# Unpacking the Usage and Implications of Neoliberal Language in the Russell Group's Education Strategies

Rodolfo Leyva

## Introduction

Since at least classical antiquity, higher education has been equated with the goal and process of cultivating reasoning skills, critical thinking, moral character, conscientious citizenship, and a disposition to seek truth and justice (Pavur, 2009). Following the period of the 18th-century Enlightenment, these classic humanist ideals have generally been paired with the Humboldtian principles of academic freedom and primacy of pure science over specialised professional training and instrumentalist research, to form the traditional paradigmatic model of a university (Ash, 2006; Michelsen, 2010). Historical accounts disagree on the degree to which the academies of yore actually practiced this model, but most seem to broadly agree that elements of it considerably influenced many of the policies and practices of Western universities till about the 1970s (Ash, 2006; Michelsen, 2010; Nybom, 2003). Indeed, this model continues to be an influential, if perhaps overly idealistic and romanticised, normative conception for what higher education should entail (Mountz et al., 2015; Newfield, 2018).

However, the past thirty years have seen the birth, uptake, and discursive dominance of the neoliberal university model, which gives primacy to the makertization and commodification of education and research. To date, the scholarly literature on this institutional transformation mostly describes the policy processes or individual academics' accounts of the neoliberalization of universities (see e.g., Ball, 2012; Morrissey, 2015; Mountz et al., 2015; Shore & Davidson, 2014). As such, there is a relative

dearth of empirical studies that have gaged the extent to which contemporary universities have replaced humanist and enlightenment educational ideals and principles with neoliberal ones. Therefore, to begin to fill this gap, the present content analysis study examines the latest education strategy statements of the 24 elite British public universities that collectively form the Russell Group, and tests whether these statements are significantly more reflective of neoliberal university discourses than traditional ones. This article continues with a brief review of the literature on neoliberalism and higher education. It then proceeds to discuss this study's methods, findings, and implications.

## Neoliberalism and Higher Education

Neoliberalism refers to a political-economic paradigm based on an ideology that calls for the commercialization of, and state facilitation or implementation of market mechanisms into, many aspects of public and private life (Ball, 2012; Leyva, 2018). To wit, neoliberal theorists and policy-makers argue that countries should seek to maintain international competitiveness and induce and accelerate economic growth in large part by: eliminating or drastically reducing government public expenditures, trade barriers, and business regulations; partially or fully privatizing their state enterprises and services; and focusing on generating exports. In so doing, countries can gain from their comparative advantages in factor endowments, ensure market credibility, achieve fiscal solvency, and attract foreign direct investment. Over time, the successful enactment of these goals and processes is hypothesised to engender prosperous and dynamic, but stable and efficient national and international markets in addition to the skilled, self-reliant, and flexible workers needed to sustain and compete in them (Friedman, 2002; Hartwell, 1995). Neoliberalism, as approximately described above, rose to prominence in the 1980s in the United Kingdom and the United States, and has since significantly shaped the 21st-century world order (Ellwood, 2011; Hall & Rustin, 2015). This section, however, will only briefly review features of neoliberal education policies and practices and their effects on contemporary Anglo-American universities.

According to neoliberal doctrine, education institutions need to be essentially turned into fiscally solvent commercial entities whose primary function is to condition and train a professionally skilled and extrinsic-value orientated workforce. It follows from this logic that funding for schools should be allocated based on market principles of cost-effectiveness, accountability, productivity, and consumer demand (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 2002). To expedite this institutional restructuring, neoliberals advocate for policies that A) force schools to compete for state

funding against public and private for-profit educational organisations. B) Increase public-private partnerships whereby selective school functions are outsourced to the private sector, or where businesses and corporations provide funding to schools in exchange for publicity, advertisement space, or research and development. And C), lead to the implementation of corporate style managerial practices and accountability metrics to help eliminate wastefulness, incentivize positive performances, fire or discipline underperforming faculty, and measure student-customer satisfaction (Ball, 2012; Boyles, 2005; Mountz et al., 2015). In the specific context of higher education, these policy inputs and outputs have manifested in and transformed this sector in the following ways.

To start with, universities currently have to prioritize and produce research that as Mohrmana, Ma, and Baker (2008: p. 9) put it is "beyond the intellectual curiosity of the investigator; [as] scholars are expected to push their ideas to application and ultimately to the market". This means that contemporary academics are continuously pressured to engage in research with industrial, medicinal, or other instrumental applications in order to bring in revenue. Such pressure normally comes in the form of performance targets, whereby an academic researcher's chances for promotion or, in many instances simply their job security, is tied to specific amounts of publications in leading journals and procured research income. These now common institutional practices and imperatives also mean that researchers are explicitly less incentivized to pursue basic science or abstract research aimed at gaining a fundamental understanding of natural, social, and mathematical phenomena. In other words, pursuing knowledge for its own sake has according to several accounts of individual academics, become untenable, because prestigious journals, grant funding bodies, and university administrators are primarily interested in promoting and rewarding applied research that has the potential for immediate commercial application or social policy impact (Chubb & Watermeyer, 2017; Gaffikin, & Perry, 2009; Lojdová, 2016).

Furthermore, as Gaffikin, & Perry (2009) argue, university degree programmes now pursue a more vocationally oriented pedagogy, "pitch tuition fees on a more lucrative basis, and are valued in terms of their output of knowledge-intensive human capital" (p. 120). That is, universities are now primarily concerned with ensuring financial solvency through maintaining continuous annual recruitment of fee-paying students, and their managers generally seek accomplish this in three main ways although these will vary by university. The first means is by expanding the construction of new teaching buildings, information technology systems, and student accommodations – which is often done via

public-private partnership deals. Correspondingly, the second means is by massive spending on domestic and international advertising campaigns. These tend to feature a given university's new and/or planned infrastructure developments, various subject rankings, international demographic profile, research accomplishments, career services, graduate employment figures, and/or 'rock-star' scientists if any. Accordingly, one of, if not the main purpose of these building investments and advertisements is to recruit both domestic and foreign students by convincing them that they are getting 'value for their money'.

The third means is by the imposition of standardized curriculums, embedding of transferable and professional skills into course content, and regular deployment of course and teaching evaluation questionnaires. While one can be generous and assume that these impositions are well-intended and meant to improve the student experience, in practice, they are gradually carving away at departments' and individual lecturers' academic freedom. For instance, course and teaching evaluations are used to discipline and regulate academics. This, in turn, promotes grade inflation and watered down curriculum, because low scores reported by disgruntled students could lead to the closure of a programme and/or firing of a lecturer. Additionally, the aforementioned impositions effectively force academics to base their course content on how well it can prepare students to attain gainful employment. Hence, in addition to undermining academics' freedom of what and how to teach, this also goes directly against the Humboldtian objective of a university pedagogy -which is one of fostering "an approach to learning, an attitude of mind, a skill and a capacity to think rather than specialised knowledge" (Ash, 2006: p. 246).

So to summarize, in total contrast with the traditional liberal-humanist model, the neoliberal model defines and aims to transform the modern university into:

> A self-interested, entrepreneurial organization offering recursive educational experiences and research services for paying clients. In such institutions, academics become managed knowledge producers who should follow prescribed sets of organizational processes. Their research and pedagogy must be justified as beneficial for the university through quantitative measures. Students are recast in the role of knowledge consumers, and have a voice in determining the manner in which educational services are packaged and delivered to them. (Hadley, 2015: p. 6)

## Methodology

Having briefly contrasted the two leading university models, the present content analysis study thus examines the following research questions.

RQ1: What is the paradigmatic portrait of prioritized educational and research objectives and values in the Russell Group's education strategy documents?

RQ2: To what extent are Russell Group universities committed to preserving and promoting higher education's historically humanist and enlightenment principles and commitments?

## Inclusion Criteria

Each Russell Group member's latest and official education strategy as of June 2018, was retrieved from their respective website. Nine of these strategies came in the form of mission and vision statements. Analysis of these pdf files covered the entire document but focused on sections specifically about teaching, learning, and research. All other sections including, for example, those to do with employment recruitment, widening participation, and environmental initiatives were examined, but not included in the analysis below as these were not relevant to this study's foci. Three universities did not have accessible pdf files, and so their teaching and learning strategies were collected directly from their dedicated web-pages and copied onto separate word files. In total, 24 units of analysis were compiled into a single dataset and analyzed via the use of NVivo software.

## Procedure

The coding procedure followed a summative and contextual approach. This entails quantifying the usage and unpacking the subtext of keywords that are initially derived from a literature review and/or a researcher's interests, and then searched for, identified, and contextualized during the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2004). Correspondingly, the present study's analysis began with the search for an examination of the syntactic and semantic context in which the following or synonymous words and phrasings are used: research, employability, learning, citizenship, volunteerism, business, industry, autonomy, curiosity, partnerships, curriculum, critical, knowledge, independent, rankings, and justice. This preliminary perusing revealed that these words and phrasing are often used parsimoniously, superficially, repeatedly, or concurrently in the same sentences and paragraphs. Hence following this initial examination, I drew on the literature discussed in the previous sections and developed a coding scheme consisting of four codes that

correspond to neoliberal university discourses and four to traditional university discourses (see Tables 1 and 2 below). I then examined each document line by line, and coded individual sentences or groups of consecutive sentences -in instances where these provided better contextual and semantic clarity, based on whether they predominantly mirrored one of the eight codes. For example, the following excerpt from Queen University Belfast's *Education Strategy 2016-2021: Summary* document has linguistic markers that reflect both the 'Employability' and 'Global Citizenship & Moral Character' codes: "Our graduates will help shape tomorrow, will be highly sought after by employers for being professional, dynamic, forward thinking, and enterprising, and will be equipped with the skills to be global citizens and to address global challenges".  However, this excerpt is arguably and overall more discursively in line (and was thus coded) with the 'Employability' code. Moreover, formulations that include relevant keywords and phrasings but which lack a clear or preponderant discursive inflection, or are otherwise too ambiguous to be coded with the aforementioned coding scheme, were left un-coded. For example, this included excerpts such as the following:

- "[The] University will provide opportunities and support for all students to have a positive experience in all aspects of their time at Cambridge and to develop themselves to be able to pursue their lives and careers when they leave the University – not just in terms of academic qualifications and intellectual capability, but also in terms of self-esteem, personal resilience and self-confidence." -From Cambridge University's *Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2015-18*
- "The creation, dissemination and application of knowledge will remain at the heart of all that we do and builds on the University's history and traditions". -From Leeds University's *Strategic Plan 2015-2020*

Table I: Codebook For Neoliberal University Discourses

| Codes | Code Applications | Recording Unit Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Employability | Sentences that directly or otherwise primarily communicate institutional commitment to enhancing student professional development. This includes for example, excerpts that indicate or stress the planned embedding of employment skills with course objectives; the increase in career advice resources, public-private partnerships, internship opportunities, study abroad programmes; and/or other initiatives to improve students' ability to successfully compete for graduate-level jobs. | "Review, reshape and expand our portfolio of taught postgraduate masters' and continuing professional development programmes to ensure they are fit for purpose in the national and international marketplace in terms of their content, structure and modes of delivery, and maximise their potential to boost the employability of our graduates.". -From Bristol University's *Our Vision. Our Strategy.*<br><br>"Provide information for employers on teaching excellence within the University to allow employers to choose graduates with appropriate skills sets." -From Queen's University Belfast's *Education Strategy 2016-2021: Summary* |
| Value For Money | Sentences that emphasize the given university's reputation, status, and commitments to raising their national and international profile; strategies for sustaining or expanding income streams such as adding courses that are commercially viable; and/or investments in infrastructure and services to help ensure student recruitment and satisfaction. In other words, these excerpts directly or implicitly speak to a given university's concerns or plans to increase student enrollment figures and investments in other areas to maximize institutional growth and financial sustainability. | "We will protect our main income sources and improve competitiveness through a focused and market-driven approach to our educational provision. We will rapidly adjust our programme portfolio to changes in demand." -From Nottingham University's *Global Strategy 2020*<br><br>"We will need to make explicit the value that is added to students' experience through the cultural, volunteering and sporting opportunities available on our exceptional campus and in the city that is our home. In a more competitive fee environment, we must become the destination of choice". -From Birmingham University's *Shaping Our Future; Birmingham 2015* |

| Codes | Code Applications | Recording Unit Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Instrumental Research | Sentences that highlight examples of applied research, or which indicate that time, support, and financial resources will be afforded to applied research. This includes research which has immediate commercial or industrial utility; social, cultural, or policy 'impact'; and/or some other potential to generate income from interested private, governmental, or third-sector organisations. | "Our ambition is to be a world-leading university, where researchers produce work of the highest significance and impact. We will be distinguished by our interdisciplinary research, for training outstanding researchers and giving parity of esteem and to discovery, application, and knowledge transfer and impact." -From *Manchester 2020 The University of Manchester's Strategic Plan*<br><br>"We will continue to improve the volume and quality of collaborative research with commercial organisations to increase our research income and economic impact." –From Southampton University's *A Connected University. Vision 2020* |
| Performativity | Sentences which suggest that auditing and evaluation instruments will be used to measure departments' and faculty's teaching and/or research performance. These instruments include for example, the Research and Teaching Excellence Frameworks, student satisfaction surveys, and graduate employment figures. | "All staff on teaching and research contracts will achieve outcomes that meet institutional policy principles of world-leading and internationally excellent research and impact by 2026". –From Liverpool University's *Research And Impact Strategy 2016-2021*<br><br>"We now collect a good deal of information from our students about how they feel about UCL and their education – in module surveys, internal surveys and through the National Student Survey (NSS). We will invest more comprehensively in this rich resource." –From University College London's *Education Strategy 2016-21* |

Table II: Codebook For Traditional University Discourses

| Codes | Code Applications | Recording Unit Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Academic Freedom (Teaching) | Sentences that communicate institutional commitment to protecting or otherwise ensuring the liberty for faculty to decide on how and which subjects to teach – irrespective of a subject's commercial utility or viability or controversial content. | "These aims are firmly grounded in an institution where, for the majority of programmes, students are required to be in residence, and where: there is a significant level of local autonomy in delivery of provision (the quality of which is assured by proportionate central mechanisms)". –From Cambridge University's *Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2015-18*<br><br>"To our staff, we commit to the promotion of a collegial community, supporting academic freedom and alert to the needs and aspirations of its members." -From Queen Mary University of London *Strategy 2014 – the Next Five Years* |
| Pure Research | Sentences which indicate that time, support, and financial resources will be afforded to the pursuit of intellectual curiosity driven research that generates new ideas, theories, models, or principles, but which may not be immediately utilized, have commercial application, or a sociocultural impact. This is sometimes also referred to as basic or blue skies research. | "We prize academic independence and curiosity driven research at Durham". –From the *Research and Engagement* web-section of Durham's *University Strategy 2017-2027*<br><br>"A great university both conveys the knowledge created by its community and is open to new ideas generated elsewhere. We will maintain the freedom for individuals and research groups to decide what to research". –From Oxford University's *Strategic Plan 2013-18* |

| Codes | Code Applications | Recording Unit Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Encouraging Student Intellectual Curiosity | Sentences which primarily indicate that teaching, courses, educational events, and/or other learning resources will be made available, which are geared towards enabling students to pursue their intellectual interests and critically and actively engage with their chosen and other disciplines irrespective of whether these are related to a future profession. | "An education at Imperial will give them insight and guidance into how they progress from a superficial engagement with this information to a deeper understanding. We will teach students how to process information in a way that extracts meaning, connects concepts and derives insight. Mastery of their chosen discipline requires them to develop conceptual and practical skills and practically apply this as they process knowledge and information" –From Imperial College London's *Learning and Teaching Strategy*  "Our teaching aims to inspire our students, challenge them, develop their curiosity and encourage them to take greater ownership of their learning, avoiding being passive recipients of knowledge." -From *Learning and Teaching at the University of Sheffield 2016-2021* |
| Global Citizenship & Moral Character | Sentences that primarily emphasize institutional efforts and/or commitments towards helping students to develop into thoughtful, well-rounded, and conscientious global citizens. | "Students will develop as global citizens, socially and environmentally aware, and sensitive to international contexts and cultures." -From York University's *Learning & Teaching Strategy 2015-2020*  "Students who undertake an education at King's do not just engage in a transaction, but a commitment to serve society and to be active and responsible citizens". –From King's College London's *Education Strategy 2017-22* |

Admittedly, the codes listed above are rough and not entirely mutually exclusive, but it should be noted that even the most rigorous and objective of quantitative content analysis coding procedures will have inescapable elements of subjective hermeneutic interpretation. This is because words and phrases are very often polysemous, and because determining the content producer's communicative intent is usually beyond the scope of the content analysis method. Instead, this method is used to extrapolate and approximate the discursive mediations and effects of texts via the application of a reliable coding scheme that represents a fairly accurate model of what a given body of text is effectively communicating (Krippendorf, 2004). Therefore, to ensure the reliability of my coding scheme, a second researcher was asked to code 6 randomly selected documents (25% of the sample corpus), using the codes shown in Tables 1 and 2. Furthermore, to avoid linguistic priming and consequent coding bias, the second coder was only given the codes and their definitions, but was not told about the broader discursive formations that they corresponded to nor about the purpose of the study. Following consultation, we generated acceptable inter-coder reliability estimates with percent agreements for all 8 codes ranging from 83% to 100%.

## Analysis and Results

*Table 3* below shows the number of times each of the 8 discursive codes was identified in each Russell Group university's education strategy statements where applicable. Note that percentages were rounded to the nearest tenth. Furthermore, as shown in Table 4, the frequency counts for the neoliberal discursive codes were summed to create an additive index ($M = 32.08$, $SD = 18.99$), so were the counts for the traditional university discursive codes ($M = 8.33$, $SD = 11.13$). A paired-sample T-test procedure was then conducted to determine whether the mean difference between these two sets of observations was statistically significant. The test showed that neoliberal discourses were significantly more numerous than traditional discourses $t(23) = 4.93$, $p < .01$. With regards to RQ1, combined, these descriptive and inferential statistics give a clear indication that the Russell Group's prioritized educational and research objectives and values, as can be gleamed from their official education strategy documents, largely reflect those extolled by the paradigmatic neoliberal university model. Specifically, these statements by and large, positively communicated their respective institutions' adoption, advancement, and planned implementation of employability, value for money, instrumental research, and performativity discursive practices.

Table 3: Frequency Of Coded Discourses Per Russell Group University

| Russell Group Member | Employability | Value For Money | Instrumental Research | Performativity | Academic Freedom (teaching) | Pure Research | Encouraging Student Intellectual Curiosity | Global Citizenship & Moral Character |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| University of Birmingham | 5.00 (13%) | 11.00 (30%) | 13.00 (35%) | 7.00 (19%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | 1.00 (3%) | .00 (0%) |
| University of Bristol | 15.00 (37%) | 17.00 (43%) | 8.00 (20%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) |
| University of Cambridge | 5.00 (23%) | 8.00 (36%) | N/A | 2.00 (9%) | 3.00 (14%) | N/A | 1.00 (5%) | 3.00 (14%) |
| Cardiff University | 5.00 (36%) | 8.00 (57%) | N/A | 1.00 (7%) | .00 (0%) | N/A | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) |
| Durham University | 3.00 (10%) | 14.00 (47%) | 4.00 (13%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | 1.00 (3%) | 1.00 (3%) | 7.00 (23%) |
| University of Edinburgh | 10.00 (14%) | 16.00 (22%) | 25.00 (34%) | 13.00 (18%) | .00 (0%) | 1.00 (1%) | 3.00 (4%) | 6.00 (8%) |
| University of Exeter | 8.00 (29%) | 5.00 (19%) | N/A | 3.00 (11%) | .00 (0%) | N/A | 5.00 (19%) | 6.00 (22%) |
| University of Glasgow | 6.00 (13%) | 19.00 (41%) | 18.00 (39%) | 1.00 (2%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | 2.00 (4%) |
| Imperial College London | 9.00 (13%) | 11.00 (15%) | N/A | 2.00 (3%) | 26.00 (36%) | N/A | 19.0 (26%) | 5.00 (7%) |
| King's College London | 14.00 (27%) | 5.00 (10%) | N/A | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | N/A | 12.0 (23%) | 21.0 (40%) |
| University of Leeds | 14.00 (30%) | 12.00 (26%) | 20.00 (43%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) |
| University of Liverpool | 10.00 (38%) | 3.00 (12%) | 7.00 (27%) | 5.00 (19%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | 1.00 (4%) | .00 (0%) |

| Russell Group Member | Employability | Value For Money | Instrumental Research | Performativity | Academic Freedom (teaching) | Pure Research | Encouraging Student Intellectual Curiosity | Global Citizenship & Moral Character |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| London School of Economics | 10.00 (37%) | 5.00 (19%) | N/A | 8.00 (30%) | 1.00 (4%) | N/A | 3.00 (11%) | .00 (0%) |
| University of Manchester | 5.00 (6%) | 19.00 (23%) | 27.00 (33%) | 20.00 (24%) | 1.00 (1%) | .00 (0%) | 3.00 (4%) | 7.00 (9%) |
| Newcastle University | 8.00 (42%) | 4.00 (21%) | 4.00 (21%) | 1.00 (5%) | 1.00 (5%) | 1.00 (5%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) |
| University of Nottingham | 15.00 (26%) | 15.00 (26%) | 18.00 (32%) | 4.00 (7%) | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | 1.00 (2%) | 4.00 (7%) |
| University of Oxford | 6.00 (18%) | 8.00 (24%) | 6.00 (18%) | 2.00 (6%) | 3.00 (9%) | 6.00 (18%) | 1.00 (3%) | 1.00 (3%) |
| Queen Mary University of London | 10.00 (14%) | 21.00 (30%) | 20.00 (29%) | 14.00 (20%) | 1.00 (1%) | 1.00 (1%) | 2.00 (3%) | 1.00 (1%) |
| Queen's University Belfast | 17.00 (47%) | 4.00 (11%) | N/A | 4.00 (11%) | 1.00 (3%) | N/A | 3.00 (8%) | 7.00 (19%) |
| University of Sheffield | 6.00 (50%) | 1.00 (8%) | N/A | .00 (0%) | .00 (0%) | N/A | 4.00 (33%) | 1.00 (8%) |
| University of Southampton | 7.00 (23%) | 10.00 (32%) | 6.00 (19%) | 3.00 (10%) | .00 (0%) | 2.00 (6%) | 1.00 (3%) | 2.00 (6%) |
| University College London | 22.00 (29%) | 28.00 (37%) | N/A | 14.00 (18%) | 2.00 (3%) | N/A | 5.00 (7%) | 5.00 (7%) |
| University of Warwick | 8.00 (28%) | 5.00 (17%) | 4.00 (14%) | 2.00 (7%) | 1.00 (3%) | .00 (0%) | 4.00 (14%) | 5.00 (17%) |
| University of York | 7.00 (29%) | 3.00 (13%) | N/A | 7.00 (29%) | 3.00 (13%) | N/A | 2.00 (8%) | 2.00 (8%) |

Table 4: Total Frequency Of Coded Neoliberal & Traditional University Discourses

| Russell Group Member | Neoliberal University Discourses (Total Score) | Traditional University Discourses (Total Score) | Total Code Count |
|---|---|---|---|
| University of Birmingham | 36.00 (97.3%) | 1.00 (2.7%) | 37.00 (100%) |
| University of Bristol | 40.00 (100%) | .00 (0%) | 40.00 (100%) |
| University of Cambridge | 15.00 (68.2%) | 7.00 (31.9%) | 22.00 (100%) |
| Cardiff University | 14.00 (100%) | .00 (0%) | 14.00 (100%) |
| Durham University | 21.00 (70%) | 9.00 (30%) | 30.00 (100%) |
| University of Edinburgh | 64.00 (86.5%) | 10.00 (13.6%) | 74.00 (100%) |
| University of Exeter | 16.00 (59.3%) | 11.00 (40.8%) | 27.00 (100%) |
| University of Glasgow | 44.00 (95.7%) | 2.00 (4.4%) | 46.00 (100%) |
| Imperial College London | 22.00 (30.6%) | 50.00 (69.5%) | 72.00 (100%) |
| King's College London | 19.00 (36.6%) | 33.00 (63.5%) | 52.00 (100%) |
| University of Leeds | 46.00 (100%) | .00 (0%) | 46.00 (100%) |
| University of Liverpool | 25.00 (96.2%) | 1.00 (3.9%) | 26.00 (100%) |
| London School of Economics | 23.00 (85.2%) | 4.00 (14.9%) | 27.00 (100%) |
| University of Manchester | 71.00 (86.6%) | 11.00 (13.5%) | 82.00 (100%) |
| Newcastle University | 17.00 (89.5%) | 2.00 (10.6%) | 19.00 (100%) |
| University of Nottingham | 52.00 (91.3%) | 5.00 (8.8%) | 57.00 (100%) |
| University of Oxford | 22.00 (66.7%) | 11.00 (33.4%) | 33.00 (100%) |
| Queen Mary University of London | 65.00 (92.9%) | 5.00 (7.2%) | 70.00 (100%) |
| Queen's University Belfast | 25.00 (69.5%) | 11.00 (30.6%) | 36.00 (100%) |
| University of Sheffield | 7.00 (58.4%) | 5.00 (41.7%) | 12.00 (100%) |

| Russell Group Member | Neoliberal University Discourses (Total Score) | Traditional University Discourses (Total Score) | Total Code Count |
|---|---|---|---|
| University of Southampton | 26.00 (83.9%) | 5.00 (16.2%) | 31.00 (100%) |
| University College London | 64.00 (84.3%) | 12.00 (15.8%) | 76.00 (100%) |
| University of Warwick | 19.00 (65.6%) | 10.00 (34.5%) | 29.00 (100%) |
| University of York | 17.00 (70.9%) | 7.00 (29.2%) | 24.00 (100%) |

Regarding RQ2, the results indicate that the majority of the Russell Group is basically disavowing their responsibility to preserve higher education's historically humanist and enlightenment principles and objectives. This is especially the case for those to do with the safeguarding and promotion of academic teaching freedom and pure scientific research. Oxford and Imperial College London are notable and relative exceptions to this trend. These are world-renowned universities with considerable endowments and income streams, and can thus for now afford to not fully adopt the neoliberal model. So despite their status, it is unlikely that the rest of the consortium will be following their example any time soon. However, the King's College London (KCL) statements had a quite bigger percentage of traditional discourses (63.5%) than neoliberal discourses (36.%). This hints to the possibility that at least on paper anyway, KCL has a stronger commitment to encouraging student intellectual curiosity, and helping students to develop into ethical and conscientious global citizens) than to promoting employability and value for money practices. Additionally, the Exeter university statements had a fairly large number of instances of traditional discourses. KCL and Exeter are another pair of prestigious universities with healthy financial resources and can, therefore, also possibly afford a way to balance staying fiscally solvent and internationally competitive with the upholding of traditional university ideals. Whether they actually do so, however, remains to be seen.

## Discussion

Over the past thirty years in many Western countries, official policy discourse about public spending in education has been presented as a threat to national competitiveness (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Newfield, 2018). To address this supposed threat, neoliberal education policies such as the ones described earlier have been steadily implemented. This has led to drastic cuts in government funding for higher education and consequent

increases in tuition fees and student loan debt. Resultantly, contemporary universities now have to decide whether to uphold their traditional liberal humanist mission, surrender to market pressures and norms, or find a balance between these conflicting standards. To gain an empirical sense of which of these paths British universities are most likely to pursue, the present study employed a content analysis method to examine the education strategies and commitment statements of the Russell Group, i.e., Great Britain's top 24 elite and world-leading public universities. While these documents do mostly contain empty marketing pabulum rather than binding policy proposals, they nevertheless serve as public pronouncements of said universities' current and future educational purposes, ambitions, and values. Hence, these statements shed light on the Russell Group's pedagogic practices and institutional priorities, which will, in turn, likely influence the wider British and global university sector.

The results show that these statements are predominantly rife with neoliberal discursive inflections of global competitiveness, instrumentalism, employability, and customer satisfaction, which principally equate a university education with professional development and research with economic utility. Conversely, largely absent from the majority of these statements are the traditional university mission and goals of nurturing intellectual curiosity, promoting academic freedom, generating pure scientific knowledge, and fostering character and conscientious citizenship. These results, therefore, suggest that the Russell Group's current and long-term plans for pedagogy and research strongly mirror the language of the neoliberal policy agenda for higher education, and have largely abandoned the academy's historically humanist and enlightenment principles and commitments.

Moreover, these results are consistent with the literature on the neoliberalization of universities (Ball, 2012; Lojdová, 2016; Morrissey, 2015; Mountz et al., 2015; Shore & Davidson, 2014), and are thus not especially surprising. However, one could argue that universities, particularly elite ones, have even in the current neoliberal era, been "culturally, institutionally and even statutorily obliged to assert their commitment to academic freedom" (Phelan, 2016, p. 1). So in this regard, it is somewhat unexpected to see how minimally this most basic and longstanding principle is attended to in the Russell Group's education strategy statements, such that it is not even really paid rhetorical lip service. There were a couple of exceptions to this with the most notable one being Imperial College London. Indeed, their rather lengthy education statement, which was also the only one to include a reference list, frequently and consistently expressed the urgent need to change existing curriculum and teaching practices, but

that this must first and foremost be guided, informed, and initiated by staff in congruence with their respective expertise and interests. For example, on pg. 26 of this statement, it says that the university will establish an approach to pedagogic change by: "Freeing up time of key academics who lead the transformation of specific modules, so they have the space to identify learning outcomes, to map these to optimal delivery methods, then to develop and deploy these within an active learning framework".

Additionally, there were a few other standout examples of counter-hegemonic narratives. In particular, the statement of KCL regularly expressed a seemingly sincere concern to help develop considerate, service-oriented, and cosmopolitan students. Note for example the following excerpt from KCL's statement on pg. 5. "We want our graduates to have strong disciplinary foundations from which to make sense of the world; we also want them to be socially responsible citizens who enjoy life". This sentiment was also expressed an appreciable amount of times in the statements from the University of Warwick (17%), Queen's University Belfast (20%), University of Exeter (22%), Durham University (23%), and Cambridge University (14%). That said, it bears repeating that these statements are simply public announcements of a university's proposed research and teaching plans and initiatives. Therefore, universities are not legally bound to follow the goals and proposals issued in these statements, and can pursue them in any way they see fit -which may or may not align with the intended spirit of said goals and proposals. The findings of this study are thus only able to provide rough insights into the Russell Group's pedagogic and institutional trends and trajectories. Future observational and survey research is needed to determine the extent and ways that the neoliberal discursive practices identified in this brief content analysis are manifesting in British and other Western universities, and impacting academics' everyday experiences and priorities.

Finally, I want to close by noting that I am not arguing against employability, the instrumentality of research, or accountability for lackluster teaching. These goals and practices are not necessarily antithetical to or totally incompatible with traditional university ones. For instance, university natural science, social science, and humanities courses have since their inception been designed to foster critical thinking, communications, researching, and data analysis skills. Such skills are inherently transferable and applicable to contemporary knowledge and service economy jobs. Moreover, instrumental research has always gone hand in hand with pure research, and students certainly deserve quality teaching and pastoral care. However, when the neoliberal expression of pedagogic instrumentalism and accountability becomes totally unmoored from

and take primacy over the academy's traditional goals and practices, then this almost invariably and predictably leads to the corruption of research, hindering of new scientific discoveries, dumbing down of curriculum to inflate grades, and shutting down of academically significant but unpopular departments and fields of research. To be certain, this is currently the case across the tertiary education sector (Bachan, 2017; Havergal, 2016; McKie, 2018), such that many universities, including most of those from the Russell Group, are running the significant risk of becoming little more than degree-mills that churn out largely uncritical, self-interested, and unenlightened graduates.

However mythical it may well be, the traditional university model is revered by possibly most academics not because they are nostalgic, recalcitrant, or lazy, but rather because they are themselves products of higher education. As such, they unlike the neoliberal managers who run the universities, understand full-well that a university education is valuable because it is supposed to: 1) nurture intellectual passions and interests –irrespective of their economic utility; 2) hone the capacity to reason logically and independently investigate truth claims, and 3) cultivate communitarian values along with a sense of fairness and justice (Newfield, 2018; Pavur, 2009). It is first and foremost through the achievement of these aims that a university education can help students to self-actualize and lead them to make broader and positive cultural, societal, and economic contributions.

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