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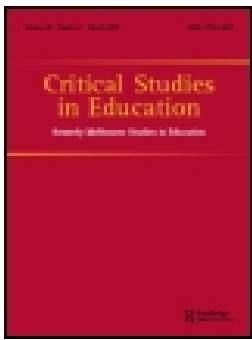
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# The Teaching Excellence Framework: symbolic violence and the measured market in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

In English higher education, the Teaching Excellence Framework represents a very significant recent policy lever in the continued operation of a measured market in the sector. Conceived as a policy to enhance and make further transparent the quality of teaching, it utilises a variety of key measurements to establish sets of related outcomes upon which effective teaching can be assessed. Drawing upon Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence and adopting policy framing as an analytical approach, we illustrate how the Teaching Excellence Framework and its related discursive techniques are significant in (re)producing the institutional conditions which enable market policy to operate effectively. The article focuses specifically on three core pillars of the marketisation project of English higher education that are strongly affirmed: the further enactment of students as consumers and universities as producers, the related pre-occupation with graduates' employability and future returns and the uncritical application of metrics to signify institutions' performance value. We show how misrecognition operates by a market policy cloaking itself under the guise of student empowerment and quality, and call for academic and political practices that forge acts of resistance.

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## Introduction

This article examines the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) as a significant policy development and as one of the most recent initiatives in a cascade of reforms inspired by neo-liberal imperatives in English higher education (HE). While the ostensible aims are manifold including balancing teaching and research, improving teaching quality, widening participation and linking education to employment, the TEF can also be seen as an instrument for the entrenchment and amplification of neo-liberal market competition in HE. The government presented the TEF most explicitly in the Green Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2015: 'Fulfilling our Potential') and the subsequent White Paper (DBIS, 2016a: 'Success as a Knowledge Economy'). These papers have followed a trajectory of market-driven reforms that gathered momentum in the UK in preceding decades (e.g. see seminal policy documents such

as Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), 1985; NCIHE, 1997; DES, 2003; DBIS, 2011). The TEF has significantly advanced this agenda by purporting to measure teaching quality through data on student satisfaction, graduate employment outcomes and staff–student contact time. Institutions’ relative performance on these measures determines their position on a three-point grading system, which carries significant implications for their public image and profile as well as potential funding revenue.

Our article is located in the wider body of scholarship on the neo-liberal political project as it pertains to HE. A range of authors have documented the shift from Keynesian welfare state settlements towards market and audit principles (Connell, 2013; Marginson, 2013), the extension of government surveillance and market measures to transform research and teaching (Collini, 2012), deregulation to enable the entry of for-profit providers (Brown & Carasso, 2013) as well as the reconceptualisation of the student as a consumer (Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011; Williams, 2013). Reputation-based market instruments such as consumer information systems and rankings have become powerful instruments to govern change by numbers (David, 2016; Enders, 2015). The powerful negative and sometimes unintended consequences of contemporary market and audit-based reforms in HE have been highlighted (e.g. see Boden and Epstein, 2006; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Naidoo & Williams, 2015), and calls for resistance have been made (e.g. see Harney & Moten, 2013). There is also an emerging body of work specifically on the TEF which reveal its links to the neo-liberal post-welfare state (Heaney & Mackenzie, 2017), its fallacies (Frankham, 2017) and inherent dangers (Forstenzer, 2016).

We draw on and extend this work by delving beneath the larger neo-liberal project to analyse how discursive acts are welded together in seminal policy papers to further build the micro-foundation on which the larger political project rests. In other words, we unearth the micro-processes involved in insinuating neo-liberal principles into the fabric of a HE sector which has until relatively recently been insulated from market forces and which remains constituted by a deeply rooted academic culture that is antithetical to marketisation. We apply Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989) as a powerful framework to analyse these micro-processes as acts of violence that aim to constrain and subordinate, but which are simultaneously highly symbolic because they are achieved indirectly and without overt force. In addition, we use Bourdieu’s related concept of misrecognition (Bourdieu, 2000) to explore how notions of empowerment signalled by the TEF have the potential, paradoxically, to enlist central actors in HE in contributing to their own subordination.

In order to analyse the key policy documents as critical instances of symbolic violence, we deploy policy framing as an analytical tool. As Fischer (2003, p. 183) has observed, since policy decisions have to be legitimised, ‘the tasks of explanation, justification and persuasion play important roles’ in policy texts and are intimately related to power relations. Policy framing with its emphasis on the construction of the policy ‘problem’ and ‘solutions’ and the application of moral vocabularies to anchor specific policy directions and the interests of actors (Entman, 1993) is highly compatible with Bourdieu’s conceptual framework. Such an approach enables us to analyse the operation of symbolic power through discourses that establish dominant categorisations

of thought, practices and institutional behaviours and present these are central to the marketisation project.

We focus in particular on the Green Paper (DBIS, 2015) and the subsequent White Paper (DBIS, 2016a) as these contain some of the most explicit reconfiguring of HE along the lines of a measured market. We organise our analyses around three dominant thematic pillars which emerge as central to the marketisation project – the student-as-consumer, graduate employability and formal ranked measurements. These themes were not only organising principles of the TEF framework and a basis for appraising institutions' market performance, but also contained a set of framings on the institutional-cultural conditions that best serve agents' interests within this reform project

### **Symbolic violence and neo-liberal market-making**

Bourdieu (1988) has defined HE as a social field constituting a set of socially structured relations with a defined system of boundaries, hierarchies and normative frameworks that supply actors operating in the field with a framework of meaning and action. Crucially, field rules constitute dominant values and cognitive systems, as well as legitimate ways of being and acting. These in turn stabilise fields and propel them towards overarching, albeit internally contested, purposes (Bourdieu, 1988).

Field dynamics are maintained through what Bourdieu has described as the logic of practice. It is through practice within institutional fields that actors internalise their value systems, providing them with an intuitive sense of field dynamics. Actors are differentiated in fields through their possession of different forms of capital that constitute economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources that are valued in the field and which define their relative power and perceived esteem (Bourdieu, 1986). Actors undertake different modes of practice that are related to their field position and sets of dispositions, defined through Bourdieu's much-discussed concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977).

Once fields have been established, systems of meaning have to be maintained to concord with the dominant logics of practice. While overt forms of control which are largely coercive in nature can be employed this can have a counterproductive effect as resistance may be provoked, particularly when the interests of change are understood to be confined to groups leveraging the most power. A more effective way of transforming field ideologies and value systems is through the more subtle use of power involving reconfigurations of thought and action that become internalised, and then behaviourally, adopted as part of an accepted way of being. In Bourdieu's framework, this is conceptualised as symbolic violence that is the imposition of specific modes of cultural and institutional practice by dominant cultural groups subsequently accepted by less dominant groups (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989). Dominant field actors exercise symbolic violence to seemingly serve a confluence of interests, but in ways that legitimate the interests of those most closely aligned to a dominant mode of practice. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through a process of misrecognition that entails the occlusion of power motives and differences and allows for power relations to be normalised in discreet ways (James, 2015). Symbolic force is thus exercised through the incorporation and naturalisation of schemes of classification, which lead to an

unequal distribution of power and rewards but which by disguising its true nature is accepted by those who are actively disadvantaged.

The concept of symbolic violence has been usefully applied to a range of different fields, including the field of formal education (Conway, 1997; Rowlands, 2015; Toshalis, 2010). We use Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence to analyse how the TEF operates through potent acts of persuasion which frame neo-liberal agendas as both inevitable and part of the natural order, or what Bourdieu refers to as a process of naturalisation. We will analyse the key documents to focus on how new categorisations of thought, meaning and experience are enacted in terms of what it is perceived to be legitimate and appropriate. These also engender new forms of symbolic classification in the dynamic relationships between institutions, students and government along neo-liberal and highly transactional lines. We will also explore the extent to which the misrecognition strategy in the TEF is built on the notion of empowerment linked to a new market identity and a promise that both students and institutions stand to gain in strengthening their market positioning.

### **Policy framing as an analytical approach**

Our approach is informed by policy framing analysis (Entman, 1993; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012; Van Gorp, 2005) in order to get beneath the inextricable connections between policy as text, policy formation and the working of symbolic power within a neo-liberal HE context. As Entman (1993) conceptualises, in the policy field textual framing helps establish the legitimacy of policy reform whilst also propagating a set of moral vocabularies that anchor a reform's necessity, direction and form. Most importantly, they serve to 'register the identity of actors or interest that compete to dominate the text' (Entman, 1993, p.55). In framing approaches, the selectiveness and salience of specific policy problems within text function as a discursive strategy on the part of policymakers, as the main communicators and corroborators of policy texts, in establishing the need for reform and how its enactment will lead to desired system change. The four functions of framing – defining a problem, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements and reaching possible solutions – are central to understanding how policy texts operate in communicating a dominant set of interests and agendas to which key institutional agents are expected to respond.

Our present analysis uses this approach as the basis for examining two key policy texts in the development of the TEF, namely the Green Paper and White Papers. It examines these framing principles in relation to both the ways in which the TEF policy framework has been enacted as central to the wider neo-liberal project and works as a form of symbolic power and control in legitimating its implementation, future trajectory and implications for key institutional actors. The first concerns the problem framing of present HE provision and its relationship to new market imperatives, specifically, how existing provision, and its cultural basis, are problematised to be in tension with new realities of a market-driven HE system where institutional relations have transformed. Within problem framing, there is significant attendance to purported problems within current provision and institutional functioning which necessitate reform and system change (e.g. failures, vested interests, out-moded practice, unaccountability). This also elides other realities or facts related

to system processes and outcomes (past success, current good practice and historical value).

The attribution of causality is connected to the overarching problem frame in terms of locating patterns within current provision and practice (e.g. institutions' and actors' levels of responsiveness and self-interest, adherence to the status quo) that cause problems identified and how they may be addressed by a new policy. In our present analysis, we identify how the policy papers have assigned some level responsibility onto key institutional actors towards fulfilling market imperatives and behaving in ways that enable the effective execution and maintenance of a competitive HE marketplace. This is further connected to the framing of moral judgements within the institutional context, including how the texts depict institutions' responsibility for fulfilling new sociopolitical and economic demands and the purported of activities which positively influence these. These involve a strong element of evaluative framings of the behaviours of institutional agents in potentially perpetuating or resolving the identified problems.

Crucially, the solutions presented within policy text are the most salient to the intended direction and form of the policy and, most significantly, how their implementation can address the identified problems. In this case, we explore how the TEF is presented as an innovative policy technology which further meets the demand of all key stakeholders. The presence of an 'excellence' framework, with a strong focus on maximising students' and institutions' market value (satisfaction, employability, choice information, league table positioning, etc.) is a way of coordinating core activities, namely teaching and learning, towards such ends.

This further reveals the operation of symbolic power through discourses that establish dominant categorisations of thought, practices and institutional behaviours and present these as endemic to the marketisation project. Most significantly, we empirically expose the workings of symbolic power through allied levers of misrecognition that valorise a set of market relations and rationalities as fundamentally in the interests of all main stakeholders.

In summary, our analysis focuses on how the policy frames within the Green and White Papers presented a dominant narrative of the TEF as a central and necessary innovation in the augmentation of neo-liberal market goals and conditions. Using the above framing principles, we organised our empirical focus around three dominant thematic pillars which emerged as central to the marketisation project with these policy texts – the student-as-consumer, graduate employability and formal ranked measurements. These themes were not only organising principles of the TEF framework and a basis for appraising institutions' market performance, but also contained a set of framings on the institutional-cultural conditions that best service stakeholders' interests within this reform project.

### **The student consumer in a competitive marketplace**

The conceptualisation of the student as an active market agent introduced in policy documents two decades ago is elevated to a central position in the TEF. Various emanations of the statement that '*choice for students*' is '*at the heart of* HE reform (e.g. DBIS, 2016a, p. 11) recur throughout both documents. The reconceptualisation of students as consumers is legitimated by narratives that construct particular diagnoses of

the problems plaguing HE including low teaching quality, elitism and the lack of student choice.

In order to valorise and naturalise the market as a necessary condition to remedy such problems, powerful actors and institutions with the potential to oppose market forces are delegitimised through strong moral vocabularies and positioned as the cause of such problems. Public universities are described negatively as *'incumbents'* who use their privilege to block change (DBIS, 2016a, p. 8). They are accused of disempowering students by providing inadequate information and little choice. Discourses of distrust position academics as resisters of change who work against the interests of students and employers. In addition, there is a negative slur on research intensive universities as incentives for research are described as *'skewed'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 12). These factors are brought together in both documents to establish a causal link to concerns over quality and widening participation. The Green Paper for example links poor information to poor decisions by students which result in low quality in teaching and life chances *'Thousands of life opportunities [have] been wasted ... because of teaching that was not as good as it should have been'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 46).

The discursive strategy of framing policy problems and delegitimising public universities paves the way for market competition to be portrayed as a *'silver bullet'* solution with the rationale that competition incentivises *'greater choice'* and *'better quality products'* at *'lower cost'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 8). The creation of a single market regulator, the Office for Students is *'explicitly pro-competition and pro-student choice'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 15). The student-consumer is presented as a crucial driver of quality and is expected to *'challenge universities to provide teaching excellence'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 53). The shift of responsibility for quality from academics to students (Sabri, 2010) is accompanied by elision in relation to what is meant by quality. The White Paper states that quality has *'many interpretations ... [and] ... different ways of measuring it'* (DBIS, 2015, p. 21). Nevertheless, the assumption is that mechanisms such as the National Student Survey through which students publicly evaluate their courses and student choice will automatically and unproblematic apply pressure on institutions to enhance quality.

The solution to elitism is to create optimum conditions for the student-consumer to act as an engine for widening participation. The TEF purports to equalise opportunities for students who have been traditionally excluded from HE as indicated by *'Teaching excellence matters, not only for students and taxpayers, but also for those who care about social mobility'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 13). The cap on student numbers is presented as an artificial restriction to student aspiration. Removing this cap thus becomes linked to enhancing social equity to ensure that *'As a One Nation Government, we believe that anyone with the talent and potential should be able to benefit from higher education'* (DBIS, 2015, p. 13). The White Paper goes further to state that *'by ending student number controls, we have made the possibility of participation in it a reality for more people than ever before'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 5).

A further important solution posed in both papers is to deregulate HE and to attribute enhanced value to for-profit institutions. The word *'quality'* is used positively only in relation to the new providers and not in a single case to publicly funded universities. Given the evidence of quality issues related to some for-profit providers (e.g. see Fielden & Middlehurst, 2017), this overwhelming positive endorsement is



remarkable. The new providers are expected to *'help drive up teaching standards overall'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 9) and to be *'a catalyst for social mobility'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 9). Space will be created for the new for-profit institutions because some *'lower quality providers will be withdrawn, leaving space for new entrants, and raising quality overall'* (DBIS, 2015, p. 19).

As we see from the above, the misrecognition strategy in the TEF is built on the notion of empowerment linked to a new market identity for both institutions and actors. The government prescribes indicators such as student satisfaction as a proxy for quality and in so doing renders other qualities of teaching such as criticality and research-led teaching that valorise academic and scientific capital as illegitimate. Publicly funded universities are required to submit to the symbolic capital which benefits new market actors or to face market sanctions and forced exit. Student-consumers, as investors in their own education, have the responsibility to make good choices as *'these decisions are significant factors in determining a student's future life and career'* (DBIS, 2016a: p. 43). The student-consumer discourse is presented as an empowering narrative that extends students' market freedoms and autonomy in their own interests. The potential disempowerment caused by a consumer mentality such as the creation of passive learners who feel entitled to good grades is obscured (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Symbolic violence is also utilised to portray market practices as beneficial to all including disadvantaged students. Individualised attributions for success and failure are naturalised in both documents as *'we will not truly begin to reduce inequality unless more students fulfil their aspirations'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 13). It is the students, not their social or economic circumstances, that are seen to be responsible for success or failure in HE. In this way, disadvantaged students are represented as responsible for their own failures while those who have succeeded supported by their inherited cultural, economic and social capital have their advantage legitimised.

### **Employability and the enhancement of graduates' economic agency and success**

The student-consumer movement is significantly related to another dominant policy agenda in marketised HE: graduates' employability. HE's responsiveness to the demands of the economy is given significant primacy in a market context where the 'success' of universities becomes contingent on how well they meet economic needs at both a private and public level. Graduates' future employability emerges as a significant marker of teaching excellence within the Green and White Papers. This is strongly referenced against a variety of interrelated motifs; namely graduate 'skills', return on 'investment' and employer 'satisfaction'. Successful future employment outcomes become a central organising principle on which the value that universities generate is understood and formally evaluated. This principal imperative expects institutions to implement effective measures towards maximising graduates' future returns. Wider macro-economic factors that may ultimately mediate the link between formal education and employment outcomes are not acknowledged. Instead, much of emphasis is on the supply-side factors (Keep & Mayhew, 2014) relating to both institutional provision and individuals' proactivity in shaping employment outcomes.

The two policy texts establish a clear problem frame around the employability agenda in terms of a functional misalignment between HE and the economy, manifest

in continued skills mismatches and employer dissatisfaction with existing provision. The title of the White Paper employs the populist policy shibboleth of the 'knowledge economy', invoking a social imaginary of raised skills demands, meritocratic global competition and empowered economic agents (Lauder, Young, Daniels, Balarin, & Lowe, 2012). The Green and White Papers are unequivocal in their charge against HE not being sufficiently attuned to broader economic demands. They utilise a selective evidential framing of purported skills deficits and lack of demand-responsiveness: *'Employers are suffering skills shortages, especially in high skilled STEM areas; at the same time around 20% of employed graduates are in non-professional roles three and a half years after graduating'* (DBIS, 2015, p. 18).

The texts diagnose causal attribution of this misalignment to a variety of supply-side issues, not least ineffective teaching provision and related measurements of institutional performance and accountabilities towards this end: *'For too long, teaching has been the poor cousin of research. Skewed incentives have led to a progressive decline in the relative status of teaching as an activity'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 12). A strong framing is evident on the relationship between inadequate provision and students' labour market outcomes; the underlying logic being that teaching excellence is both a corrective to graduates' potentially unfavourable economic experiences and outcomes, and also an effective means by which they may be propelled to successful economic outcomes. Relatedly, there is a clear charge for institutions to engage in pedagogic and curricula pursuits that best meet these demands, ideally boosting the *'industry-relevance of their offerings'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 46). The implicit frame here is that traditional modes of teaching are not sufficiently demand-responsive to economic needs.

A related moral judgement is developed on the need for effective employability enhancement through teaching excellence, premised on universities' obligation to fulfil the fiscal demands of its key stakeholders. In abdicating this responsibility through maintaining the status quo, English universities compromise their status as both part-publicly and part-privately financed institutions whose existential status is conditioned by the enhancement of individuals' human capital. The moral judgement-framing extends to pathologising inadequate practice as symptomatic of institutions, and their professionals, operating as 'closed systems' (Schimank, 2005) that are detached from the prevailing stakeholder demands. Value for money is not only to be appraised at the immediate point of experience, but also as measurable future returns for individuals and the wider economy: *'Students expect better value for money; employers need access to a pipeline of graduates with the skills they need; and the taxpayer needs to see a broad range of economic and social benefits generated by the public investment in our higher education system'* (DBIS, 2015, p. 18).

As a policy solution to these problems and their underlying institutional causes, the TEF therefore works through a number of key levers that are designed to maximise graduates' employability and future returns. The formal measurement of graduate outcomes as a proxy for institutional efficacy affirms performative practice-orientations that equate quality teaching and learning with the enhancement of economic capital. Employers are salient stakeholders in the policy texts, not just a set of powerful field actors who sit outside of institutions, institutional responsiveness towards a set of utilitarian outcomes: *'We hope this [the TEF framework] will also be used by providers evaluating their provision and considering how*

they can tailor it to better deliver relevant skills for the labour market' (DBIS, 2016a, p. 58).

The TEF operates a sleight of hand in augmenting the employability agenda so that it becomes central to institutions' activities and core goals; and in doing so, it serves towards reproducing dominant interests of policymakers and employers. It employs a variety of misrecognition strategies that enable this agenda to become legitimated and naturalised as a central priority within the current institutional field dynamics of marketised HE. These strategies play into a range of key stakeholders' needs – in particular, students and senior managers – to maximise the market value of university credentials and ensure return-on-investment and future economic success. One strategy is the empowering of students as active labour market agents whose agency is channelled towards self-optimising pursuits that strengthen their field advantage in a more competitive labour market. The Green and White Papers strongly endorse an ethic of instrumental individualism and competition amongst students with the ultimate goal of maximising the commodity value of their university credentials.

The employability agenda, actively propagated in the policy papers and used in the TEF as a key lever for appraising institutions' quality, effectively conditions institutional actors' behaviours, whether they actively subscribe to this agenda or not. The retooling of disciplinary learning as a mode of vocationally orientated praxis with codified sets of learning outcomes is pivotal to how students appraise the nature and value of their formal learning. In combining discourses of individual and institutional responsibility, the TEF inculcates a set of field behaviours that are channelled towards the enhancement of field advantage. Institutional efforts towards enabling this pursuit help add value to students' extant credentials and are understood to signify institutions' value-added. Senior managers, and to lesser extent, academics, are co-opted into this agenda as it significantly raises the stakes for their own reputational capital and, therefore, market positioning. The global competition dimension, continually referred to, adds a further incentive for institutions to '*enhance the world class reputation of the sector*' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016a: p. 29) and therefore ensure an attractive competitive offering for both home and international students.

Another related strategy is developing closer synergies between institutions and employers so that employers are accorded one of the most significant field positions within the new university-economy nexus. As influential actors in the marketised HE field, employers are in a strong position to leverage closer links with universities, as well as to encourage students to engage in forms of work experience and early professional socialisation. One of the immediate links is through structured work experience and internships that are increasingly offered to students as a vehicle towards enhancing future opportunities. Such experiences become an attractive draw for students seeking to develop stronger ties with employers. Added to related pressures to build an employability profile, including extra-curricula pursuits, participation in work experience and work-related learning potentially generates a competitive advantage for graduates, whilst allowing employers to identify and screen-out future talent. In order to improve their stock of job-related capitals, students have to increasingly self-commodify their university achievements and institutions have to demonstrably facilitate this process.

## The measured market

The consumerist framework and the employability agenda that underpin the political push for further marketisation in HE are strongly related to another dominant political narrative: the measured market. Data, information and measures are at the heart of the political agenda and proposed to become *'ever more fundamental to driving policy and regulation in higher education'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 66).

Since more than a decade, a political project has been at work to install instruments for informing the market by an increasing range of measures of provision and consumption according to the logics of market competition and economic value. With the TEF, 'governance by numbers' (Ball, 2015; Sellar & Lingard, 2013) is gathering significant momentum to finally cure market imperfections, most notably *'insufficient competition and a lack of informed choice'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 8). In the past, the dominant practice has been to pile up one governmental and institutional data system after the other to inform stakeholders. This created over-complexities of data provision, most notably for student information and choice. The new rating system of the TEF is also expected to address problems of entry of private for-profit providers who will strengthen the logic of the market against the interests of publicly funded universities who need *'to do more to promote competition'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 22).

With the TEF, the market signalling of stratified valorisation of teaching follows the logic of more simple sound bites via two channels: First, the government itself is acting as a rating agency of its public and private providers in a quasi-Olympic competition for gold, silver and bronze; and second, third party data providers are encouraged *'to develop engaging and easy to understand information tools'* (DBIS, 2016a, p. 66), i.e. ranking systems. This process makes it easier to access and digest information, as has, for example, been shown for the use of the NSS that primarily operates through its use in league tables (Gibbons, Neumayer, & Perkins, 2015). Simplification also makes data seem more authoritative obscuring the discretion, assumptions and arbitrariness that unavoidably infuse such lists (see the findings of Cheng & Marsh, 2010, that differences in NSS data between universities – frequently used for league tables – explained only about 3% of the variance in individual student responses). Consequently, uncertainty and contingency get absorbed and data appear more robust and definitive than it would if presented in more complicated forms.

As all rating and ranking systems, the new rating system of the TEF will do Aristotelian science: measuring the objects under consideration, comparing them and ordering them vertically. Such a system of commensuration turns qualities into quantities within a metric that allows for the production of a hierarchy of universities with a simple and clear order. Differences between universities become a matter of better or worse within a pre-defined space of performance, a value statement that excludes non-hierarchical alternatives. Qualities that do not align to the logic of the competitive market ordering of HE or that cannot be expressed in quantities disappear are marginalised and become devalued (Enders, 2015).

The TEF thus plays a key role in defining the legitimate areas of practice, i.e. those that have measurable value leading to desired sets of outcomes and the marginalisation of others. The notion of value itself is reframed in principally utilitarian ways and HE's key stakeholders are encouraged to inculcate the values and rationales

of the *homo economicus*. The TEF is the new key organising tool by which effective and less effective institutions will be assessed in meeting specified outcomes to serve ‘consumer information’ and ‘employers expectations’ and to produce ‘value for money’ (DBIS, 2016a, p. 23). It is based on a moral vocabulary that presents HE as responsive to multiple stakeholders of the market, with the perceived success of such responsiveness determining their field position and potential accumulation of advantageous forms of capital as a result.

Such ‘trust in numbers’ (Porter, 1995) has a strong appeal in advocating the new political framework and in mobilising the cultural and political meanings of objectivity to legitimate future action and to exert acts of persuasion towards relevant others. Symbolic violence works through various acts that frame the market agenda and its instrumentation as both inevitable and part of the natural order. At one level, market-driving policies are legitimated by making reference to past experiences of what is framed as an objective ordering of universities based on performance measures. Reference is made to the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise in the 1980s, the predecessor to the current Research Excellence Framework (REF): ‘We have long accepted the principle of funding research on the basis of quality. We will now extend this to teaching’ (DBIS, 2016a, p. 13). The TEF thus appears as the natural extension and counterpart to the ‘long accepted’ REF. Instrumenting the TEF by data sets that have already become part of the natural order of the reporting cycle in HE (the National Student Survey; retention data; data on graduate employment) adds another element of familiarity of supposedly accepted practices.

On another level, the performative conceptualisation of teaching excellence is underpinned by discursive practices that point at the inevitable success of the new policy that will serve a confluence of interests. The ‘rich new data source’ will deliver the ‘reform agenda ambitions: improving choice, competition and outcomes for students, the taxpayer and the economy.’ (DBIS, 2016a, p. 14). The new measures will deliver ‘benefit’, ‘right choices’, ‘high quality’, ‘future productivity’, “better outcomes” and “value for money” (DBIS, 2016a, p. 8), and make an end with institutional practices that are “squandering of taxpayers’ money” (DBIS, 2016a, p. 46). The issue of misrecognition is central here, namely the acts of persuasion that political intentions are necessarily in stakeholders’ own interests, most importantly for ‘students, employers and the taxpayers who underwrite the system’ (DBIS, 2016a, p. 8). It is beneficial to all parties to embrace the agenda, and conversely, deleterious if they do not.

Rhetorical devices change when stakeholders are addressed who used the consultation process towards the White Paper to express major concerns as regards the agenda for re-reform in HE (most namely, certain university mission groups, the Student Unions and the Trade Unions, see DBIS, 2016b). As regards Student Unions, which advocated a student boycott of the NSS, questions are raised ‘what more could be done to improve transparency and accountability to students as members’ and to establish ‘robust scrutiny and transparency’ (DBIS, 2016a, p. 60) as regards the Unions’ use of taxpayers’ money.

The rewards and sanctions associated with fulfilling (or otherwise) the expected performance of the metrics is intended to frame the values and responsiveness of universities as providers and to help to channel students’ values and behaviour accordingly. From a governmental point of view, such a strategy of constructing the measured

market will have an additional political appeal due to its incalculated ‘blame avoidance’ (Weaver, 1986), shifting the blame to the consumers and producers in the HE market place. Rhetorical devices mobilised to legitimate the use of ‘magical numbers’ (March, 1996) and to make the miracle of the market finally happen work as a smoke screen to avoid recognition that responsibility and risk in HE are further transferred from the government to universities as producers and students as consumers.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our approach offers a novel way of examining the mobilisation of neo-liberal policy goals. We argue that the concept of symbolic violence adds to the wider body of scholarship on the critique of the neo-liberal political project a critical perspective on government policy as acts of domination and persuasion. We highlight the socio-political construction of problems and solutions, the imposition of specific interests and practices, their related moral vocabulary and strategies of misrecognition that valorise market-making as fundamentally in the interests of all main stakeholders.

Our policy analyses highlights the political framing of the purposes of HE as a market; the explanations, justifications and persuasions positioning students as consumers and universities as producers within this market; and the related set of levers (logics, orientations and practices) meant to shape operations in the field of HE. These include the student-as-consumer and active market agent, the preponderance of employability and future return-to-investment, and more aggressively so than in the past, the imperative for universities to act as producers of human capital aligned to the needs of employers and economic growth. Their repeated elevation to the role of paying customers, paid providers and employability-maximising system regulators is narrated as an empowering condition that also enables them to generate positional benefits if they succeed in the struggle for prestige in the competitive market field. A range of formal measurements towards these ends are depicted, legitimated and operationalised via the TEF so as to align to the further state-induced engineering of marketised HE. Metrics form a crucial component to symbolic violence as they serve to establish a profound level of symbolic differentiation within the field and an allied set of field rules that are expected to influence actors’ behavioural responses. Successful institutionalisations of metrics function as ‘engines of anxiety’ (Espeland & Sauder, 2016) and generate ‘powerful and unanticipated effects: they can change how people think about what they do’ (Espeland & Sauder, 2012: 86).

The symbolic violence perspective on the TEF exposes the subtle use of power involving reconfigurations of thought and action that constrain and subordinate certain institutions and actors while creating the opportunity for others to enter the field of HE in a more advantaged position. We have shown how symbolic power rests on the incorporation and naturalisation of schemes of classification based on market measures that displace and marginalise more traditional forms of academic capital. This allows a symbolic force to be ‘fully exercised while disguising its true nature ... and gaining recognition, approval and acceptance’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 85). We have shown how the fundamental power dynamic at the heart of neo-liberal policy formation and its mediation within HE is the acceptance of marketised policy goals through processes of cultural reconfiguration whereby actors are made to

believe that the direction of change can work in their interest. Symbolic violence operates in the name of empowerment and quality through a gradual process of cultural reorientation to transform generative structures in HE. Our analysis concludes that in this way misrecognition operates in the TEF by cloaking itself under the guise of student empowerment and quality while reconfiguring the field and perpetuating, reinforcing and legitimating social differentiation.

There have been wide ranging criticisms of the TEF as well as more practical actions such as the student union boycott of the NSS. Likewise, various senior managers have publicly raised questions of its validity and usefulness, when it has resulted in reputational risk and weakened league table standing. This has to date however not stalled the TEF but rather led to it being pursued with sustained vigour while pragmatic adjustments have been made to its instrumentation (see Department for Education (DfE), 2017). The TEF has, for example, been relabelled into the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (a rhetoric response to its incapacity to measure teaching excellence). Further, the weight of the NSS in the metrics has been reduced (probably in anticipation of future student boycotts), and it is considered to abolish the TEF panels (that tended to favour traditional providers over new, private providers).

While Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is largely one of domination, it also contains seeds of resistance, as submission to domination is never total since agents are continually involved in a permanent struggle in the institutional field. Symbolic violence can only be exercised with the complicity of those that are subject to it (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 164). Bourdieu's tools can simultaneously be used to expose the instruments of symbolic violence and to make visible the mechanisms of misrecognition in order to forge acts of resistance that have the potential to obstruct the operation of symbolic violence.

In this vein, further research is required to challenge what Bourdieu has termed 'doxa' which is the unquestionable orthodoxy of market competition inscribed in the TEF that operates as if it were the objective truth. Recent work on the competition fetish in HE (Author, 2016) has challenged the view that competition is the panacea to solve all the problems of HE and that individuals are only capable of acting out of self-interest. Initiatives such as the TEF also threaten to weaken solidarity through blind and incessant competition based on a flawed notion of excellence. Crucially, once such a policy gets naturalised fully into institutional life, such resistance can often take the form of a 'hidden transcript' 'spoken behind the back of the dominant' (Scott, 1990, p. 12), or a form of 'resigned compliance' to the managerial field games it engenders (Farrell & Morris, 2004, p. 94).

It is thus imperative that students, academics and managers in HE find new ways to re-collectivise to confront these trends in creative and dynamic ways. Rather than retreating into a nostalgic and imagined golden age of HE, we need to recognise the major problems related to students and learning in HE in the 21st century (Naidoo, 2016). We need to highlight alternatives such as practices that are built on the foundations of ideas of inclusive excellence, the student as a partner and co-producer of HE (Neary & Winn, 2009) and co-operative university movements (Winn, 2015; Wright & Greenwood, 2017). Conceptions of the student–university relationship such as co-production offer a genuine extension of student agency and

meaningful democratic involvement that considerably exceeds the one-dimensionality of the student-consumer concept. In resisting the commodifying practices within the dominant policy frameworks such as the TEF, and therefore enriching trust between students and academics, university teachers can convey the significance of students' responsibilities towards both their own knowledge development and overall contribution to the intellectual life of the university. By extension, critical pedagogic practices within formal programme content can be used to incorporate open dialogue around the value of higher learning and the wider purpose of study beyond market transaction. As part of a critical distancing rather than faithful compliance to policy frameworks such as the TEF, university teachers and managers, in active collaboration with students, have a substantive role in retooling conceptions of studentship beyond what is enunciated within recent policy.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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