a degree along the same lines but presents it as an enjoyment of learning:

This Prospectus has been written not only to give you information about the degree programmes offered at UCL and how they are taught, but also to give you a feeling for UCL's ethos and a foretaste of the excitement of studying here. UCL's hallmark is research-led teaching (UCL 2006).

This re-imagining of learning as something to be excited by and to enjoy can be seen as a re-emergence of the discourse of the traditional liberal idea of education and is not traceable in the UEL or Kingston prospectuses, which present education as a means to a vocational outcome. The traditional liberal view can be seen in this set of prospectuses as an idea that is only in the two old universities.

### **Prestige**

In the texts of this period, there is an increase in the explicit use of the discourse of the idea of a degree as a prestige marker. RHUL's prospectus's introduction invokes this discourse: 'the University of London degree gained by our talented, high achieving graduates is valued the world over' (RHUL 2006). It is marked that RHUL does not mention its name and the college explicitly, rather the wider federated university. Degrees awarded were at this point from University of London: RHUL had previously stressed its college identity, but perhaps the University of London was seen as better recognised. This change of branding was likely to be raising the degree's prestige by using hierarchical status, and acknowledging the discourse of the idea of a degree as a status indicator. Equally notable is the globalisation aspect to this claim: in a prospectus for domestic students the institution's document is attuned to global recognition of the degree, and suggests graduate employment for the domestic students on an international stage.

UCL's prospectus for 2006 also includes significant references to the impact of the institution on the wider world, in particular the prospectus emphasised the university's significant research reputation. UCL's text contains multiple references to the Research Assessment Exercise and the high results that the university has gained. The UCL section on humanities talks in terms of prestige about

status markers of the institution, e.g. having the best Scandinavian library in UK. The statistics at a glance look very much like the top selling-points of a product that you might find on the marketing for a consumer good: to consolidate the transition from elite status to the commodification of a degree as seen in Figure 11 below:

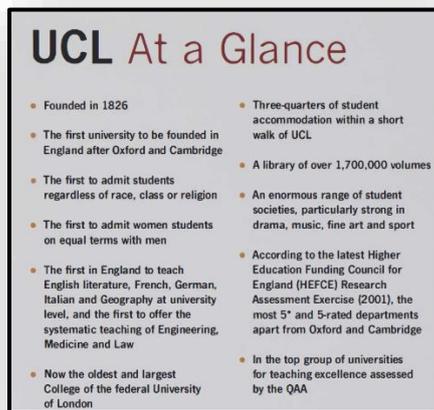


Figure 11 'UCL at a Glance' (UCL 2006)

The inclusion of this reductionist information in UCL's text invokes the prestige of the institution in the hierarchy and is a highly complicated marker which would require significant cultural capital to be understood. These markers are highly coded, use specific academic jargon and reference league tables and external indicators that might not be well known: they portray prestige.

UEL's prospectus in this period does not reference any external league tables and the institution's lower status in the hierarchy of the league tables can explain this. UEL's text refers consistently to the flexibility of its programmes and mentions their students' diverse commitments: 'We offer a range of education courses, with the flexibility to enable you to combine your studies with other commitments' (UEL 2006). This statement can be seen to engage with its market, as UEL drew its cohorts from many non-traditional students with a significant proportion of part-time and mature students. Kingston's text positions itself as drawing prestige from its industry links and offers a counter reading of the need for prestige within the discourse of the idea of a degree.

Prestige as a marker of hierarchy within this period is invoked by the two higher status institutions but most strongly by the highest status institution, UCL. The institutions are using different strategies to promote their institution within this period.

### **Graduate employment**

The focus on after degree outcomes, rather than the content of the degree, continues in this set, and is amplified in all the institutions. The idea of graduate employment is used as a marketing theme in the 2006 UCL prospectus, with more text than in previous issues relating to industry links. There is a continuation of the practice from the former UCL prospectus of adding employer names to illustrate the course description. Refocusing the prospectus on graduate outcomes in this way has left little room for the degree content. The continual and strong references to the importance of graduate outcomes invite the prospective student to consider the post-degree period – what job will this degree product be able to leverage for the student? In Kingston's prospectus, a page headed 'Get more from your studies' (Kingston 2006) refers not to maximising the value of what is being studied but to going beyond the institution to gain a better graduate outcome. It recommends students:

... experience working life. Many of our courses enable you to spend some time putting theory into practice by working in industry or commerce (Kingston 2006).

This extract from the introductory section of the Kingston prospectus indicates the value that is being placed on work experience as part of the course. By this period, the inference of the discourse of graduate employment as the idea of a degree includes actual job preparation. It shows that the institutions' prospectuses put high value on the degree's use in securing paid employment. The choice of language can be viewed as denigrating academic theory itself; the idea of studying being preparation for the workplace only implies that more valid time in a degree would be spent in 'authentic' work settings. The practice invokes the idea of a degree for graduate employment, but at the same time devalues study for the degree. Within the UEL prospectus there is significant mention of the UK economy and interpretations of labour market trends, giving justifications for course choice in a distinctly uncritical way, e.g. 'computers and computer based systems are essential to any organisation today. People who can build, implement and maintain these systems are in constant demand ...' (UEL 2006). In this statement, there is no indication of what these jobs are, how skilled a student has to be, or the depth of knowledge acquired on the course; the description of the degree rather vaguely indicates the use of the degree for graduate employment.

Another addition to this period's UCL prospectus is data from the UK's collection of Destination of Leaver Higher Education [DLHE] in the course descriptions to show where graduates have obtained employment. Published occupational titles are not related to subjects studied and have not been chosen just on the basis of fitting the course that the graduates had taken, they are jobs from all industries and fields. They also include jobs for which degrees are not necessary, e.g. non-graduate level occupations such as 'residential care', and previously non-graduate jobs such as 'headhunters'. UCL also explicitly addresses the issue of degrees and the broad range of jobs they can offer, as seen in Figure 12 below.

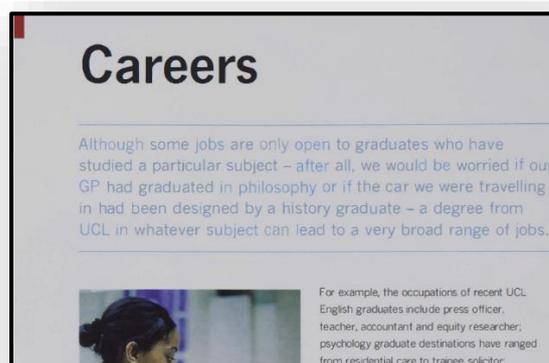


Figure 12 'Careers' (UCL 2006)

UCL's list of occupations in the prospectus are not only traditionally professional graduate roles, and this is an indication of the variability of the idea of a degree for employment (Elias & Purcell 2004).

The lack of content in course details is marked in all the prospectuses while the account of the jobs graduates could achieve afterwards is highly generic, not subject-specific, as illustrated in the UCL extract illustrated above. It reconfirms the idea that the degree is necessary for graduate employment and a professional life (Warmington 2003). This period tries to create an idea of a degree that is beyond disciplinary boundaries in terms of graduate employment, and this idea of a degree has not necessarily anything to do with content. The emphasis on graduation from UCL aligns the degree with the prestige related to the hierarchy of the institution; it is that they are UCL graduates which is

foregrounded, as emphasised in the introduction to the prospectus which discusses the importance of a UCL degree.

Kingston also engages with the use of authentic data from the DLHE and early in its prospectus represents the range of job titles that arise from the 2002 graduates' data (this would have been the most recent year available in 2005 when these prospectuses were written). The full page listing of selected job titles is shown below in Figure 13:

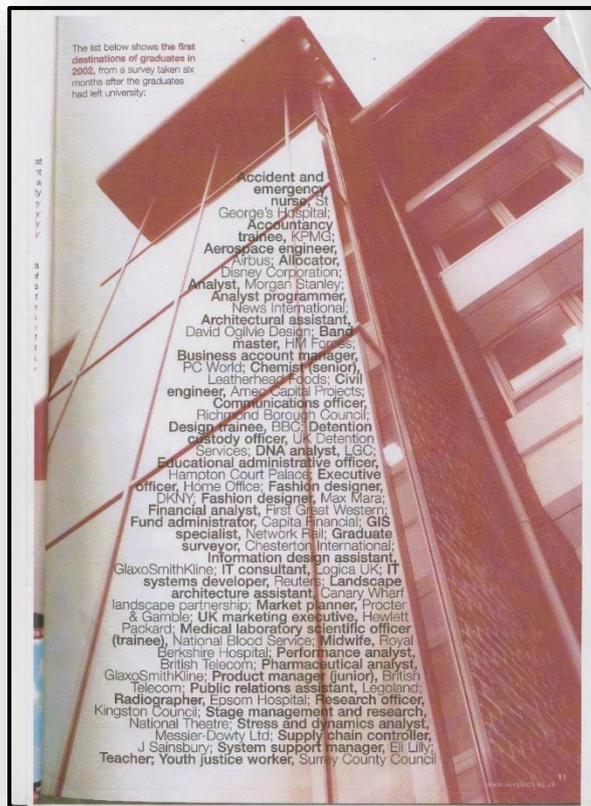


Figure 13 Kingston graduate outcomes (Kingston 2006)

The figure lists job titles and career opportunities which are a purposively selected sample by the writers of the prospectus from the data deriving from the DLHE. The jobs selected seem to be well-known medium to large enterprises with high status or vocational job titles. However, unlike in UCL's text, in the Kingston's text the graduate outcomes in the course details suggestions are consistent with the content of the courses. Additionally, Kingston mentions their faculties and schools have specialist careers-related staff who 'build up strong links with local and regional employers' (Kingston 2006), and some of these are named.

Kingston's specifying of exact outcomes including employers and selecting elite or well thought of graduate outcomes as displayed in the figure points to the importance to Kingston of reasserting the usefulness of a Kingston degree. These titles are also used as part of degree descriptors, using colloquial, friendly language: 'in the past we have had students working for ...' (Kingston 2006). This contrasts with a lowering of trust in the idea of a degree being actually a useful graduate employment product – perhaps as a result of the public discourse of a now crowded, even uncertain labour market.

That the idea of a degree as graduate employment is solidified and hegemonic is demonstrated by every instance of every degree in all four institutions referring to the graduate outcomes. There

appears to be a real concern across all prospectuses that proof of specific jobs is needed to create the belief the degree can deliver a professional future.

### **Employability**

The mid-2000s was the high point across pre-entry materials for the idea of a degree as graduate employability and assuming a degree's validity is to be judged on how transferable the skills are to business. UEL supports this and tethers the institutional purpose to industry with its discussion of skills in its prospectus. It describes curriculum development in an effusive way:

... an extensive programme of staff research, consultancy and secondments ensures that programme materials are up to date and directly relevant to a rapidly changing business world (UEL 2006).

Kingston's text stresses this 'extensive programme' of curriculum development to show engagement with industry and relevance to business. Kingston refers to a student's curriculum vitae as a motivator for taking subjects: 'several courses are available as a minor field in Business, adding a useful extra dimension to your graduate CV' (Kingston 2006).

Within a hegemonic discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment, those disciplines that do not map straight on to jobs struggle. For courses which do not have obvious industry links there are awkward constructions to make academia fit business modes. For example, when talking about a humanities course Kingston says of the most academic research-based undergraduate activity 'through the dissertation you will also develop your research interests and problem-solving skills' (Kingston 2006), thereby linking the dissertation to the discourse of employability. The extract links academic subject with generic skills and also explains how these skills will be transferable to the real world, which is clearly highly valued:

... the skills of the historian include research, information management, critical analysis, communication and ICT. These are all transferable in terms of supporting lifelong learning and career development (Kingston 2006).

As well as being externally fixated, the idea of a degree as employability is also constructed in these prospectuses on a deficit model that indicates generic skills must be developed separately from the degree. Examples are seen in UCL's prospectus, which for some time had resisted generic employability skills language and now, though the institution stresses a core program for all students, 'also provides basic training for students in key skill areas: management, business, professional and personal transferable skills' (UCL 2006): this quotation comes from the Engineering program. Importantly in terms of the homogenisation of vocabularies used by very different status institutions, a very similar description is offered by UEL in its prospectus:

Our programmes equip you not only for this work, but also with the essential problem-solving, communications and business skills necessary for success in the workplace (UEL 2006).

This reasserts the importance of the idea of a degree for graduate employment while also invoking the idea of a degree for employability and adds to the sense of employment focus in this set of prospectuses and their lens on the workplace.

### **Summary**

Within this period the prospectuses are becoming even more alike, making it difficult to determine the status of the institution now from a reading – other external sources such as league tables have to be consulted: the language is homogenising between institutions of different status. Text standardising has a codifying effect, and the differentiation of texts within this period by hierarchical status is challenging. Since differences in the texts are becoming more covert and coded, as indicated by the prestige marker in 2006, they are harder to interpret without the keys to the code in terms of

especially specific cultural capital and knowledge of higher education. In this period the messages become increasingly hard to understand without a detailed knowledge of the place of each institution in the field of higher education.

There was also within this period a significant change in the presentation of information about course materials. The new modes of presenting course information was another element being added to an already marketised higher education sector. The observed practice in this period of presenting course details in terms of their post-degree impact indicated the commodification of the degree (Naidoo & Whitty 2014). The details of courses in the institutions now are list-based, therefore fitting the definition of cold knowledge developed by Ball and Vincent's (1998), rather than narrative descriptions as in the first prospectuses reviewed from 1977 and 1984. In the course details, there are various marketing devices used by each institution, such as easy to read charts that provide enough detail so that students can apply just from the prospectus. Previously, prospectuses were only a source of information and students had to consult another source to find out details of codes and information about applications.

The prospective students are constructed as consumers, and the degree providers are vying for the students and deploying institutional markers in their struggle for 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984) in the marketplace. Consequently 'knowing the ropes' is central in the student choice making process and encompasses use of information material (Whitty & Clement 2015). Therefore, this situation makes it critical that this cold knowledge of institutional documentation is useful and accessible to enable transition information to be used by those with differing forms of cultural capital.

There is an indication of something like the traditional liberal idea of a degree, but it is expressed as a new minority discourse about the experiential value of a degree. These minority discourses relate to the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes and are expressed as 'enjoying' your degree, a love of learning', etc. As signalled in the previous set of prospectuses, this re-emergence of the traditional liberal idea of learning as the idea of a degree provided a counterpoint to the economic purposes of a degree, but is not traceable in the prospectuses of the two new university institutions.

While the prospectuses are using more external references, and increase their intertextuality in this period, only the old universities seem to reference league tables which indicate the hierarchy of the higher education sector in the UK. In the text of UCL, there are many references to elite status and hierarchy – it is a dominant theme: while the mentions in RHUL of hierarchy are not particularly strong. As noted in previous periods, Kingston again aligns its prestige to industry links and the old universities, particularly UCL, emphasise their higher hierarchical status.

A significant feature of this set of prospectuses is the presence on each course page of actual employer names and known large businesses, even when graduate outcomes research reveals that most graduates are not employed in large business (Purcell & Elias 2013). Each degree lists where previous graduates found jobs, identifiable as signs of the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment. The engagement of business in the practice of higher education has been a policy-driver for a substantial period, and was in this set of prospectuses acknowledged overtly.

In this set of prospectuses the focus on graduate employment continues but also intensifies with a linking of the idea of need for generic skills for employability in addition to the degree delivering graduate employment. The constructs of what the degree is are becoming confused; much of the language about graduate employment and employability is complex, confusing and interchangeable.

Table 23 overleaf displays the tracing of each idea of a degree in the four case study institutions' prospectuses of 2006:

Table 23 Discourse topics traced in 2006 prospectuses

	<b>Traditional liberal purposes</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
University College London [UCL]	Minority	Dominant	Minority	Minority
Royal Holloway, University of London [RHUL]	Minority	Minority	Dominant	Minority
Kingston University [Kingston]	Silenced	Silenced	Minority	Dominant
University of East London [UEL]	Silenced	Silenced	Minority	Dominant

In the previous period's analysis of prospectuses, the discourse that was traced as dominant was graduate employment and while this is still in this period strong in each institution it is not necessarily dominant. That is, the consistent reference on every page of the prospectuses about the need for skills development within the degrees, including most notably in the course details section, means that employability is the most dominant discourse in these prospectuses overall, as it seems dominant in the two new institutions and minority in the two old universities.

The entry year of 2006 was the high point of the idea of a degree for employability, and that idea is traceable and found in all institutions. Additionally, what is important for student choice is that the prospectuses are drawing from a quite limited and increasingly shared vocabulary. In writing about graduate employment and employability, very similar language choices have been made. This is during a period where the degree can be priced differently but is increasingly in different institutions described in almost the same words in each prospectus. The chapter which follows this one will compare these messages that have been traced in this prospectus with the idea of a degree as it has been established in this period.

## **2013 academic year entry – A close reading of prospectuses**

This final section of the chapter works with the texts which were published for entry in the academic year 2013. This section will undertake a close reading of the prospectuses to trace the messages about the idea of a degree within the texts.

This academic year of entry was chosen for the collection of the prospectus as the discourse-oriented secondary historical analysis of this thesis identified the preceding period in which these prospectuses were being readied for publication as one in which the macro discourse of the idea of a degree had changed. With the change, institutions could have as many of the highest achieving students they could attract but were capped on the number of lower achieving students, so the nature of who deserves access, or who deserves preferential access, to higher education was changed.

In this chapter the stage of the analysis which aims to reveal the messages about the idea of a degree is undertaken, and the next subsection begins the close reading of the 2013 prospectuses by describing the materiality of the prospectuses and their use of language

### **Description of the 2013 prospectuses**

This set of documents moves dramatically away from the previous set and seemed fully part of the digital world for the first time. Throughout the prospectuses, there are pictures, as found on websites.

Online ordering and digital copies are available for all prospectuses. In 2013, the move towards printing prospectuses on demand for students interested in their institution, and giving them the course details they asked specifically for via an online form, was the noticeable change compared to the previous prospectuses. That the digital copies are offered first to all users is an indication of a digital first strategy. For some institutions (Kingston and RHUL) in 2013 a bespoke digitally printed prospectus is possible (that is, prospective students choose the content online and have the printed prospectus sent to them). Courses are selected by the student in the ordering process and only the sections specific to the prospective students' selected interests are printed.

If the prospectuses of 2013 were designed on a 'digital first' basis, it means the assumption is they would be read primarily online and not on paper. There are indications of this assumption in the presentation of what is recognisable as web writing, short sentences with no complex phrasing and headlines giving much content information. There have been changes to the format, layout and language to ensure information is at an understandable, accessible level of English, even though it still aims at domestic undergraduates. Now the prospectus design looks more like an interactive tool framed by prospective students' questions. For example, UCL details how to choose the best degree for the reader and introduces explanations of the structures of degrees. The changes include textual and visual features that make the prospectuses less like formal academic documents and more informal, more in the style of a magazine. There are features in the prospectus that look like magazine layouts, such as UCL's year in pictures (which is of 2011, the last full calendar year before the publication of these prospectuses), as shown in Figure 14 below. Interestingly, this use of a year in the life of UCL is presented following a calendar year of January to December: it does not align with the UK academic year, September to June. Although this is a small change, it is a decision which shows the prospectus tried to represent its processes in a way that is not just academic but aligns with the wider world, an indication the institution is trying to decode the academic:



Figure 14 'UCL's Year in Pictures' (UCL 2013)

This move towards a layout that uses familiar devices from the media marks further the move to the publications as persuasive marketing tools establishing the sales offer of the institution. The importance of the institution as a brand is growing.

UEL's section entitled 'The right place to study' listed questions for students to ask themselves relating to facilities, support and accommodation, the first part of the section is shown below in Figure 15. The text asked students to find out: 'Does the talk match the reality?' (UEL 2013), inviting scrutiny of the marketing text and emphasising students' individual needs while they are studying. UEL also provides helpful questions in deciding where to study, bypassing the topic of what study to pursue, assuming prospective students have already decided that, which is a change from previous prospectus eras:



Figure 15 'Right Place to Study' (UEL 2013)

The figure above overleaf from UEL affirms that students should be sure their choice of institution is right for them, and also is a brand offer. UEL does not quote league tables, in which it usually performs badly in this era, but instead concentrates on the mode of study and how to enter the institution, as has been seen in previous prospectuses.

### **Traditional liberal**

The discourse of the traditional liberal idea of a degree, which had been dormant in the prospectuses for a long period between 1992 and only briefly emerged in 2006, reappears in this set of prospectuses in nearly all of the four institutions.

The new mode contrasts with the occasional re-emergence of the traditional liberal idea of a degree as a reaction to narrow graduate employment purposivity: it means the prospectus can suddenly switch to a discourse on the value of academic studies 'You will also address issues about the very nature of art and human perception of visual culture' (UCL 2013). The traditional liberal discourse being called upon in this way is both an acknowledgement of the hegemonic idea of a degree for graduate employment and at the same time a rejection of graduate employment as the sole narrative of a degree. Tellingly, this inverted usage of the traditional liberal idea does not deploy the idea of the inherent intellectual or self-developmental quality of a degree as the traditional liberal idea actually does, but instead it praises the degree as just a great experience for three years.

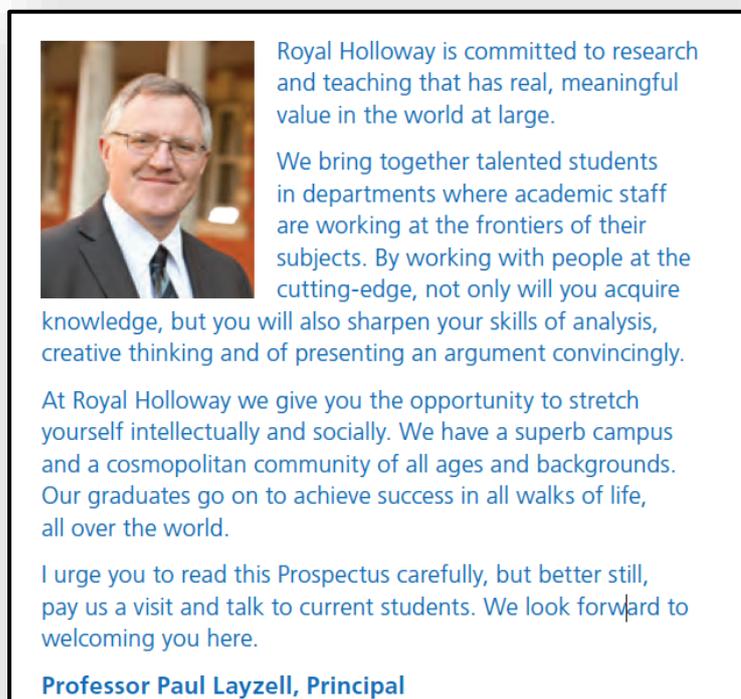
But this can be a distinctly secondary argument. The questions that UEL's prospectus is suggesting on which students should reflect are primarily graduate employment oriented in terms of which type of course they should take at UEL, whether it be single honours or sandwiched with work experience

years. Then the range of routes into UEL is explained, foregrounding routes that students without traditional A Levels can enter higher education by, detailing Foundation Degrees and Extended Degree pathways early in the prospectus (UEL 2013). Only at the end of the second page does the text make the case for UEL in a quasi-traditional liberal mode, citing the staff expertise: 'passionately committed to the subjects they teach' (UEL 2013). Further making the case for UEL, the (then acting) UEL vice-chancellor speaks on the transformative nature of higher education and the lifelong value:

However, I don't believe that a university education is just about the time you spend here; rather, I believe it is part of a lifelong journey. I am passionate about our potential to deliver an experience that will help you transform your life, and build the basis for a long and successful future (UEL 2013).

The time focus of the statement is explicitly neither on the period attending university nor the immediate graduate outcomes. It is instead focused on a much longer timeframe, another marker of differentiation of the institution and appealing to UEL's cohort of mature studies.

In RHUL's prospectus, the RHUL principal in his address, shown below in Figure 16, reminds readers there is more to studying than just acquiring knowledge. He invokes the traditional liberal idea of a degree by mentioning intellectual pursuits, and more than the idea of graduate employment: it is a transformative experience:



Royal Holloway is committed to research and teaching that has real, meaningful value in the world at large.

We bring together talented students in departments where academic staff are working at the frontiers of their subjects. By working with people at the cutting-edge, not only will you acquire knowledge, but you will also sharpen your skills of analysis, creative thinking and of presenting an argument convincingly.

At Royal Holloway we give you the opportunity to stretch yourself intellectually and socially. We have a superb campus and a cosmopolitan community of all ages and backgrounds. Our graduates go on to achieve success in all walks of life, all over the world.

I urge you to read this Prospectus carefully, but better still, pay us a visit and talk to current students. We look forward to welcoming you here.

**Professor Paul Layzell, Principal**

Figure 16 Principal's address in prospectus (RHUL 2013)

In this excerpt, the RHUL's principal includes in his short address all the topics of the discourse of the idea of a degree: traditional liberal, prestige markers, graduate employment and employability. This shows both the complexity of student choice and breadth of offer the idea of a degree has in this final period of this study, and that the traditional liberal discourse has returned in a flexible, diluted way.

## Prestige

Throughout this set of 2013 prospectuses there was an increase in traces of an identifiable discourse of the idea of a degree as a prestige marker established by the university's status in the hierarchy. The prospectuses have become inter-textual and all four institutions use diverse external indicators as markers of their degrees' prestige to establish their place within the market. They also begin to address the offer of the institution specifically, using the idea of prestige but constructed in different ways depending on their branding.

UCL's prospectus begins with a full double-page spread titled 'Why UCL', which lists in bullet point form reasons why it is the best institution. Rankings are referred to as in the Research Assessment Exercise: previous Nobel Prize winners and Royal Society members are listed – but in comparison, it does not quote any media sites such as the Good Education Guide (UCL 2013). The omission of media published tables, in which UCL would rank highly, is another coded status indicator (i.e. UCL does not need to invoke league tables). Almost all the external reference points are rarefied markers of higher education excellence, which requires a specific kind of cultural capital to decode and understand.

RHUL's offer seems to be based on a holistic student experience and says that 'Royal Holloway has earned a reputation as a place where capable, thoughtful and creative leaders blossom' (RHUL 2013). In these instances, where the reputation comes from is not indicated – this reaching out of the text to external sources, a mark of intertextuality – it is suggested – was not needed. Further indication of the institution's offer is expressed in the vice-chancellor's introductory statement, which acts as a mission statement of the prospectus:

... although no university can guarantee that a degree will enable you to walk straight into the perfect job once you leave, higher education does, on average, greatly increase your earning potential. But it's not just about getting a job; a degree widens your choices in life. Being at university brings many other opportunities you can take advantage of – freedom, great new friends, new experiences (RHUL 2013).

In Kingston's prospectus for the 2013 academic year many references are found to external sources, establishing its position: on an early page it quotes *The Guardian University Guide's* 2012 review about excellent student experience and later quotes *The Sunday Times'* university guide, which says 'the vocational nature of most Kingston degrees stands students in good stead when it comes to getting jobs' (Kingston 2013). The institution calls its degrees 'education for life' (Kingston 2013), and emphasises the integration of study into students' day to day lives. The use of media sources is enlightening about who has power and authority in the modern world and the engagement of marketing with the texts, where Kingston uses two well-known newspaper university guides, not the coded academic league tables based on a combination of higher education metrics used in the QS and THES league tables, which require greater knowledge of the higher education system to understand. It also contrasts to UCL's approach of naming no external sources.

The prospectuses have intensified prestige markers and embraced the importance of the institution in the marketing of their degrees. Earlier periods studied in this thesis showed that prospectuses ceased to market degrees on the basis of the course (having in previous periods reduced content about degrees.) They are now focusing on institutional reputation instead, and marketing the whole package, as implied by the final line of RHUL's prospectus introductory page detailing the benefits of the institution, which finishes: 'if you don't believe us come and look around' (2013) – the campus-oriented approach ends with a phrase that sounds like a sales pitch, which also appeared in the previous RHUL prospectus of 2006.

Although UEL's prospectus makes little reference to external league tables there is an acknowledgement of the idea of a degree as marked by prestige in their vice-chancellor's welcome address. In the opening pages of the UEL prospectus he offers 'A future in which you will not just be a

university graduate, but proud to be a UEL graduate' (UEL 2013). This statement engages with the notion that degrees are marked by their awarding institution and opposes the notion that only elite institutions confer status that graduates should be proud of.

All four institutions in this set engage with the idea of a degree marked by the prestige of the institution, but as in previous sets of prospectuses reviewed in this study interpret this in different ways depending on their branding. This sector wide engagement indicates the importance of the discourse of the prestige of institutions.

### **Graduate Employment**

Graduate employment is of key focus in this period, and is being used in ways unseen before. RHUL goes further with the idea of a degree being for life, invoking the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment in its statement using DLHE data:

We want to ensure that a Royal Holloway degree is an investment for life, securing privileged access to our events, facilities, networks and support through an active and involved alumni community ... Six months after graduating, 89% of 2010 Royal Holloway first degree graduates were working, studying or both (RHUL 2013).

In another part of the text, RHUL mentions a 3% unemployment statistic according to DLHE data, proof of the success of the degrees, and a key performance indicator that was established as a metric of the major idea of a degree from the institutional perspective.

The development of the previous period's interest in work experience and engagement with industry is now being voiced, and the growth of valuing 'authentic' experience is no longer just implicit as in previous years, but has become a significant marker of the discourse of employment. For example, in UEL's prospectus one course description states:

These programmes provide valuable real-world experience which is highly attractive to employers when you graduate and can often lead directly to a job (UEL 2013).

The excerpt deploys the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment, and affirms the value of degrees as being judged by employers – and the 'real-world experience' as helping with this. The use of the term 'real-world' is meaningful as it can be seen to position university study as theoretical and impractical: the real-world experience is in opposition to studying, thereby negatively invoking the discourse of the idea of a degree for traditional liberal education.

Traceable in this period is a trend to make degree titles more like industry names or job titles, rather than theoretical or academic-sounding titles that require explanation to map onto occupation titles. At Kingston, many have become work-based e.g. 'BSc Environmental Hazards and Disaster Management' (2013). Another, discursively related, change is that the language has subtly altered in subject-related positions by changing the usage to 'becoming a psychologist' (Kingston 2013) from the previous use in prospectuses 'doing psychology' (Kingston 1998). In Kingston's prospectus, the link between degree and vocational aim is both stronger and fallacious, as the degree course, while preparing for training, as a psychologist does not include the practical training requirements or even postgraduate study required: the psychology degree mentioned is the first step but does not guarantee becoming a psychologist.

The role of employment in the idea of a degree is echoed in the RHUL prospectus, when even in a section on access for all and widening participation, employers are mentioned: 'Work to enhance learning opportunities for all has engendered a series of mutually beneficial relationships with local, regional, national and global organizations, including Procter and Gamble, Mercedes Benz, BP and the BBC' (RHUL 2013). The connection can be direct. In the UCL description of its careers advisory service an employment recruiter is referenced: 'Working in collaboration with UCL Careers Service, Matchtech Group have attended numerous employment fairs ...' (UCL 2013).

The discourse of graduate employment in relation to the idea of a degree, as seen in all four institutions in this period, was identifiable as the hegemonic theme within the UK prospectuses, but there are now multiple markers being invoked relating to the concept. Potential employment prospects related to the degree are foregrounded in this round of prospectuses, with some mention of careers, employment or job outcome on the early pages of each publication.

### **Employability**

Across all the institutions in the 2013 prospectuses, there was a significant move in the materials away from the explicit and specific generic skills-based language used in the 1998 and 2006 prospectuses, and a silencing of the discourse of the idea of a degree seemingly for employability: such material as appears on skills language is now related to graduate employment. In this period, a general discussion of transferable discipline specific skills appeared as attributes, as the former graduate employability discourse became more complex and was integrated into learning and teaching agendas within institutions (Holmes 2011).

There is now also a lack of consensus within the prospectuses about the meanings of skills-based language and the formerly fairly simple concept of employability as the capacity to become employed has become a complex marker that means different things to different segments, what Morley calls a 'condensation symbol' (2003), and one very hard to pin down. For example, in the UEL prospectus there appears a distinction between degrees:

We offer courses that are designed to prepare you for specific careers, such as podiatry or civil engineering, and also courses that are broader but offer you the opportunity to learn invaluable transferable skills suited to a large range of careers (UEL 2013).

The extract could suggest that the discourse of the idea of a degree for employability has been substituted with that of graduate employment in courses, and not simply those that are vocationally oriented courses like Podiatry and Civil Engineering. However, other extracts from the prospectuses seem to show that the language of skills is becoming more complex and at the same time more similar between the institutions, and is referring to long-term graduate employment, not the mere process of gaining employment as a graduate:

Empowering you with study and life skills - Integral to your learning is the development of skills which will serve you well whatever your future holds. These include researching skills (such as sourcing, sifting and analysing information), communication skills (from making presentations to learning about teamwork), time management, motivational and leadership skills as well as social and cultural awareness (UCL 2013).

We understand the importance of graduate employability - during your student years and beyond ... Employers want well-rounded graduates. As well as a good academic record, they look for evidence of involvement in student activities and work-experience. [The institution] offers plenty of opportunities to develop your skills on campus and meet employers, starting from the week you join (RHUL 2013).

These excerpts reframe the skill-possessing employable graduate of the past prospectuses as someone capable of gaining employment long-term, rather than merely achieving an immediate post degree position. This interest in the degree being for long-term gain is seen in RHUL's statement on employability which includes 'We want to ensure that a Royal Holloway degree is an investment for life' (RHUL 2013). It works on several levels, and UCL discusses the general skills, including those of study, as an investment: 'Empowering you with study and life skills integral to your learning is the development of skills which will serve you well whatever your future holds' (UCL 2013). Each of the four institutions in the study talk about the longevity of the degree qualification, and this notion of a return on investment can be seen as a response to the over-credentialing and oversupply of graduates.

## Summary

This subsection summarises the close reading of the prospectuses published by the case study institutions in 2013. The entry of websites to market courses had been building for many years but it is only in 2013 that the printing of hard copy prospectuses ended for many institutions. There are still printed prospectuses, but these are now printed only on demand from students after they have chosen their subjects. They are sent along with a general introduction and text on funding and fees. This set of prospectuses was the last where students could browse the whole of a university's offering.

In this last set of prospectuses weight has shifted towards the institutional character, and the prospectuses spend more time than in any previous period establishing their institutional habitus and promoting it. The actions of the institutions can be understood to be demonstrating competitiveness and the homogenising of the vocabularies to describe themselves is theorised by Baker and Brown (2007): the institutions in this period are consistently using the same language such as quality, excellence, student experience and Baker and Brown (2007) argued that the institutions are appropriating the 'sayings of the tribe' (1990, p.110).

These approaches reflect the actions of institutions where they 'developed strategies to convince parent and student customers to "buy" a particular, higher education "brand name".' (Slaughter & Leslie 2001, p. 157) The value of the brand name at each institution is invoked in different, coded ways that put forward the 'brand offer' of each institution. Each institution in previous prospectuses, such as 1977 or 1984 explicitly named and addressed its audience, whether students moving away from home for the first time (UCL 1984; RHUL 1984), mature students looking for industry engagement (Kingston 1977) or part-time students (UEL 1977; 1984). However in this set of prospectuses there is no explicit definition of the audience that the university is targeting. Instead of the previously explicit discussion of audience there are now just taste markers that are deployed differentially to appeal to different parts of the market who can 'read' them (Whitty & Clement 2015). In this way, the differentiation of the institutions has become more covert by suppressing mention of different target cohorts of students.

For middle-class students seeking education to maintain their class position, there is evidence that they select from a small group of elite institutions (Thomas 2001). There are also indications that for working-class students and non-traditional students the experience of education and nature of study is more important and the choice is made on broader characteristics (Adnett & Tlupova 2008). The taste markers that are used in prospectuses of this period, when the audiences are not only signalled by words but also by other semiotic markers, include those to appeal to specific tastes. For example, those students looking for elite providers might respond to information which talks about position in league table, research status and elite graduate employers. For students seeking to choose on an experiential basis, read here as a diluted marker of the traditional liberal idea of a degree, there are markers in the prospectuses relating to the friendliness of the campus, course support by academics and other staff and local employers that are known. The use of pictures is also very important in these now highly visual documents. The increase in pictures, many of which now have more students in them, invokes student choice research that indicates students look for institutions where 'people like me' go (Bowl 2003). This is interesting when contrasted to the prospectuses of the earliest periods studied which were often still-life of artefacts of study or landscape photos of campus and of either empty classrooms or even few and less identifiable students.

When considering the messages within these prospectuses, it is noticeable that there is absent in any prospectus in this era a scrutiny of course content, or an account of what happens in the lectures and the classrooms. There is an increasing interest in the student experience beyond the classroom and the prospectuses talk in similar terms, using similar language, about their extra-curricular offers such as in-course volunteering, while there is also interest in the global reach and possibilities for

overseas experience within the degree and afterwards. There are also some diluted indications of the traditional liberal idea of education, and these are particularly concentrated in the old universities of UCL and RHUL.

The idea of a degree as indicated by a prestige marker increases in this period in terms of its breadth of traceability across all the prospectuses. It has been dominant for several sets of prospectuses in UCL's texts but in this set, all of the institutions invoke external sources which use different league tables from different sources to justify their place in the hierarchy. Kingston uses student experience league tables which offer a different hierarchy of institutions in the UK, and UEL mentions its friendliness and accessibility. RHUL aligns itself with a different brand offer, mentioning it has one of the highest rates of successful completion. There have been no other references in any previous set of prospectuses to the completion of the courses, nor are they in any other prospectus of this period, despite it being one of Archer's (2003) findings that this is important to working-class students as part of the value of the degree.

The universities, in setting up their brand (Slaughter & Leslie 2001), establish their markers of difference in implicit, coded ways. The offer of each institution is identifiable if the specific cultural capital and understanding of the higher education field is available. UCL's prospectus details its research expertise and the number of academics who are in a Royal Society to establish its brand marker, and does not mention league tables. RHUL's prospectus constructs its offer by quoting the high student completion rates and concentrates on the rich student extra- and co-curricular experience that the institution offers. Kingston, as it has done in every set of prospectuses studied, asserts its link to industry and the authentic nature of its job-oriented courses. UEL emphasises the different pathways into the degree, the passion of their staff and the flexibility of their provision. This varying discourse of prestige is a dominant one in this set of prospectuses across all the institutions.

The idea of a degree for graduate employment is referenced in all the prospectuses of this period, however, it seems normalised as if it is an obvious linkage. The graduate employment focus has shifted from the importance of just getting any job to getting a job that is of high status, either with a named large employer in the old universities or getting an entrée into a job through on-course internships in the new universities. However, although this discourse is throughout the prospectuses of this period it does not seem the most important.

Employability in this period, compared to the last edition of prospectuses, has substantially waned, although there is still mention of skills and the need for them. The idea of authentic work experience which is similar to but different from employability has replaced it as a recurrent theme, and this maps more closely to the idea of graduate employment rather than to an idea of lifelong learning of generic skills.

Table 24 overleaf shows the deployment of the discourses within this set of prospectuses:

Table 24 Discourse topics traced in 2013 prospectuses

	<b>Traditional liberal purposes</b>	<b>Prestige</b>	<b>Graduate employment</b>	<b>Employability</b>
University College London [UCL]	Minority	Dominant	Minority	Minority
Royal Holloway, University of London [RHUL]	Minority	Dominant	Minority	Minority
Kingston University [Kingston]	Silenced	Minority	Dominant	Minority
University of East London [UEL]	Minority	Minority	Dominant	Minority

The discourse that was strongest in this set of prospectuses was the discourse topic of prestige of the degree in the old universities, whereas graduate employment was strongest in the new universities. The idea of the prestige of the degree was reviewed in the literature as being linked to the hierarchy of institutions, but the analysis of all the sets of prospectuses has shown how prestige is constructed differently by the various institutions. It has by this period of entry become an extremely important marker of the idea of a degree in all the prospectuses.

This chapter has undertaken a close reading of the prospectuses and the next chapter is the Discussion chapter.

## 8. Discussion

This chapter draws together the analysis and develops the findings of the research in this thesis. As the research problem is focused on the development of the discourses themselves throughout the time period, their ebb and flow throughout the years is discussed here thematically to see how the discourses have developed over time. The research problem of this study asks two questions. Firstly, what are the messages of the idea of a degree, and secondly how these messages about the idea of a degree are discernible in the prospectuses? The thesis's research questions seek to generate understandings of how messages about the idea of a degree are presented and also encoded in the prospectuses, and how these messages have changed over the period of massification. Part of the thematic analysis is to consider whether the discourses have operated differently in the different institutions.

This Discussion chapter operates as the formulation of critique, which is step seven within the discourse–historical approach of Reisigl and Wodak (2009). To follow this step, which comes directly after their sixth step of detailed case studies, that was worked on in the chapter of the same name, is to formulate a critique which involves the 'interpretation of results, taking into account the relevant context knowledge and referring to the three dimensions of critique' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 96). This thesis adheres to Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) tripartite method of critique, as detailed in the Methodological Framework chapter: '1. Text or discourse immanent critique... 2. Socio-diagnostic critique ... 3. Prospective critique' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009, p. 88). To deal with the three dimensions of critique mentioned, it has been important to take note of the orientation of the research questions, as defined in the Literature Review chapter, and the boundaries of the scope of this research, outlined in the Methodological Framework chapter. It is also clear that this is a subjective exercise and naturally one influenced by the analyst's perspective. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, my intention is for my position in the research to be clear and my interest in promoting a more mindful and more widely comprehensible production of institutional texts should be also made apparent. I have tried in the analysis of, reflection on, and discussion of the texts, to follow methodological processes so that there is a clear pathway to and justification of the contributions the thesis makes.

The chapter is supported also by LeGreco and Tracy's research (2009); they put forward a method of analysis drawing on the critical discourse analysis traditions, including that of Fairclough (1992; 1993; 1995; 2001). They suggest that once analyses have been undertaken (explained as applying structured questions to the data), there needs to be a step which involves 'translating the resulting raw data into a more accessible narrative' (LeGreco & Tracy 2009, p. 1535). They hold that forming stories which arise from the data requires critical reflection to find common elements and to shape a narrative to bring together a tangible product (LeGreco & Tracy 2009): this expands Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) approach to the formulation of critique. It is this formulation that the next sections of this chapter will undertake.

Approaching this Discussion chapter in two parts, the chapter aims to look at the same documents, the prospectuses, and the same analysis that has been carried out, through two different lenses. One of these lenses is chronological, to see how the prospectuses can be understood to have identifiable discourses which respond to or ignore the discursive events that have occurred in the period that could have influenced their writing. There is, however, no assumption that the discursive event or eventement did, or must have, changed the discourses viewable or the constructs that may be central to that institution. The chronological lens is merely assessing the discourses that seem to be most prominent in the prospectuses in the four chosen case study institutions in the period after the discursive event has been identified by secondary historical analysis. The other lens used in this chapter is one which considers the discourse topics identified as a whole and discusses them thematically. Deciding what and how texts invoke discourses is intricate: Reisigl and Wodak talk about

the boundaries of a discourse being partly fluid (Reisigl & Wodak 2009). In the context of marketisation of higher education, Fairclough discusses the boundaries and insulations between 'orders of discourse' being impacted on as part of broader struggles and social conflicts (Fairclough 1993). The discourses that are analysed in this thesis are examined to try and make, in Fairclough's terms, the relationships in discursive practices 'identifiable between the texts and events' (Fairclough 1993, p. 135). The naming of the discourses therefore should not be seen as concrete but as approximations of positions towards the understanding of what could be identified as the institutions' constructions of the idea of a degree.

In what follows, the first major section of this chapter will trace the four discourses that were identified in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter through the data that was collected in the four case study institutions, across the six time periods. The next section will chronologically review the key themes and suggest contextual narratives of the periods of massification. The final section draws together the elements of this chapter and proposes findings to be discussed in the Conclusion chapter of this thesis.

### **Chronological development of the idea of a degree**

This section takes a time period approach to the discourses of the idea of a degree and reflects on the macro discourse changes identified in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter and the analysis of the prospectuses in each of the periods across all four institutions.

In analysing the discourses as they play out in the different period, it facilitates an understanding of how the idea of a degree has been constructed by institutions from readings of the prospectus texts. There are different identifications of discourses about the idea of a degree that are brought together in each of these sections which are: firstly the eventemente that prompted the collection of materials in this period; secondly the macro discourses identified through secondary analysis of the literature; and thirdly my analyses of each of the prospectuses.

#### **1977 prospectuses' key themes**

The period of the mid-1970s was one where the idea of the purpose of a degree was changing in its impact in policy discourses; the eventemente of the Ruskin speech (Callaghan 1976) was established as a key point in this process. Callaghan's Ruskin speech introduced to the UK the global idea of education to increase human capital, and drew higher education in as a tool to serve the need to raise the population's skills for the economic prosperity of the nation. Table 25 below summarises the discourse topics identified in the close reading of the prospectuses in the Detailed Case Studies chapter alongside the macro discourses identified in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter:

*Table 25 Macro discourses compared with discourses traced in 1977 prospectuses*

	<b>Traditional liberal</b>		<b>Prestige</b>		<b>Graduate employment</b>		<b>Employability</b>	
<i>Old (pre-1992) or new (post-1992) institution</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>New</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>New</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>New</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>New</i>
<i>Academic year of prospectus 1977</i>	X	X	X			X		?
<b><i>Macro discourse topics identified in 1977 eventemente period</i></b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>			

As can be seen in the table above, three of the discourses identified through secondary historical policy analysis in the year of writing of the prospectuses, that is traditional liberal idea of a degree, prestige of a degree related to its awarding institution and graduate employment can be traced within the 1977 set of prospectuses from the four case study institutions: employability does not seem present but is possibly emerging in the new universities. However, there is significant differentiation by type of institution in relation to the idea of a degree, with the new universities deploying clearly the idea of a degree for graduate employment but old universities not as strongly. The old universities concentrate on collegial and traditional liberal notions of education and draw on their heritage and research expertise. The idea of a degree as a signal of prestige is invoked by the old universities and not the new. The two non-university HEIs involve external references to support the value of their degree, including invoking their historical location, longevity as a polytechnic, and at UEL the awarding body of the CNAA. This suggests they are not able to draw on internal markers of prestige and recognise their subordinate place in the hierarchy.

Using Jager and Meier's (2009) concept of discursive events, the analysis of the institutional prospectuses are contrasted against the event of the period to see whether, and if so how, it changed the discourse practices. Although there are some indications of graduate employment and emerging links with industry in this set of prospectuses, there is a lack of evidence of reaction to the discursive event of the Ruskin speech (1976). It seems as if the flow down of the idea of a degree for employment is not yet being replicated in the prospectuses across all institutions. This is an example of policy taking time to influence practice in education (Ball 2015). Although the prospectuses show that the need for education to engage with industry and professional skills is stronger in the new universities, this was a long-standing practice of the polytechnics and their previous incarnations (such as Kingston's initial links to industry), so they cannot be said to have arisen from the Ruskin speech only (1976). Therefore, while higher education is being discussed as becoming part of the economy in macro policy and is linked to the idea of human capital (Becker 1964), the policy was not discernible in the marketing practice within the prospectuses.

These prospectuses do not seem to show a strong indication of institutional discursive enactment of national policies towards higher education being linked to the imperative to be trained for the benefit of the economy. The case study institutions' documents reviewed here still in a number of ways seem products of a system where the idea of a degree, with some rare and future-oriented exceptions, is essentially constructed in elite terms.

### **1984 prospectuses' key themes**

The eventement of 1983 was established in this research as being when the private returns from higher education become foregrounded, driven by funding for higher education being reconceptualised as needing private funds (Carpentier 2005). The period was the beginning of the idea of a degree as a consumer product, supported by the Conservative government's neo-liberal oriented market ideology. Table 26 overleaf shows the discourse topics traced in the 1984 prospectuses along with the macro discourses traced in the eventement preceding the academic year of entry chosen:

Table 26 Macro discourses compared with discourses traced in 1984 prospectuses

	Traditional liberal		Prestige		Graduate employment		Employability	
	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New
<i>Old (pre-1992) or New (post-1992) institution</i>								
<i>Academic year of prospectus 1984</i>	X		X			X		X
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 1984 eventemente period</b>			X		X			

Noted in table 26 above the macro discourses identified are both identifiable in the prospectuses but the traditional liberal discourse topic remains in the marketing materials while it has disappeared from policy discourse. Within the macro discourses, Barnett describes this period as the ending of the traditional liberal elite era of higher education (1990). Therefore within this set of prospectuses there could be expected to be a significant shift from the previous set: however a close reading of the prospectuses does not show them significantly different from the previous period reviewed within this study, although there are some new instances of invoking the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment, mainly in what will become the new universities. Marketisation of the texts is not particularly strong, although there are moves towards an introduction of new modes of persuasion. This could be linked to the identified policy change for this eventemente, that being at university now costs money, students do not receive grants, and they are not paid to be there. What can be observed is a shift towards an emphasis on gains to be made from undertaking the studies. This period can be argued to be one where the policy eventemente impacts on the texts and can be understood to have acted as a discursive event.

The content of the degrees offered by each institution is still explained in depth and in academic terms, but there are no references to any theoretical orientation of courses. The institutions of the case study prospectuses from this era appear now to be framing the idea of a degree in terms of the benefit of higher education for the economy. The polytechnic providers engage more with industry, and these institutions have increased their references to industry links, whereas the old universities still rely on their prestige in enabling the graduates to prepare for graduate employment. That the new universities have career outcomes listed under degrees, a feature introduced in this set of prospectuses, suggests a subtle shift of emphasis of the idea of a degree from subjects studied towards graduate employment.

Although expenditure in the period of 1983 was of concern, questions about value for money related to graduate outcomes do not yet pervade these prospectuses. But there is certainly an increase in the future post-graduation focus of the degrees and what outcomes may be possible from the study that students are considering. There is also a major shift in that, unlike the previous set of prospectuses, these documents do not indicate that the institutional writers, apart from at UEL, are addressing students considering whether to undertake a degree, but rather those who have already decided to engage with higher education.

Although in this summary there is no substantial shift in the texts, there is a subtle difference in discursive practices, as these prospectuses begin, in their messages about the idea of a degree, to move away from the traditional liberal idea of a degree. This is happening particularly in the future new universities. The idea of a degree is being reformed towards a product of the market, as can be seen in the prospectuses' awareness of the need for degrees to provide value for money, particularly

in terms of graduate outcomes and the skills to make one employable. Therefore, there does seem to have been an influence of the eventemete in the discursive practices in the prospectuses of this period.

### 1992 prospectuses' key themes

Table 27 below shows the discourse topics traced in the close reading of the prospectuses alongside the macro discourses identified in the eventemete preceding the academic year:

Table 27 Macro discourses compared with discourses traced in 1992 prospectuses

	Traditional liberal		Prestige		Graduate employment		Employability	
	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New
<i>Old (pre-1992) or New (post-1992) institution</i>								
<i>Academic year of prospectus 1992</i>			X		X	X	X	X
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 1992 eventemete period</b>			X		X		X	

Analysis of the prospectuses shown in Table 27 above indicates the major change is that the idea of a degree for graduate employment is invoked in all institutions and is one of the significant drivers of why students would attend university. The traditional liberal idea of a degree is absent and prestige remains present as a discourse topic in the old universities. Employability as a discourse topic appears in all the prospectuses, particular examples of some vocations emerge, and in the UK, all institutions reviewed, including the elite ones, mention generic skills related to employability such as 'self-confidence'.

The product of the degree is increasingly commodified and seen in terms of 'graduate outcomes', not the content of the courses: there is concentration on the idea of a degree and graduate employment. This is more apparent in the lower-status institutions, but all institutions take up the vocational theme rather than the academic theme of the 1970s. As well as vocationalism, the first suggestions of attending university for the experience or rite of passage begin to appear, which is noticeable as stressing the student experience can be read as a diluted form of the traditional liberal idea of a degree.

The prospectus material has not yet become significantly more marketised than in previous periods, nor explicitly more competitive. In this period, the examined prospectuses (excluding the unavailable UEL prospectus) could be expected to have been impacted by major structural reforms in the ending of the binary system and the apparently related discursive shift to marketisation. As the changes were not introduced suddenly by the UK governments, and there were three years to prepare for the publication of those prospectuses, it is a surprise that the materials were quite similar to the previous set of 1984, in terms of their delivery of information.

The eventemete of this period related to the ending of the binary divide and the creation of new universities from the old polytechnics. This created a single system of higher education within the UK and the policy driver was to create a market in higher education and simplify funding arrangements. There were key concerns about quality raised during the period and whether degrees from former polytechnics and universities would be the same, and this debate is related to the discourse of the idea of a degree linked to the prestige of the awarding institution.

In the case studies, the prospectuses of each institution are becoming more similar than in previous periods with some points of difference between the old and the new universities studied. In this period institutions, through the structural changes to the systems, were becoming less explicitly codified by formal status and such a change within the tertiary system made it more challenging to read the status of the institutions, while the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment gained hegemonic status.

For this period of 1992 there was certainly a change in discursive practices for the new universities as they changed their status and gained degree awarding powers in their own right. However, it is not clear whether this impacted extensively on the discourse of the idea of a degree: rather it impacted on the field in which the discourse of the idea of a degree changed.

### 1998 prospectuses' key themes

The eventemete of this period was the introduction of fees for domestic students in the UK, following the recommendations of the Dearing Report (1997). A core message of the Dearing report related to the importance of higher education serving the needs of the knowledge economy and this aligned with the new Labour government's desires, and so was a key driver of the reforms that introduced fees. The linking of higher education to the economy increased the focus on graduate employment as a measure of degree success. There was also a continued development of the marketisation of higher education and now there were metrics such as graduate employment by which to compare institutions quantitatively. Table 28 below shows the discourses identified in the close reading of the prospectuses in the Detailed Case Studies chapter, alongside the macro discourses identified in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter:

Table 28 Macro discourses compared with discourses traced in 1998 prospectuses

	Traditional liberal		Prestige		Graduate employment		Employability	
	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New
<i>Old (pre-1992) or New (post 1992 institution)</i>								
<i>Academic year of prospectus 1998</i>	X		X		X	X	X	X
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 1998 eventemete period</b>			X		X		X	

As table 28 indicates, the prospectuses of this period share a hegemonic inclusion of the discourse of graduate employment and also the discourse topic of employability in the idea of a degree. Within the old universities there are still traces of the discourse topic of prestige and some trace of the traditional liberal idea of a degree re-entering the old universities but in a new, different form.

As these prospectuses were published immediately after the Dearing report appeared, they quite possibly required some quick rewriting from documents which were already print ready. Although the macro discourse around the idea of a degree had been moving towards fees for some time, the Dearing report actioned them. The 1998 entry prospectuses were available for prospective students at the beginning of the 1997 academic year in September for applications to start in the following academic year. In the prospectuses is represented for the first time the degree as an item for student purchase – a product which has been costed. There is no longer much emphasis on the content of the degree and great significance is given to post-degree outcomes, primarily of graduate employment.

The increased focus on graduate outcomes in the prospectuses suggest that the policy changes that have been identified as an eventemente in this research can be traced as a discursive event (Jager & Meier 2009), as the discursive practices of prospectuses changed in this set of prospectuses.

### 2006 prospectuses' key themes

The discourse topics traced in the close reading of the prospectuses of the case study institutions for the academic year 2006 are shown below in Table 29 alongside the macro discourses identified in the eventemente relating to the academic year selected:

Table 29 Macro discourses compared with discourses traced in 2006 prospectuses

	Traditional liberal		Prestige		Graduate employment		Employability	
	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New
<i>Old (pre-1992) or New (post 1992 institution)</i>								
<i>Academic year of prospectus 2006</i>	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 2006 eventemente period</b>			X		X		X	

Although Table 29 shows little change from the previous set of prospectuses, there are substantial differences in the presentation of the prospectuses. The traditional liberal idea of a degree is present in the old universities in the new diluted form of student experience. Prestige is invoked by all the institutions, whether hierarchical status of institutions or in Kingston's case a counter discourse which draws prestige from its industry connections. Graduate employment is still present and employability, while traceable is waning in its previous dominance.

The discourses deployed have been homogenised and focus on the four discourse topics of the idea of a degree can be identified, indicating a heightened branding and awareness of the selling of the degree. Although all the discourse topics identified are presented slightly differently by institutions, and have responded to change, they are discernible, except for traditional liberal which is not in the new universities. Employability skills do not seem as significant as in previous prospectuses, particularly not the generic employability skills such as problem solving, communication, or team work. When skills are mentioned they are often high level – critical reasoning, research skills, negotiation and are even discipline-focused. However, their use overall is significantly waning in repeated explanations of employability. Employability has been described by Morley as an empty signifier (Morley 2007) and the concept is used for so many purposes and with such inconsistency in the prospectuses it is hard to establish how it is being used.

The eventemente of this period was the introduction of variable fees for institutions, along with a requirement for institutions to put measures in place to ensure fair access to their institutions. The introduction of the variable fees was designed to promote a market, and at the time of writing the 2006 prospectuses the institutions did not publicly know whether other institutions in the sector would be charging the full amount of fees or the baseline amount. However, in the end, all the institutions within this study charged the full amount of fees and the policy of variable fees did not differentiate the price for an undergraduate degree.

Within the prospectuses, there is an increase in marketing practices (Fairclough 1993), but, the institutions do not respond explicitly to the most recent eventemente of fees being charged, albeit the degree has become more commodified. There is little evidence that the increase in fees to £3000 had any effect on the specific prospectuses. However, in the UK, the media reaction to the increases

created debate about the overcrowded graduate job market (Burke 2001). Therefore, the prospectuses' strong deployment of the idea of a degree for graduate employment is traceable to perceived concerns about the actual worth of the qualification, which may have been encouraged by the media reaction about fees.

Marketisation of higher education has clearly impacted on this set of prospectuses, though uneven in development, and institutions are not necessarily competing explicitly against other institutions, using the prestige markers to invite the students to compare other institutions. The key theme of the prospectuses is the linking of the degree to business and industry, but the fact that students are paying increased, marketised fees did not appear in these documents to be a discursive event within Jager and Meier's (2009) terms. Further, there did not seem to be a discursive event in this period. That is, although the discursive practices within the prospectuses increased in their focus on graduate employment and employability and professionalised their marketing, they did not become explicitly competitive in their prospectuses.

### 2013 prospectuses' key themes

By 2013, what was displayed in this set of prospectuses was a further homogenising, even since the 2006 period, particularly with the increased use of the same vocabulary throughout the documents, as if there was one script from which the idea of degree marketisation derives. The idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes was traced in all prospectuses, in a weaker more diluted form connected to student experience and enjoyment of learning. The discourse of prestige also featured in all the case study institutions, however the new universities constructed this as a counter discourse to the hegemonic hierarchical status of institutions. Higher education sector internal policy documents and sector-wide markers, such as league tables, external collections of data and research assessment exercises, are all mentioned. Graduate employment was mentioned in all the prospectuses but as noted in the Detailed Case Studies chapter no longer seemed as dominant. Graduate employment markers seemed in this set more connected to the discourse of prestige than before, as shown by the intensification of the trend to name large or elite employers. Employability and generic skills language also was present in four prospectuses although it was even less of a focus than in previous institutions. That all four identified discourse topics could be traced in all institutions in this period, as noted in table 30 below, indicates a proliferation of discourses about the idea of a degree, which would make the reading of the prospectuses to understand and differentiate their offer much more difficult. Table 30 below shows the discourse topics identified in the close reading of the case study institutions 2013 prospectuses, alongside the macro discourses identified in the period:

Table 30 Macro discourses compared with discourses traced in 2013 prospectuses

	Traditional liberal		Prestige		Graduate employment		Employability	
	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New
<i>Old (pre-1992) or New (post 1992 institution)</i>								
<i>Academic year of prospectus 2013</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Macro discourse topics identified in 2013 eventemente period</b>			X		X			

The idea of a degree is becoming openly discussed, and institutions are using a language that echoes that found in national texts of the policy (Boden & Nedeva 2010). The old and the new universities have lost their overtly differentiating factors, which once provided a range of higher

education modes; there has been a loss of variant voices through marketisation, massification and unification of the system.

The idea of a degree for graduate employment is clearly constructed in the texts as the primary reason for study and its imperative has intensified in response to the policy introduction of higher fees and significant competition between courses: the interest in employability has accordingly weakened. In the 2013 prospectuses, employability is constructed merely as a means of assuring graduate employment. The exchange value of a degree in the graduate employment market has become a marker of degree quality, used by the government authorities to feed into league tables. As can be seen from the institutions' use of league tables, these indicators matter to the universities.

However what is new is the attention given to extra-curricular elements of student experience. Perhaps this foregrounding of the student experience is compelling for the institutions because the idea of a degree being a curriculum-based knowledge transfer process was under threat during this period by calls for increased focus on industry-relevant learning (Tomlinson 2012). The calls for increased linking to industry, derived from macro discourses which commenced in the mid-1990s, and the idea of a degree as a significant cog in the machinery of the local domestic economy might leave the universities not sure what they are selling. There is evidence in all prospectuses of the universities trying to add both innate value and increased commodification, such as talking about the 'free' extras to be acquired. The idea of a degree as judged from this experience is highly experiential in nature and there are very few specific details about any of the fields of study.

As a reaction to the somewhat dehumanising metric of graduate employment, there is, in contrast to all previous sets of prospectuses, an emphasis on the lifelong purpose of degrees across all types of institutions. This longer time-frame links to a key inconsistency highlighted by Morley (2007) and Clegg (2010) in the definition of employability, the time period over which the institutions are describing the purpose of a degree paying off. There is in each of the prospectuses an explicit response to the macro discourse which expects an immediate pay-off of the degree investment, because of the heightened fees. This is a response to the increased focus on the need for admissions materials be more explicit about the purpose of a degree.

The analysis of the prospectuses shows that there was a change in discursive practices following the identified eventements in terms of their heightened marketing focus and new introduction of ideas of a degree relating to completion and lifelong learning. Therefore, the 2012 eventement can be seen to have been a discursive event (Jager & Meier 2009); however it is also a development from previous eventementes as the process of marketisation of higher education through the period of massification has been gradual but consistent.

The next section works through Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) seventh step of a formulation of critique relating to each of the discourse topics traced in each set of prospectuses.

## **Thematic discussion of discourse topics of the idea of degree**

This section takes a thematic view and looks at the discourses over the whole period of study and at how the discourse topics have developed and changed over time within the data. The discourses reviewed were identified in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, based on constructs of the idea of a degree. They were thematically named through a reading of the extant literature and four discourses were traced through the prospectuses: this section considers how they have developed over the time period.

### **Traditional liberal**

This subsection considers the deployment of the traditional liberal idea of a degree across the period of massification, as identified in the prospectuses by each historical eventement. Within the

texts there are traceable instances of the traditional liberal idea of a degree in the first sets (1977 and 1984) which are followed by a long period where it is difficult to ascertain any use of the discourse. Its re-emergence from 1998 appeared stronger in the old universities. It is also to some extent used as well in the new universities in different form, as the idea of a degree offering a whole set of other life attributes, including foreign holidays (invoked by the advertising of year abroad appearing from 1998) and talking about news events and political participation (invoked by pictures of discussion groups in non-study rooms, not in pubs or bars).

In 1976, the opening period of this study, passages were found within the prospectuses explaining what degrees were, what students' study would be like in operational terms, and what made up the academic nature of the course. The text was written from an academic perspective and the impetus of the course descriptions described what the prospective student would be doing during the course; the time period in focus was clearly that of the degree itself, not the student's later use of the qualification (Clegg 2010). The set of prospectuses from 1976 used a language to distinguish the academy from the professional associations, but by the early 1980s the language distinguished the academy from industry, in contrast to the present day, where the missions of the academy of professions and industry are purported to be aligned.

In another aspect of the traditional liberal idea of a degree, there are some indications about it being re-constructed as a pastime in the pre-entry course materials across all time periods, though this is stronger after 2006. Language appears to be directed at insiders as well as being coded, that is using ideas and terms that invoke codes for middle-class behaviour and tastes by alluding to elements of the traditional liberal idea of a degree, as in the extract which talks about joining student societies: 'if you are interested in helping to run the place' (UCL 1976). In all prospectuses after 1976 details are provided about possible accommodation options and student societies. The inclusion of this information would point towards pastimes undertaken at university even though they are presented differently in each prospectus, as discussed in the Detailed Case Studies chapter.

For several periods, within the study between 1976 and 1998, in old universities there is a silence about the quality of the overall student experience as a reason to choose universities. The 'pastime' discourse emerges in the 1992 prospectuses from the former polytechnics at Kingston and University of East London, discussing the positive student experience to be found there. In general across the prospectuses, the early scant references to pastimes in the 1992 prospectuses develop, by 1998, into a full blown argument for students to attend their institution and live the student lifestyle (Parker 2009). This claim that the idea of a degree included enjoyment was up to this point only secondary. Information about what else happened while students were undertaking the degree either came after the introductory pages and general information, in the departmental or faculty structure based course details. Comments on the student experience were also found with accommodation details, maps and transport information and were deemed as valuable but not-critical information.

However, in the set of prospectuses from 2006 a significant change took place in the presentation of the theme of student experience. This re-emergence in the old universities and continuation in the new universities aligns with the introduction of the surveying of the student experience by the National Student Survey which built a profile in the UniStats website introduced by the time of the 2013 prospectuses. An exhortation in several of the prospectuses from the older universities, UCL and RHUL, was made to come to university 'for the experience'. This additional discourse could be a reaction to the loss of content related to degree descriptions, notable between the prospectuses of 1998 and 2006.

The discourse of the idea of a degree connected to the traditional liberal education concept was prominent at the beginning of the period of research (Ball 2009) and the argument in its defence, within the UK particularly, has links to an elite education which some sought to have protected (Amis

1969). The modification of the discourse of traditional liberal can be seen as re-emerging in a new diluted form which constructs study as enjoyment, as a past time and it is invoked more strongly in old universities, and earlier, especially after 2006.

## **Prestige**

This subsection traces how the idea of a degree, as marked by prestige drawn from the awarding institution's hierarchical status, has developed through the period of massification. The markers found in relation to prestige have shifted across the periods, becoming more implicit indices of prestige that require knowledge about the higher education system in order to be 'read'. This has occurred while the prospectuses have homogenised through an adoption of marketing language, and while the stratification of the higher education field in the UK has increased. However, in the later (2006 and 2013) texts markers of prestige remain. They are increasingly culturally coded: that the markers of prestige have become more covert and require middle-class cultural knowledge of the higher education system to be read is a key finding of this thesis.

Three of the prospectuses in the first set of 1976 invoke the institutions' status as a marker of prestige that transfers to their degrees. UCL and RHUL use discursive markers of their own status to show the prestige of their degrees, while the future UEL indicates the recognisability of its accrediting body, the Council of National Academic Awards, to indicate the prestige of its degrees. However, this research suggests that although all prospectuses acknowledge the discourse of prestige of the institution, only the old universities deploy the prestige of their institutions in their texts as a rationale to undertake their degrees.

In the prospectuses of 1984 there are less frequent deployments of the prestige of the degree. UCL refers to its high status in its text in the same way as the previous prospectus and Kingston invokes a counter to this discourse in drawing its prestige markers from industry. However, the prospectuses show a clear difference in the mission between universities and polytechnics; they are offering different kinds of courses and it is suggested that the lack of need to invoke prestige of the degree is due to this overt differentiation in mission.

After the end of the binary divide between institutions in 1992, there remained some references in the old universities to the prestige of their degree. In RHUL's prospectus, a reference is made to the right choice of university as well as choice of degree, which alludes to the prestige of the institution being linked to its degree. The major structural change of the ending of the binary system did not end the hierarchy of institutions, but instead made the degree's prestige due to the universities' status more coded, as seen in the increase after 1992 of complex markers of prestige by the elite institutions, particularly UCL. This change is important for this research, particularly in the light of a crucial cause of the shift: the policy driver for the unification of the system, which desired an introduction of a market into the UK higher education field.

Accordingly, it was in the 1998 set of prospectuses that the old universities of UCL and RHUL include in their prospectuses explicit mention of the prestige of their degrees and the position of their institution in the hierarchy of universities. Previously, the indicator of prestige has been less explicit at UCL in the 1976 and 1984 prospectuses, not openly stating as UCL does in 1998 (as quoted in the Detailed Case Studies chapter) that the reputation of the institution impacts on the degree. RHUL also openly marks its association with the University of London as a reason why the status of their degrees, that is, the prestige of their degrees should be recognised.

In the 2006 academic year prospectuses there is a less explicit invoking of the idea of a degree as marked by prestige, although this is still traceable. There is introduced now a new operation of the discourse of the idea of a degree relating to prestige. The prospectuses of RHUL and Kingston both

suggest the reputation of the universities will help students find employment, linking the idea of a degree for graduate employment and the idea of a degree as a marker of prestige.

Within the prospectuses of the 2013 academic year, each institution addresses the 'brand offer' of the university and engages with marketing tactics to invoke the idea of degree prestige. In three of the institutions there are external indicators of esteem of the degrees to the course content being used. These range from the student experience at the institution, judged by an external media source (Kingston 2013), graduate employment indicators and league table positions (RHUL 2013), and most strongly, but also covertly, referencing of the status of the institution with a list of Royal Society memberships and Nobel Prizes that the institution's teachers hold (UCL 2013). Only UEL, where the institution's position at the bottom of the league table would make it difficult, does not deploy this discourse of external prestige validation.

The idea of a degree as an indicator of prestige via the hierarchical status of the institution is a complex concept. The continued stratification of higher education through the period of massification and marketisation has led to a notable stress on the place of individual institutions within the hierarchy and prestige was a key site of struggle for market dominance. While the market has grown and the degree has become commodified (Naidoo 2003), the importance of the status of the awarding institution has become greater. The ending of the binary system in the UK intensified this struggle as it meant there were no longer obvious structural differences within the higher education field between polytechnics and universities.

The discourse topic of the idea of a degree as marked by prestige commenced within the old universities and then in the periods from 2006 was deployed in all the case study institutions. The tracing of the discourse of the idea of a degree as marked by prestige is complicated, as variant markers of prestige are deployed. The markers of prestige also operate in terms of 'class taste markers' (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 1999), by engaging with the institutional habitus to attract students who understand the codes being deployed in the discourses. At points in the prospectuses, the old universities explicitly advise students to consider the institution they wish to attend as this impacts on the value of their degree, but this clarity disappears towards the end of the period being studied and does not appear in the prospectuses for the academic years 2006 or 2013.

## **Graduate Employment**

This subsection discusses the increasing importance of the idea of a degree for graduate employment across the timeframe of this study, as deployed in the prospectuses of the case study institutions. In 1976, the first period of this research, there are references to students' possible future careers, particularly in vocational courses such as Engineering. However, the markers of graduate employment are constructed differently between the old and new universities. It is in what will be the new universities that the discourse of the idea of a degree for graduate employment is invoked, whereas in the old universities the professional routes after the vocational degrees are not referenced in the same way.

In the following periods, there are soon growing references to the immediate and specific roles to which a degree could lead. Particularly in the new universities by the late 1980s, an orientation of degrees for graduate employment purposes was coming to the fore, with less information about the academic nature of courses in the prospectuses and more about what positions degree-holders would achieve in industry, and there are increasing references to students' future employers (Clegg 2010). In the prospectuses of 1998, a perceptible shift can be detected, with universities discussing the usefulness of their degrees in the real world, and emphasising the employment available immediately after the degree. This inherent denigration of academic study is noted in the work of Morley (2007), who suggests that by this point, in the UK the universities feel production of new workers is a core responsibility. In the 2006 prospectuses, this responsibility becomes a main theme of the

prospectuses and all case study institutions insert references to industry and business collaborations in the development of educational programs, with mere academic discussion largely silenced. On each page in the course descriptions examples of previous occupations of graduates abound. These are often also presented personal case studies which readers will in marketing theory find easier to relate to – but there are no accounts of the academic context of the courses.

The graduate outcomes detailed in the prospectuses of the late 1990s are the most specific, using language that makes employment a natural progression from the degree. In the mid-2000s much of the language became more vague, referencing graduate outcomes more generally, and even vocationally-orientated courses often did not specify a career. This change in the promise of the degree could be read as an indication of its lessening exchange value (Bol 2015), especially in a weakening labour market for graduates.

Within the last set of prospectuses, the significance of the link to external industry has gone beyond being a core issue for the curriculum. By the mid-2010s governmental macro discourses are exhorting the institutions to shift their gaze towards the authentic experience of work being more valued than the academic study within a degree, and the course descriptions reflect this by including much detail on work experience gained in the degree. Links between degree courses and jobs, however tenuous, are provided, such as those described in the Detailed Case Studies chapter relating to work in linguistics and banking; the course content is sublimated to indicate the exchange value of a degree in the labour market.

The idea of a degree for graduate employment developed gradually in the early periods of the study, particularly in the new universities. The idea of a degree for graduate employment constructs successful outcomes of higher education in terms of the pursuit of relatively elite jobs. Although in this work there have been other discourses of the idea of a degree traceable through the prospectuses, the graduate employment markers have been consistently growing and hegemonic since the 1992 period.

There are implications arising from the increasing emphasis on post-degree outcomes – common notion is repeated by Eagle and Brennan when they report some researchers claim ‘students are simply in the higher educational system to acquire a qualification and that any education picked up along the way is incidental’ (Eagle & Brennan 2007, p. 44). The findings of the present research into the changing idea of a degree over the period of massification, as represented in the pre-entry materials, complements Malcolm Ball’s 2009 work, showing that the idea of a degree functioning to enhance human capital – primarily for individual economic purposes – became hegemonic by 1992 in all four types of universities.

This concentration on the graduate employment discourse continues after 1992, although the discourse of employability is able to be differentiated as a separate and more dominant discourse in the 2006 prospectuses. Noted in the analyses of the later prospectuses is a convergence of the discourse for graduate employment with that of prestige, in that the institutions increasingly name elite employers or elite routes as graduate employment outcomes, most noticeably in the 2013 set of prospectuses. The homogenisation of vocabularies and proliferation of discourses within the prospectuses is seen by this thesis as a result of the increasingly competitive nature of graduate employment. That is, graduate employment had become of such importance to the idea of a degree by the 2000s that a differentiating factor was needed such as the prestige of the graduate employment. The use of elite employers in the course descriptions is a coded marker for prestige and graduate employment, as significant cultural capital is needed to recognise some of the names and be able to differentiate them from other employers.

## **Employability**

This subsection summarises the progress of the idea of a degree for employability in the period 1976-2013 within the case study institutions' prospectuses. Essentially, the notion of employability refers to the skills a graduate has and can develop, which are to be general and transferable, and are differentiated from the notion of graduate employment. Employability is a concept that identifies processes internal to the student and graduate employment is the finding of a specific role. At the beginning of the period within the study, the government policy drive to use higher education for skills development in the mid-1970s had not impacted on the case study institutions, as they do not use the term 'skills' in relation to the outcomes of the courses, and are generally more focused on their academic nature and content. Despite the policy of this period, there are no references to transferable skills, but many to the nature of study in the 1970s prospectuses. The prospectuses are explanatory texts, giving information about what students will do in their degrees relating to tutorials and seminars. At this earliest point of the research, the 1976 prospectuses had much more course content than later sets, and differentiated and elevated the idea of degree-level study (whether at polytechnic or university) above on-the-job training.

Perhaps reflecting an increase in the need to establish the worth of education to the economy, in the next set, the one for 1984, the idea of a degree is constructed in greater detail by the institutions, with the degree descriptions focused primarily on what will be studied and providing little reference to skills-based language except on a disciplinary skill basis. In the early 1990s, there is a growing inclusion of both disciplinary and non-disciplinary skills in the description of the degrees, which may well be due to the pressure felt in 1992 when the enhanced and unified market for higher education intensified the universities' need to market their courses and quantify degree outcomes. There is now a significant development in what is included in the course descriptions about their worth, both transferable and disciplinary, which makes up much of the course content related material. The Dearing report (1997) suggested degrees should be relevant, and the response through institutional practices was to enhance the description of the degrees in terms of generic skills, that is in terms of enhancing graduates' employability. The focus on generic skills constructed a deficit conception of a degree, which called into question the quality of a degree, and was linked to a narrow idea of a degree for graduate employment only.

This use of skills to show the added value of degrees continues into the 2006 set of prospectuses, when in the content of the courses there is much emphasis on the skills-based language and little on course content, so invoking the discourse of employability. There is so much about skills in each course description it is difficult to tell without the heading which degree is being described, indicative perhaps of the idea of employability being an 'empty signifier' (Morley 2007), which leaves the institutions presenting text in prospectuses that do not link to the discipline of the degree, but attribute acquisition of non-disciplinary skills. Although the term 'employability' is used from the mid-1990s onwards extensively in research and the grey literature of policy and government (Boden & Nedeva 2010), it does not appear in prospectuses of those periods. The term employability is only mentioned in the 2006 academic year prospectuses in any period of the case study institutions and then disappears in the last set of prospectuses. The texts of the 2013 prospectuses cease to use language invoking discourses on employability and invocations of transferable skills, and instead include discussion of authentic work experience. Further, skills are less discussed in favour of other employment markers like job titles and company titles, as markers of the hierarchical status of institutions.

The discourse of employability as such was absent in the early prospectuses and then was consistently found within the prospectuses from 1992 onwards. This idea of a degree is, within the academic and policy literature relating to higher education, seen to be closely associated with changes

in changes in the use of the concept of employability (Hillage & Pollard 1998). The term 'employability' is often used within public discourse about degrees in the UK, particularly in relation to league table quotients of students gaining employment after graduation. However, this research indicates this is just one notion of a degree, though one which has gained more influence since the late 1990s. There are invocations of skills-based language in prospectuses from the very earliest period and these skills begin to seem more generic, or transferable in the early 1990s. The instances of prospectuses mentioning employability appear to be waning or changing in the 2013 set of prospectuses. A new concept has been introduced related to the perceived need to prepare students for the workforce, the new concept is authentic work experience and the language of transferable skills has diminished.

Within the prospectuses, employability seems to be represented and understood primarily as a statistic of government. However, what is seen and what is being transmitted to the prospective students through league tables, and therefore inter-textually in the prospectuses, is the idea of employability and initial employment being synonymous. This develops Tymon's comment: 'currently, most stakeholder groups use statistics from graduate destinations surveys to measure employability, whereas what these provide is a limited snapshot of employment' (Tymon 2011, p. 3). The operation of the discourse of employability, so powerful in government policy discussions and the theory of higher education, is much less present in the prospectuses than in the policy discourses, perhaps as it does not appeal to students in the university choice process.

## **Summary**

This chapter has built on the Detailed Case Studies chapter which considered the prospectuses in historical periods. The chronological lens in that chapter analysed the discourses of the idea of a degree that appear in the prospectuses published by the four chosen case study institutions over the six periods after each eventemente.

As well as the historical viewpoint deployed in the first section of this chapter, the first research question required an interest in the development of the discourses themselves throughout the time period, and their ebb and flow throughout the years. This too has been discussed here, in the second section, providing the analysis in a thematic way viewing the discourse topics using a thematic lens. The purpose of looking in this thematic way at the texts is to see how the discourses have developed over time.

The core work of this thesis is not to provide an answer to what each text from each individual institution means and how it could have influenced an idealised prospective student, but instead to unsettle the notion that prospectuses are neutral documents and to expose the implicit meanings within them. That this work can be done using critical techniques drawing on sociology of education, history of education and critical discourse analysis is in and of itself indicative that these texts, which are often ignored and have been shown in other research not to be trusted by prospective students (Dyke, Foskett & Maringe 2008; Slack et al. 2014), do in fact form part of the public understanding of the idea of a degree. Equally, the methodological choice of case study institutions means that findings based on these four sites are not necessarily applicable to the whole of UK higher education, and the analysis of these prospectuses should not be taken to mean necessarily that other, non-case study institutions' prospectuses, had the same discourses within them. However, the reasons behind choosing the four case study sites from different types of institutions across the period of massification was so the analysis of the sites have some 'reliability' to similar case study sites (Bassegy 1999).

The discussion does not claim to reveal the truth behind the messages the prospectuses are imparting, nor to uncover any deception in the institutions whose documents have been analysed. Nor

is its intent to minimise the prospectuses to documents which have only one meaning and one purpose. Instead its purpose it is to follow MacLure in seeking to unsettle these texts: as she says, texts can be 'shaken up, breached, disturbed, torn – so that new questions and meanings are generated' (MacLure 2003, p. 81). This study aims to understand what messages about the idea of a degree are discernible in the prospectuses, through institutional writers who re-write the texts responding, often sub-consciously, to discursive events which have impacted on the institutions' world view in the period since the previous prospectus was published. This is not a study of the process of writing of prospectuses, but is a close reading (MacLure 2003) of the texts in order to trace and name the constructs and discourses that are identifiable in the selected prospectuses.

The two major findings of this thesis, addressed more fully in the Conclusion chapter, add to understandings of the process of student choice for higher education and how the coding of institutional messages operates. The thesis expands the literature on research into the production of messages by institutions for students, and also into the qualitative impact of information that informs student choice.

The thesis finds that there is an increasing homogenisation of vocabularies in the prospectuses. That is, the institutions are now not drawing on different vocabularies as at the start of the period, but are using the same lexical markers to send messages about the ideas of a degree. This homogenisation contrasts with evidence of differences in the outcomes of degrees by institutions (Bathmaker 2015; Naidoo & Whitty 2014; Tomlinson 2008).

A marked finding of the prospectus analysis is the increasing standardisation of the publications, in physical form, layout, textual features; the prospectuses at the end of the period of study are significantly more similar to one another than at the start. This homogenisation of form also impacts on the discourses that are identifiable in the texts, as can be seen from the mapping in the tables of the identification of the discourses in the prospectuses in the Detailed Case Studies chapter. Over the period of study, institutions increasingly struggled to distinguish themselves within a competitive market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006; Marginson 2013), and these struggles to deal with the marketisation can be shown to have impacted on the constructions of the idea of a degree presented in the pre-entry materials.

The significant homogenisation of prospectuses in the period, from distinctive institutional documents in the first set of prospectuses in 1976 to the convergent focus, tone and form of the prospectuses in 2013, reflects the marketisation of higher education and the transformation of the university system into a quasi-market of institutions (Marginson 2013). Also, the increase in the coded nature of the information in prospectus documents between the early period of 1976 and the most recent period of 2013 has been identified in this work, specifically relating to the omission of explanations of core concepts and the lessening of descriptions of the content of the course. Over the time period studied, looking at each eventemete, the institutions' presentation of the idea of a degree has changed across the sector, reflecting marketisation and massification of the system and impact of government policy discourses.

The next chapter draws together the analyses of the thesis and presents the findings from the research questions.

## **9. Conclusion**

This chapter draws together the analytic work of this thesis and outlines its contribution to the literature. The original contribution that this research offers is to provide insight into the development of the idea of a degree over the period of massification. It looks at the concept of the idea of a degree and maps how the messages about it have changed within UK institutional prospectuses since the academic year 1977. The thesis aims to contribute to the field of research which looks at student choice of a higher education institution in a UK context. This is a historically-orientated analysis that seeks to understand how universities have conceived and marketed the idea of a degree over a four-decade period in which the range and number of institutions, as well as the size of the student body, have enlarged considerably.

This thesis aims to understand how the idea of a degree operated within the field of higher education within the UK over the period of massification and how this has been represented in the pre-entry prospectuses. The thesis examines institutions' use of messages about the idea of a degree, as observed in prospectus materials from four UK institutions with different status in the higher education field over four decades. It undertakes this work to understand how the discourse topics of the idea of a degree have operated, and how messages sent by institutions within prospectuses have changed while the meanings of higher education varied (Scott 1995) through the process of massification in UK higher education.

This thesis has addressed its research questions throughout the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter which identified the discourse topics of the idea of a degree and the Detailed Case Studies chapter which has identified through close reading where the presentation of certain messages in prospectuses have changed over the period. The Discussion chapter has put together a narrative of the analyses of the discourse of the idea of a degree from this work. The construction of the idea of a degree seems from this work to be a discursive site of struggle in the period since and through massification in the UK.

In concluding this thesis, the first section discusses the first and second research questions and includes subsections explaining the two main findings of the thesis. The second substantive section of this chapter engages with theory and identifies the contribution to the literature. The third part of this chapter reflects on necessary limitations to the analysis, the fourth suggests possible future research topics that could arise from the research findings, and the fifth and final section presents an epilogue to this research.

### **Research questions**

There were two overarching research questions in this thesis which were considered in turn, as the second was dependent on the analysis in the first research question. These are outlined in this section and the findings that arose from the research questions are detailed.

#### **First research question**

The first research question asked how the idea of a degree in the UK had changed over the period of massification. This work required a secondary discourse-oriented historical analysis to be undertaken to establish key points within the national contexts of the UK when the discourse of the idea of a degree changed in part through shifts in government policy discourse. This work is summarised in the next section and fully presented in the preceding Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter. The analysis drew on the work of Goodson (2005), who explains the concept of eventementes as key moments of change.

The relevant literature was analysed within this context to deepen understanding of the idea of a degree and to delineate the key discourse topics of the idea. There were four topics of the idea of a degree identified; these were the idea of a degree for traditional liberal purposes, as a marker of prestige of its awarding institution, for graduate employment, and for employability. The narrative accounts of how the idea of a degree has changed illuminated some of the constructions of the idea of a degree. The analysis in this thesis generated a narrative of how the discourses have been traced in periods identified using historical periodisation analysis (Goodson 2005). In the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter a historical orientation was taken about the idea of a degree: the chapter constructed a narrative history and identified key moments of change, eventementes, over the last forty years.

As argued earlier in this thesis in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, the purposes of higher education have been recalibrated. This thesis's historical analysis identifies that changes in the discourse have been largely under the influence of national policy discourses, providing for graduate employment as their first purpose. There was over the period since 1977 an increased link to employability and a strengthening connection between education and the economy. Also observed, was an increasing hierarchy in the varied outcomes of degrees, depending on their awarding institutions, with universities constructing their positions by invoking the prestige of their degrees, drawing on the hierarchical status of their institutions.

Another perceivable macro policy discourse change within the texts is the move towards marketisation. The UK government's rhetoric from the Thatcher era of the late 1970s onwards was to create a market for higher education, and this was a significant driver to end the binary system (McCaig & Taylor 2015). From this period onwards, there have been attempts to institute freer market conditions in the UK, particularly from the introduction of variable fees for the 2006 academic year onwards. However, the control that is needed to be exerted on the market, along with a range of other reasons preventing criticism of other universities' products as degrees, means that a fully competitive market has not been instituted. Key work by Marginson on the quasi-market mechanism explains this process in depth and with clarity (Marginson 2013). The policy drive towards marketisation and a range of measures, particularly the recent change in funding for students with the highest grades, which commenced in the 2013 academic year, means there are markets operating in higher education between certain sector groups that can compete for students with the highest entry qualifications.

The discursive markers, here called eventementes, were used as points of data collection for the next major stage of analysis which looked at prospectuses of each academic year following the eventemente that started the period. This second stage of the analysis that relates to the second research question, is described in the next subsection.

## **Second research question**

The second research question was whether and how these changes in the idea of a degree have impacted on the messages that are sent by institutions in their pre-entry prospectuses over the period of massification. The prospectuses were collected for the academic years following the key moments of change identified by the analysis of the discourse of the idea of a degree. As detailed in the Methodological Framework chapter and explained in the Research Design chapter, this thesis's concept is based on critical discourse analysis deriving from Fairclough's (1993) work on analysis of discourses in materials produced by higher education institutions, including prospectuses. It uses Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach to structure the analysis of the thesis. Four main discourses of the idea of a degree, understood as 'formulated assumptions' (Reisigl & Wodak 2009), were identified in the review of literature dealing with the idea of a degree. These topics of the discourse of the idea of a degree were traced through the prospectuses coinciding with each of the eventementes established.

The full second research question was:

How have the messages about the idea of a degree in institutional materials changed in line with shifts in macro discourses about the idea of a degree over the period of massification? Are the messages different depending on the status and type of institution?

The second research question for this thesis originates from a perceived lack of analysis in the literature on student choice in higher education and invites several broad understandings about the student choice process. The eventemes were identified as part of the first research question and used as data collection points for the second research question's analysis. The eventemes were identified through historical analysis of policy changes, but the main work in this thesis has not been policy analysis. The focus has concentrated on the texts and their meanings, overt and coded. Ball in his work on policy trajectory studies explains that texts do not arrive out of the blue (Ball 1993b) and policy touches down in messy and complicated ways (Ball, Maguire & Braun 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that it is probably ineffective to seek to trace individual policy changes or even shifts in any kind of linear or specific way in an individual text of a prospectuses. However, in Fairclough's work, looking at the historical change between prospectuses in 1968 and 1993, his mapping showed a major difference in the 'nature and objectives of university prospectuses' (Fairclough 1993, p. 156). In his study which analysed marketisation, it is at this level of abstraction that the changes can be seen over a longer time-scale in this project.

Based on a textual analysis of the prospectuses published between 1976 and 2013, this thesis finds that the significant change in the understanding of the idea of a degree is reflected in the prospectuses, but, the changes between each set of prospectuses are incremental and not necessarily possible to link to any specific policy change. Even when fees were introduced for universities in the UK for the entry year of the 1998 set of prospectuses, there was no change in the introduction and course details section: and when the fees became variable in 2006 there was also no significant change to the prospectuses.

However, to focus specifically on the second research question, the long-range changes in macro policy discourses across time are viewable in the prospectuses, with a significant shift towards the graduate outcomes of a degree, meshing with the increased focus on the human capital argument for higher education, as discussed in the Discourse of the Idea of a Degree chapter, during the massification of the sector. This is a move from the discussion of the degree itself and its course content towards concentration on the degree outcome, with for example, course details being described primarily by the job titles of previous graduates: this change is indicative of the majoritisation of the graduate employment idea of a degree, and this change is clearly perceivable between the 1976 prospectus and the 2006 and 2013 prospectuses.

In the prospectuses, there have also been clear signs of the commodification of the degree, with persuasive language used to promote the best features and asserting status, often in increasingly smaller pools, that is marketing institutions as the best university in a specific region or at the top of a named league table for student experience. As Baker and Brown note, the language choices used in marketing materials become demotic and colloquial (Baker & Brown 2007), based on advertising principles. Much of this type of language is noted in the prospectus analysis, and this emphasis can come in design features, not the major text of the prospectus, that is in headings, side panels, or pull-quotes from the texts used as graphic features, that presumably could have been added through the influence of marketing experts – although who wrote the texts has not been a topic of this research.

The construction of the degree in the UK can be understood, from the prospectuses analysed, to display multiple understandings of what the idea of a degree is, which increases the complexity of the ideas put forward in the prospectuses. The prospectuses homogenise the vocabularies they draw on, which were differentiated by type of institution in the beginning period but are extremely similar at

the end of the period of study. That is, in the early sets of prospectuses the ideas of degrees invoked were differentiated by the status of the institution described in the prospectus, with the future new universities focusing on links to graduate employment and the old universities on the traditional liberal idea of a degree. However, by the 2013 set of prospectuses, all of the discourse topics identified could be found in all the prospectuses in their differing contexts, and therefore the idea of a degree was not linked directly to the statuses of institutions. This combination of all the topics of discourses deployed in case study institutions' prospectuses was marked, and in this study the 2013 period was the only time they could be all traced as appearing together in any of the periods. This homogenisation of vocabularies and drawing on the same discourses of the idea of a degree is seen by this thesis as a symptom of the marketisation of the universities, in that none of the institutions now wish to be seen to be offering a lesser degree than the others.

There is also a significant commodification of the nature of the discursive text. Fairclough discusses this move of universities towards commodification of their language use and aligns it with marketisation as a 'pressure to use associated discourse techniques' (Fairclough 1995, p. 109). This thesis finds that the move towards the commodification of the degree can be seen as a result of the marketisation of the higher education field. This move has been noted elsewhere within education. Wilkins in his work on the visual elements of school brochures comments on the 'material role of school brochures and websites as elements implicated in the commodification and visual saturation of education as an object of consumption' (Wilkins 2012, p. 73). Naidoo and Whitty (2014), in their work on students as consumers, draw on Bourdieu to explain that the nature of the social practice within the higher education field has been altered by marketisation:

Higher education has therefore become more open to forces for commodification, while education has developed into a product and process specifically for its 'exchange' rather than for its intrinsic 'use' value (Naidoo & Whitty 2014, p. 216).

The discourses of the idea of a degree that are traceable in the prospectuses have become more numerous throughout the latest period of study. In the early periods of study the idea of a degree was simpler and specific types of institutions' prospectuses can be read to have constructed the idea of a degree in simple, even single, ways. The old universities were analysed to construct a majority discourse of traditional liberal education in the 1977 academic year while the new universities' dominant discourse was graduate employment. However, in the most recent set analysed for the 2013 academic year all four institutions invoked all the identified discourses of the idea of a degree, traditional liberal, prestige, graduate employment and employability, making how a degree is constructed in each institution more complex and complicated. This can be posited to be linked to the increased commodification of the degree as the use of multiple reasons to justify undertaking the degree is a sign of the weakened absolute value of a degree within a massified system. This tension was explained by Naidoo and Whitty (2014) as the lessening of an undergraduate degree's exchange value, rather than a shift in construction of the idea of a degree.

In answering this second research question this thesis makes two major findings which write back to the literature on student choice.

The first finding is that over the period studied there has been a homogenisation of the vocabularies and a proliferation of discourses within the prospectuses. Within this overall finding it is also found that the four ideas of a degree identified in the literature appear variously during the period in relation to different eventemes and are differently prioritised across the four institutions. Across all the institutions, there has been in the prospectuses a reduction in discussion of course content and a significant increase in focus on graduate employment.

The second finding is that the increasing homogenisation of vocabularies and increase in invoking of various discourses of the idea of a degree in the prospectuses has, across the period of study,

increasingly concealed the hierarchic prestige of institutions. The discourse of the idea of a degree has continued to be used in part as a status indicator by institutions to differentiate themselves in the market, and to reinforce status hierarchies, but in less explicit ways than at the beginning of the period of study. The idea of a degree becomes a covert code to represent differentiation of the institutions, replacing the previously formalised and overt differentiation of institution types, into university and non-university higher education.

The next section explores these two findings in more detail.

### **Homogenisation of vocabularies and presentation of the idea of a degree in prospectus materials**

The first major finding of this thesis relates to the changes in the extent to which the prospectuses appear as coded documents, and to which the distinction between institutions has become increasingly coded. This section explains the thesis's first finding and expands the research in the field of student choice by identifying how the idea of a degree and its identified discourse topics have changed over the period of study.

As the previous section discussed, the use of discourse becomes more complex in the UK as the formal structures of different institutional types were changed in 1992. Concentration on course content and the nature of studies during the course has waned through the years in the prospectuses with a hollowing-out of course details and a lessening of the impact of the traditional liberal idea of a degree. This aligns with changes in the public narratives about higher education, towards the idea of a degree as being linked to the graduate transitions afforded by the degree after its completion.

This thesis aligns with research that contends that the idea of a degree linked to a human capital theory basis for education (understood in this work primarily as a degree for the purposes of graduate employment) has become hegemonic in the policy discourses in the UK in more recent times. This research identifies four discourses of the idea of a degree which have been established in literature of higher education over the period of study, that of: 1) traditional liberal education; 2) prestige of the degree as an indicator of status of the institution in the higher education hierarchy; 3) graduate employment; the related but different (Clegg 2010) discourse of 4) graduate employability. These four are not used exclusively or on their own by any institution but are employed in varied ways to attract enrolments and assert status positions by the institutions.

Tracing the discourses of the idea of a degree over forty years reveals there is a shift towards homogenisation of vocabularies across all types of universities and coalescence around a discourse of university education for the economy. This coalescence is majoritised from the 1998 set of prospectuses, where there is no substantial academic disciplinary information in the course descriptions, and instead the degree is presented primarily in employment terms. This is a focus shift where a quality that is being sold is that the degrees are 'industry related', industry linked and can offer work-based 'authentic' experience.

What follows in the next set of prospectuses from the academic year of 2006 is an intensifying of this discourse, where academic subjects are presented primarily as interesting due to their links with labour market information – that is, if there is buoyancy in an industry this is a reason to study the subject. Within the last set of the prospectuses of 2013, the linking of the degree to employment is very strong and the inclusion of 'authentic' workplace-based experiences is a major focus. Whereas at the beginning of the period the prospectus texts may have described the academic materials to be studied in the degree, the content of the course descriptions in the 2013 prospectuses in many cases focuses exclusively on the job titles that could be relevant to graduates of the particular degree.

There was more observable differentiation in the institutions in the early period of data collection, with the 1976 and 1984 prospectuses clearly stating their different audiences and different purposes. Their status was clearer due to the formal binary structure of the higher education field when institutions were defined between universities and polytechnics. Universities' and polytechnics' coding of symbolic capital and cultural capital became more evident as policy shifted, ending the binary divide and its formal structural differentiation. As government policy favoured massive expansion of higher education and fees are charged in the later 1990s onwards, in order to gain advantage in the unified system, institutions developed what is described as a visible quasi-market (Marginson 2013).

### **Institutional distinction in prospectuses through the use of the idea of a degree**

This section discusses the changes that have been mapped across the period through the encoding of the discourses of the idea of a degree within the institutional prospectuses.

Some key changes can be found by mapping the discourses of the idea of a degree over the period. There is an increase in textual emphasis on graduate employment over the period, there are more links to employability, and the content of the degree has been hollowed out as less detail is given about course content. It can also be said that it is harder to judge the status of an institution at the end of the period than at the beginning, as there has been a homogenisation of the marketing materials and an increase in coding of the prestige of a degree as indicated by the status of the institution.

This research traces the discourses through the case study institutions in the period studied and follows the messages in the prospectuses in the years when the policy driver for a degree linked to graduate employment has become hegemonic, showing a development from the commencing power of the discourse of the traditional liberal idea of a degree. This research also shows that the discursive shifts related to the policy changes are complex, not immediately reactive to policy shifts, and engage substantially with the institutions' status and the marketisation of the sector. The deployments of the discourse topics of the idea of a degree are multiple, and are used by institutions of varied status to argue for different truth claims. Discourse topics of the idea of a degree identified and used by this thesis (traditional liberal, prestige, graduate employment and employability) were never identified on their own in any prospectus in the sample. A key finding is that in no institution's prospectus was only one idea of a degree invoked – and so the idea of a degree can from this finding be seen to be multiply constructed. The discourse topics develop through the period and are inter-textual in that they engage with policy drivers, globalisation, media and the digital world. They can operate independently from each other in institutional marketing materials of prospectuses: that is, the idea of a degree for multiple purposes does not seem to create conflict, and also plays out differently in institutions of different status.

While the literature tells us differentiation has increased between institutions (Whitty & Clement 2015), the prospectuses and institutions have become homogenised in textual language; however, the prospectuses continue to establish their distinction in coded ways which align with the idea of a degree especially. That is, this research finds that institutions' documents use coded discourse to present an idea of a degree to establish the symbolic value of their degrees and reaffirm their status in the hierarchy. Through the identifiable discourses of the idea of a degree within their prospectuses, institutions' values can be interpreted. Mapping institutional discourses of the different ideas of a degree through visual cues and use of external reference points is critical to establishing the distinction of the institution. These messages require significant cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) for the readers of the prospectuses to understand them. That is, it is established that students using prospectuses for the purpose of institutional choice require understanding of the higher education system. However, over time, there is an increase in the complexity of the explanation of the post-university transition and observable in the prospectuses is the rising importance of graduate

employment for the idea of a degree. This means that prospective students also need a strong understanding of the labour market and economic value for higher education to differentiate between different degrees at different institutions in the more recent prospectuses.

This thesis finds that in the period of massification studied, between 1976 and 2013, the formerly explicit markers of differentiation of institutional status were clearly discernible in the 1976 prospectuses but have gradually been elided, and the prospectuses can be seen to be homogeneous without explicit status markers in the texts in 2013. The later sets of 2006 and 2013 prospectuses are undifferentiated by unambiguous status markers and the indicators of institutional prestige are only able to be understood by reading coded discourses, particularly of prestige. The findings of the analysis of the prospectuses indicate that in Bourdieu's terms they are establishing their distinction, or distinctiveness, in the field, and the mechanism that they are using to do this is coded messages of the idea of a degree.

As has been seen in the tables in the Discussion chapter, the hegemonic idea of a degree within the studied UK prospectuses has progressed from being in 1976 based on the traditional liberal idea of a degree to the current 2013 prospectuses, which are unanimous in deploying a discourse of the idea of a degree as based on graduate employment. The majoritisation of the graduate employment discourse has been traced in this research from the 1992 prospectuses onwards. Further, this research indicates that the idea of a degree is a shifting concept, which has been impacted on by the changes in the relation between higher education and government policy discourses. However, throughout the analysis of the prospectuses it is clear that because at least elements of the discourse of the idea of a degree can be ascertained in all prospectuses, across all periods, multiple discourses of the idea of a degree are present in the texts. The discourses are deployed by institutions strategically and are inter-discursive in effect, being used together and to invoke each other to create an enhanced concept of the degree offer.

The analysis of the prospectuses indicates that the mapping of discourses relating to the idea of a degree is less straightforward than the national policy agendas for higher education. This would align with Ball's reading of how policy is enacted (applicable here although developed in his research within schools) – messily and with time-lags (Ball 2015). What can also be stated is that with the growth of marketization, these documents' deployment of the discourses is both more complicated and more complex. The invoking of the discourses is not only complicated in that prospectuses include more presentations, but also complex in that the discourses of the idea of a degree can be regarded as complementary, and also at times to some extent contradictory in terms of tensions between the discourses of graduate employment and employability.

The prospectuses have moved from presenting at the most two ideas of the degree to the four that have been mapped in the analysis of the discourse of the idea of a degree, a development which increases the complexity of the discussion. But funding authorities in the UK link the degrees to a simple measure of immediate employment and reduce the complex career-formation process of the undergraduate degree to a single metric of 'employability' – employment within four months in any level of work: this measure has been questioned as to its reliability (Purcell et al. 2008). The difficulty with measurement is important because it seems to situate a measure of the worth to the economy of a university in a context where proofs cannot be empirically made due to the fluctuating labour market, the varying plans of students and the different groups of students on which institutions draw (Morley 2007). The rate of employability judged by the DLHE survey which is undertaken only a few months after graduation also offers alleged data itself based within the discourse that identifies the idea of a degree as closely linked to graduate employment. Universities issue statements on their websites about the idea of linking to industry within their institution, about their links to the economy and the employment-generating worthiness of their degrees, and by the alleged testing of post-

graduation outcomes, universities purport to be able to prove the employability of their students (Tymon 2011, p. 3) – but these processes may not be reliable.

In the period after 1992 all the institutions engaged with the idea of a degree for graduate employment, but the secondary discourses they present changed depending on the hierarchical position of the institution. As a supplementary discourse, UCL never engages in the same way with the discourse of employability, but instead invokes the prestige of its degrees, drawing on the hierarchy of institutions and the importance of the exchange value of its degree. The ‘second ranking’ institution RHUL engages with graduate employment primarily but also invokes quite heavily the traditional liberal idea of a degree. The former polytechnics, the new universities of Kingston and East London, both engage with the hegemonic discourse of graduate employment very strongly, and also with the discourse of graduate employability, as represented by concentration on skills-based language and less course-content related information. Kingston and UEL describe their courses almost exclusively in the prospectuses after 2000 in terms of the graduate employment outcomes that students have achieved and the generic skills that students will pick up; there is little technical or disciplinary knowledge expressed in these prospectuses.

In terms of the ideas of a degree being used strategically, this research finds that the discourses are deployed by the institutions as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). The institutions’ prospectuses in the post-1992 period use the idea of a degree as graduate employment as primary; the supplementary discourses of the idea of a degree are being used by the institutions to establish and maintain their distinction. This development has been particularly influenced by the marketisation of higher education which has led to a standardised genre of prospectuses influenced by branding practices (Chapleo 2011), and has reformed the materials of the student choice process, such as prospectuses, within the period of massification in the higher education field in the UK.

Prospective students seeking information in the institutional prospectuses encounter complex messages and it would be a better and more equitable situation if the codes were clearer. However, this may be increasingly difficult, as the market for higher education becomes effectively more segmented, and the idea of a degree as presented becomes more complex, despite various drivers for clarity, transparency and more information, as called for by those who are interested in prospectuses (Browne et al. 2010; Szekeres 2010). For improvements in equity, government drivers for massification need to engage with the implications of differentiated outcomes and the impact of students not making informed choices (Bathmaker 2015; Crozier et al. 2008).

Linear relations are, however, found in this research between the deployment of the discourses of the idea of a degree and the status of institutions. These are significant to note in that the difference between the varying discourses of the idea of a degree can be understood as being based on the hierarchical status of institutions. A possible reading of this research is that, depending on their hierarchical status, the institutions in the later sets of prospectuses, especially in 2013, construct different rationales as the core offer of the idea of a degree, while invoking all four identified discourses. That is, the underlying position the institutions engage with is a public discourse that the older, higher-status universities implicitly offer a traditional liberal idea of a degree (Downs 2015), an elite education, while the newer, lower-status universities offer the idea of a degree focusing on graduate employment. These differentiated rationales are linked to entrenched ideas of value and quality within the UK higher education system (Davies, Williams & Webb 1997) which have been not been unsettled by widening participation, marketisation or massification (Whitty & Clement 2015). This research’s contribution to the literature is that these divisions are traceable and discernible through an institution’s prospectuses and the idea of a degree within the UK continues to be most significantly understood as a signalling tool with its primary value drawn from the prestige of the degree-granting institution.

## **Contribution to the literature**

Having undertaken a narrative of the analyses drawn from the prospectuses in the manner advised by LeGreco and Tracy (2009) in the previous chapter and in the review of the findings against the research questions, it remains to offer a further interpretation of these narratives in relation to the literature. Revisiting MacLure's technique of a close reading of texts (2003), it is useful to reflect upon the arguments that can be made relating to the specific purposes of this research.

This section uses the findings of the analysis of this thesis and contextualises them within the extant research, as outlined in the Literature Review chapter. This thesis works with literature that draws on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of the field of higher education, particularly as understood by Bathmaker, that is understanding a field as a sign of the 'differentiated nature of social space in advanced societies, and practical action within it' (Bathmaker 2015, p. 65). This thesis drew on literatures which held the concept of cultural capital operating in the student choice process as particularly meaningful, and the transmission of cultural capital through messages encoded in prospectuses as being a key point of interest.

The research is motivated by an understanding that the process of student choice of university is a 'generative moment' of social reproduction (Ball et al. 2002). The thesis works on the premise that comprehending the messages institutions send in their texts contributes to knowledge about the student choice process, which can generate understandings that can help make the process of transition to university more equitable. The emphasis of the research is on the institutional texts and not the student reception of them. Further, it is not a study of the process of prospectus writing, but a close reading (MacLure 2003) of the texts to trace and name the constructs and discourses identifiable in the materials selected.

Pre-entry materials produced by institutions, including prospectuses, have been recognised in several studies (Graham 2013; Hartley & Morphew 2008; Saichae & Morphew 2014; Symes 1996) as suggestive in terms of the creation of the image of the institution, and as artefacts of the symbolic value that readers should place upon their institution and those was in which institutions can establish their distinction from others (Bourdieu 1984). This study shows that institutions try to distinguish themselves from each other, to create distinction, the concept described by Bourdieu (1984), and how it links with the role of higher education as social reproduction, in which process prospectuses provide a key early artefact.

In this study it emerges that the institutions create distinction (Bourdieu 1984) by drawing on different discourse topics of the idea of a degree. The historical aspect of the work shows how the discourses have interacted with policy changes, most specifically marketisation and massification; this is more fully discussed in the sections that follow. Studying and understanding the messages about what the idea of a degree offers is meaningful for being able to make informed choices during this process.

This study did not pursue how cultural capital operated within the practical action process of student choice: researchers have explored this area with the associated interest in the habitus that an institution offers (Ball 1993a; Ball & Vincent 1998; Reay, David & Ball 2005). Instead, this research looked at the messages perceivable in the prospectuses about the idea of a degree and how these ideas of a degree can often include coded messages as markers of class distinction that are being signalled in institutional prospectuses.

A finding from the tracing of discourses is that there are in the more recent texts, 2006 and 2013 particularly, multiple ideas of a degree constructed in each prospectus. This complexity means that a specific type of cultural capital is required to understand what is being offered by each institution. In terms of an understanding of the social implications of Bourdieu's description of higher education

institutions as 'structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1998), the barriers to entry posed by homogenised entry materials require increased amounts of a specific kind of cultural capital, and this leads to increased inequity in the system.

The identification of a homogenisation of vocabularies that present the messages within the prospectuses can be attributed to the increased marketisation of the field of higher education, and this homogenisation also intensifies the difficulties in differentiating the offers made by institutions. This supports Naidoo's argument about higher education being a relay system for inequality (Naidoo 2004). As if it is true that the institutional outcomes cannot be differentiated without the cultural knowledge to read the codes about the prestige of the institutions and the outcomes, the prospectuses entrench social reproduction because those who have the 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent 1998) have an advantage over those who can only access the 'cold knowledge' (Ball & Vincent 1998) of the institutional texts and of knowledge of how a highly stratified higher education system contributes to social inequality.

Literature about the outcomes of degrees shows diverse outcomes from different institutions (Power & Whitty 2008), and the path to middle-class professionalism previously offered by a degree is now not assured by all institutions (Bratti, Naylor & Smith 2008). The differentiation in degree outcomes is hard to measure qualitatively, though league tables enumerate this for public consumption. The tables indicate a significant difference between an elite top-rated provider such as University College London, and the University of East London which is frequently 'pathologised' in the press as being the 'worst-performing' university (Griffiths & Burgess 2015).

In other words, as elite education has become massified and the simple assumption that university education leads directly to professional work has become less and less true, the struggles in the life space over economic and cultural goods continues. Universities may now all engage with the idea of a degree for graduate employment, but they distinguish themselves by indicating in the prospectuses which degree and institution is more tasteful or has higher class, in order to position their 'goods' in the struggle for distinction (1984). But the struggle disguises itself as a struggle, hence the homogenisation of prospectuses and the markers of distinction become more subtle and encoded.

Thomas's work with Bourdieu finds that the more affluent protect their position (Thomas 2001), and higher education as a structuring structure is a key site of struggle for this protection. In this research it was found that the messages about the idea of a degree within the highest status institution, University College London, and the lowest status institution, University of East London, were in the most recently studied prospectuses difficult to differentiate. Therefore, there is an issue about the prospectuses being hard to comprehend by those who do not have the specific cultural capital to seek out league table results, and to decode the coded messages.

As research into outcomes of undergraduate degrees suggests, there are significant differentiations of outcomes and a public perception has grown that some are not 'worthwhile qualifications' (Bathmaker 2015, p. 64). If so, then this thesis's finding that the documents produced by institutions cannot be easily differentiated is an equity issue.

The prospectuses of the earliest period in the study show that the messages employed by institutions about the idea of a degree were never simple and often performed as what Naidoo describes as a relay system for social reproduction (2004). Looking at all the prospectuses in the early periods, there was a sense of transparency in them, partly due to the writing style being less marketised: and the texts were largely focused on the course content. However, even in the early prospectuses it would have not been possible without additional texts or cultural knowledge to ascertain which of the institutions had higher status. The differentiation between the two sets of institutions in the early prospectuses were clearer, due to the formal binary divide between universities and polytechnics, and the different offerings of courses that they made. The introduction

sections of the prospectus in the early issues explicitly defined their target audiences, although this was lost in later prospectuses: therefore their role in the reproduction of social hierarchies was more transparent earlier.

Much of the discourse about prestige throughout the prospectuses was undertaken not in explicit statements about the status differences of institutions, nor in coded messages about the idea of a degree, but instead in what Bourdieu (1984) understands as taste markers, and Maguire, Ball and Macrae elaborate to call 'class-taste markers' (1999, p. 304). These class-taste markers can be found in the prospectuses, in semiotic messages not always related to words in their layout, in the composition of the photographs, and in the busy-ness or the stylised nature of the prospectuses. As Bourdieu describes of these markers 'it is these imponderables of practice which distinguish the different – and ranked – modes of culture acquisition' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 2), and these ways of practice create differences that require cultural capital to read. In this research these facets of practice that operate as class taste markers within the prospectuses to distinguish the institutions have been identified.

These class taste markers have been noted elsewhere, and the findings of this thesis link and support other literature such as the work of Bowl (2003), working with non-traditional entrants (coincidentally at the University of East London). She talks about the varied experiences of these students and the importance of the institution's habitus (Bowl 2003). Grenfell and James quote Bourdieu and explain that 'habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself as a "fish in water"' (Grenfell & James 1998, p. 14). Bowl works with this concept to explain the 'game' of higher education as having 'explicit and implicit rules which are never made entirely clear to those who enter it from outside' (Bowl 2003, p. 125).

Reading the texts of the prospectuses, the lack of differentiation between institutional types would seem to be a game where the rules of the idea of a degree as a hierarchical marker need to be explained by someone. This goes some way to explaining why there is such low trust in institutional materials (Dyke, Foskett & Maringe 2008; Slack et al. 2014). However, perhaps the class-taste markers (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 1999) visible in some of the softer parts of the prospectuses, the visual design and photos and social activities, are appealing to different segments. Massification of the field has meant graded statuses of universities; they have the same ideas of a degree deployed in their prospectuses, but they are actually delivering different types of higher education for a range of ambitions and purposes (Reay, David & Ball 2005).

However empowering the notion may be that there are all kinds of higher education for student aspirations, if the higher education field values certain kinds of degree more than others, and if the relationships between higher education, the broader field of labour market relations, and individuals are unequal, depending on the institution the degree comes from, then there is inequity if these differences are not explicit. Such lack of information about the status of degrees is not able to be solved by presenting graduate employment outcome statistics for which the symbolic significance is hard to read and which do not give the whole picture. The increase in homogenisation and difficulty in separating the institutions through their prospectuses is hidden behind what Gibbs calls a 'deceptive openness' (Gibbs 2001, p. 85). The hyperbolic messaging and the focus on description of the product of higher education associated with the discourse of graduate employment only enhance this.

The contribution of this thesis has been to add to the field of student choice research where this thesis's literature review identified a gap in how institutions have presented their idea of a degree in their marketing materials and how this has changed over the period of massification. The literature on student choice indicates that prospectuses are a significant part of the student choice process (Harding 2012; Maringe 2006; Moogan & Baron 2003; Winter & Chapleo 2015). There have been calls for more research into prospectuses (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2015; Smyth & Banks 2012; Szekeres 2010; Tomlinson 2016; Whitty & Clement 2015), and this is what this thesis does. The student choice

literature had established that cultural capital is important in the choice of higher education process (Crozier & Reay 2008; Reay, David & Ball 2005) and that there is a perceived and significant difference between hot knowledge about higher education gained through family and friends and cold knowledge from institutional materials such as prospectuses (Ball & Vincent 1998; Bowl 2003). This thesis shows by studying the prospectuses over the last forty years that they have not become easier to read and that through their homogenisation of vocabularies and ideas of a degree the institutions have become more difficult to differentiate, reinforcing the importance of hot knowledge. That is, hot knowledge is the most important and this thesis shows that it has become increasingly important since marketisation and as the codes have homogenised.

Therefore, the inequity in information about student choice can be seen to still play out in the marketing materials of higher education. These findings give weight to Bowl's (2003) argument that access to information is a site of inequity and give additional weight to the arguments that the choice making process are unequal and requires cultural capital (Reay, David & Ball 2005) and ability to read middle-class taste markers (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 1999). However, providing more information is not as Brooks (2003) finds, a solution. My work adds to Brooks' (2003) findings and shows evidence that even when marketing materials appear homogenised there are still discourses which are significantly different underpinning the texts that are provided. That is, even though the prospectuses may at the end of the period of review look very similar, massification has not fundamentally altered the ways the institutions differentiate themselves in their marketing materials.

### **Implications for practice and further research**

There are two major implications for practice that arise from this work. Reisigl and Wodak suggest that an important final stage of their discourse-historical approach is to think about how the analytical results can be applied (Reisigl & Wodak 2009), and that is what this section will attempt. The first application relates to the creation of materials to assist students in understanding how and why prospectuses are written by the higher education institutions – that is exposing and explaining the models of construction that prospective students may encounter in ways which help to promote understanding and decode the discourse structures that both permeate and shroud the texts. This work would potentially be equally useful for careers practitioners and those advising students in their choice of institution, as well as for the producers of future prospectuses.

As the concept of human capital development has over the period of massification become significant as a majority discourse, the idea of a degree should be further reflected on, researched and made explicit in policy and governmental and practice documents. Although the changes of the period studied have impacted on the understanding of the purposes of a degree within public discourse, the findings of this research show that the development of human capital is not the only basis for the construction of the idea of a degree, and there are other motivations for taking on what is a significantly time-intensive, and now a personally expensive, programme – and these should be also made clear in the texts of institutional policy made available to students in order to bring equity in the social formation and reproduction and formation effected by higher education. The more elite universities, in forming the codes they give out in prospectuses to prospective students, are sending messages that the degree-related goals are significant in the social reproduction and formation of elites.

The literature review of student choice materials for this thesis has shown that there is a relatively small field of policy sociology and of the specific institutional practice of the marketing of higher education to students, which means that there is a paucity of theoretical and conceptual materials on the area. The present research has been focused through a specific lens, one seeking to trace how the idea of a degree has developed and changed in the period since massification. The contention is that

the specificity of this study adds to and expands the existing literature in a number of discrete and distinct ways.

This research identified several studies that worked with prospectuses using critical discourse analysis (Askehave 2007; Fairclough 1993; Graham 2013; Hartley & Morpew 2008; Saichaie & Morpew 2014; Symes 1999). This thesis extended their research in several ways. All these works drew to some extent on Fairclough's (1993) multi-genre work which looked at marketisation. This research extended the historical time period looked at to a greater period than any of the other works showing Fairclough's (1993) method can be used over greater lengths of time which. Additionally, although several of the studies used a range of institutions (Askehave 2007; Graham 2013; Hartley & Morpew 2008; Saichaie & Morpew 2014) and also noted stratification and differentiation of type of institution this variety was not a core focus of any of these studies. Therefore, this thesis's identification of differences in prospectuses over time and by institutional type adds to this literature. There is more research that could be undertaken in looking at prospectuses, particularly as they move to new online 'personalised' forms of publication and it is hoped that the findings of this research will be useful for this future work.

With different research questions, this research could have been carried out differently as it touches on several areas within the policy studies discipline. The history of massification in the UK including analysis of the policies which impacted the idea of a degree over the period of massification could have been focused on, and due to the focus on the marketing materials produced by institutions for students there are consequent limitations to the range of the study. Recognising the necessary limits of the study also indicates avenues of further research, including work in other national contexts, notably Australia.

There is much available research on the marketisation of higher education, and the processes of producing prospectuses and online texts could also be investigated. Other researchers' work is being undertaken in the marketing and business disciplines on this subject (Helmsley-Brown & Optlaka 2015): the present research does not analyse the marketing practices as strategies, but shows that the materials that now are assumed to be produced primarily for marketing purposes were in the beginning of the period presented as informative, operational documents.

There is a distinct need for more study in the area of research explored in this thesis, to develop understandings of how policy impacts on institutional practice, and also studies of the decision-making process for students. Some of the further areas of work that are touched on in the findings of this research that could be pursued are:

- Institutional practice related to, and understanding of, employability, examining how institutional staff feel employability is being dealt with in the institutions now it has become more silent in the marketing materials.
- Research from the prospective student perspective to see how they interact to the different ideas of a degree in the marketing materials – extending Archer's (2003) work to look specifically at marketing materials.
- Viewpoint of career counsellors, undertaking a wider qualitative assessment of how career counsellors react to different ideas of a degree, drawing on my practitioner as researcher position.
- Curriculum studies indicating how course content has changed in parallel with changes in the idea of a degree in the period, particularly as detail about course content has been found in this study to increasingly to be not detailed in the marketing materials.

The Literature Review chapter quotes Burke and McManus's research (2009) that finds information should be accessible to students who do not know how to ask the right kinds of questions. But with the homogenisation of vocabularies and proliferation of the discourses of prospectuses it is

not clear that anyone making a choice on the basis of the documents for the 2013 academic year would know that there were any questions that need to be posed. Regulation which has been introduced in the UK on the marketing of institutions, promoted by the Browne review (2010), and including the addition of statistical information, aims to address these concerns. This thesis generates a framework for the idea of a degree to be considered within research on student choice, and therefore exposes hitherto unexamined aspects of student choice that are important. This framework can provide a structure for further research into the qualitative dimensions of student choice and a more holistic development of a research-based understanding of the process in order to develop further the equity of higher education.

## Epilogue

In the digital advertising for the 2016 academic year, when this research was being finalised, a notable new mode of marketing appeared in an elite institution: UCL marketed its courses as ‘research-based teaching’, emphasising in-depth study and old-style demanding thinking as necessary for work of this elite nature. The digital marketing apparently looks back to the traditional liberal idea of a degree as an extension of the mind.



Figure 17 UCL website (UCL 2016)

This new model of a research-focused degree is a move towards a resurgence of the content of the degree model, one that finds the prestige of the university’s degrees in their inherent quality, drawing on the hierarchy of institutions as a signal to attract elite intellectual talent. The institution is wishing to retain its high status both against challenges from other institutions and also against the governmental policy-driven and materialistic marketisation of the university system. This example is interesting in both its form, which is digital marketing, and also its underlying message.

While the findings of this research are that institutions have become more focused on graduate employment and the new universities focused on ‘authentic’ work, there is further modern distinction at work in this advert. In Bourdieu’s terms (1984), the phrasing of the advert makes it clear that research-led teaching, is hard and significant and is a taste marker. Class is being invoked by the institution, indicating students attending UCL will become researchers through their learning: they will generate knowledge not just use it.

The innovative campaign is designed to attract the very best students and make students interested in UCL think they are the very best – with underlying institutional purposes that are both aspirational and themselves ultimately, if subtly, economic. This indication of a shift to this new, and old, idea of a degree shows how degrees are conceived in constantly changing ways.

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