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Massification, Marketisation and Loss of Differentiation in Pre-Entry Marketing Materials in UK Higher Education

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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 students to new and diverse student cohorts with differing information needs. The increased positioning of students as consumers by higher education means the student choice process has become complex. Drawing on a recently conferred doctorate, this article 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 'prospectus' documents aimed at students. Taking a discourse-historical approach, the work identifies six periods of discourse change between 1976 and 2013, analysing prospectuses from four case-study institutions of different perceived status. The research finds that the materials homogenise gradually over the period and there is a concordant concealment of the differential status, purpose and offer 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. This research's finding that the documents produced by institutions have become increasingly difficult to differentiate highlights equity issues in provision of marketing in terms of widening participation and fair access aims.

Keywords: England; massification; value of higher education; student choice

1. Introduction

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 and Clement 2015), and as age participation rates have risen (Marginson 2016). 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 expansion, alongside changes in the career development education provided by universities (Farenga and Quinlan 2016), and the increased positioning of students as consumers by higher education institutions (Naidoo and Whitty 2014; Woodall et al. 2014), means the student choice process has become complex.

Degrees produce diverse outcomes from different institutions (Power and Whitty 2008), and the path to middle-class professionalism previously offered by a degree is now not assured by all institutions (Bratti et al. 2008). If, 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), institutions' pre-entry materials matter. Differentiation in degree outcomes is very hard to measure qualitatively, though league tables enumerate different value

judgements of higher education institutions for public consumption (Spence 2018). The league tables indicate a significant difference in outcomes between an elite top-rated provider such as University College London, and the University of East London. The lower status institutions are frequently 'pathologised' in the press as being the 'worst-performing' universities (Griffiths and Burgess 2015).

Understanding where institutions sit within the imagined hierarchy of status requires a specific form of cultural capital associated with first-hand knowledge of higher education. This research drew on literature 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 element of student choice.

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 research question of this paper is to investigate what strategies institutions use to influence students' choice as seen through their production of marketing materials and whether these strategies have changed over the period 1976–2013. The gaze analysed is not that of student's experience but rather the gaze of the institutions upon the students and the institutions' position is explored through the analysis of messages in prospectuses published by four purposively chosen higher education institutions over six periods.

The study is limited to one general, mainly undergraduate, mainly domestically oriented prospectus per year and takes a documentary analysis approach (McCulloch 2004). This presented a limitation as this study did not pursue how cultural capital operates in student choice practices: researchers have explored this area extensively (Ball 1993; Ball and Vincent 1998; Reay et al. 2005), nor how institutional staff strategically formed their positions in constructing the prospectuses.

The examination of heretofore accepted practices relating to student choice is critical for this research. The production of pre-entry materials by universities could be taken neutrally as a routine practice, but it is by drawing on literature informed by sociological theory that such ordinary university practices can be seen as ideological. The discursive practices of prospectus content are important, as they are more than a 'harmless genre' (Askehave 2007, p. 740); this study agrees that the prospectuses have critical impact in the choice-making process, 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 choice-makers, independent of their access to other forms of knowledge.

A fallacy of neutrality relating to higher education pre-entry materials means that these documents have been overlooked as neutral documents for too long. The research of Dunne, King and Ahrens shows that application to university is itself a site of struggle for the field of education (Dunne et al. 2014). The messages that documents send are important; Maguire, Ball and Macrae argue that 'market tactics do semiotic "work" as class-taste markers' (Maguire et al. 1999, p. 291) and an investigation of the tactics deployed by the institutions, drawing on Bourdieu's work on distinction (1998) in the field is the core of this research.

The emphasis of the research is on the institutional texts and not the student reception of them. This research looked at the messages and markers perceivable in the prospectuses and how these ideas of a degree can often include coded messages as markers of class distinction that are being signalled in institutional prospectuses.

2. How Pre-Entry Materials Are Constructed

Pre-entry materials produced by institutions, including prospectuses, have been recognised in several studies (Graham 2013; Hartley and Morphew 2008; Saichaie and 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 in which institutions can establish their distinction from others (Bourdieu 1998, p. 97). This study seeks to investigate how 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.

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 and Vincent 1998), and are not well regarded in contrast to information from more informal sources (Reay et al. 2005). These informal sources of information, such as from family and friends, are termed hot knowledge (Ball and 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 and Vincent 1998). Therefore, the materials institutions provide directly are important steps in many students' 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 is not well trusted by students in the choice process (Briggs and Wilson 2007), but the products of cold knowledge (university marketing materials) have not been well analysed.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) is useful for conceptualising the motivations for students' choice of university, in that the student choice process is not a neutral one. 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).

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 and 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 1993, p. 13)

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 research as it explains why the marketing of higher education institutions is not neutral and deserves exploration.

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 and Brown 2007, p. 380).

These power struggles between the competitors have impacts upon the experiences of prospective students. Those from a working-class background are less likely to have access to hot knowledge and are 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 from hot knowledge (Whitty and 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 research does not study 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.

The idea of cultural capital and the deployment of middle-class taste markers is discussed by Maguire et al. (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 et al. 1999). Further research draws on Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, such as the work of Reay et al. (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 and 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).

This advantaging of people with a specific cultural capital plays out in the marketing materials of higher education and gives weight to Bowl's argument that the choice making process is unequal (2003), as is the view that it requires cultural capital (Reay et al. 2005) and the ability to read middle-class taste markers (Maguire et al. 1999). There is continuing inequity in information presented to students to make their choice of institution in the need for a specific cultural capital to decipher prospectuses' implications (Dyke et al. 2008; Slack et al. 2014). However, simply providing more information is not, as Brooks finds (2003), a solution. 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 and McManus 2009, p. 47)

Evidently, the hot knowledge (Ball and Vincent 1998) of cultural capital not only helps inform choices but eases the fear around the selection process and the absence of it 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 that '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 that 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 and Hutchings 2000, p. 564).

How cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) operates within the process of student choice is not the question that this research 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 that 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 et al. 2008). Reproduction of these social codes is undertaken through signalling messages by institutions (Brown and Bills 2011).

In this research, 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 and 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. 249–50)

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. This is particularly of concern in a highly marketised and competitive system when some institutions are struggling for survival.

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. This is a distinction this research 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).

3. Changes of Policy and Eventementes

While the literature tells us differentiation has increased between institutions (Whitty and Clement 2015), the prospectuses and institutions have become homogenised in textual language; however, this work seeks to understand how prospectuses continue to establish their distinction in coded ways.

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 that 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 paper seeks not only to look at how the market tactics operate in different status institutions, but wishes to trace how these changes have developed over time. Further, it seeks to trace how varying and competing discourses have developed over time in institutions of different status.

The period 1976–2013 was interrogated for indication of changes in the texts and analysed for any links as signalled by politico-historical 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 higher education policy in the UK. Unlike Goodson (2005), this paper 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. Thus, there are differences in this paper's application of the technique of establishing eventementes, in that it selects not the biggest change within the period in terms of massification but the one analysed to have most altered the construction of the prospectuses. Therefore, the following periods were chosen for collection of the prospectuses as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. A listing of prospectus years collected and the key policy event preceding their publication.

Prospectus Year	Key Policy Event
1977	1976 Ruskin speech
1984	1983 Education (Fees and Awards) Act
1992	1992 Further and Higher Education Act
1998	1997 Dearing Report
2006	2006 Future of Higher Education Act
2013	2012 Higher Education reforms on Key Information Sets and fees ⁱ

ⁱ Implemented too late to impact 2012 prospectuses.

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 and then London.

Limiting the locational siting of institutions to London lessens the effect of any regional variable. Although this research deals specifically with the domestic student market, it is notable that 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 were broken down again as is detailed below in Table 2 along with their self-selected grouping at the time of the 2012 publication of prospectuses.

Table 2. The prospectuses of institutions representing each group.

Institutions' Grouping
Russell Group
1994 Group
University Alliance
Million+

This paper follows [Wodak and Meyer \(2009\)](#) in citing the techniques it uses 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 and Meyer 2009](#), p. 2)

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 to observed shifts in this process over the period of massification in the UK. The next section seeks to illuminate how differentiation has worked in different periods through a close reading of the texts ([MacLure 2003](#)).

The research 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. However, 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 in the identified eventemete-related periods.

4. Tracing Differentiation

This section discusses the changes that have been mapped across the period through the encoding of middle-class taste markers within the institutional prospectuses. Twenty-three prospectuses were collected from the four institutions' archives across the six time periods, with one institution's document having been lost during the 1992 changing of status. The documents varied in length both between institutions and over time, and at the beginning of the period were often over 200 pages in length, but by 2013 they were around 100 pages each. Previous research was drawn on 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. Two fields of study were particularly looked at as they were represented in all the prospectuses throughout the years and between institutions: Engineering and English Language studies.

3. Careers development services information—in many prospectuses 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 systematic analysis of these sections enabled recording data in a code book for all the institutions which included researcher reflections and text excerpts. Though the analytical framework of this research is based on Fairclough's 1993 marketisation work, the code book was developed from his later work in 2001 and was useful inclusion to support the analysis of each set of prospectuses. Each year was seen as its own period and this is how data are presented in the following sub-sections.

4.1. 1977

The prospectuses of the four UK case study institutions show a diversity within the system in 1977, 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. 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 Million+'s reference to itself as a non-traditional institution (1977) and RussellGroup as having 'scholarly distinction' (RussellGroup 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' in this period as Gatfield et al. (1999) discuss in their critique of later prospectuses.

Within the texts, there are at times 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.

Institutional identity and purpose is made explicit in some prospectuses, such as Million+'s, which describes its institution as 'offering a different kind of educational experience provided by the universities' (Million+ 1977). Million+'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 social justice.

This is also seen in the prospectus from UniversityAlliance where 'together with younger students, the polytechnic welcomes older men and women on its degree and diploma courses' (UniversityAlliance 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 Million+ 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 . . .' (Million+ 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, which did not have its own degree awarding powers.

4.2. 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 used then 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.

The UniversityAlliance prospectus of 1984 went further than in the 1977 prospectus in discussing who might apply. Within each of UniversityAlliance's course descriptions, there is text about who each course was aimed at. For example in a course listing: 'the course is designed for mature entrants aged 30 or over' (1984)—while most prospectuses were then written for full-time young entrants. UniversityAlliance seems to be responding to marketisation but in an unusual way. In the previous set of prospectuses, UniversityAlliance 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 might be thought to be practice orientated, the prospectus states 'the important interrelationships between traditional scientific areas of study are emphasized' (UniversityAlliance 1984).

There are also changes in Million+'s text in this period. The prospectus from Million+ 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 (Million+ 1984). The previous 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. Million+'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' (Million+ 1984).

That Million+'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 Million+ prospectus. The clear explanations that follow in Million+'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.

4.3. 1992

In 1992, the distinctiveness of the old universities' prospectuses in the study, with RussellGroup and 1994Group 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 Million+ 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 which is a practice that begins in this period 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 RussellGroup 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 and Clement 2015, p. 49).

The reduction in detail in the prospectuses in this period 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 et al. 1999).

This analysis of the prospectus materials supports the view that the period of the ending of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities is a point at which the previous differences between the old and new universities is transformed into a quality indicator (Davies et al. 1997). 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. As what were called the new universities become separated in what Leathwood describes as the 'extended hierarchy of universities' (Leathwood 2004, p. 41), this replays the same old and new divide, for those who understand the code.

4.4. 1998

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 possibly why the student choice literature shows a fit between the habitus of the institution and the habitus and class of the student (Crozier et al. 2008).

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 RussellGroup text addresses students moving away from home for the first time: 'it may be your first extended period away from home' (RussellGroup 1998). Following on from this, the concerns and the welfare information provided in the RussellGroup prospectus (moving away from home, chance of getting a single bedroom) are very different from those in the Million+ prospectus, which privilege not accommodation but child-care provision, using pictures of students with children and mature students. In its prospectus, 1994Group directly addresses the parents of the students who are presumed to be reading the 1994Group prospectus. Addressing a specific audience of prospective students with presumably parents engaged in their education, the 1994Group text suggests students will be well looked after on campus.

Through these methods, the institutions characterise themselves and speak directly to their preferred audiences. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concept, the habitus 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 who are likely to feel included or excluded by the documents.

This promotion of the university environment is echoed in the increased marketisation of Million+ which specifically addresses its target audience. Unusually, in any of the prospectuses of this set and those previously seen, Million+ 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' (Million+ 1998). This

extract indicates the diverse student population that Million+'s prospectus is aiming for, and addresses concerns about completing the course, an issue which Archer (2003) found was a specific concern of students in her study of working-class students.

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 that when students are choosing institutions (Bowl 2003), they do not see themselves as the right fit with the institution, and feel out of place. These problems are amplified 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 a 'mechanism of class reproduction' (Ball 1993, p. 13).

4.5. 2006

Within this period, the prospectuses are becoming even more alike, making it difficult to determine the status of the institution now from a mere 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, as shown in the use of key achievements such as Research Assessment Exercise results in the 'At a Glance' section of the RussellGroup institution's prospectus. In this period, the messages become increasingly hard to understand as all four institutions make competing, complex claims for the prestige of their institution. For example, the Million+ discussing their range of courses; UniversityAlliance trumpeting its links to industry; 1994Group institution the recognition of its products internationally and the RussellGroup invoking external validation of excellence in the RAE and QAA reports and foregrounding in a general section of their provision of the best Scandinavian library in the UK. A prospective student reading these four different prospectuses without a detailed knowledge of the place of each institution in the field of higher education could have difficulties establishing the varied market tactics (Maguire et al. 1999).

There was also within this period a significant change in the presentation of information about course materials. The new modes of presenting course information were another element being added to an already marketised higher education section. The observed practice in this period of presenting course details in terms of their post-degree impact indicated the commodification of the degree (Naidoo and 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 (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.

4.6. 2013

In this last set of prospectuses analysed, 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, but at the same time: 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' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 110) in the homogenising of their vocabularies.

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 and

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 (RussellGroup 1984, 1994; RussellGroup 1984), mature students looking for industry engagement (UniversityAlliance 1977) or part-time students (Million+ 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 and Clement 2015). In this way, the differentiation of the institutions has become more confusing and less explicit by suppressing mention of different target cohorts. The imagery of the prospectuses also changed with illustrations of students who were diverse in ethnicities and ages—who were previously only seen in the Million+ early prospectuses many years before it became common as in the latest sets of prospectuses.

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 the nature of study is more important and the choice is made on broader characteristics (Adnett and 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 the institution's position in league table, research status and elite graduate employers. 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 contrasts 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.

The universities, in setting up their brand (Slaughter and Leslie 2001), now 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. RussellGroup'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. 1994Group'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. UniversityAlliance, as it has done in every set of prospectuses studied, asserts its link to industry and the authentic nature of its job-oriented courses. Million+ 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.

5. Discussion

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 become elided, and the prospectuses can be seen to be homogeneous without explicit status markers in the texts from 2013. In the 2006 and 2013 prospectus sets, each institutional prospectus looks very similar on the surface and the indicators of institutional prestige are only able to be understood by reading coded discourses, particularly of coded markers of prestige. The period of study of these prospectuses coincides with enormous growth of the higher education system and a significant intensification of competition. The struggle in many institutions for numbers explains perhaps why institutions would not want to alienate any group and have ceased overtly differentiating their offer: a major market tactic is they wish to attract a larger number of applications. This hunger for numbers has professionalised marketing departments and influenced the marketisation of higher education

which could be seen as a cause for the standardised genre of prospectuses influenced by branding practices (Chapleo 2011) and professionalised marketing practices.

This research finds that institutions' documents use coded messages to present the symbolic value of their degrees and reaffirm their status in the hierarchy, these are both in use of images and in deployment of market tactics to appeal to projections of certain segments of audiences. Through the mapping of the identifiable discourses and close attention to the vocabulary used in the texts within their prospectuses, institutions' values can be considered. Mapping institutional marketing strategies through visual cues and use of external reference points is critical to establishing the distinction of the institution. Many messages require significant types of specific forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) for the readers of the prospectuses to understand them, both middle-class and other.

Much of the discourse about prestige throughout the later prospectuses after 1992 was undertaken not in explicit statements about the status differences of institutions but instead in what Bourdieu (1984) understands as taste markers, and Maguire, Ball and Macrae elaborate to call 'class-taste markers' (Maguire et al. 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 elusive modes 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.

However, the class-taste markers (Maguire et al. 1999) visible in some of the softer parts of the prospectuses, the visual design and photos and social activities, may also be deployed deliberately to market to different segments. Middle-class taste markers (Maguire et al. 1999) of particular sports and social habits are deployed by the institutions as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). But there are other markers from institutions to appeal to less 'traditional' middle class tastes such as indication of flexibility of course provision in the Million+ and the promotion of links to industry to assuage any concerns about degree not leading to a graduate role in the UniversityAlliance prospectus. While in the earliest prospectuses these differences in market positioning were explicit and discursive, in the later prospectuses the texts appear homogenous, but further interrogation of them reveals taste-markers appealing to different audience segments almost as dog whistles operating beneath the similar packaging of the marketing documents.

By tracing the four institutions across the six time periods and looking at thousands of pages of marketing materials, this research found linear relations between the deployment of specific vocabularies of different institutions and their institutional statuses. These relations between institutions and the language choices made are significant to note, as the differences between the deployment of markers can be understood as being based on institutional efforts to appeal to different audience segments while not alienating a wider range of prospective students. A possible reading is that, depending on their hierarchical status, the institutions in the later sets of prospectuses, especially in 2013, construct different rationales about what the purpose of a degree is which align to their institutional offers.

These differentiated rationales are linked to entrenched ideas of value and quality within the UK higher education system (Davies et al. 1997), which have been not been unsettled by widening participation, marketisation or massification (Whitty and Clement 2015). This research's contribution to the literature is that the entrenched divisions and mission differences are traceable and discernible through an institution's prospectuses within the UK, and higher education's institutional status continues to be most significantly understood as a signalling tool with its primary value drawn from the prestige of the institution. 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.

Prospective students seeking information in the institutional prospectuses encounter complex messages. Earlier versions of the prospectuses such as in Million+ and UniversityAlliance had an educative function, explaining what higher education was like, but the move to marketisation over the period means that these documents become much less informative; holding less factual information and more persuasive text including coded markers. As the market for higher education becomes effectively more segmented and marketised, the institutional offers as presented become 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).

This study did not pursue how cultural capital operated within the practical action process of student choice: researchers have explored the area with the associated interest in the habitus that an institution offers (Ball 1993; Ball and Vincent 1998; Reay et al. 2005). Instead, this research looked at the messages perceivable in the prospectuses and how these texts can often include coded messages as markers of class distinction that are being signalled in institutional prospectuses.

Thomas's work finds that the more affluent protect their position (Thomas 2001), and suggests higher education as structuring structure (Bourdieu 1984) which operates as a key site of struggle where the more affluent students seek this protection from the right kinds of higher education institutions. In this research, it was found that the prospectus messages 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.

6. Conclusions

The prospectuses of the earliest period in the study show that the messages employed by institutions 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 marketized: and by the texts being more focused on 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 was 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: these statements were absent in later prospectuses, and therefore their role in the reproduction of social hierarchies was more transparent earlier.

Although class taste-markers have been noted in previous research, this work traces them through the period of massification in different institutions and shows how they have changed in 1976 of being overt markers and to being codified calls to specific audiences in different institutions. Through this tracing, the game of higher education entry in the analysed period is uncovered 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 explicit differentiation between institutional types would seem to be such a game where the rules and hierarchical markers need to be explained by someone. This goes some way to explaining why there is such low trust in institutional materials (Dyke et al. 2008; Slack et al. 2014). While at first glance the prospectuses seem to be sending the same messages, making the same claims about the purposes of their degrees—degrees make you employable, get you a job, you enjoy yourself—the encoded class-taste markers (Maguire et al. 1999) visible in some of the softer parts of the prospectuses, such as the visual design and photos and social activities, are deliberately 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 et al. 2005).

But 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 themselves 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 of which the symbolic significance is hard to read and which do not give the whole picture. The increase in homogenisation and the 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 effect.

The literature on student choice indicates that prospectuses are a significant part of the student choice process (Harding 2012; Maringe 2006; Moogan and Baron 2003; Winter and Chapleo 2015). There have been calls for more research into prospectuses (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015; Smyth and Banks 2012; Szekeres 2010; Tomlinson 2016; Whitty and Clement 2015), and this paper examines the prospectus texts as artefacts of power in themselves. The student choice literature has established that cultural capital is important in the process of higher education choice (Crozier et al. 2008; Reay et al. 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 and Vincent 1998; Bowl 2003). This research 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 critical and this research shows that it has become increasingly important since marketisation and as the codes have homogenised and much of the sorting and sifting mechanisms have become harder to read.

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 (2003) argument that access to information is a site of inequity and given additional weight to the arguments that the choice making processes are unequal and require cultural capital (Reay et al. 2005) and the ability to read middle-class taste markers (Maguire et al. 1999). However, providing more information is not a solution, as Brooks (2001) finds. My work adds to Brooks' (2001) 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.

If it is true that the institutional outcomes cannot be differentiated without the cultural knowledge to read the codes of prestige of the institutions and the suggested outcomes, the prospectuses entrench social reproduction, since those who have the hot knowledge (Ball and Vincent 1998) have an advantage over those who only access the cold knowledge (Ball and Vincent 1998) of the institutional texts.

It should not be assumed that if prospectuses and admissions documents were made easier to read, then equity or fair access will be delivered. It is important not to overlook the complexities of access to information, nor diminish the power of structural inequalities (Brooks 2001, p. 225), and to assess the continuing, and inherently socially negative, need for specific kinds of cultural capital to provide a full understanding of the differences between what different institutions are really offering to prospective students.

In terms of an understanding of the social implications of Bourdieu's description of higher education institutions as 'structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1998), the barriers posed by homogenised entry materials require increased amounts of a specific kind of cultural capital, and these barriers could lead to increased inequity in the system and reinforces existing structural inequalities. The more elite universities, in concealing the taste-markers in prospectuses to prospective students, are sending

messages that the traditional roles of higher education, as sites of social reproduction and formation of elites, are acceptable and remain unchallenged by the many changes in the higher education sector over the 40 years of the study.

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