Learning Analytics and the Empowerment Paradox: A Foucauldian analysis of sector policy versus lived experience

Daniel Clark

BA (Hons), PGCHE, MA, SFHEA, SCMALT

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Department of Educational Research
Lancaster University
United Kingdom

Abstract

The discourse of educational technology within Higher Education is imbued with notions of technology's capacity to empower its stakeholders, and this is particularly evident in the promissory narrative surrounding Learning Analytics. Learning Analytics represent a significant area of growth and investment, with universities introducing sophisticated data infrastructures to track engagement, monitor activity, enhance attainment, and boost retention. Nevertheless, claims of empowerment do not go unchallenged, and a growing body of critical work highlights the inherent complexities surrounding Learning Analytics and power. Using a Foucauldian lens of governmentality and subjectification, this study examines how empowerment is constructed in sector discourse and how it is enacted, negotiated, or resisted in everyday lived experience. The study adopts a multi-organisational design, combining a Critical Discourse Analysis of sector texts with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of lived experience. Drawing on sixteen documents and nineteen interviews across seven UK universities, the study traces how sector rhetoric translates into concrete artefacts and rules-in-use. It specifies the institutional conditions under which Learning Analytics are experienced as supportive rather than disciplinary—namely, arrangements of knowledge, control, and voice. In doing so, this thesis contributes to the critical study of educational technology by reframing Learning Analytics as a governance design problem and offering practical implications for care-first, participatory configurations of Higher Education.

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This is for you, Dad—always leading the way.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification. All quotations, data, and ideas taken from the work of others are acknowledged through full and accurate citation. No part of this thesis has been published or submitted for a higher degree elsewhere.

Ethical approval from the Department of Educational Research Ethics Committee was received on 18 June 2024 (Ref: EdRes-2024-4596-EdAp-2). Informed consent was obtained from all participants and data were handled in accordance with the requirements set out by Lancaster University.

Signed:

Name: Daniel Clark

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Clark, D. (2023) 'The construction of legitimacy: a critical discourse analysis of the rhetoric of educational technology in post-pandemic higher education', *Learning, Media and Technology*. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2022.2163500

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List of figures and tables

List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
DfE	Department for Education
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HeLF	Heads of E-Learning Forum
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Jisc	Joint Information Systems Committee
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LA	Learning Analytics
LMS	Learning Management System
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
OfS	Office for Students
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SIS	Student Information System
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes
TEL	Technology Enhanced Learning
UCISA	Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Introduction

1.1 Learning Analytics in Higher Education

As the use of technology to deliver, facilitate, and administer learning, teaching, and assessment in Higher Education (HE) has become more sophisticated and embedded, so too have the possibilities for harnessing and utilising the data captured by, and derived from, such systems and tools (Clow, 2013; Williamson, 2017; Klein et al., 2019). Taken within the UK context, significant investment has been made by universities into sophisticated technical infrastructures and software platforms to facilitate the exchange of data between disparate systems for the purposes of providing 'actionable intelligence'.

As Williamson (2017) observes, education has emerged as a key site where visions of data-driven futures are played out, and where "diverse forms of information about education [are] being rendered in machine-readable digital data, which can then be subjected to sophisticated forms of processing, calculation, analysis, interpretation, visualisation and circulation" (2017, p. xv). These technical advances have taken place at a time when universities have come under increasing regulatory scrutiny—necessitating seemingly deeper levels of insight concerning universities, their activities, and their reporting metrics. Changes to attendance monitoring requirements and heightened institutional accountability, alongside broader trends such as the student success agenda and the increasing framing of students as consumers in HE, have prompted universities to embrace data-driven approaches as a means of demonstrating compliance, enhancing institutional oversight, and optimising student outcomes.

This, in turn, has led to significant development in the field of Learning Analytics (LA)—a broad and collective term used to describe the collection, measurement, analysis, and reporting of data about students and their learning environments to assist organisations, teachers, and students themselves in tracking engagement, monitoring activity, improving attainment, and boosting retention (see Long and Siemens, 2011). LA, in its infancy, began as little more than the provision of datasets from a disparate set of sources, such as activity within the Learning Management System (LMS) or attainment data stored in a Student Information System (SIS). But, with the progressive development of interoperable systems and the exchange of data between these, the provision of 'big' data within HE has created possibilities for drawing upon data from a range of sources, aggregating it, and then using sophisticated algorithms and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to monitor activity, model behaviour, and predict outcomes—the output of which is then presented to users in the form of visual dashboards in proprietary and purpose-built LA software platforms.

Whilst this proliferation forms part of the broader 'digitalisation' of HE, there is evidence to suggest that LA is emerging as a distinct area of investment and strategic priority (Williamson, 2017; Selwyn, 2020), and—in recent years—adoption of proprietary LA platforms such as *Solutionpath*, *IntelliBoard*, *Tableau*, and others has increased significantly. Indeed, as of 2024, around one in three UK universities reported that LA platforms are used at scale—specifically, 29% said LA is used in at least half of their courses—while a further 19% plan to implement or pilot LA systems over the next two years (UCISA, 2024). In parallel, programmes led by Jisc[1] (e.g., the HEFCW-funded Learning Analytics Cymru initiative and Jisc's ongoing LA service) have also provided shared infrastructure and templates for further adoption, helping to normalise analytics across the UK (Jisc, 2018).

As Dixon, Howe, and Richter (2025) contend, universities frequently cite three primary drivers for LA adoption: data-informed retention strategies, learner engagement, and student wellbeing. Nevertheless, in an era of declining student retention, stricter regulatory compliance, and increased metrification, LA represents a key component of the broader HE technical apparatus and their use increasingly underpins academic practice, resourcing, and institutional governance processes.

1.1.1 Learning Analytics in practice

Proprietary LA software platforms typically present data visually in the form of user-friendly, colour-coded, dynamic dashboards (see Figure 1). Combining data from multiple sources, such as the SIS, LMS, attendance data, library access, and other systems, dashboards visually depict how 'engaged' students are (based on clicks, swipes, and logins), how well they're performing (based on attainment data), and their propensity to succeed (based on algorithmic modelling).

LA platforms can be configured in different ways. In some configurations, dashboards are visible to both staff and students, often forming the basis of discussions or 'conversation starters' between a student and their personal academic tutor, for instance. In other settings, dashboards are only visible to staff. In most scenarios, dashboard data is visible to programme and module leads, and senior leaders. Typically, dashboards provide cohort-level benchmarking data that student performance is measured against, and, with some systems, an algorithmically determined risk score is presented to denote the likelihood of a student failing an assignment, academic stage, or dropping out entirely. In cases where students have access to LA dashboards, benchmarking data and risk scores tend to be used as motivational prompts and as mechanisms of gamification (see Molnar, Garcia and Kostkova,

[1] A not-for-profit organisation that provides IT services and digital resources in support of Further and Higher Education.

2024). In some configurations, LA platforms issue automated 'nudges' to students (e.g., via email or phone notification) as an early warning of disengagement or as a prompt for action.

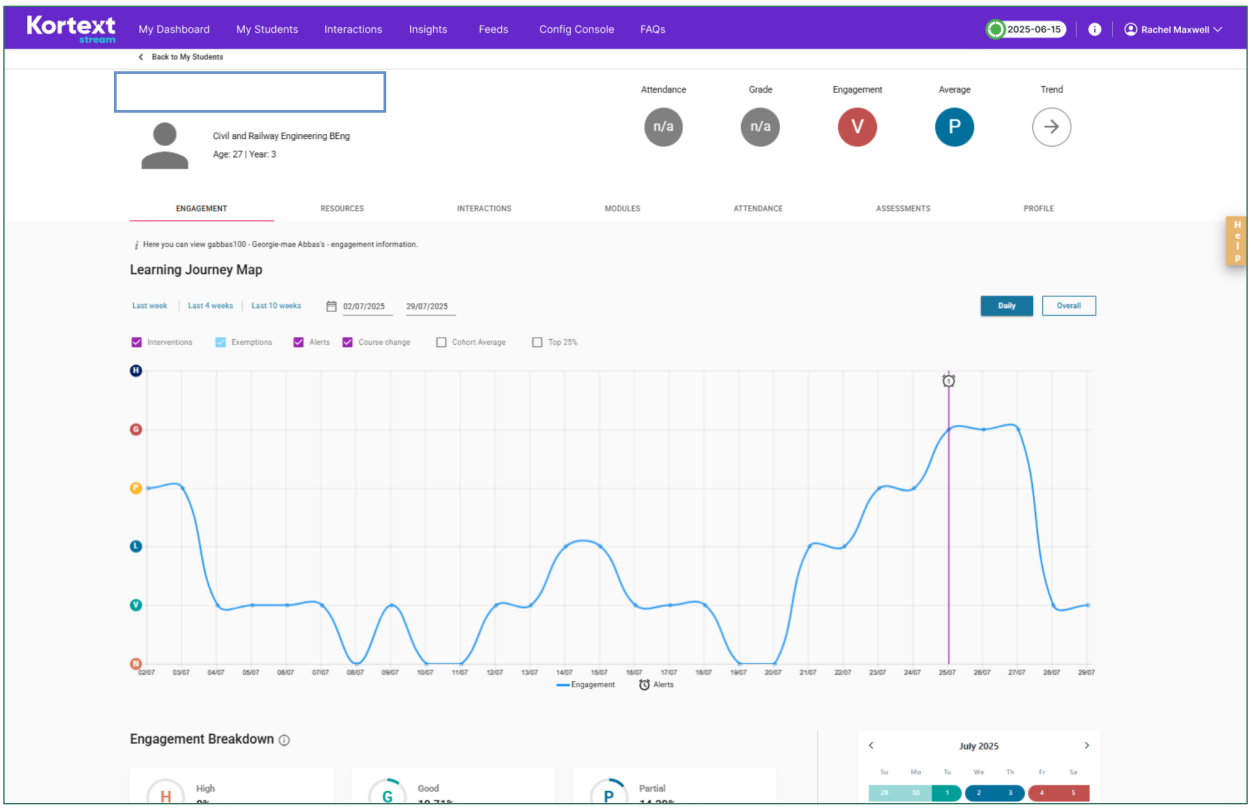

Figure 1. A student's view of a proprietary LA dashboard displaying engagement scores

For universities, the perceived value of LA lies not only in the ability to provide actionable insights that can enhance teaching and learning experiences but also in the potential to drive institutional change and inform policy decisions. Universities utilise LA so that they can identify at-risk students earlier, tailor interventions to individual needs, and ultimately improve student retention and success rates. Indeed, LA is frequently promoted by vendors for its ability to reveal patterns in student engagement and performance, helping institutions to identify and address systemic issues such as gaps in curriculum design, disparities in student support services, or the effectiveness of different teaching methods. This data-driven approach is attractive to universities as it enables them to make evidence-based decisions, such as allocating resources more effectively, designing targeted professional development for staff, or modifying institutional policies to better support student success.

Moreover, proponents argue that LA can support strategic planning by providing insights into enrolment trends, graduation rates, and other key performance indicators. Policymakers within institutions may use this information to set goals, track progress towards these goals, and adjust strategies as needed. On a broader scale, data aggregated from LA systems are frequently used to inform national education policies by highlighting trends across multiple institutions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that impact student outcomes and helping to shape initiatives aimed at improving the overall quality of HE.

Taken together, these arrangements make LA not just a student-facing tool but a governance device that shapes academic practice, resource allocation, and institutional oversight—precisely the claims of empowerment this thesis interrogates next.

1.2 The promissory narrative of Learning Analytics

Accompanying LA's increased adoption within UK HE is what I refer to as the *promissory narrative* of LA—an inherent "truthiness" (see Selwyn, 2013, p. 10) with which claims of LA's efficacy are imbued. Indeed, empirical evidence of LA's value to students, staff, and institutions is mixed and often highly contextualised, yet grand and optimistic claims are frequently made about LA's egalitarian and transformative potential.

One such claim—which forms the focus of this research—is in the promissory narrative of LA's means of empowerment. However, empowerment is not the only, nor necessarily the most significant, discursive frame through which LA gains legitimacy. LA is part and parcel of a wider HE paradigm shaped by neoliberal and market logics, where data-driven systems and digital platforms are mobilised to optimise performance, demonstrate value, and render both students and staff visible and measurable (Selwyn, 2014; Williamson, 2017; Komljenovic, 2022). In this sense, the empowerment discourse operates alongside—and often in tension with—other rationalities of control, accountability, and efficiency. LA can therefore be understood simultaneously as a promise of empowerment and as an apparatus of monitoring, incentivisation, and datafication, integral to the platformisation and assetisation of HE (Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024; Birch *et al.*, 2025).

Yet, the empowerment narrative remains central to this thesis because it provides the rhetorical bridge between the aspirational and the operational—between how LA is promised and how it is enacted. LA is often presented by vendors, policymakers, and some educational development scholars as tools that empower staff and students through informed decision-making and learner-centred approaches that foster wellbeing and inclusion. This is aligned with broader concepts of the digitally empowered

teacher and student—concepts that are a mainstay in the rhetoric of educational technology in HE (see Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020; Moore, Jayme and Black, 2021; Clark, 2023) and in recent UK HE policy (see Jisc, 2020; Office for Students, 2021). Furthermore, LA plays a critical role in fulfilling the social imaginary (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015) of neoliberal individualism, engendering agency, self-regulation, and personal responsibility (see Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017; Munro, 2018; Williamson, 2018; Raaper, 2020; Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2021; Raaper and Komljenovic, 2022). These claims are underwritten by metrification and audit—numeric indicators through which teachers and institutions evidence value (Beer, 2016; Selwyn, 2021).

Although the discussion that follows critically examines these promissory narratives, it also acknowledges emerging alternatives. A *relational turn* in HE scholarship emphasises care, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility as counterpoints to data-driven individualisation and managerialism (Kreber, 2013; Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017; Zembylas, 2025). This framing informs the thesis's concluding discussion, where I consider how LA might be re-configured toward *care-first*, participatory practices.

1.2.1 Problematising empowerment: The empowerment paradox

As the discussion above suggests, empowerment is not an isolated discourse but one expression of a broader set of rationalities—neoliberal, managerial, and platformised—that shape how LA is introduced and legitimised within HE. These promises do not go unchallenged; there is a growing chorus of criticality from the cultural studies of data, surveillance studies, critical algorithm studies in education, and critical technology studies, that highlight the inherent complexities concerning the asserted benefits of LA, particularly claims of LA's capacity to empower its users.

As Knox (2017) observes, LA is subject to considerable 'black-boxing' that obscures the underlying algorithmic processes of data analysis from users, with studies indicating that students and teachers feel "uninformed and uncertain" (Roberts *et al.*, 2016, p. 16) about *how* their data is used. For teachers and students, therefore, the actual processes of data analyses are concealed, and so any educational action, decisions, or steps taken are limited to, and inherently bound by, responding purely to the *output* of LA systems, thereby "limiting any sense of empowerment to a *reaction*" (Knox, 2017, p. 738), rather than a position of knowledge or actual power.

Similarly, Selwyn (2014) observes how the data infrastructures of HE are acquiescent to the neoliberal logic of efficiency, measurability, and accountability, and rely on notions of self-governance. However, as Lawson observes, these "micro-disciplinary techniques" (2011, p. 93), applied as a method of 'empowerment', create a paradox of unfreedoms and a system of discipline (Foucault, 1977). It is

therefore unsurprising that the use of data (and by extension LA) has been tendered as a "persuasive culture of governance that seeks to exert control through economic rationality, efficiency and individual accountability" (Tsai, Perrotta and Gašević, 2020, p. 557) and that LA therefore represents "new forms of self-regulating subjectivity, and self-monitoring behaviours [that] have the potential to alter relationships between students" (Wintrup, 2017, p. 99).

The political–economic context further complicates empowerment claims. The rapid growth of the LA market reflects the commercialisation of HE data infrastructures, with private vendors designing platforms that shape how student data are collected, combined, and acted upon (Komljenovic, 2022; Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024). While institutions may present LA as neutral means of improvement, the increasing role of private actors raises questions about ownership, governance, and how valuation stories and dependencies influence local practice.

It is this inherent complexity, between the promissory power that LA systems purportedly afford and the lived experiences of this claim, that is the focus of this research study. Sector narratives position LA as a rational and inevitable response to the availability of data. Policy documents, advisory reports, and vendor white papers promise efficiency, personalisation, and foresight, using a solutionist and technocratic register that helps to pre-authorise implementation. Nevertheless, critical scholarship warns that technologies are never merely tools: they encode assumptions about what should be measured, which outcomes matter, and how responsibility is allocated. In LA, therefore, the rhetoric of empowerment frequently accompanies particular mechanisms—dashboards, 'engagement' thresholds, and automated nudges—mechanisms that classify, normalise, and steer behaviour. I refer to this tension as the **empowerment paradox**.

1.3 Identification of the research problem

Building on the empowerment paradox above, the core problem is a translation gap: sector texts promise empowerment, and local studies describe mixed experiences, but we know far less about how empowerment talk is operationalised as concrete artefacts and rules-in-use, and how these arrangements shape what people can actually do.

Accordingly, the task is to connect discourse to practice. This study follows empowerment claims into institutional configurations and traces how people experience, negotiate or resist them. Three practical conditions frame the analysis: knowledge (clarity about data collection, purpose and consequence), control (practical influence over visibility, classification and action), and voice (participation in setting,

contesting and overseeing local rules). Where these are thin, empowerment is largely rhetorical; where they are stronger, LA is more likely to be experienced as support rather than discipline.

Existing work has mapped educational technology and LA discourse and documented user experiences, but, particularly in UK HE, it seldom links promissory narratives to the specific artefacts (dashboards, indicators, thresholds, escalation protocols) and governance arrangements (access, audit, contestation) through which LA is felt. This study addresses that gap by reading sector policy texts alongside multi-stakeholder accounts and by specifying the conditions under which LA is experienced as enabling or disciplinary.

Across the thesis, I use empowerment to mean a felt expansion of informed agency—that is, the extent to which people can understand how analytics work (knowledge), influence what is seen and what follows (control), and participate in shaping and contesting local rules (voice).

1.4 Research aims and objectives

This study aims to explain how the promissory narrative of empowerment surrounding LA in UK HE is constructed in sector discourse and how it is enacted, negotiated and felt in everyday institutional practice. To meet this aim, the project (i) maps how empowerment is articulated across policy, advisory, vendor and sector texts, specifying the problems, solutions and subject positions that LA discourse authorises; (ii) links those promissory accounts to the concrete artefacts and rules-in-use through which LA is implemented (e.g., dashboards, indicators, thresholds, escalation protocols); (iii) examines students', academics' and professional services' lived experiences with attention to knowledge, control, and voice; and (iv) integrates discourse and experience to develop an empirically grounded account of when LA is encountered as enabling and when it functions as discipline, with implications for institutional policy and practice.

1.4.1 Proposed research questions

In order to achieve these research aims, the following research questions are identified:

Note on development: this initial set of exploratory questions was refined following the literature review. The final research questions used in the study are specified in Chapter 2.6 and adopted throughout the thesis.

RQ1: What are the promissory narratives surrounding LA and how are these narratives constructed and perpetuated in sector publications and associated LA vendor literature?

RQ2: How do stakeholders—including students, academics, professional services staff, and institutional senior leaders—perceive the ways in which LA shape the distribution and experience of power within HE?

RQ2.1: What benefits and drawbacks do different stakeholder groups perceive in the use of LA?

RQ3: How do stakeholders' lived experiences of LA align with or diverge from the promises attributed to its functionality and impact within HE settings?

RQ3.1: To what extent do LA systems reinforce existing power asymmetries or enable challenges to traditional power structures within HEIs, when analysed through a Foucauldian lens of power?

1.5 Research Design

This study adopts a Foucauldian conception of power as relational, productive and enacted through practices rather than possessed (Foucault, 1977, 1982). It also draws on related Foucauldian concepts—particularly governmentality, subjectification, and the apparatus (*dispositif*) (see Foucault, 1978)—to trace how LA functions as a technology of governance that organises visibility, knowledge, and conduct within HE. Power works via discourse and apparatuses that make particular problems visible, render certain solutions reasonable, and authorise specific actors to act. LA is treated as one such apparatus—an alignment of ideas, techniques, and routines that together organise how learning is seen and governed.

Two notions are central. Governmentality highlights how conduct is steered at a distance—how norms, indicators, and scripts invite self-management while aligning behaviour with institutional objectives. Subjectification draws attention to how actors are formed as particular kinds of subjects (e.g., 'at-risk students', 'data-empowered teachers') and how they take up, negotiate or resist these invitations. Within this frame, the empowerment paradox names a recurrent pattern: claims to enable action coincide with techniques that structure and delimit what counts as appropriate action.

The lens is applied in two ways: A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines sector texts to identify problematisations, regimes of truth and subject positions—how LA is made thinkable, desirable and necessary, and an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) then traces how these invitations

are encountered in practice—how students, academics and professional services staff experience visibility, classification, and intervention, and where counter-conduct appears. Together, CDA and IPA connect promissory narratives to rules-in-use and lived experience, providing a coherent way to analyse when LA is experienced as enabling and when it functions as discipline.

Epistemologically, the study adopts an interpretivist stance: it assumes multiple, context-dependent realities and seeks to understand how actors make sense of LA in their own terms. This orientation foregrounds hermeneutic interpretation and thick description over prediction or measurement, and it underwrites the choice of methods—CDA for situated readings of sector texts and IPA for idiographic accounts of lived experience. The Foucauldian frame then provides a critical lens on how those interpretations are shaped by governing arrangements.

1.6 Scope, contributions, and limitations

This thesis examines how the promissory narrative of empowerment around LA is constructed in UK sector discourse and how it is enacted, negotiated, and felt in everyday practice across multiple HEIs. The contribution is threefold. Conceptually, it develops an empirically grounded account of the empowerment paradox in LA, specifying the practical conditions—knowledge, control, and voice—under which analytics are experienced as support or as discipline. Empirically, it brings together a multi-actor, multi-institution dataset (students, academics, and professional services staff) and reads these accounts alongside sector texts, thereby bridging discourse and lived experience. Methodologically, it pairs Critical Discourse Analysis with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to connect promissory talk to rules-in-use and to the textures of everyday encounter.

The study is deliberately delimited. It focuses on the UK HE context and on LA as a sociotechnical practice; it does not evaluate the instructional efficacy of particular tools, test models for predictive accuracy, or conduct technical audits of algorithms. IPA's depth-over-breadth logic means participant numbers are modest and institution selection is purposive; findings are analytically generalisable (theoretical transfer), not statistically representative. The CDA corpus emphasises recent policy, advisory and vendor texts; while broad, it is not exhaustive of all sector communications. The research is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal; it captures how LA was talked about and experienced within the study period and cannot claim how arrangements may evolve over time. Finally, by centring empowerment, other important lenses (e.g., cost–benefit, narrow effectiveness studies) are treated as context rather than primary objects of analysis.

Notwithstanding these boundaries, the anticipated implications are substantive. For institutions, the analysis offers practical levers—improving knowledge (clear, layered disclosure), enhancing control (meaningful opt-ins/opt-outs, avenues to contest classifications), and widening voice (student/staff participation in local governance and design)—that can make LA feel enabling rather than managerial. For sector bodies and vendors, the findings speak to procurement, assurance and design choices (e.g., how thresholds, visual encodings and escalation protocols shape experience). For scholarship, the study demonstrates a way to connect policy imaginaries to everyday arrangements, opening a path for comparative and longitudinal work. These implications are developed in detail in Chapters 7 and 8.

1.7 Chapter outline

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on educational technology and LA, focusing on the UK and synthesising three strands—sector discourse, empowerment, and lived experience—to surface the gaps this study addresses. Chapter 3 then establishes the theoretical framework, setting out a Foucauldian account of power, governmentality and subjectification, and defining the thesis's analytic focus on the empowerment paradox and the practical conditions of knowledge, control, and voice. Chapter 4 details the methodology, including data sources, sampling, CDA and IPA procedures, ethics, quality criteria and limitations. Chapter 5 reports the CDA, showing how sector texts construct problems, solutions and subject positions around LA and codify the promissory narrative of empowerment through a grammar of metrics. Chapter 6 presents the IPA of students, academics and professional services staff, tracing when LA is experienced as enabling and when as disciplinary, and how participants navigate visibility, classification, and intervention. Chapter 7 synthesises the discourse and lived-experience findings, answers each research question explicitly, and develops an empirically grounded account of the empowerment paradox with implications for governance, design and sector policy. Chapter 8 concludes by summarising the contribution to knowledge, reflecting on scope and transferability, offering recommendations for practice, and outlining priorities for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2: Literature Review

Critical studies into the nature, use, and effects of educational technology—collectively referred to as *Critical EdTech research*—have sought to problematise the pervasion of technology in education, including its impact on pedagogy (Koehler *et al.*, 2014; Decuypere, Grimaldi and Landri, 2021; Gallagher, Breines and Blaney, 2021; Fawns, 2022), the use of data (Jarke and Breiter, 2019; Macgilchrist, 2019; Knox, Williamson and Bayne, 2020; Williamson, 2020; Witzenberger and Gulson, 2021; Gourlay, 2022; Birch *et al.*, 2025), the reinforcement of inequalities (Czerniewicz, 2018; Rafalow, 2020; Swauger, 2020; Jarke and Macgilchrist, 2021), assetisation and rentiership (Birch, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021; Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024), platformisation (Dijck, Poell and Waal, 2018; Williamson and Komljenovic, 2023; Noteboom, 2025), and algorithmification (Selwyn, 2021; Williamson, 2021). Collectively, this work has been crucial in advancing what Selwyn (2013) refers to as a *technological pessimism* against the deterministic interpretation of educational technology as an objective force for good. It is within this field that this study is situated.

2.1 Literature search approach and methods

While LA is a broad field spanning pedagogic design, intervention studies, technical architectures, and model validation, the present review is deliberately delimited. It does not evaluate the efficacy of particular LA systems and tools for improving attainment, nor does it survey algorithmic techniques, dashboard design, or 'what works' in instructional terms. Instead, LA is examined as a sociotechnical practice situated within a sectoral policy ecosystem—the focus is on how LA is made thinkable and actionable through discourse, how power and "empowerment" are constructed around it, and how these claims meet lived experience in HE. The primary frame is the UK context (with selective international studies where they illuminate shared patterns), and *policy* is read capaciously to include government publications, advisory/sector bodies, vendor and investor texts, and sector think-tanks (see Policy Definition and Document Identification within Chapter 4.1 Research Design for more detail). This scope clarifies that the chapter's contribution is conceptual and critical—to map promissory narratives, theorise power, and then place those narratives alongside stakeholder experience.

2.1.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

LA has antecedents in educational data work from the 1990s (e.g., early tracking and 'student success' analytics), but as a distinct research field—and as an object of critical inquiry within the *Critical EdTech* canon—it has coalesced only over roughly the last two decades. To take a wide yet coherent view, the

search window for this review spanned 2003–2025, capturing the emergence of LA as a distinct field and the maturation of critical perspectives.

Searches were conducted across ERIC, Education Research Complete (via EBSCOhost), Scopus, and Web of Science, supplemented by targeted searches of key journals and proceedings (e.g., *Journal of Learning Analytics*, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *Learning, Media and Technology*), and backward/forward citation tracing of reference lists.

Representative Boolean search strings included:

- "learning analytics" AND (policy OR discourse OR rhetoric OR imaginaries OR governance OR governmentality OR power OR empowerment OR consent OR surveillance OR agency OR "lived experience" OR perceptions)

- ("student success" OR "predictive analytics") AND (higher education) AND (ethic* OR privacy OR fairness)

- datafication AND (university OR "Higher Education" OR HE) AND (policy OR practice)

Inclusion:

- Peer-reviewed articles, books and chapters that interrogate discourse, power/empowerment, governance, ethics, or lived experience of LA (students, academics, professional services).

- Empirical and conceptual work in UK HE; international studies are included where they illuminate shared patterns or offer conceptual leverage.

Exclusion:

- Studies focused primarily on technical performance (algorithm benchmarking, model tuning), interface usability divorced from questions of power or governance, or pedagogic efficacy trials of specific tools without consideration of discourse or institutional arrangements.

- School/FE contexts unless findings clearly translate to HE governance/experience.

- Non-English publications and purely promotional materials lacking identifiable authorship or methods.

Screening proceeded in two stages (title/abstract, then full-text), with decisions recorded against the above criteria. Where studies straddled categories (e.g., dashboard trials with rich qualitative accounts), inclusion was governed by their contribution to the review's three strands: sectoral discourse, power/empowerment, and lived experience.

2.1.2 Data extraction and approach

Each retrieved publication was screened for fit with the field and with the aims of this thesis. I used the Systematic Review Checklist (CASP, 2022) as a guiding rubric to judge methodological quality and relevance, adapting the prompts for qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies. As the appraisal proceeded, recurring concerns—sectoral narratives of LA, the construction of power/empowerment in policy and practice, and stakeholders' lived encounters with LA—coalesced into the three-strand analytic frame used to organise the review and to refine the research questions. This frame also guided inclusion decisions by privileging studies that speak to discourse, governance and experience rather than tool efficacy alone.

The review therefore proceeds within these three strands (see Figure 2). First, it maps the discursive terrain of educational technology—narrowing to LA—to identify the promissory narratives and policy imaginaries that frame LA's purpose and value. Second, it develops a conceptual lens on power and empowerment, drawing on Foucault to clarify how "empowerment" is constructed in sector texts and how it will be read in this thesis. Third, it surveys empirical research on stakeholders' lived experiences of LA (students and staff), attending to agency, surveillance, consent, fairness and inequality. This sequencing—context, concept, experience—provides the scaffold for the CDA/IPA design and positions the thesis to examine how promissory claims about LA travel into practice.

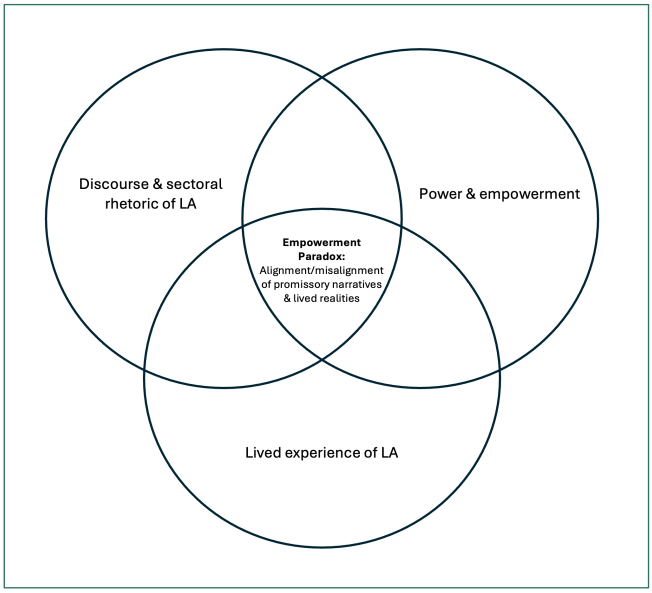

Figure 2. Scope of the review

2.2 Discourse, Rhetoric, and Learning Analytics in HE

A nascent strand of the Critical EdTech canon has focused on *discourse* and its role in the proliferation of educational technology in HE, and this work itself draws from—and is framed by—a broader suite of critical technology research (see Postman, 1992; Garnham, 2000; Winner, 2004; Lefebvre, 2006; Feenberg, 2009). This framing is important because it locates the genealogy of Critical EdTech research, situating contemporary discourse analyses within a longer intellectual history that treats technology as ideological and politically productive, and clarifying how current narratives about educational technology—and, by extension, LA—have emerged, circulated, and acquired authority.

As Selwyn (2013, p. 21 citing Adorno, 1981, p.126) contends, educational technologies are frequently imbued with an "overbearing matter-of-factness" in which their rhetoric acts to progressively and implicitly naturalise their adoption and use. That sense of inevitability is often underwritten by wider processes of digitisation in society (see Rudd, 2013; Selwyn, 2013, 2021), and so sits squarely within the broader context of critical technology studies.

As Ferré (1995) contends, as technology comes to be accepted as a natural phenomenon, and as a product of progress and human intellect, it perpetuates what Coyne describes as "the romantic narrative that pervades the digital age" (1999, p. ix)—the tendency to ascribe positive value to technology by default. In such a landscape, the discourse of technology in contemporary society is imbued with notions of technology for the common good, betterment, advancement, and progress. Borgmann (1992, p. 208) describes a "syncategorematic" sense of the good that attaches to technology—even in the absence of any agreed measure of 'goodness'. This ideological inheritance is the backdrop against which educational technology's (and LA's) promissory claims about empowerment are made.

Against this backdrop, critical scholarship turns to the discursive field itself. Much of this work has sought to examine and uncover the narratives, promises, and inherent power dynamics encoded in educational technology-related discourse and—as shall be described—draws on a broad sectoral policy ecosystem, including publications by government departments (e.g., Department for Education, Office for Students[2]), educational technology vendors and suppliers (e.g., Microsoft, Salesforce, Anthology), private consortia and venture capital companies (e.g., Emerge Education[3]), advisory

[2] The regulator and competition authority for the HE sector in England.
[3] A global venture capital organisation specialising in seed-fund initiatives within the education sector.

bodies (e.g., Jisc, UCISA[4], Advance HE[5]), sector think tanks (e.g., HEPI[6], Policy Exchange[7]), scholarly publications, and universities themselves. This rich rhetorical landscape—spanning policy white papers, vendor manifestos, think-tank reports, and institutional strategies—presents a significant body of dialogue that scholars have sought to problematise.

2.2.1 Romance, Neutrality, and the Contradictory Discourses of Educational Technology

Empirical analyses of the sectoral policy ecosystem have tended to critically explore the discourse of technology *broadly* instead of more nuanced explorations into the narrative of specific technologies such as LA. Nevertheless, such work is included here as it usefully highlights the broader discursive terrain within which LA is subsequently positioned—thereby articulating one component of this study's scholarly contribution. Hayes (2015), for instance, analysed UK government policy and university strategy documents (1997 to 2012), observing transformatory narratives including rhetorical 'exchange values' and boosterist claims of technology's capacity to "increase, create, enhance, and improve learning" (2015, p. 30). These findings are reflective of Czerniewicz and Rother (2018) who identified discourses of efficiency, expedience, and transformation in their macro-level study of educational technology policy and strategy documents in UK and South African universities.

Building on these studies, Matthews (2021)—whose recent analysis of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) statements and UK university strategy documents—offers an expounded view of the supposed *neutrality* of educational technology discourse. Indeed, Matthews highlights the remediatory statements that "construct technology in the context of education as a tool to be used as both an end in itself and as a neutral tool for achieving a specific end" (2021, p. 211). As Matthews warns, whilst the stated benefits of educational technology often include improved student attainment and learning gain, enhanced flexibility, and more personalised learning opportunities, the presentation of technology as apolitical, neutral and inevitable is inherently problematic in that this approach "ignores the many competing ideologies and interests at play" (2021, p. 204). Similarly, Ferreira and Lemgruber (2018) show how the pervasive image of "technology-as-tool" operates as a conceptual metaphor that appears neutral while reducing complex human–technical relations to instrumentality. This tool metaphor, widely diffused across academic and marketing discourse, sustains the optimistic

[4] An association that supports UK universities in the development of academic, management and administrative information systems.
[5] A charity and professional membership scheme promoting excellence in HE.
[6] A UK-based think tank.
[7] A UK-based think tank.

fix. Consequently, if technology is *just a tool*, effects are presumed to depend solely on use, thereby obscuring the commercial agendas and production–consumption contexts of artefacts.

Outside the HE context, these findings are reflected throughout different stages of education. Indeed, as Selwyn (2021) notes, educational technology has permeated virtually all elements of primary, secondary, and tertiary education, and the determinism and inherent "truthiness" (see Selwyn, 2013, p. 10) of its use and adoption are consistent throughout all these stages. Indeed, in an earlier study of the rhetoric of educational reform, Selwyn (2016) highlights the propensity for 'EdTech speak' that acts to sustain the enchantment and neutrality of its adoption through the use of deterministic verbs, hyperbolic claims of "impact" and "transformation," and playful branding that forecloses doubt—features that render digital change commonsensical; elements that Lee and Brett (2014) describe as the metamorphic shift from 'state-of-the-art' to 'state-of-the-practice'. Similar observations are made by Walker and White (2002), Vrasidas (2015), Mertala (2021), and—of particular note—Marone and Heinsfeld (2023) who, in their analysis of Google and Microsoft's discourse on educational technology, highlight a deterministic "technology as a solution" framework in which technology is depicted as an inevitable choice for the advancement of people and society. This observation is salient for the present study as it underscores HE's permeability to commercial and third-party influence.

Of note, Roumell and Salajan (2016) show that these findings are transferable and applicable within international contexts; indeed, their macro-level analysis of US education policy highlighted "the enchantment and the romance of technology as the optimistic fix for education" (2016, p. 393). Importantly, Roumell and Salajan reported complex and contradictory discourses, including the contradistinction between educational technology's capacity to reduce inequalities and deliver student-centred approaches, with the systemic dissonance of educational technology for surveillance, economic output, control, and compliance.

The contradictory discourses highlighted by Roumell and Salajan continue elsewhere internationally. Indeed, Liu and Barranquero (2025)—in their analysis of HE-oriented press releases in Spanish media—note the prevalence of boosterist myths and egalitarian promises around MOOCs[8] despite the prevalence of conflicting statements noting high dropout rates and the persistence of inequalities in access. Equally, Žmavc and Bezlaj's (2024) analysis of European Union (EU) policy documents on educational uses of technology (2015 to 2022) observed incongruities in the description of the

[8] Massive Open Online Courses

empowered teacher and student versus the rhetorical tension that said "empowerment" is only ever afforded to those who utilise (and comply with) technological adoption.

The promissory and contradictory elements of educational technology discourse represent a significantly under-explored area when taken in the UK context and within the deliberate framing of LA. Moreover, the UK HE landscape is unevenly mapped, and extant analyses have tended to prioritise statutory policy or institutional strategy while leaving the wider sectoral ecosystem of advisory bodies, think tanks, consortia and vendors under-examined. A reasonable conclusion is that while there remains a significant paucity of studies that foreground LA's discourse as a distinct object of analysis, existing work on educational technology discourse nevertheless furnishes the conditions into which LA is routinely introduced. The romance of technological solutionism, the commonsensical register of *EdTech speak*, and the neutralising "technology-as-tool" metaphor collectively prefigure LA as an obvious, desirable fix—predisposing the sectoral policy ecosystem to cast LA, prediction and "personalisation" as self-evident goods. In short, enchantment and optimism pre-configure LA's promissory claims. The next subsection traces how this romantic framing hardens into a grammar of measurement—metrics, indicators, and 'machine behaviourism'—through which LA's value is articulated and its authority secured.

2.2.2 Data, metrics and machine behaviourism

Extant research shows that LA discourse is organised through a language of measurement. Indeed, observing the pervasion of data processing logics into formal educational practices, Knox *et al.* (2020) describe a fixed lexicon (e.g., 'insights', 'evidence-based', 'real-time') and modal claims of efficacy ('will identify', 'will optimise') which together naturalise quantified ways of knowing learning. Knox *et al.* characterise this drift as 'machine behaviourism', where behavioural traces and predictive outputs are treated as proxies for learning itself. Aligned with the discursive commonsensical dialogue highlighted in adjacent research (see Selwyn, 2016; Matthews, 2021; Marone and Heinsfeld, 2023), metrics are framed as the rational means of seeing and improving education, thereby pre-authorising the LA dashboards, thresholds, and risk scores that follow.

In this sense, the lexicon of metrics does important argumentative work: LA dashboards and key performance indicators are framed as transparency devices—making the 'invisible' visible. Furthermore, in their investigation into the ethics of LA, Wintrup (2017) describes how risk bands, thresholds, and traffic-light colours are presented as commonsense and neutral representations of progress. Indeed, as Beer (2016) argues, metrics exercise 'metric power' by structuring what organisations notice, value and act upon. Read discursively, therefore, LA indicators operate as

signifiers that bring together improvement, accountability, and foresight, and in turn, they reposition expertise toward those who can *produce* and *interpret* numbers—mirroring, as discussed below, Žmavc and Bezlaj's (2024) contention of how 'excellence' in teaching is discursively framed around technical proficiency and decision-making.

These prior studies are broadly reflective of Williamson's (2016) account of how digital education governance situates LA 'talk' within data infrastructures and policy imaginaries through which preferred futures are reiterated and normalised. Williamson shows how the same phrasings (e.g., 'evidence-based decision-making', 'early warning', 'personalisation at scale') recur across ministerial speeches, institutional strategies and vendor white papers. This too is reflected in my own prior research where an analysis of university strategy documents highlighted the propensity for the use of data (e.g., LA) to "be presented as a matter of fact, and as a key component of progressive digitalisation" (Clark, 2024, p. 560).

For Macgilchrist (2019), this repetition does more than echo a shared vocabulary—it sets an expectation that problems should be solved with numbers. Indeed, Macgilchrist (2019) calls this a form of 'cruel optimism'—early warning triggers can promise help yet sideline underlying inequalities when prediction takes precedence over structural considerations. Indeed, in earlier work, Macgilchrist (2018) observes how the digital subject of twenty-first-century education is formed and sustained through expectations of being measured and optimised. These analyses foreground how LA discourse does more than just make promises of enhanced data-empowered decision making; it produces subjects and mechanisms of intervention in the form of the 'at-risk student', the *data-led teacher*, and the *data-literate manager*—for whom being quantifiable is a condition of legitimacy.

Political–economic analyses sharpen this picture by tracing the distance between rhetoric and practice. Indeed, Komljenovic *et al's* (2024) analyses of universities, EdTech start-ups and investors shows how HE is being reimagined around digital user data and platform services even as day-to-day realities lag behind. Komljenovic *et al.'s* (2024) call for more transparent and democratic data governance underscores a broader discursive point; that investment-led imaginaries and valuation stories tend to run ahead of institutional practice. To that end, promissory talk about LA leans on futures that have yet to materialise, while present implementations remain partial and uneven—echoing observations made concerning the broader application of educational technology in HE (see Decuypere, Grimaldi and Landri, 2021; Macgilchrist, 2021; Selwyn, 2021).

Collectively, this work infers that LA's authority rests not only on technical capability but on a shared rhetoric of numbers—a way of speaking (and seeing) that recasts learning as that which can be made

visible, comparable and governable. This notion dovetails with the broader neoliberal rationalities of performance and asset value that circulate through HE—items discussed in the following section.

2.2.3 Neoliberal undercurrents, assetisation, re-infrastructuring

National strategies have been central to how digital technology is imagined in UK HE. Munro's (2018) CDA of thirteen government and arm's-length digital teaching and learning strategies (2003–2013) shows these documents repeatedly positioning technology as a lever for marketisation. At the same time, they juggle uneasy claims that digital systems will both enhance learning and intensify competition—contradictions that, Munro argues, render technology complicit in the neoliberal reshaping of the sector.

Pandemic-era publications reprise and amplify this pattern. My own analysis of sector-oriented texts produced in response to the global pandemic (Clark, 2023) found an opportunistic rhetoric of technology-as-saviour and 'catalyst for change', which smoothed the path for unprecedented investment in data-driven infrastructures. The tone was resolutely promissory—digital systems were cast as unambiguously beneficial, while the consumerist and neoliberal assumptions underwriting those promises were rarely made explicit. This pandemic inflection is now part of the background noise of UK HE discourse, yet its specific consequences for how LA is framed have received limited sustained attention.

Beyond the UK, related work identifies the same rationalities at play. McGarr and Johnston (2021) trace policy framings that are at once student-centred and surveillance-ready, aligning classroom practice with performance management and compliance. Ferrante *et al.* (2024) map transnational sociotechnical imaginaries that present digital technologies as solutions to social and educational inequalities while privileging standardisation, benchmarking, and future-oriented 'readiness'. In this sense, these discourses advance a governing vocabulary—competitiveness, efficiency, accountability—in which educational value is demonstrated through targets and auditability. What is less developed in this literature is a fine-grained account of how these logics are taken up to justify the specific predictive and behavioural claims made for LA.

A second thread tracks the financialisation of these imaginaries. Indeed, recent analyses show how predictive systems and their outputs are narrated as institutional 'assets' expected to deliver returns—improved retention, optimised resourcing, reputational gains—thus legitimising continued spend (Williamson *et al.*, 2025). In parallel, universities are being 're-infrastructured' as platform logics reorganise workflows and dependencies so that analytics services become connective tissue rather

than optional add-ons (Williamson, 2025). Political–economic studies show that investment-led valuation narratives often outstrip what universities can actually do: turning user data into institutional value is difficult, implementation costs mount, and large incumbent platform companies continue to set the terms of engagement (Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024). These observations suggest a discursive–practical gap; however, we still know relatively little about how assetisation narratives specifically travel into LA procurement, governance, and everyday use within UK HEIs.

Within this policy discourse, professional identity is also recast. Indeed, as Žmavc and Bezlaj observe, EU-level texts construct notions of the 'excellent teacher' as one who integrates platforms and demonstrates data-driven pedagogy, with relational and critical judgements subordinated to quantifiable indicators (2024). Alongside this, as Ortegón *et al.* (2025) highlight, affective brokerage amplifies this shift, whereby EdTech intermediaries (e.g., commercial professional-learning networks and vendor-affiliated ambassador programmes) 'enthuse and inspire' teachers into techno-optimist imaginaries, making visible enthusiasm for tools a marker of professional legitimacy. These rhetorical moves relocate authority toward those who design and govern infrastructures, positioning educators as implementers of externally defined data practices. Notwithstanding, as Jandrić and Hayes (2018) highlight, extant analyses have tended to focus on organisational or government policy and, as a consequence, little analysis has been undertaken on the texts, publications, and accounts of other key stakeholders, including advisory agencies, private consortia, and venture capital companies.

Finally, these discourses solidify in institutional form. Assetisation stories and platform dependencies normalise procurement and governance such that LA becomes embedded in the very architecture of institutional operations. As the grammar of performance sediments into contracts, workflows and dashboards, LA's promises persist even where evidence is uneven; educational worth is tethered to what can be counted, and the infrastructure makes those counts difficult to ignore. What remains under-examined is the junction between these promissory narratives and everyday practice in UK HE—the point at which empowerment claims meet disciplinary effects.

In summary, current sector discourse positions LA as a self-evident public good: a neutral, metrics-led route to efficiency, personalisation, and foresight. These claims are animated by romantic and technocratic imaginaries, travel through an ecosystem of policy, advisory and corporate genres, and are reinforced by post-pandemic crisis/resilience framings. At the same time, the literature documents how such imaginaries fold into neoliberal logics of performance, assetisation and re-infrastructuring, with attendant risks of surveillance and asymmetrical control. Two gaps follow: first, LA-specific discourse is comparatively under-analysed in the UK context beyond statutory policy; second, the connection between these promissory narratives and stakeholders' day-to-day encounters with LA is

insufficiently mapped. The next section develops a Foucauldian lens on power and empowerment to read these dynamics more precisely, before turning to lived experience.

2.3 Empowerment and LA

Notions of power and control have long been entwined with education, but 'empowerment' as a named construct gained traction in the 1970s. Empowerment theory (see Rappaport, 1984), while rooted in social psychology, draws on Marxist analyses of how power is produced and sustained (Burton and Kagan, 1996) and, for Rappaport, it is the process by which people, organisations and communities "gain mastery over their lives" (1984, p. 4). Nevertheless, Adams (2017) emphasises the ambiguity of the term in that it functions both as an analytic for understanding power/powerlessness and as a rhetorical claim mobilised to justify action. In HE, LA is frequently positioned in precisely this dual sense—offering the means through which students and staff might act (e.g., dashboards, alerts, predictive models), and a language by which institutions justify data-led intervention as empowerment (see Williamson, Eynon and Potter, 2020; Moore, Jayme and Black, 2021; Clark, 2023, 2024).

2.3.1 Emancipatory practice

Understandings of empowerment in education vary with the subject (who is empowered) and the conditions of its bestowal, with Lawson (2011) identifying two distinct manifestations. The first of these is empowerment as emancipatory practice whereby power is redistributed to those with less of it. Critical pedagogies (such as Freire, 1970; Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1988) informed student-centred approaches that decentre teacher authority, and with the rise of the internet and networked knowledge (Castells, 2015), these ideas were re-animated within digital pedagogies (see Costa *et al.*, 2018) casting learners as partners with enhanced agency (see Beetham and Sharpe, 2007; Nelson, 2008; Daniela, 2020).

LA is often folded into this emancipatory narrative: progress dashboards promise legibility of learning, recommender systems pledge tailored pathways, cohort analytics are said to support responsive teaching, and—with this—policy and strategy documents echo longer-standing claims that technology extends reach and opportunity (Beetham and Sharpe, 2007; Conole *et al.*, 2008; Weller, 2011; Spector, 2016). Notwithstanding, critics caution that the emancipatory narrative can obscure how digital systems mediate social, political and economic tensions (McCarthy, 2011). Indeed, as Selwyn (2021) argues, assumptions of a level digital playing field reflect a privileged standpoint and, to that end, claims of empowered, personalised learning—including those made for LA—should be treated with

careful scepticism (Jenkins, 2009; Watling, 2012; Costa *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, whilst LA may enable timely feedback, self-regulation, and intervention opportunities, the extent to which these constitute emancipatory practice depends on whose goals are served, which choices are actually available, and how 'actionability' is defined.

2.3.2 Empowerment, governance, and discipline

Lawson's (2011) second manifestation—empowerment as governance and discipline—illuminates this ambiguity. Echoing Ecclestone's "moral authoritarianism in the guise of liberal intentions" (1999, p. 333), empowerment arrives and is manifested through disciplinary technologies (see Foucault, 1977) such as metrics, personalisation, assessment, and risk scoring. Viewed through this lens, the promise of self-management and self-efficacy can be redefined as the normalisation of behaviour and, therefore, these "micro-disciplinary techniques" (Lawson, 2011, p. 93)—badged as mechanisms of personalisation and support—form what this thesis terms the empowerment paradox.

LA is a principal arena where this plays out. Indeed, sector literature attributes empowering potential to data for students, staff and organisations (Jisc, 2020, 2022, 2025; Office for Students, 2021) and universities increasingly rely on analytics and predictive modelling to monitor, support, and retain students. Indeed, as Williamson (2019) notes, data drive the metrics by which institutions are appraised and compared, and data are seen to super-empower HE. From a critical standpoint, however, datafication institutes a "persuasive culture of governance" (Tsai, Perrotta and Gašević, 2020, p. 557) that exerts control through economic rationality, efficiency, and individual accountability.

In LA specifically, Wintrup (2017) shows how LA dashboards and early warning triggers cultivate self-regulating subjectivities: that is, students monitor themselves against configured thresholds, teachers are reoriented toward risk management, and peer relations may be reshaped as some are labelled 'at risk'. Across HE, rising dependence on metrics embeds accountability regimes through quality and standards (Tomlinson, Enders and Naidoo, 2020), assessment (Yorke and Zaitseva, 2013), and engagement (Mandernach, 2015)—with LA often supplying the indicators that make such regimes practicable. Research on organisational data practices extends these concerns to personalised and institution-level analytics alike (Jarke and Breiter, 2019; Williamson, Bayne and Shay, 2020; Komljenovic, 2021), highlighting how empowerment claims can coincide with intensified oversight, nudging, and conformity to modelled norms.

2.3.3 Economic rationality

Empowerment is also articulated in economic terms within the ongoing marketisation of HE (Komljenovic and Robertson, 2016; Munro, 2018; Komljenovic, 2019; Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2021; Clark, 2024). Since the late 1990s, universities have operated ever more within market rationalities (Williams, 2013; Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017; Raaper, 2019) predicated on the neoliberal figure of the rational, agentic actor (Munro, 2018; Raaper and Komljenovic, 2022). Framed this way, LA promises 'choice' and 'voice' through comparative cohort-level benchmarking, personalised nudges, and flexible study options. Yet, as responsibility shifts from the institution to the individual (Harvey, 2005; Selwyn, 2013), LA's predictive risk scores and engagement indicators can intensify responsibilisation—recasting progression as a problem of personal motivation and effort, rather than structural inequality. Institutional deployments that bundle analytics with performance-based funding, retention targets or consumer-style 'student success' metrics can thus make economic empowerment indistinguishable from performance management.

2.3.4 The empowerment paradox

Taken together, these strands support Lawson's (2011) view that empowerment and control are not opposites but interdependent processes realised in specific institutional settings. Emancipatory claims—including their economic variants—are routinely entangled with the governance effects of data-intensive systems; conversely, governance arrangements can open genuine capacities for action, albeit within bounded frames. For LA, promises of agency and support co-produce routines of classification, prediction and evaluation that also underwrite surveillance and normalisation. What remains thinly described is how these dynamics vary across UK HE, how different actors (students, lecturers, professional services and leaders) interpret and negotiate them in everyday practice, and which organisational arrangements most condition those experiences. The following subsection therefore turns to stakeholders' lived accounts of using and being subject to LA, tracing when analytics is experienced as enabling and when as constraining, and the organisational conditions under which each predominates.

2.4 Learning Analytics and Lived Experience

Sector narratives position LA as neutral, beneficial, and empowering; lived experiences complicate that picture. Empirical work with students, academics, and professional services staff shows that the meanings and effects of LA is negotiated locally through uneven understandings, constrained choices and limited participation in governance. The evidence base remains skewed and much of the literature centres on students' reported usefulness and usability of LA dashboards, with comparatively fewer sociocritical accounts that surface power, surveillance, and the reconfiguration of roles within datafied

institutions (Valle *et al.*, 2021). Reading this corpus against the promissory imaginaries outlined in Chapter 2.2 and the empowerment paradox developed in Chapter 2.3 reveals persistent tensions between what LA promises and how it is felt in practice.

2.4.1 Awareness, consent, and trust in practice

Across a range of contexts, studies point to limited awareness among students of institutional LA practices and uncertainty about what data are collected, why, and to what ends. Early work identified low levels of understanding of activity capture within learning platforms (Fisher, Valenzuela and Whale, 2014; Roberts *et al.*, 2016). Subsequent multi-site qualitative research reached similar conclusions, noting that most undergraduate students lacked awareness of educational data mining and analytic practices, as well as the data on which they rely (Jones *et al.*, 2020). Survey evidence from Australian universities indicates that many students either do not recall consenting to LA or are unclear about what consent entailed in practice (West *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, Slade, Prinsloo and Khalil (2019) argue that meaningful consent is structurally difficult when analytics are embedded into core systems, where opting out risks exclusion from study, and where data uses are diffuse.

Notwithstanding these gaps in understanding, many students articulate a baseline of trust in their university that is not extended to commercial platforms. For instance, they are often more willing—conditionally—to allow uses of academic data where a clear educational rationale is articulated (Jones *et al.*, 2020; West *et al.*, 2020; Herodotou *et al.*, 2023). As Herodotou *et al.* (2023) contend, that trust is contingent on transparency (i.e., what is collected, why, and by whom), data minimisation (avoiding encroachment into personal traces), proportional access controls, and credible assurances against secondary use. Disquiet grows where analytics expand beyond learning traces to location, device, or third-party data, or where data may circulate outside immediate academic relationships (West *et al.*, 2020).

Alongside conditional trust sits anxiety about surveillance and behavioural pressure. Indeed, focus-group work records students' unease with ubiquitous monitoring (e.g., continuous logging of online behaviour, Wi-Fi presence) and with nudges that spill over into domestic or social spaces (Roberts *et al.*, 2016). Noted concerns include 'feature creep' in data collection, potential sharing with vendors or prospective employers, and a generalised sense of always being visible (West *et al.*, 2020). These experiences mirror the discursive patterns traced in Chapter 2.2.—that claims of neutrality and inevitability in policy documents are recapitulated as opaque infrastructures that require students to accept monitoring as a condition of participation.

Taken together, prior research indicates that power in everyday LA practice is organised along three interlocking dimensions—those of knowledge, control, and voice. *Knowledge* concerns informational symmetry, whereby stakeholders know what is collected about them, for what purposes, how data are processed, and with what consequences (e.g., risk flags, outreach, record-keeping). *Control* refers to the practical ability to shape, limit, or contest how LA operate (e.g., who sees what, the feasibility of opting in or out of non-essential uses, whether classifications can be challenged or corrected, and how strongly dashboards and nudges channel behaviour). *Voice* concerns participation in governance, and whether students and frontline staff help define the purposes, limits and accountability of LA systems—through policy, design, and oversight—and can therefore influence the rules under which LA is enacted. Where knowledge is thin, control is limited and voice is absent, empowerment is largely rhetorical; where these conditions are strengthened, LA is more likely to be experienced as a supportive tool rather than a constraint.

Evidence on *voice* remains mixed. Seminal work highlighted the absence of student voice in institutional decision-making around LA (Slade and Prinsloo, 2013), with subsequent case studies suggesting that this deficit persists and can be consequential (Roberts *et al.*, 2016; West *et al.*, 2020; Whitelock-Wainwright *et al.*, 2021). Where co-developed guidance and rights statements have been produced—often through collaboration between institutional analytics teams and student representatives—they can clarify data scopes, purposes and red lines, and thus reduce informational asymmetry. Nevertheless, such practices are uneven across institutions and rarely extend to design choices such as threshold settings, visual encodings, or escalation protocols. In terms developed in Chapter 2.3, the structural conditions that would enable empowerment—comprehension, practical control and co-governance—are only partially met.

2.4.2 Agency, classification and the "data gaze"

Studies of lived experience also illuminate how LA reconfigures agency by shaping interpretation and action. Indeed, LA dashboards and early warning systems are commonly presented as mechanisms that enable timely help, self-regulation, and personalised pathways. Some students report appreciating granular feedback and the sense of direction that LA can provide. Notwithstanding, others describe how being flagged 'at risk' can alter their self-perception, trigger discouragement, or narrow perceived options, for instance by steering away from demanding modules/units for fear of algorithmic misinterpretation (Ifenthaler and Schumacher, 2016; Roberts *et al.*, 2016; Gray *et al.*, 2021). Students are both data producers and recipients of inferences, yet they often lack insight into how classifications are derived. Indeed, as Knox (2017) argues, the opacity of model logic means that conclusions can be

consequential without being intelligible, locating interpretive power with system owners, and not its users.

Macgilchrist's (2019) account of *cruel optimism* is useful here. Indeed, whilst predictive support tools may promise help, they risk displacing attention from any structural conditions if the improving prediction is the primary locus of LA use. In this sense, the result is a relocation of responsibility onto individuals to align themselves with modelled norms of engagement and progression. This dynamic resonates with the empowerment paradox described in Chapter 2.3 whereby the techniques introduced under the banner of support simultaneously normalise particular behaviours and highlight deviations from expected patterns.

Importantly, the analytics gaze is bi-directional. Indeed, qualitative research involving teaching staff and academic advisors shows that LA infrastructures also create managerial visibility of staff practices (Jones, 2019). Comparative dashboards for retention, activity, or response times can become proxies for teaching quality or advising diligence, prompting concerns about reductive evaluation and pressures to 'teach to the metrics'. Of note, Tsai, Perrotta and Gašević (2020) observe tensions for both learners and teachers as they navigate systems that purport to enhance control while narrowing the repertoire of acceptable actions through thresholds, scripts, and automated prompts. For some staff, algorithmic suggestions and outreach protocols are experienced as encroachments on pedagogical judgement; for others, they are helpful prompts so long as they remain advisory and contestable. These findings connect directly to the policy vocabularies identified in Chapter 2.2 and the governance mechanisms set out in Chapter 2.3; in other words, the language of evidence and optimisation is materialised as interfaces and workflows that define what counts, who is counted and what follows.

Equity considerations cut through these dynamics. In particular, consent propensity and trust are not evenly distributed, and demographic differences have been observed in users' willingness to share data, degrees of institutional trust, and levels of comfort with analytics (Li *et al.*, 2022). As Lim *et al.* (2021) highlight, if those least trusting or most vulnerable are also the least visible to LA, algorithmic modelling risks reproducing blind spots and interventions may miss those most in need. Conversely, as Parkes *et al.* (2020) caution, if at-risk labels adhere disproportionately to certain groups, there is a danger of pathologising students rather than addressing structural barriers. Prinsloo and Slade (2017) recast these relations as a 'data gift' economy in that students give data in anticipation of benefit, but the exchange is shaped by context, history and perceived fairness. In practice, the distribution of benefits and burdens remains uneven and under-described, particularly within UK HE.

Lived-experience work also highlights the mediating roles of professional services staff and LA teams. Frequently situated between pedagogical and managerial priorities, these roles translate model outputs into institutional practice and set many of the tacit parameters that shape experience (e.g., thresholds for alerts, escalation routes, and the tone of outreach). Their decisions can stabilise proportional uses of LA or lock in assumptions that are difficult to contest from the outside. Some studies report tensions between strategic imperatives (e.g., retention targets) and pedagogical ones (e.g., formative feedback), with practitioners navigating competing logics in everyday implementation (Gašević *et al.*, 2019; Scheffel *et al.*, 2019; Tsai, Perrotta and Gašević, 2020). These cross-pressures point to governance as a lived issue rather than solely a policy artefact.

Overall, the extant research into the lived-experiences of LA both corroborates and complicates the discursive and theoretical accounts developed in Chapters 2.2 and 2.3. Students and staff do encounter clear benefits where LA use is transparent, proportionate, and dialogic, but they also report constraint where systems are opaque, prescriptive, or managerial. Whether LA is experienced as enabling or disciplinary hinges on the local configuration of *knowledge* (clarity about collection, purpose and consequence), *control* (tangible influence over visibility and action), and *voice* (participation in defining purposes, limits and accountability). As Rets *et al.* (2021) and Whelan *et al.* (2024) note, these conditions are variably in place across institutions and are rarely described in sufficient granularity to link sector narratives to specific organisational arrangements.

2.5 Gaps within the literature and study rationale

Taken together, the three strands of this review reveal patterned absences in our understanding of the promissory narrative of LA versus the lived realities of its users. First, the discourse strand (Chapter 2.2) demonstrates how a romantic and technocratic register—solutionism, neutrality, inevitability—preconfigures LA as an obvious good, and how this register circulates across governmental, institutional and corporate genres. Yet, LA-specific discourse in the UK remains unevenly mapped and analyses tend to privilege statutory policy and institutional strategies whilst leaving 'arm's length' publications, such as those authored by advisory bodies, think tanks, consortia and vendors, comparatively under-examined. The mechanics of promissory talk are also under-described. Indeed, we know the keywords (e.g., 'evidence-based', 'personalised learning', 'data empowered'), but far less about how these travel into institutional contexts and subsequently played out in the lived realities of users.

Second, the power/empowerment strand (Chapter 2.3) clarifies how empowerment operates both as emancipatory promise and as a technique of governance. This duality is well theorised in education

more broadly, but only partially worked through for LA. In particular, the empowerment paradox—the way LA dashboards, thresholds, and systemic nudges present control as support—has been articulated conceptually but seldom traced empirically across different institutional arrangements. The literature gestures to neoliberal rationalities (marketisation, responsibilisation, performance management) and to the assetisation and re-infrastructuring of HE, but it rarely shows how these macro logics are formalised in LA artefacts themselves. The result is a theoretically rich but operationally thin account of power in LA.

Third, the lived-experience strand (Chapter 2.4) provides evidence of conditional trust, low awareness, and ambivalence among students and staff, alongside tangible benefits where uses of LA is transparent, proportionate and dialogic. Notwithstanding, this evidence base is narrow in scope and often decontextualised. Single-institution and student-only studies dominate the scholarly landscape; professional services staff and senior decision-makers are less visible—despite their pivotal role in translating models into practice. Indeed, many accounts are light on specificity about the analytics in question which makes it difficult to connect reported experiences to the discursive framings and power dynamics identified earlier. Alongside this, equity effects are flagged but unevenly followed through, and demographic variation in trust/consent and differential exposure to risk labels are noted, but there is a lack of comparative analyses that link these to particular institutional configurations of LA.

Methodologically, therefore, three linked gaps remain. First, there is a scope gap as most studies are single-institution and single-actor, leaving few comparative accounts that connect students, academics and professional services within the same analysis. Second, there is a specificity gap as findings are seldom anchored to the concrete artefacts and rules that shape use (e.g., which dashboards and indicators, which thresholds and escalation routes, who sees what), making it hard to relate lived experience to the policy grammar of metrics. Third, there is a contextualisation gap; indeed, empirical accounts are rarely read directly against the sector's promissory narratives or through explicit frames of empowerment and governmentality. Substantively, there is also a political-economic gap around how valuation stories and platform dependence are invoked to justify LA and how such talk conditions expectations of use; and, finally, an equity gap concerning how benefits and burdens are patterned across groups and disciplines, and how organisational choices amplify or mitigate those patterns.

Across the three strands, a further gap emerges in the connection between promissory narratives and everyday arrangements. We have robust descriptions of sector imaginaries and compelling accounts of practice, yet comparatively few studies show how those narratives are taken up as rules-in-use within institutions. The conditions that appear decisive for whether LA is experienced as enabling or disciplinary—what people know about data practices, the practical room they have to act, and the

extent to which they can shape local rules—are rarely examined together, and almost never contrasted across UK institutions. The next section translates these gaps into the study's research questions.

2.6 Development of the research questions

The review warrants only minor refinements to focus. It confirms the value of examining LA discourse across the wider UK HE ecosystem (beyond statutory policy) and, for lived experience, foregrounds three practical conditions that shape whether LA is experienced as empowering or disciplinary: knowledge (clarity about collection, purpose, and consequence), control (practical influence over visibility and action), and voice (participation in rules and governance). Accordingly, the research questions are retained with modest clarifications to reflect this emphasis.

RQ1: What are the promissory narratives surrounding LA, and how are these narratives articulated across UK HE sector texts? In what ways do these texts construct problems, solutions, and subject positions?

RQ2: How do stakeholders—including students, academics, professional services staff, and senior leaders—perceive the ways in which LA shape the distribution and experience of power within HE?

> **RQ2.1**: What benefits and drawbacks do different stakeholder groups perceive in the use of LA, and how do these map onto conditions of knowledge (clarity about collection, purpose, and consequence), control (influence over visibility and action), and voice (participation in governance)?

RQ3: How do stakeholders' lived experiences of LA align with or diverge from the promises attributed to its functionality and impact within HE settings, and under what organisational arrangements are these alignments most evident?

> **RQ3.1**: To what extent do LA systems reinforce existing power asymmetries or enable challenges to traditional power structures within HEIs, when analysed through a Foucauldian lens of power?

Collectively, these questions trace a coherent line of inquiry from discourse to practice. RQ1 is addressed through a CDA of sector texts, identifying how LA is made thinkable and desirable through particular problematisations and subject positions. RQ2 and RQ3 then extend the analysis to lived experience, using IPA to explore how those narratives are encountered, negotiated, and sometimes

resisted by different stakeholder groups. Together, the questions link the promissory imaginaries of LA to the everyday arrangements through which power, agency, and care are experienced in HE.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that underpins the analytical lens through which this study is conducted. It draws primarily on the work of Foucault—particularly his concepts of disciplinary power, surveillance, governmentality, subjectification, the apparatus (dispositif), and resistance—to interrogate the sociopolitical dynamics surrounding LA in HE. The chapter begins by outlining the role of theory in critical research and justifying the adoption of a Foucauldian perspective. It then examines key Foucauldian concepts and their relevance to the study of educational technology, with a particular focus on LA. The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is also introduced as a complementary lens for exploring how imagined futures shape and are shaped by the deployment of LA in both policy and practice. The chapter concludes by mapping these theoretical insights onto the study's methodological approach, highlighting how theory informed both the CDA and IPA phases of the research.

Foucault's work is often situated within the broader tradition of critical inquiry in that it is attentive to the questioning of that which is taken for granted. As Wandel (2009) observes, Foucault's most significant contribution lies in his reconceptualisation of power as productive rather than merely repressive. Indeed, rather than seeing power as something that simply limits, prohibits, or conceals, Foucault argues that power is generative: it produces knowledge, norms, categories, and subjectivities. Crucially, this understanding of power depends on dissolving the traditional binary between language and reality. Power, in Foucault's account, operates through discourse—not only in what is said, but in what becomes sayable, knowable, and governable.

In this light, LA is not approached as a neutral technological intervention or simply a tool for improving institutional efficiency. Rather, it is treated as part of a broader sociotechnical formation that enacts new modes of visibility, categorisation, and behavioural governance. Foucault's conceptualisation of power enables this study to interrogate both the discursive construction of LA in policy and strategy, and the lived, situated responses of students and staff navigating datafied institutional environments. As Hope (2015a) argues, Foucault's analytical framework provides education and technology researchers with a powerful set of tools for examining how governance and control are exercised through routine practices and implicit norms—illuminating the often subtle and unacknowledged ways in which power circulates and is internalised in educational settings.

Within educational research, empowerment is often associated with agency, participation, and autonomy—values central to liberal and humanistic traditions of pedagogy (see Freire, 1970; Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1993). In critical EdTech studies, however, empowerment is treated with greater

scepticism; indeed, it frequently functions as a rhetorical device that legitimises technological interventions while masking relations of control (Selwyn, 2014; Knox, Williamson and Bayne, 2020). Drawing on Foucault, this thesis approaches empowerment not as emancipation from power but as a relational effect of power—produced through particular configurations of visibility, knowledge, and participation. In this sense, empowerment is not a fixed state that technologies confer but a condition that is continually negotiated within governing arrangements. This Foucauldian reading situates the "empowerment paradox" at the centre of the analysis: the same mechanisms that promise agency may simultaneously structure and delimit its exercise, building on the definition of empowerment introduced in Chapter 1.3.

3.1 The Role of Theory in Critical Educational Research

Theory in critical educational research does more than provide abstract explanatory models; it serves as a tool for questioning assumptions, unveiling power relations, and imagining alternatives. As Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) contend, critical theory in education aims not only to understand the world but to challenge and change it—foregrounding issues of power and ideology. In this sense, theory is not merely an interpretative lens applied to data after collection; rather, it actively shapes the questions posed, the methods chosen, and the interpretations drawn. This study therefore adopts such a stance, treating theory as an integral part of its critical orientation rather than a retrospective explanatory device.

In the study of educational technology—and LA in particular—there is a tendency to focus on functionalist or instrumental perspectives, framing digital systems in terms of their efficiency, predictive accuracy, or scalability (see Selwyn, 2013, 2014; Slade and Prinsloo, 2014). While such approaches are valuable in certain domains, they often fail to interrogate the broader social, political, and cultural forces that shape both the design and use of technology in education. To that end, a critical theoretical approach, by contrast, asks not only *what* technology does, but *why* it has been imagined, implemented, and legitimised in particular ways, and with what implications for those subject to its application and operation.

This study embraces a critical epistemology grounded in critical-interpretivist and post-structuralist traditions, recognising that knowledge is treated as situated and co-constituted in researcher–participant interaction. In this sense, the aim is to develop credible, context-rich interpretations of how LA is experienced and governed, not to generalise statistically. Sampling, instruments, and analytic choices were therefore made for depth, variation, and meaning (not representativeness), consistent with this stance. This study adopts an anti-foundational stance that resists universal truths

and instead attends to the partial, contingent, and power-laden nature of knowledge production which is especially pertinent to LA, where claims of objectivity often mask underlying values, assumptions, and power relations (see Lyotard, 1984; Lather, 1993; Latour, 1993; Burr, 2015). As Burr (2015) explains, a critical-interpretivist perspective views knowledge as the product of social processes, language, and historical context, rather than as an objective reflection of reality. Here, theory becomes a means of destabilising taken-for-granted assumptions—what Foucault (1977) terms "regimes of truth"—that underpin dominant narratives of technological progress and educational reform.

The role of theory in this study is thus twofold. First, it functions diagnostically, enabling the interrogation of the discourses that circulate around LA—particularly the promissory narratives that frame data-driven approaches as inevitable, necessary, or emancipatory. Second, it functions reflexively, informing how the researcher engages with lived experiences of stakeholders and remains attuned to their own interpretative position. This dual function is consistent with what Denzin and Lincoln (2017) describe as the *critical moment* in qualitative research—a commitment to social justice through an engagement with power, meaning, and the politics of representation.

In choosing Foucault as the primary theoretical lens, this study aligns itself with a body of critical educational research that foregrounds questions of surveillance, discipline, and the governmentality of subjects (see Ball, 2003, 2013; Lawson, 2011; Hope, 2015a; Knox, 2017; Williamson, 2017; Selwyn, 2020; Castañeda and Williamson, 2021; Macgilchrist, 2021; Gourlay, 2022). In this study, discipline helps specify the normalising operations of dashboards and thresholds; governmentality illuminates self-management and responsibilisation; subjectification tracks how roles are formed (e.g., 'at-risk student', 'data-enabled academic'); and the apparatus/dispositif frames LA as a coordinated alignment of discourse, techniques, and routines. Foucault's work does not offer a traditional "theory" in the structuralist sense, but rather a *toolbox* of concepts (see Hope, 2015a)—such as discourse, subjectification, and resistance—that can be applied to diverse empirical contexts. These tools allow researchers to map the micro-operations of power in everyday educational practices, making visible the normalising logics embedded within apparently neutral technological ecosystems.

Importantly, this theoretical underpinning also embraces the methodological implications of a critical stance. As will be elaborated later in this chapter, both the CDA and IPA components of the study were informed by this theoretical positioning. Indeed, in CDA, theory enabled the interrogation of sectoral texts not only for their propositional content but for the discursive formations they constituted and the power relations they encoded. In IPA, theory guided the interpretation of participants' narratives, drawing attention to how individuals internalise, contest, or resist the norms and expectations embedded in LA practices.

To that end, theory in this study is not secondary to method; it is constitutive of the research process itself. It enables the questioning of dominant discourses, the surfacing of hidden power dynamics, and the exploration of alternative imaginaries. In doing so, it aligns with the aims of critical educational research: to challenge inequities, foreground voices that are marginalised or overlooked, and contribute to more just and reflective educational futures.

Alternative theoretical frameworks such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Habermasian Critical Theory, or Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital might also have offered useful insights to this study. ANT, for instance, would foreground the agency of non-human actors such as algorithms and databases, enabling exploration of how LA technologies influence educational interactions. Critical Theory might emphasise the communicative rationalities underpinning policy claims, and Bourdieu might frame power through forms of social and cultural capital.

However, these alternatives were not chosen for specific reasons. ANT, while valuable, tends to flatten power dynamics rather than foregrounding the nuances of hierarchical relations central to this study's objectives. Critical Theory's primary focus on communicative action could obscure the subtle forms of discipline and governance highlighted by Foucault's concepts. Similarly, Bourdieu's notions of capital and habitus, though insightful, might not fully capture the specificities of surveillance, resistance, and subjectivation processes explicitly foregrounded by LA discourses and practices.

Foucault's concepts, by contrast, provide a particularly rich conceptualisation of power, explicitly framing the relationships among discourse, technology, surveillance, and subjective experience—central elements to understanding LA in HE contexts. Moreover, complementing Foucauldian ideas with sociotechnical imaginaries enables critical examination of future-oriented policy claims and their alignment with lived realities.

3.2 Foucault's Relevance to Learning Analytics

The decision to adopt a Foucauldian framework within this study reflects a commitment to unpacking the hidden architectures of power embedded in educational technologies such as LA. Foucault's work is particularly valuable in illuminating the everyday, often subtle, ways in which power operates—not as a top-down imposition, but as a dispersed, productive force that shapes practices, norms, behaviours, and subjectivities (Foucault, 1977, 1982). Power, in this view, contrasts sharply with traditional conceptions that frame it solely as domination or repression. Instead, Foucault invites researchers to consider how power circulates through discourse, institutional structures, and practices of self-regulation—dimensions highly relevant to the datafication of HE.

LA, as a system of measurement, prediction, and intervention, can be seen as an example of what Foucault described as the "microphysics of power"—the mundane, routinised techniques through which individuals are made visible, classifiable, and governable (1977, p. 27). Whether in the form of dashboards, risk alerts, or engagement scores, LA constitutes a regime of visibility that reconfigures students and staff *as they are rendered through LA systems*—subject to monitoring, comparison, and evaluation within data-driven institutional logic. As Selwyn (2014), Williamson (2017), and Knox (2017) contend, such systems do not simply observe behaviour but actively structure it, promoting particular kinds of conduct while discouraging others. LA thus operates both as a mirror for institutional priorities and as a mechanism for governing behaviour, shaping how users act in response to what becomes visible through data.

Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is especially relevant here. Indeed, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault describes how modern institutions—such as schools, prisons, and hospitals—deploy surveillance and norm-setting practices to encourage conformity and internalised control. The panopticon, his emblematic metaphor, functions not through constant observation but through the possibility of being watched, which leads individuals to self-regulate. LA replicates this logic: even when not actively monitored, students and teachers may alter their behaviour in anticipation of data visibility. The awareness that activity is being tracked—even if not acted upon—can foster what Lyon (1994, 2010) terms "anticipatory conformity"—the act of subtly nudging users towards institutional ideals of productivity, engagement, and success.

Furthermore, this study also draws on Foucault's later concept of governmentality, which extends his analysis of power into the domain of self-governance. Governmentality, in this sense, refers to the rationalities and techniques through which individuals are encouraged to manage themselves according to prevailing norms (see Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991). In the context of LA, this includes the mobilisation of data to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, or to visualise their progress in relation to institutional benchmarks. These self-tracking practices, while often framed in empowering terms, also reflect neoliberal ideals of autonomous, self-improving subjects—individuals who willingly participate in their own optimisation (see Williamson, Bayne and Shay, 2020). Indeed, as Knox, Williamson, and Bayne (2020) contend, the design and implementation of LA systems often embed particular visions of the learner and the institution—visions that are not neutral but politically charged.

Importantly, Foucault's framework also highlights the possibility of resistance. While power is pervasive, it is never totalising. There are always points of refusal (see Foucault, 1982) where subjects push back, reinterpret, or subvert the logics imposed upon them. In the context of LA, this may take

the form of students ignoring LA dashboards, teachers rejecting engagement metrics, or institutions rethinking the design of their analytical systems in response to ethical concerns. These resistances are not always overt or oppositional; they may be subtle, individual, or ambivalent in character, yet they are analytically significant. They reveal how power is negotiated, contested, and sometimes reconfigured from within.

A Foucauldian framework therefore supports the dual analytical approach adopted within this study: the critical interrogation of the *discourses* that construct LA as a desirable, necessary innovation (as explored through the CDA), and the examination of the *experiences* of those who live with its consequences (as explored through the IPA). By focusing on power not just as a structure but as something that is dynamic, productive, and embedded in everyday practices—Foucault offers a way to connect institutional narratives with lived realities. This is particularly important given that many policies frame LA in aspirational, neutral, and depoliticised terms, overlooking the complex social relations and ethical tensions that it enacts.

The adoption of a Foucauldian lens places this study in dialogue with a growing body of critical scholarship that interrogates the datafication of education. Scholars such as Hope (2013, 2015a, 2015b), Selwyn (2019), Williamson, Bayne, and Shay (2020), and Macgilchrist (2021) have all drawn on Foucault to reveal how educational technologies function not only as tools of learning, but as instruments of governance. These studies have shown how data practices shape subjectivity, define what counts as legitimate knowledge, and delimit the possibilities of educational action. By building on this work, the present study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how power, technology, and education intersect in the evolving landscape of LA. In doing so, a Foucauldian lens offers not just conceptual clarity, but a critical resource for questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape how LA is imagined, implemented, and experienced in HE.

Together, these insights demonstrate why Foucault's work provides the conceptual anchor for this study. Read alongside sociotechnical imaginaries, his concepts offer an analytically coherent way of connecting LA's promissory future-making with the everyday arrangements through which visibility, conduct, and value are organised.

3.3 Disciplinary Technologies and the Everyday Governance of Learning Analytics

While Foucault's concept of disciplinary power has already informed much of the preceding discussion, this section elaborates on how LA operates as a *disciplinary technology*—not only shaping individual conduct but also structuring institutional practices and decision-making. In this sense, LA integrates practices of measurement, surveillance, documentation, and intervention into the routine governance of HE. In Foucauldian terms, LA operates as an apparatus (dispositif): a contingent alignment of discourses, techniques, and institutional routines that renders learning governable. These mechanisms do not rely on overt coercion but work through subtle, routinised processes that normalise particular behaviours and render others deviant or undesirable.

One of the most emblematic features of disciplinary power is what Foucault (1977) termed *the examination*—the process that combines surveillance with the production of knowledge. In LA, this can be seen in the way students' engagement data are continuously recorded, analysed, and compared against benchmarks. Dashboards, early warning systems, and risk alerts render learners permanently visible, producing categories such as "at risk," "non-engaged," or "on track." These categories, in turn, become the basis for interventions that reinforce institutional ideals of what a successful student should look like.

However, the reach of disciplinary logic extends beyond the student. Staff, too, are increasingly subjected to analytics regimes that measure attendance, module engagement, or marking timelines, embedding performance management within pedagogical spaces. In both cases, documentation plays a central role—not simply as record-keeping, but as a means of organising conduct and legitimating institutional action. As Ball (2003) notes, such performative regimes blur the boundary between education and audit, creating "fabrications" that reshape the values and priorities of academic work.

What makes LA particularly subtle as a disciplinary apparatus is the banality of its operation. Indeed, risk scores, coloured alerts, and drop-down action menus present themselves as neutral tools for student support, masking the value-laden assumptions and behavioural norms they encode. The seamless integration of these mechanisms into everyday university systems and routines makes their disciplinary effects difficult to see—and therefore more powerful. As Hope (2015b) argues, when digital technologies become mundane, they no longer appear as instruments of control, but as common-sense features of a data-informed institution.

This normalisation also has consequences for how students and staff interpret their roles. As individuals become accustomed to being observed and measured, self-monitoring becomes embedded in daily practice. Yet, not all actors comply uniformly. Some students ignore alerts or actively challenge the meanings attached to their data; some staff question the pedagogical value of engagement metrics

or resist managerial uses of data. These everyday refusals do not overturn the system but remind us that disciplinary power, while pervasive, is not all-encompassing. It is precisely in these moments of doubt, workaround, or critique that the contingent nature of LA's disciplinary logic is revealed.

In this way, LA exemplifies the fusion of disciplinary technologies with neoliberal rationalities. By encouraging self-tracking, internalised norms, and optimisation, it not only manages populations but seeks to align them with market-driven ideals of productivity, efficiency, and accountability. Recognising this dynamic is essential if researchers and practitioners are to interrogate not just what LA *does*, but what it *demands*—of learners, teachers, and institutions alike.

3.4 Governmentality and the Self-Management of Learning

Where disciplinary power operates through surveillance, normalisation, and the organisation of space and time, Foucault's concept of *governmentality* offers a broader framework for understanding how individuals come to govern themselves in line with institutional and societal expectations. Introduced in his later work, governmentality refers to the "conduct of conduct"—the myriad ways in which subjects are shaped to regulate their own behaviour through norms, desires, and forms of self-understanding (see Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991). In the context of LA, this mode of power becomes particularly salient, as students and staff are not merely managed externally but are invited to become active participants in their own governance.

Governmentality emphasises the productive dimensions of power—not through direct coercion but through the internalisation of rationalities that make certain behaviours appear natural, necessary, or desirable. In HE, this is evident in how LA systems present data dashboards, progress trackers, and comparative analytics as tools for personal development. These interfaces encourage students to monitor their engagement, benchmark their performance against peers, and take proactive steps to improve. This process—often framed as empowering—actually depends on a prior shaping of what counts as meaningful action, responsible learning, or academic success.

Such technologies work through what Foucault (1988) terms *technologies of the self*—techniques that enable individuals to interpret and act upon themselves according to prescribed norms. This is a key modality of governmentality in LA. In LA, these techniques are not neutral; they are encoded with specific values and assumptions about the ideal learner: motivated, self-directed, resilient, and competitive. By aligning institutional metrics with individual responsibility, LA systems subtly transfer the burden of success (or failure) onto the learner. Risk scores, for instance, do not simply describe a

situation—they invite particular forms of self-intervention: logging in more often, submitting earlier, participating more visibly. In this sense, data does not merely represent; it instructs.

Staff, too, are caught within these rationalities. The pedagogical promise of LA is often tied to ideas of enhanced personalisation, targeted support, and professional accountability. Yet these expectations can transform educational relationships, shifting the role of the educator from that of facilitator to data-interpreter and compliance manager. As Castañeda and Williamson (2021) suggest, such shifts are not simply technical—they represent deeper reconfigurations of educational labour, pedagogical responsibility, and professional subjectivity.

This framing aligns closely with neoliberal logics. LA systems often embed principles of audit, efficiency, and responsibilisation—constructing students and staff alike as autonomous agents responsible for their own outcomes. The promise of self-knowledge through data is entwined with the imperative to self-optimise. In this sense, governmentality helps to illuminate how LA functions not just as a system of oversight, but as a mode of governance that privileges certain ways of being, learning, and succeeding.

Crucially, this also means that the power of LA does not reside solely in its technical architecture but in its capacity to shape conduct through appeals to freedom, choice, and improvement. Students are not forced to engage with dashboards—but they are encouraged, nudged, and judged according to their responses. Staff are not required to act on risk alerts—but such data become embedded in performance reviews, policy documents, and pedagogical expectations. Governmentality thus captures the subtle interplay between autonomy and control that defines much of the LA landscape.

By drawing on this concept, the study is able to move beyond questions of surveillance and visibility to examine the rationalities that underpin data use in HE. It helps foreground how LA reconfigures the role of the learner, the educator, and the institution—not through imposition, but through the diffusion of norms that appear self-evident and benign. In doing so, governmentality adds further depth to the study's critical account of how LA shapes educational life.

3.5 Resistance, Refusal, and the Possibility of the Otherwise

While Foucault's theories have often been criticised for presenting power as totalising, he consistently emphasised that power relations are never fixed, one-directional, or uncontested. Indeed, Foucault observes that where power is present, so too is resistance (1978), but not as an external force that opposes power from the outside, but as something that emerges from within the same relations that

make power possible. Foucault's notion of counter-conduct is useful here: situated practices that redirect or refuse governing invitations from within. In the context of LA, this perspective opens up analytical space to consider not only how power is exercised through data infrastructures, but how individuals and groups navigate, negotiate, and potentially subvert those same structures.

Resistance in this study therefore does not manifest as grand rebellion; rather, it is treated as a spectrum of actions, omissions, and reinterpretations—ranging from quiet disengagement to critical reappropriation. Some students, for example, may ignore dashboard alerts, resist the behavioural nudges embedded in platform design, or actively question the institutional narratives surrounding "engagement" and "risk." Others may play the system strategically, performing visibility for the sake of compliance without internalising its logic. Similarly, staff may quietly push back against managerial expectations tied to LA metrics, critique the pedagogical value of certain indicators, or resist the normalisation of data-informed teaching as an unquestioned good.

As shall be discussed in Chapter 6, these small acts of refusal are significant. They point to the contingencies and contradictions within LA systems and remind us that technological governance is always incomplete. As de Certeau (1984) suggests, everyday users often engage in particular "tactics" that repurpose dominant structures for their own ends—acts that may seem minor but cumulatively reveal the limits of control. In this sense, resistance is not merely a reaction to power but a condition of its exercise—it signals the possibility of alternative interpretations, alternative practices, and ultimately, alternative imaginaries of what education—and educational technology—might become.

Importantly, resistance also invites reflexivity on the part of researchers. It challenges us not to assume the coherence or inevitability of data-driven governance and to attend closely to the lived experience of those subject to its logics. As Ball (2013) argues, education is not a smooth space of policy implementation, but a site of contestation, improvisation, and uneven enactment. Recognising resistance allows this study to treat students and staff not merely as recipients of policy or users of technology, but as agents engaged in shaping, challenging, and reconfiguring the educational conditions in which they find themselves.

In sum, resistance offers a critical counterweight to the dominant logics of surveillance and governmentality discussed earlier. It makes visible the frictions and failures in the operation of LA systems, foregrounds the agency of those who navigate them, and opens the door to imagining education otherwise. It is through such moments of friction—however quiet or ambivalent—that new possibilities for teaching, learning, and institutional life may begin to emerge. By combining Foucault's attention to institutional rationalities, discipline, and subjectivation with the concept of sociotechnical

imaginaries, the study is able to interrogate both the ideological work of LA in policy and its lived negotiation in practice. These theoretical commitments directly inform the methodological choices outlined in the next chapter.

3.6 Theoretical Integration: Linking Theory to Methodology

Methodologically, the thesis is critical-interpretivist. Interpretivism orients the inquiry to meaning-making in context (foregrounded in the IPA), while a Foucauldian, post-structural lens directs attention to how meanings are patterned by discourse, visibility, and rules (foregrounded in the CDA). Together, these commitments support explanation by interpretation: the task is to show how "empowerment" is understood, enacted, and steered, rather than to test causal effects or adjudicate "what works".

In the CDA component, theory plays a diagnostic role, guiding the reading of sector texts for their problematisations, subject positions and regimes of truth. Following Foucault, discourse is treated as the historically specific rules that delimit what can be said, known and done. Promissory claims about student empowerment, institutional efficiency and data-driven transformation are approached not as neutral descriptions but as strategic articulations that draw authority from wider sociotechnical imaginaries. Accordingly, the CDA attends to genre, modality, intertextual circulation and repetition—how policy and commercial texts naturalise particular visions of digital education and position learning analytics as a necessary response within a problematised HE landscape.

Simultaneously, the IPA component is shaped by a theoretical sensitivity to how power operates through subjectivity and lived experience. Drawing on Foucault's account of subjectification, the analysis attends to how students and staff come to recognise themselves—or resist recognising themselves—within the evaluative gaze of analytics systems. The emphasis here is not on identifying attitudes toward LA as a discrete technology, but on exploring how individuals make sense of their datafied presence, negotiate behavioural expectations, and experience the tensions between empowerment, surveillance, and resistance. IPA's interpretative commitment to understanding how people make meaning of their experiences aligns closely with the study's post-structuralist stance, recognising that experience is always already mediated by language, discourse, and social context.

Together, these methods offer a way to "read across" discursive regimes and lived realities, enabling a more holistic understanding of how LA is both imagined and inhabited. The adoption of a Foucauldian lens facilitates this integration by providing a common analytical vocabulary—linking, for instance, policy narratives of optimisation to the micro-practices of self-monitoring or anticipatory

conformity reported in interviews. Moreover, the shared critical orientation of CDA and IPA ensures that both methods resist surface-level accounts and remain attuned to issues of power, exclusion, and the politics of representation.

Importantly, this theoretical-methodological integration supports the study's broader critical agenda: to trouble the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin LA's rise, to foreground the voices and frictions that complicate its use, and to open up space for imagining more equitable and reflective digital futures in HE. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach taken in this study, showing how the theoretical perspectives introduced here informed both the CDA and the IPA.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4. Methodology

Drawing directly upon the theoretical framework articulated in Chapter 3, this chapter details how Foucauldian perspectives and sociotechnical imaginaries inform the methodological choices made in this study. This research project adopts a qualitative methodological approach in that it "starts from the notion of the social construction of the realities under study…[and] is interested in the perspectives of participants in everyday practices" (Flick, 2007, p. 2). To that end, the research project is situated within an interpretivist (critical-interpretivist) epistemological tradition—treating meaning as produced in context and aiming for credible, situated interpretation rather than universal claims (see Burr, 2015). This approach not only shapes and frames the methodological apparatus through which the research project is performed, but also aligns with the theoretical lens through which the research is based, particularly in relation to issues of power and experiences of LA.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) serve as complementary methodological approaches that directly address the research questions posed in this study. CDA enables an examination of sector policy (RQ1) by exploring discourses surrounding promissory rhetoric and power relations within HE. By analysing language and rhetoric, CDA elucidates how power is constructed and 'naturalised' (see Fairclough, 1989) in the discourse of LA, providing insights into the ideological underpinnings of empowerment claims. Concurrently, IPA facilitates an in-depth exploration of stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of LA (RQ2 and RQ3), allowing for a nuanced understanding of power dynamics as they manifest in individuals' lived realities. Through IPA, the study explores how stakeholders navigate and negotiate power structures within HE institutions, shedding light on the alignment (or misalignment) between perceived empowerment and actual lived experiences of LA (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005). Taken together, CDA and IPA offer a layered methodological framework that bridges macro-level discursive constructions with micro-level phenomenological accounts—enabling a richer, multi-perspectival view of how LA is both talked about and lived.

While other qualitative methods could provide valuable insights into stakeholders' experiences with LA, CDA and IPA offer unique strengths that align closely with this study's objectives and theoretical underpinnings. CDA, unlike other textual or documentary analyses, is specifically concerned with "the discourses and sociocultural practices that the text reflects, reinforces and produces" (Paltridge, 2006, p. 184), enabling the researcher to "reveal the kinds of power interests buried in these texts" (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 5). CDA is focused on the commonsensical and taken-for-granted components of discourse (see Fairclough, 1989, 2013); concepts that align directly with the concept of 'forgetfulness' in IPA, whose primary objective is to "uncover or disclose a phenomenon by pulling away layers of

forgetfulness or hiddenness that are present in our everyday existence" (Frechette *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). Indeed, IPA is concerned with the experiential aspects of being human, and how people make sense of their lived experiences. It therefore enables the researcher to trace how individual interpretations are shaped by wider sociotechnical systems, institutional logics, and implicit norms.

Other approaches, such as grounded theory, narrative inquiry, or ethnography, were considered but ultimately deemed less suitable. Grounded theory, while useful for generating theory inductively from data, tends to prioritise abstraction and coding over the deep contextual analysis of discourse and lived meaning required by this study. Narrative approaches, though rich in capturing individual stories, place emphasis on coherence and plot rather than interrogating sociopolitical context or institutional structures. Ethnography, though well-suited to examining culture and situated practice, was beyond the logistical scope of this project. By contrast, IPA offers the requisite depth through which to explore the intricate layers of meaning embedded within stakeholders' experiences of LA.

4.1 Research Design and Selection Criteria

This study adopts a dual-component qualitative research design that reflects the twofold aims of the research questions. Firstly, it examines how LA is discursively constructed and legitimised in sector-level policy texts. Secondly, it seeks to explore how LA is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by key stakeholders within HEIs. This sequencing reflects the analytical logic of the study itself: beginning with the promissory rhetoric of LA—what is claimed and anticipated in the policy domain—and moving to the lived realities of its implementation and impact within HE contexts. The intention is to foreground the interplay between imagined futures and everyday practice, enabling a critical interrogation of alignment, disjuncture, and contestation between discourse and experience.

To operationalise this dual-component design, the following sections outline the processes by which relevant documents were identified and analysed, and how participants and institutions were recruited to ensure contextual depth and analytical validity.

Policy Definition and Document Identification

This study adopts a broad yet strategically bounded definition of policy. While policy is often equated with compliance and regulation—documents that dictate governance structures and enforceable decisions—this research embraces a more fluid conceptualisation. Drawing on Trowler's notion of policy as "a statement of intentions or of practice, as it is perceived by policymakers or as they would like it to be" (2003, p. 95), policy here is understood not simply as a codified set of rules or directives,

but as an articulation of aspirations, priorities, and strategic visions. It encompasses a range of texts that seek to shape the future of HE through the imagined potential of digital technologies, and in particular, LA.

In this sense, digital policy is approached as a discursive construct—an arena in which sociotechnical imaginaries (see Jasanoff, 2004; Jasanoff and Kim, 2015) are articulated and contested. This framing allows the study to attend not only to the overt content of policy texts but also to the embedded assumptions, value systems, and legitimating logics they reproduce. Crucially, the digital policy landscape in the UK is not the sole preserve of government or institutional actors. Rather, it is shaped by a dynamic ecosystem that includes intermediary bodies such as Jisc, the QAA, and UCISA, think tanks, advocacy organisations, and other non-statutory agents that operate between government and HEIs. These organisations frequently serve as brokers of influence, translating policy aspirations into sector-wide narratives and practices.

Moreover, this landscape is increasingly permeable to commercial and private sector interests. EdTech companies, consultancy firms, and venture capital-backed platforms have become active participants in shaping the discourse of educational technology and LA—sometimes as co-authors or sponsors of policy documents. As such, the question of *whose* imagined future is being promoted becomes particularly salient. The notion of policy as a declaration of "what ought to be" is thus problematised by the multiplicity of voices—and interests—that shape it (Clark, 2023; Heinsfeld and Marone, 2023).

Given these complexities, the selection of policy documents for analysis followed an iterative, criteria-driven process. The goal was not to be exhaustive, but to curate a corpus of texts that exemplify the dominant discourses surrounding LA in UK HE and offer sufficient depth for critical engagement. Documents were initially identified via purposive keyword searches (e.g., "learning analytics," "student data," "learning analytics dashboards") conducted primarily within the online repositories and publication archives of key intermediary organisations (including Jisc, HEPI, QAA, and TASO[9]). Citation chaining and bibliographic back-tracing were also employed to identify influential documents referenced by others in the field.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- The document must engage substantively with LA (not simply mention it in passing);

[9] An independent hub providing research and resources to help reduce equality gaps in HE.

- It must pertain to UK HE at the sector level, rather than focus solely on institutional or vendor-specific implementation (although institutional case studies were acceptable so long as they were included within a broader narrative);

- It must demonstrate discursive richness—i.e., offer insight into how LA is positioned in relation to empowerment, surveillance, transformation, or policy futures;

- It must be published within the past ten years, to capture both continuity and change over time.

Documents were assessed for authorial clarity, sectoral influence, and thematic salience. Priority was given to those that were cited frequently in sector discussions or visibly aligned with national policy initiatives. Documents primarily promotional in nature or those that lacked sufficient analytical depth were excluded following this review process.

The final corpus comprises sixteen documents, selected to provide both a diachronic and cross-organisational view of LA discourse. As shown in Table 1, the corpus includes publications from major sector bodies such as Jisc, HEPI, and the Office for Students, as well as contributions from government departments, cross-party think tanks (e.g., Policy Connect[10]), and sector-specific opinion repositories (e.g., Wonkhe[11]). These texts represent a blend of strategic white papers, technical specifications, advisory reports, and reflective analyses—each contributing to the shaping of how LA is imagined, legitimated, and deployed across the HE landscape.

The final corpus of policy documents selected for this study is presented in Table 1. The documents are listed chronologically to facilitate a clear view of evolving discourses over the selected timeframe. Appendix 5 contains the complete list of documents generated through the initial policy-mapping exercise, alongside notes on relevance and reasons for exclusion from the final corpus.

[10] A cross-party think tank founded in 1995 primarily known for running all-party parliamentary groups.
[11] An independent online blog featuring opinion pieces and news relating to UK HE.

Year	Author	Document Title
2016	Policy Connect	From Bricks to Clicks
2017	HEPI	Rebooting Learning for the Digital Age
2018	Jisc	Written Response to Education Select Committee
2019	Department for Education	Realising the Potential of Technology in Education
2020	Jisc	Digital at the Core: A 2030 strategy framework for university leaders
2021	Office for Students	Gravity Assist
2022	Jisc	From Technology-Enabled Teaching to Digitally Enhanced Learning
2022	Wonkhe & Solutionpath	Using Data to Better Support Students
2023	Jisc	Student Analytics: A Core Specification for Engagement and Wellbeing Analytics
2023	Jisc	Digital Strategies in UK HE: Making Digital Mainstream
2023	Jisc	Code of Practice for Learning Analytics
2023	Jisc & Emerge Education	How Can EdTech Address Some of the Greatest Challenges Facing HE Leaders?
2024	TASO	Using Learning Analytics to Prompt Student Support Interventions
2024	QAA	Case Study: Measuring Educational Gain (Imperial College London)
2025	Jisc	How to Approach Digital Transformation in Higher Education
2025	HEPI	Solving the Continuation Challenge with Engagement Analytics

Table 1. Final Corpus of Policy Documents

The selected documents span a ten-year period, enabling analysis of both persistent and evolving themes. Earlier texts (e.g., Policy Connect, 2016; HEPI, 2017) reflect the initial framing of LA as an emergent innovation, whereas more recent publications (e.g., Jisc, 2023–2025; TASO, 2024) situate LA within broader conversations about wellbeing, digital maturity, and post-pandemic transformation. Together, they provide a robust foundation for examining how LA is discursively constructed across different institutional imaginaries and policy horizons.

Institutional and Participant Selection

For the participant-based element of the study, seven HEIs were ultimately selected for inclusion. These institutions were chosen based on their visible and operational use of LA—particularly via Learning Analytics Dashboards (LADs) and related intervention practices. Selection was guided by desk-based research and professional insight; where possible, organisations were selected based upon their *proactive* application of LA to monitor progress and stage interventions. Additionally, to reflect the nuanced and contextualised impact of LA, where practicable, organisations were selected based on contrasting student demographics.

The institutional sampling approach prioritised variation in engagement maturity and implementation models. Publicly available information—such as strategy documents, internal reports, and online resources—were triangulated with sector knowledge and informal conversations with professionals in the digital learning field. Institutions were prioritised where LA was not only implemented, but embedded in student and staff practices.

Participants were recruited using a contextual purposive sampling strategy (see Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). Participants included undergraduate students, academic staff, professional services staff, and—in two settings—University senior leaders. Selection was determined by the relevance of LA to a participant's immediate context—for example, they had access to LADs, engaged in LA-related interventions, or were responsible for implementing LA from an operational or strategic point of view. Efforts were made to sample participants from a range of disciplines and across different levels of study to ensure varied perspectives.

Gaining access to appropriate participants was facilitated through the use of institutional gatekeepers—typically digital learning leads or equivalent roles accessed via the Heads of E-Learning

Forum[12] (HeLF) network. These gatekeepers provided both logistical support and contextual insight, identifying staff and students whose exposure to LA was sufficiently embedded to yield meaningful data. The use of gatekeepers was a deliberate methodological decision. Indeed, as Dahlke and Stahlke (2020) note, gatekeepers are often necessary to mediate access to study locations and stakeholders, particularly when the research setting is diffuse or complex. As Wilson (2020) observes, there is a paucity of research into the use of gatekeepers in HE research, nevertheless—in the context of this study—their inclusion was critical: institutional use of LA varies considerably across programmes and departments, and so identifying participants with sufficient exposure required local knowledge.

A total of 19 participants were involved in this study, drawn from the seven different HEIs. The number of participants per HEI varied—from as few as one in some cases to as many as seven in another—with a median of two participants per HEI. This variation reflected differing levels of institutional engagement and the degree of access facilitated by local gatekeepers. Some institutions were more forthcoming in identifying and supporting access to suitable participants, while others were more constrained by internal priorities, competing demands, or a more cautious stance on research involvement. Despite this uneven distribution, the approach remains valid—participants were purposively selected for their direct and meaningful engagement with LA, ensuring that the data gathered reflected authentic, experience-rich accounts across a diverse set of institutional contexts. Senior-leader participation was limited (indeed, only two institutions contributed leadership perspectives), so findings that reference leadership views are presented as indicative rather than representative across the sector.

HEI	**Total**	**Roles represented**				**Context**	**Platform**
		Student	**Academic**	**Support**	**Leader**		
University 1	1		1			Small post-92 university (~8,000 students)	IntelliBoard
University 2	2		1	1		Medium-sized post-92 university (~13,000 students)	Jisc Learning Analytics
University 3	1		1			Large Russell Group university (~27,000 students)	SEAtS
University 4	3	1	2			Large post-92 university (~33,000 students)	StREAM (SolutionPath)

[12] A closed network of professionals occupying equivalent strategic-level roles related to digital learning and technology enhanced learning in UK HEIs (of which the researcher is a member).

University 5	7	3	1	2	1	Medium-sized post-92 university (~20,000 students)	StREAM (SolutionPath)
University 6	4	2	2			Plate glass university (~14,000 students)	StREAM (SolutionPath)
University 7	1				1	Medium-sized post-92 university (~12,000 students)	Tableau

Table 2. Total HEIs, participants, and their LA provider

Table 2 provides an overview of the institutions included in the study, the number of participants recruited from each, their respective role(s), and the LA platform in use. To maintain anonymity, institutions are referred to using generic identifiers (e.g., University 1, University 2, and so forth).

Appendix 2 contains a detailed participant overview, outlining the composition of the sample across institutions and stakeholder groups.

4.2 Research Methods

The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries played a key role in guiding the CDA approach, particularly in informing the criteria for selecting policy documents and interpreting their content. Specifically, documents were selected based on their explicit or implicit envisioning of technological futures, allowing the analysis to critically engage with how these imagined futures align with broader institutional and sector-wide ambitions and anxieties.

As outlined in the preceding sections, this study draws on two complementary qualitative methods: CDA and IPA. These approaches underpin the dual strands of the research design, with CDA used to interrogate sector-level policy discourses, and IPA applied to explore stakeholder experiences within institutional settings. The following sections explain the rationale for each method in turn, and outline how they were applied within the context of this research.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The CDA component of this study was grounded in the macro-analytical tradition of discourse analysis, as defined by Fairclough (1989, 1993, 2003) and later built upon by Taylor (2004), Woodside-Jiron (2004), Paltridge (2006), Wodak and Meyer (2009), and Machin and Mayr (2012). While recognising that CDA is a non-prescriptive method with multiple theoretical orientations, this study

adopted a critical macro perspective, focusing not on micro-linguistic features but on the sociocultural and ideological contexts in which texts are produced, circulated, and consumed.

The 'critical' in Critical Discourse Analysis signals its grounding in critical theory and its commitment to examining the ways in which discourse sustains, legitimises, or challenges power relations. As Wodak and Meyer argue, this orientation is "directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity" (2009, p. 9) in that it seeks to uncover how social inequalities and ideological forces are embedded within, and perpetuated through, discourse. This study therefore adopted a macro methodological position, connecting the text itself with "the discourses and sociocultural practices that the text reflects, reinforces and produces" (Paltridge, 2006, p. 184). In this context, particular attention was paid to the "constructive effects of language [and] the way in which the socially produced ideas and objects that constitute our 'reality' are created and maintained" (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 63).

From an operational perspective, Fairclough's three-dimensional framework formed the basis of the analysis, requiring attention to (i) the textual features of the documents, (ii) the discursive practices surrounding their production and reception, and (iii) the wider social practices and power structures in which they are embedded (Fairclough, 1989, 2003). This approach was particularly suited to interrogating the promissory narratives of LA, allowing the study to move beyond surface-level content and explore the discursive construction of imagined futures, logics of empowerment, and the naturalisation of particular technological trajectories.

Consistent with Phillips and Hardy's emphasis on the constructive influence of language (2002), the CDA was attentive to how texts implicitly and explicitly shaped assumptions about educational technology, institutional priorities, and the role of data in HE. Documents were examined iteratively, beginning with close reading to identify recurrent propositions—often signalled through modal verbs and assertive statements (e.g., "Learning Analytics will enable institutions to…")—and followed by thematic coding into broader conceptualisations, such as efficiency and personalisation. These conceptualisations were then situated within their discursive and social contexts, drawing attention to the role of intermediary bodies, commercial actors, and broader sectoral reform agendas in shaping the discourse.

This macro-analytical lens enabled the study to treat policy texts not merely as technical artefacts but as discursive interventions—positioning LA within broader visions of institutional reform and digital transformation. Rather than reiterating the intentions stated in these documents at face value, the CDA explored how particular logics (e.g., efficiency, empowerment, personalisation) were rendered commonsensical, and whose interests these imaginaries served. In doing so, the analysis remained

attentive to how discourses were both shaped by, and contributory to, wider power relations within the HE policy landscape.

This strand of the analysis directly addressed RQ1, enabling a critical examination of how LA is discursively constructed and legitimised within policy discourse, and how such constructions encode visions of empowerment, institutional reform, and sectoral change.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

To explore the lived experiences of key stakeholders engaging with LA this study employed IPA—an idiographic and phenomenological methodology designed to examine how individuals make sense of their experiences within particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). Given the research aim of understanding how power, agency, and empowerment are perceived and negotiated by students and staff using LA, IPA provided an appropriate methodological framework for capturing rich, situated accounts of experience.

At its core, IPA is concerned with the interpretation of *meaning*—how individuals experience phenomena, and how they interpret those experiences through their own conceptual lenses. This interpretative element, often referred to as the double hermeneutic (Giddens, 2013), recognises that the researcher is also engaged in a process of making sense of the participant making sense of their world (Smith, Osborn and Breakwell, 2004). This reflexive stance aligns closely with the study's interpretivist epistemology and critical theoretical grounding, particularly its attention to how meaning-making is conditioned by institutional and sociotechnical power structures.

IPA was chosen over other qualitative approaches (such as grounded theory or narrative inquiry) due to its commitment to depth over breadth—prioritising the detailed examination of how participants experience, interpret, and emotionally respond to the phenomenon in question (see Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). This depth was particularly relevant for a study exploring the often opaque or ambiguous power dynamics of LA, where participants' feelings of agency, surveillance, or empowerment may not be easily captured through surface-level questioning or standardised tools.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary mode of data collection, enabling a balance between focused inquiry and open-ended exploration. This format allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to pursue emergent themes and clarify meanings (see Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). The interview schedule was designed iteratively, guided by the principles of IPA and informed by existing literature on LA, datafication,

and educational technology policy. Questions sought to elicit concrete accounts of participants' engagement with LA—whether as users, recipients, or implementers—and to surface reflections on how such engagement was experienced in relation to agency, responsibility, and institutional culture. As Frechette (2020) notes, sufficient interview length and flexibility are vital for enabling the kind of reflective dialogue IPA is reliant upon. All interviews took place online (via Microsoft Teams), and typically lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, providing sufficient time for in-depth discussion and, where appropriate, follow-up elaboration.

Throughout the interviews, probing and follow-up questions were used to deepen understanding of how participants conceptualised the role of data in educational contexts, and how these conceptualisations were entangled with broader narratives of accountability, care, risk, or improvement. The open and flexible structure of IPA was particularly effective in enabling participants to reflect critically on these issues—especially in contexts where their engagement with LA was experienced as both supportive and constraining. Appendix 3 presents the complete interview schedules employed across participant types, outlining the prompts and thematic areas that guided data collection.

By foregrounding participants' subjective and situated experiences, IPA offered a powerful means of addressing RQ2 and RQ3: how stakeholders experienced the power dynamics of LA, and how these experiences aligned with—or diverged from—promissory narratives in policy. In doing so, IPA provided insight into the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which LA was interpreted, normalised, or resisted by those most directly affected by it.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Full ethical approval was obtained prior to the commencement of this study. Ethical considerations were integral to the research design, particularly given the study's focus on the lived experiences of students and staff in relation to LA. Since the study engaged human participants in semi-structured interviews and analysed publicly available policy texts, a multi-faceted approach to ethical scrutiny was adopted.

All materials relating to the ethical conduct of the study—approval, participant information, consent documentation, and data procedures—are included in Appendix 1.

Informed Consent, Voluntary Participation and the Use of Gatekeepers

The principle of informed consent underpinned all engagement with research participants. Participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the aims of the research, what participation would involve, their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and how their data would be stored and used. These were distributed in advance of any interviews and discussed at the beginning of each session. All participants gave explicit written consent using a signed consent form, which also included specific items regarding audio recording, the anonymised use of quotations, and the storage of data.

Recognising the potential for institutional hierarchies to influence willingness to participate—particularly for students and early-career staff—care was taken to emphasise that participation was entirely voluntary and that there would be no consequences for non-participation. BERA (2024) guidelines state that research participants must be free from any coercion or undue influence to participate in research, and the use of institutional gatekeepers therefore introduced an element of complexity into the recruitment process. As a result, communications had to be carefully managed, and care was taken to ensure that no participants were recruited via line managers (either directly or indirectly), or through any means that could imply obligation.

Crucially, gatekeepers were not asked to recommend or select individuals to take part. Instead, they distributed a prepared invitation that included full ethical information and a link for self-enrolment. This approach sought to reduce selection bias and ensure that participants responded on the basis of informed interest, rather than professional obligation or convenience. As Wilson (2020) observes, minimising the filtering role of gatekeepers is essential in maintaining the voluntariness of participation and protecting research integrity.

Throughout the process, attention was paid to the dual accountability that researchers face—to both the institution granting access and to the individuals whose experiences are being captured (see Israel and Hay, 2006). Some gatekeepers requested early access to data and findings and, in all cases, they were informed that the final study and its associated anonymised data will be made available to them *after* all examination processes have been completed.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Given the potential sensitivity of the subject matter, particularly where participants discussed institutional practices, failures, or perceived contradictions, strong attention was paid to anonymity. All interview data were pseudonymised at the point of transcription, and identifiable details—including job titles, departments, or university names—were removed or amended. HEIs were

anonymised using a letter-based system (e.g., University A, University B), with institutional descriptors (e.g., 'a large post-92 university') employed only where necessary for contextual framing.

Where quotations are used in this thesis, every effort has been made to ensure that participants cannot be identified. In cases where quotations might be deemed sensitive or potentially attributable, paraphrasing was used instead. These decisions were made with careful ethical judgement, prioritising participant welfare over direct citation.

Data Security

All data collected during this study were stored in accordance with Lancaster University's data protection guidelines and GDPR guidelines. Recordings from the online interviews were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices. Transcripts and consent forms were stored separately, with access restricted solely to the researcher. Any backup data were stored using encrypted cloud storage services approved by the University. In accordance with University guidelines, the data will be stored for a minimum of ten years, after which it will be permanently deleted.

Pseudonymisation was employed during transcription, and a unique identifier code was assigned to each participant, with no names or identifying markers included in any written documents. Participants were informed of these measures in the information sheet supplied to participants, and all participants were given the option to withdraw their data within a four-week period following the interview.

Positionality and Power

This study was underpinned by a critical theoretical orientation that recognises the inherently power-laden nature of the research process. Research encounters are never neutral; they are shaped by social location, institutional positioning, and the histories that both researcher and participant bring to the interaction. These dynamics are especially salient in studies of educational technology and LA, where the researcher, participants, and technological systems are all situated within complex and intersecting structures of institutional power.

As a professional working within UK HE, the researcher brought a situated insider perspective to this project. This positionality conferred certain advantages—familiarity with the organisational structures, technological systems, and policy narratives under investigation enabled more nuanced questioning, stronger rapport, and more contextually grounded interpretations. However, it also introduced risks

of assumption, bias, and interpretive blind spots, particularly in relation to tacit knowledge and normalised institutional practices that might otherwise go unchallenged.

To mitigate these risks, the research process was deliberately reflexive. Reflective field notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis, capturing moments of affect, surprise, or interpretive uncertainty. These notes served as a tool for interrogating assumptions and surfacing latent preconceptions. Interview schedules were piloted and iteratively refined to ensure that they neither presumed shared knowledge nor closed down alternative framings of experience.

Importantly, the researcher's positionality also shaped the process of data interpretation. IPA's double hermeneutic (Giddens, 2013) requires the researcher to make sense of participants making sense of their experiences—an inherently subjective process. The interpretation of meaning was therefore approached cautiously, with awareness that analytical framings are not neutral windows onto participant truth, but co-constructed through the researcher's own conceptual and professional lens.

Although techniques such as member checking or peer debriefing were considered as means of enhancing interpretive validity, they were ultimately not employed in this study. Member checking, while often recommended in qualitative research, was deemed misaligned with the epistemological assumptions of IPA; as Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2021) argue, participant endorsement does not necessarily equate to deeper interpretive truth, particularly where interpretations move beyond surface-level description. Similarly, while informal peer dialogue occurred throughout the research process, no formal peer debriefing protocol was implemented. Instead, the analysis prioritised transparency and critical reflexivity, with illustrative quotations carefully contextualised and interpretive claims substantiated through close engagement with the data.

By foregrounding the researcher's embeddedness within the field—and by adopting a critically reflexive stance—the study sought to ensure that power dynamics were neither ignored nor inadvertently reproduced in the conduct or representation of the research.

Ethics of Interpretation

Building on the previous discussion of researcher positionality, this section addresses the interpretive responsibilities embedded in IPA, particularly in light of the ethical and political dimensions of meaning-making.

IPA rests on the premise that meaning is co-constructed, in that the researcher seeks to understand how participants make sense of their lived experience while simultaneously interpreting that sense-making through their own lens. The double hermeneutic places a heavy interpretative burden on the researcher—not only to engage empathetically with participants' accounts, but also to interrogate them critically, situating them within wider institutional, social, and political contexts. As Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) note, good IPA requires the researcher to move beyond description, combining empathic engagement with an analytical commitment to understanding the meaning and function of experience.

In this study, particular attention was paid to preserving fidelity to participants' intended meanings, especially in instances where their narratives were contradictory, ambivalent, or emotionally charged. Ethical interpretation involved more than simply presenting what was said; it involved grappling with what was implied, what remained unsaid, and how these silences might reflect institutional pressures, feelings of surveillance, or internalised logics of accountability. For example, one academic participant expressed a tension between using LA to help students who are struggling and feeling complicit in watching them fail in real-time. Interpreting this narrative required a delicate balance—acknowledging the well-meaning intent behind the intervention while also situating it within broader discourses of datafication, responsibilisation, and institutional risk.

These interpretative decisions were guided by an ethic of care. Quotations were not selected to be sensational or representative in isolation, but rather contextualised within participants' broader meaning-making and the themes emerging across the dataset. In some cases, paraphrasing was used in place of direct quotation where it was felt that anonymity might be compromised or that citation risked misrepresenting the affective tone of what was shared.

The ethics of interpretation are also inherently political. In this study, participants often reflected critically on institutional shortcomings, such as a lack of transparency around LA, the emotional burden of monitoring, or the subtle pressures to perform data-informed care. Representing these accounts with integrity meant recognising their broader significance—not merely as individual complaints, but as situated critiques of institutional power, organisational logics, and digital governance. Care was taken to frame such reflections not as isolated exceptions but as insights into the systems and imaginaries within which participants were embedded.

To that end, the interpretative stance adopted in this study was one of respectful scepticism—committed to honouring participants' voices while also reading them in relation to the sociotechnical conditions that shape what can be said, felt, or known. This orientation echoes the critical-

interpretivist commitments underpinning the research more broadly, and reinforces the principle that ethical representation is not only about accuracy or anonymity—but also about justice.

4.4 Data Analysis

This section outlines the procedures undertaken to analyse the data collected through CDA and IPA. While these two strands of analysis were initially approached independently—reflecting their distinct epistemological and methodological foundations—they were ultimately brought into conversation through a comparative synthesis, which examined both convergence and divergence across the findings. NVivo[13] was used to support both phases of analysis, enabling systematic coding, theming, and cross-referencing across the two datasets.

Analysis of Policy Discourse (CDA)

The CDA component followed an approach aligned with Fairclough's (1989, 2003) three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, comprising analysis of:

(i) Textual features,

(ii) Discursive practices, and

(iii) Social practices.

The analysis began with a close reading of each policy document, during which propositional statements were identified—particularly those articulated through assertive, promissory, or modal constructions (e.g. *"learning analytics will enable…"* or *"data-empowered institutions can…"*). These statements, often presented as strategic certainties or normative imperatives, were treated as discursive artefacts that revealed how LA was being framed within sector discourse.

In the second stage, these propositions were grouped into mid-level conceptualisations that reflected the intended outcomes or underlying logics attributed to LA. These included framings of LA as a mechanism for personalisation, risk mitigation, performance enhancement, or behavioural responsibilisation. This interpretive activity corresponds to the level of discursive practice, where the

[13] a qualitative data analysis software package.

analysis sought to understand how LA was being constructed, justified, and operationalised in policy narratives.

To support this process, NVivo was used to systematically tag propositions, organise and compare conceptual groupings, and develop visual maps of emerging themes. These conceptual clusters were then aggregated into a series of high-level thematic categories, which articulated their broader social and ideological significance. These themes—such as *student success and retention*, *efficiency and data-driven management*, *empowerment*, *surveillance and control*, and *neoliberal rationalities*—were interpreted at the level of social practice, reflecting how discourse serves to reinforce or reproduce dominant institutional logics.

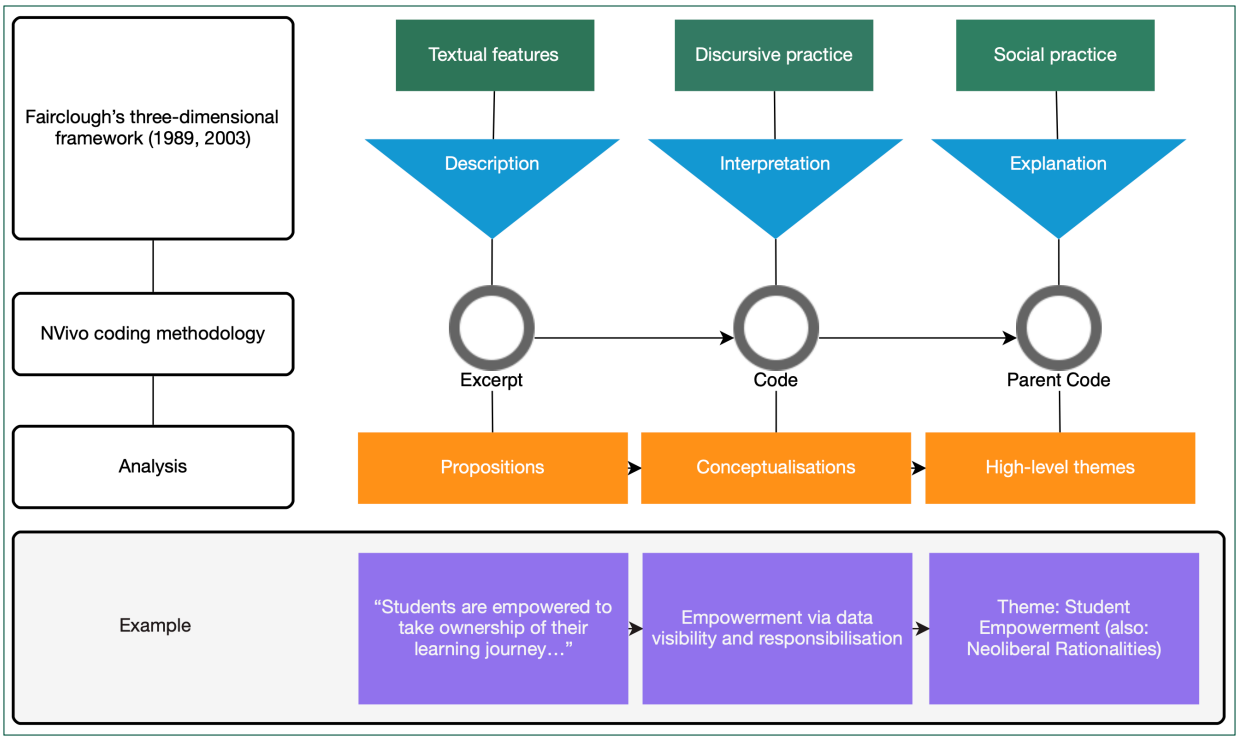

Figure 3. Thematic coding aligned to Fairclough's three-dimensional framework

This thematic framework is summarised in **Figure 3**, which maps the progression from surface-level statements to deeper ideological patterns. At this stage, documents were re-analysed with attention to their production and circulation contexts, including the roles played by institutional actors, intermediary bodies, and commercial stakeholders in shaping, legitimising, and disseminating dominant imaginaries of LA in HE.

This multi-layered approach builds on the interpretive method developed in earlier work (see Clark, 2023) and was designed to remain sensitive both to the linguistic construction of policy propositions and the structural conditions under which such meanings acquire authority, coherence, and normative force. Appendix 6 presents the full CDA coding matrix and the accompanying IPA coding bridge, illustrating how discursive categories were aligned with interpretative themes across the two analytic strands.

Analysis of Participant Interviews (IPA)

As noted, all interviews took place online—the audio from which was automatically transcribed using speech-to-text functionality within Microsoft Teams. The interview transcripts were reviewed in totality for any transcription errors and then analysed using a thematic approach consistent with the principles of IPA (see Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). This process drew on Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis framework to support the initial phases of familiarisation and inductive coding, while preserving IPA's commitment to idiographic depth and double hermeneutics. While traditional IPA does not prescribe a specific coding protocol, Braun and Clarke's framework was used pragmatically to support the early phases of analysis—particularly in supporting initial familiarisation, data reduction, and the organisation of codes prior to deeper interpretative work.

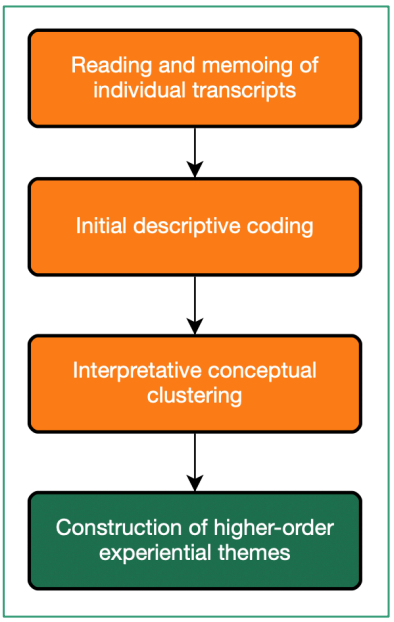

Figure 4. Thematic development process for analysis of interview data

Each transcript was read multiple times to develop an interpretative account of the participant's meaning-making, with emergent codes capturing both descriptive and conceptual content. These codes were then grouped into higher-order experiential themes, which sought to reflect participants' perceptions of LA in relation to power, agency, care, surveillance, and institutional culture. As Vicary and Ferguson (2024) contend, particular care must be taken to preserve participants' language and affective tone and so—where necessary—memos were used to document any reflexive observations and potential interpretative blind spots.

NVivo supported the creation of thematic maps, allowing for patterns to be identified across participants while also maintaining attention to individual narrative nuances. While participant experiences were diverse, shared themes gradually emerged, including tensions between

empowerment and monitoring, the normalisation of data-driven intervention, and the sense of moral responsibility attached to both staff and student engagement with LA.

To ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' intended meanings, claims were regularly reviewed against full transcripts, with alternative interpretations explored before finalising the themes. The double hermeneutic process involved not only interpreting participants' accounts of LA, but also attending to how the researcher's own experiences and assumptions—particularly in the context of digital learning—may have shaped those interpretations. In line with Larkin et al (2006), the analysis attempted to balance empathic engagement with critical reflection—recognising the ethical and political implications of how experiences were represented, especially in relation to institutional shortcomings.

Appendix 4 provides a worked example of the IPA coding process, illustrating how initial notes, emergent themes, and interpretative layers were developed.

Comparative Integration

Following the initial analysis of both datasets, a cross-comparison phase was conducted to explore points of alignment and disjuncture between policy discourse and lived experience. Using NVivo's matrix coding tools and node cross-referencing features, thematic clusters from the IPA were compared with discursive conceptualisations from the CDA. This integrative approach—discussed further in Chapter 7—was designed to explore points of alignment, dissonance, and negotiation between promissory policy narratives and participants' lived experiences of LA in practice.

4.5 Bringing the Methodological Framework Together

This chapter has outlined the methodological framing of this study, situated within an interpretivist and critically-oriented epistemological framework. By combining CDA and IPA, the research design provides a bridge between macro-level discursive formations and micro-level lived experiences, enabling a layered interrogation of how LA is constructed, legitimised, and experienced within HE.

The rationale for adopting CDA lies in its capacity to expose the ideological undercurrents embedded in policy discourse—revealing how particular logics of efficiency, empowerment, and transformation become naturalised through language. IPA, meanwhile, enables a granular exploration of how these logics are received, reinterpreted, or contested by those engaging directly with LA in their institutional contexts. Together, these methods offer a powerful means of addressing the study's core research

questions, allowing for a nuanced reading of alignment and disjuncture between sector-level narratives and stakeholder realities.

Throughout the design and execution of the study, ethical considerations have been embedded at every stage—from participant recruitment and data handling to the interpretive act of representing lived experience. Particular attention has been paid to issues of power, positionality, and the ethics of interpretation, recognising that the research process itself is inherently entangled with the very dynamics it seeks to explore.

The following chapters apply these methods in turn, beginning with the CDA of policy discourse in Chapter 5, before turning to the IPA of lived experience in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5: Policy Discourses of Learning Analytics

5. Policy Discourses of Learning Analytics

The high-level themes identified within the CDA reflect a broadly promissory—and at times utopian—narrative of LA and their application within HE. LA form part of HE's data-driven future and their adoption is frequently linked to more fundamental existential issues concerning the challenges faced by HE today and in the future. The presence of a vociferous and broadly positive stance on LA within these publications is, to some degree, unsurprising given that they are primarily concerned with promoting educational technology for the benefit of students, staff, and institutions. Nevertheless, it is important to re-emphasise that, in keeping with the CDA approach, all emergent themes are analysed within their broader contexts in recognition of the influence and legitimacy the publications pose for present and future practice in the field of LA.

Attention therefore turns firstly to the dominant themes across the sixteen documents and how they frame how LA is described and imagined in policy. Following this, cross-cutting themes of empowerment are examined in more detail, including the stated beneficiaries of empowerment and the means of LA's capacity to empower. Attention is then drawn to the internal tensions and contradictions within these narratives, the neoliberal-managerialist functions of LA rhetoric, the futures being envisioned and legitimised, and the ways in which depictions of LA have evolved over time. Throughout, each document is referenced by name with supporting quotations and, consistent with the CDA approach, attention is given to authorship and/or sponsorship so that the publications can be considered within their unique sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts.

5.1 Dominant Themes in Policy Discourse

Across the documents, a set of interlocking themes recurs, namely: improving student success and retention, enhancing teaching and the student experience through personalised support, leveraging data for efficient decision-making, and keeping pace through the digital transformation of HE. These themes will be explored in turn.

A primary theme is the **promise of improved student outcomes**—particularly higher retention and achievement—via early identification of struggling or at-risk students. For instance, HEPI's *Rebooting Learning for the Digital Age* report claims that "learning technologies and data-rich approaches can help identify what works in learning and teaching" (2017, p. 5) thereby boosting student outcomes and experience. Indeed, the report cites evidence that predictive LA enable staff to "spot disengaged and underachieving students at the earliest possible opportunity" (2017, p. 7) linking LA directly to reduced drop-out rates in the UK and abroad. Similarly, the more recent HEPI publication, *Solving the*

Continuation Challenge with Engagement Analytics, asserts that universities using student engagement analytics are "bucking [a] downward trend" in continuation, warning that "ignoring the impact of analytics is a mistake" (2025, p. 1). The emphasis on LA as a tool for student success is frequently quantified across the corpus; indeed, the Policy Connect cross-party commission report *From Bricks to Clicks* notes that increasing student retention is a "major motivation" for adopting LA (2016, p. 4), and Jisc's written response to the Education Select Committee's *Value for money in Higher Education report* (2018a) likewise heralds "statistically significant increases in retention" (2018b, p. 6) where LA is used, citing a 4–6% rise in one US college and a 2% boost in a UK pilot. Overall, the dominant narrative is that LA will help more students stay and succeed, addressing sector concerns about student retention and outcomes.

Another key theme relates to **personalisation and enhanced support**—the notion that LA allow educational experiences to be tailored to individual student needs and preferences at scale, thereby enriching the learning experience. The discourse often frames LA as enabling timely, "targeted and personalised support and assistance to each student" (Policy Connect, 2016, p. 4). Indeed, Policy Connect explicitly refers to LA as "enormously powerful" for improving the student experience through personalised interventions (2016, p. 2). In practice, this means using individualised student engagement and progress data to trigger support—such as academic feedback, reminders, or pastoral help—when and where it is required. Similarly, the Department for Education's *Realising the Potential of Technology in Education: A strategy for education providers and the technology industry* exemplifies Nottingham Trent University's Student Dashboard, noting how the dashboard draws together student engagement data from myriad sources to "help build better working relationships between students and personal tutors" (2019, p. 14) who can then intervene appropriately.

Alongside this, the Office for Students' *Gravity Assist* report likewise observes that "learning analytics software tools can help students visualise how they are engaging…and how they are progressing in relation to their peers" (2021, p. 32)—thereby prompting opportunities for self-reflection and personalisation of learning. Going even further, HEPI's *Rebooting Learning* report proposes that LA data will increasingly enable the "delivery of personalised learning, tailored to the areas where individual students are struggling" (2017, p. 8). This theme carries through into the area of student wellbeing and support, with Jisc's *Student Analytics* report contending that the expansion of LA to track wellbeing indicators will create "more responsive and caring student services" (2023c, p. 1) without overburdening staff

Whilst these policies depict LA as a means of empowering teachers and institutions to give students individualised attention, the policies also introduce the notion of self-regulation on the part the student.

Indeed, the Office for Students (2021), the Department for Education (2019), TASO (2024), and Jisc (2022, 2023c) all cite examples of how students should be encouraged to act on their engagement data when it is visible to them, with HEPI citing a particular institutional case study that found 81% of first-years "increased the amount of time they spent studying after viewing their engagement data" (2017, p. 31). Consequently, in the corpus, personalisation appears both in terms of institutionally led tailored support and as the cultivation of independent, self-monitoring learners.

A third prominent theme is **data-driven efficiency and evidence-based decision-making**, aligning LA with improved management and value for money. Policy texts frequently link LA to better use of resources and more informed institutional strategies. In Jisc's *Digital Strategies in UK HE: Making Digital Mainstream* (2023b), university leaders argue that embracing data and digital tools is essential for efficiency and competitiveness, with one contributor observing that "Universities that get to grips with the digital and data-driven future will succeed. Universities that do not will find it harder…to operate cost effectively" (2023b, p. 4). This managerial logic—that analytics are needed to allocate effort and funding optimally—is echoed throughout the corpus. Wonkhe's *Using Data to Better Support Students*—a report co-authored by the LA vendor Solutionpath—underscores how engagement data helps to "identify where to direct finite resources" (2022, p. 5) such as academic advisors' time, thereby using staff capacity more efficiently.

Aligned with this, Jisc's written response to the Education Select Committee's *Value for Money in Higher Education* (2018a) report argues that LA provide universities with a near-real-time assessment of whether student support interventions are effective, a crucial function "at a time when there is greater focus on the efficacy of spending on student success" (2018b, p. 6). Furthermore, the emphasis on value extends beyond financial considerations to include social and moral imperatives. Indeed, within the same document, Jisc position LA as a tool to "support disadvantaged students and drive improvements in retention and attainment, all of which could contribute to perceptions of value for money" (2018b, p. 1). In this sense, the discourse combines the ethical responsibility to support students with an economic rationale for institutional efficiency, reinforcing the idea that LA serves both equity and financial sustainability—a sentiment echoed in the more recent publications by TASO (2024) and Wonkhe (2022).

Beyond financial and social considerations, LA is also framed as a key driver in the broader shift towards evidence-led practice in HE. Indeed, Jisc's various reports on digital transformation emphasise the importance of building a 'data-first culture' in universities, where decisions—from curriculum design to student support—are guided by hard data rather than intuition (Jisc, 2022, 2023c, 2025). Indeed, in *How to Approach Digital Transformation in Higher Education*, one of Jisc's seven key

recommendations is to "collect data and make decisions based on evidence" (2025, p. 22)—further reinforcing the managerialist logic underpinning LA adoption. Moreover, even at the level of teaching practice, LA is portrayed as ascribing a more scientific, data-driven approach to teaching and learning. The *Gravity Assist* report, for instance, suggests that by using real-time analytics in an active learning classroom, teachers can quickly identify knowledge gaps "across the whole class" (Office for Students, 2021, p. 46) and adapt their teaching accordingly. In this sense, LA is positioned not just as a tool for institutional governance but as a mechanism for optimising pedagogical effectiveness at every level of the academy.

Finally, an implicit theme across the corpus is **inevitability and digital transformation**—the sense that adopting LA is part of the natural (and necessary) evolution of HE in the digital age. The policy texts frequently contextualise LA within the broader trend of HE's digital transformation agenda and the post-pandemic impetus for change. Indeed, Jisc and Emerge Education's joint report *How can EdTech address some of the greatest challenges facing HE leaders?* laments HE's historical "underinvestment in digital" (2023, p. 52)—a sentiment that is shared frequently throughout the corpus. Alongside this, the global pandemic is repeatedly referenced as a catalyst for change, with Jisc and Emerge Education—in an earlier report—noting "if the past two years have shown us anything, it is that universities must invest in digital. The risk of missed opportunities is too great" (2022, p. 3).

Throughout these narratives, LA is positioned as part of the inevitable modernisation of HE; a "foundational technology" (HEPI, 2017, p. 8) that will soon be ubiquitous. The discourse suggests that embracing LA is not just an optional innovation but a requirement to futureproof universities. The Department for Education's *Realising the Potential of Technology in Education: A strategy for education providers and the technology industry*, for instance, explicitly ties technological adoption to the future survival of the sector, envisioning technological ecosystems where tools such as LA reduce workload and raise student attainment (2019, p. 2). Similarly, Jisc's *Student Analytics: A core specification for engagement and wellbeing analytics* observes how the scaling of student support through better and more sophisticated use of data is "vital to the future success of the HE sector" especially since current systems "will struggle to cope without a radically different way of operating" (2023c, p. 1).

Consequently, many policies do not just endorse LA for their immediate benefits but construct their use as an inevitable step towards the university of tomorrow—one that is data-informed, personalised, and resilient in the face of massification and change. This promissory theme of inevitability serves to legitimate and validate LA initiatives by portraying them as aligned with the direction of progress. To that end, the dominant discourse across the corpus portrays LA as a panacea for student success and

institutional effectiveness: a means to improve retention and attainment, to personalise learning and support, to enable evidence-based management, and to transition HE into a data-driven future.

Taken together, these themes construct LA as an inherently beneficial and necessary innovation for the sector, naturalising its adoption while simultaneously foreclosing critical engagement with its assumptions, limitations, and broader implications for HE governance.

5.2 Empowerment Narratives in Learning Analytics Policy

Whilst the aforementioned themes are framed in positive, solution-oriented terms that position LA as being beneficial for all stakeholders, woven throughout this narrative are underlying assumptions concerning LA's capacity to empower its users. These cross-cutting themes—of the empowering force of LA—manifest in different ways across the corpus; some are explicit and overt, others more implicit and embedded within the broader narratives, yet all contribute to a shared imaginary of agency, autonomy, and enhanced capacity through data.

Student Agency and Self-Regulation

Across the corpus, there is a strong emphasis placed on student empowerment, whereby learners are portrayed as active agents who can utilise LA data to guide their own educational journeys. This empowerment is often articulated through the availability and visibility of LA dashboards, which ostensibly enable students to reflect on their progress, make informed decisions, and adjust behaviours accordingly. The Office for Students, for instance, highlights the benefits of LA dashboards to "help students to manage their own learning" (2021, p. 87), while Jisc's *Code of Practice for Learning Analytics*, invites learners to "manage your learning experience" and "understand your learning engagement" (2023a, p. 4) through the provision of LA data dashboards. Similarly, Wonkhe's co-authored report with Solutionpath suggests that students "can use their engagement scores to self-reflect" (2022, p. 5)—thereby positioning students in control of their learning and academic progress.

This construction of agency draws heavily on the language of self-regulation, portraying students as agentic beings with the power to monitor, optimise, and modify their own learning behaviours. However, the form of agency implied here is not open-ended; rather, it is framed around specific institutional metrics—such as LMS login data, library usage, and attendance—suggesting a normalisation of particular behaviours as indicators of success. The QAA's case study at Imperial College London, for instance, asserts that LA should be used "to empower students", enabling them "to reflect and gain insights into their own educational experience" and become "active agents in their

own learning" (2024, p. 2). Yet, conversely, the purported agency is structured around and predicated on data that institutions already deem valuable, reinforcing a particular vision of what engaged learning looks like.

HEPI's *Rebooting Learning for the Digital Age* also positions LA as a tool to support "student success and empowering students," drawing on behavioural insight theory to suggest that providing learners with their own learning data and predicted outcomes will prompt self-improvement (2017, p. 30). Analogising LA to fitness trackers, the report imagines students using analytics apps to manage academic performance through regular monitoring. Empirical evidence is cited from Purdue University's Signals pilot, where students exposed to LA were more likely to attain higher grades and seek help earlier—behaviours interpreted as signs of empowered learning. The report imagines a future whereby an LMS, for instance, would use such data to personalise content delivery, further blurring the line between data-informed self-regulation and institutionally scaffolded engagement. Much like fitness apps that use biometric feedback to encourage step counts or calorie goals, this metaphor positions students as rational, self-correcting actors, reinforcing a behavioural logic that frames empowerment as measurable alignment with institutional norms.

The promise of empowerment is further reinforced through institutional narratives of targeted support. The TASO report (2024), which evaluates LA-driven interventions, found that students receiving such support reported increased clarity about where to seek help and an "increase [in] confidence in self" (2024, p. 22). Here, empowerment is linked not only to data access and visibility but also to the orchestration of interventions based on predictive risk. Students are positioned as more confident and better supported, but only insofar as they respond to institutional prompts derived from their data patterns. In this sense, empowerment is contingent and mediated—it emerges not through open-ended student agency but through a system in which student behaviours are categorised, monitored, and acted upon. What appears as autonomy is deeply structured by institutional priorities and definitions of risk. Framed as a benefit, these mechanisms nevertheless contribute to a model of empowerment that privileges compliance and responsiveness over independent meaning-making or critical engagement with data.

As a consequence, student empowerment is depicted as a desirable outcome of LA implementation, grounded in data visibility and personal responsibility. Yet the underlying logic remains largely institutional: data must be interpreted correctly, acted on promptly, and aligned with institutional goals of retention and success. Thus, while empowerment is foregrounded, it is framed within a narrow conception of agency—one that privileges certain behaviours and modes of engagement over others.

This framing of student agency ultimately aligns with institutional metrics and risk logics, illustrating how empowerment narratives work to individualise responsibility while maintaining institutional authority—an important discursive pattern in the corpus.

Staff Empowerment in Decision-Making and Teaching Practices

In parallel to student narratives, policy texts frequently frame LA as a means of empowering academic and support staff. This empowerment is typically articulated in terms of increased visibility into student progress, improved capacity for timely intervention, and more strategic decision-making. For instance, HEPI observes that "empowering staff and students with better engagement insights has fostered a more supportive and proactive learning environment" (2025, p. 3). This language of empowerment is often framed in dual terms—staff gain both insight and authority, thereby positioning them as more effective agents in improving student outcomes.

Jisc's *Digital at the Core* report underscores this, noting that many educators "have the necessary digital skills and creativity but aren't always empowered to apply them or recognised for it" (2020, p. 20). The implication is that LA can enable staff to make pedagogical decisions grounded in real-time evidence rather than intuition or retrospective data. In this sense, LA is framed as not just tools for intervention but for pedagogical innovation and professional validation.

At the same time, the nature of this empowerment remains tightly coupled with institutional objectives. More broadly, several documents highlight the role that LA play in empowering staff to more effectively support their students. Indeed, citing Nottingham Trent University's use of an LA engagement dashboard, the Office for Students observes how LA "enable[s] university staff to better support students" (2021, p. 88)—emphasising that when lecturers or tutors can easily identify which students are struggling (via low engagement scores or automated flags), they are empowered to act early, rather than react after a failure or withdrawal. This reinforces a reactive model of teaching, where empowerment is linked to pre-emptive action against risk.

This model of empowerment, however, is not unproblematic. While positioned as a resource for enhancing pedagogical decision-making, the kind of professional agency offered by LA is ultimately bounded by institutional logics and risk-based models of intervention. Tutors are not simply empowered to act—they are expected to respond in particular ways to particular forms of data, which are themselves shaped by the assumptions and priorities of the systems that produce them. In this sense, empowerment is less about professional freedom and more about equipping staff to perform data-responsiveness in alignment with institutional norms.

The corpus promotes a model of data-informed professionalism in which good teaching is increasingly defined by the ability to interpret and act on analytical data. In practice, this positions academic judgement as something to be augmented or even directed by data systems. While framed as enabling, this model subtly recasts staff roles in line with audit culture and managerial priorities, where responsiveness to data becomes a key marker of performance.

As a consequence, staff empowerment is consistently portrayed as both a mechanism for improving student outcomes and a marker of institutional maturity in handling data. Yet the professional autonomy implied by empowerment is entangled with responsibilities to the institution's data-driven priorities. In this context, empowerment may be less about independence and more about enhanced capacity to comply with performance expectations.

Staff empowerment, like that of students, is thus conditional and functional—offered not as autonomy in a pedagogical sense, but as alignment with data-driven institutional priorities, reinforcing a model of professional accountability grounded in audit culture (see Shore and Wright, 2015).

Institutional Empowerment through Data-Informed Policy and Resource Allocation

Alongside the empowerment of individuals, the policy documents frequently depict institutions themselves as beneficiaries of LA, empowered to become more agile, responsive, and strategic (see Policy Connect, 2016; Jisc, 2020; Office for Students, 2021; Jisc and Emerge Education, 2023). This narrative constructs universities as data-driven organisations, in which leadership is enhanced through access to real-time insights on student behaviour, performance, and engagement. LA is thus positioned as a tool for institutional foresight—enabling senior leaders and planners to pre-empt risks, allocate resources more effectively, and tailor support at scale.

Jisc's *Digital at the Core: A 2030 Strategy Framework for University Leaders* emphasises this institutional perspective, stating that analytics will provide universities with "actionable strategic intelligence" that can drive decision-making at all levels (2020, p. 32). Similarly, Jisc's *Digital Strategies in UK HE: Making Digital Mainstream* underlines the necessity of becoming "data empowered" in order to navigate the challenges of massification, regulatory pressure, and resource constraints (2023b, p. 4). These framings suggest that LA do not simply enhance institutional oversight—they legitimise it as a modern imperative.

HEPI and Policy Connect also frame LA as central to fulfilling performance metrics and evidencing impact. In *Solving the Continuation Challenge*, HEPI cites institutions where LA contributed to a

measurable rise in continuation rates, with one institution reportedly "protecting over £100K in fee income" which could then be reinvested in student support (2025, p. 3). The implication is clear: LA empower institutions to achieve efficiency gains while simultaneously advancing social or pedagogical goals. This fusion of financial and educational logics renders LA an attractive tool of governance.

Moreover, institutional empowerment is frequently discussed in relation to compliance and accountability. Jisc's submissions to government frame LA as a means of evidencing value for money (Education Select Committee, 2018a), while the Office for Students' *Gravity Assist* report references the alignment of LA use with the Teaching Excellence Framework and other frameworks for demonstrating institutional quality (2021). Here, empowerment is not simply internal—it extends to the institution's public and political identity—LA provide evidence to regulators and stakeholders, allowing universities to demonstrate that they are data-informed, student-focused, and continually improving.

However, this construction of empowerment is not without tension. The ability to "see" more—to measure, monitor, and model student engagement—also reinforces a managerial logic in which educational practice is increasingly shaped by what can be quantified. The promise of control through data is framed as empowerment, but it also positions institutions within a landscape of perpetual optimisation. This logic naturalises the need for continual improvement, not only in teaching and learning, but in the analytics systems themselves, fostering a feedback loop in which institutions must constantly refine their data practices to remain competitive, compliant, and credible.

Ultimately, institutional empowerment within the discourse is tightly interwoven with the performative demands of HE policy. LA is imagined as essential infrastructure for realising a more accountable, strategic, and responsive university. Yet this empowerment—while couched in the language of innovation and insight—is largely predicated on the imperative to manage risk, improve retention, and satisfy external benchmarks. As such, it raises important questions about whose interests are ultimately being served and how institutional priorities are being shaped through the very tools that claim to empower.

This construction of institutional empowerment reveals how LA is positioned not just as tools for support, but as instruments of strategic governance—where performance, accountability, and risk management become central to the sector's imagined future. Taken together, these empowerment narratives present LA as a multifaceted solution to the challenges facing HE—one that enhances agency, improves decision-making, and enables strategic oversight. Yet, as the following section will explore, these constructions of empowerment are closely entwined with mechanisms of control and

surveillance, raising critical questions about the limits of autonomy and the broader implications of data-driven governance in HE.

5.3 Control and Surveillance in Learning Analytics Policy

While the preceding sections have explored how LA is framed as empowering tools for students, staff, and institutions, it is vital to recognise the simultaneous presence of mechanisms of control, surveillance, and regulation. This section builds directly upon the discussion of empowerment by examining how the very conditions that enable agency and support are entangled with structures that monitor, prescribe, and enforce particular behaviours. The tensions within these narratives are not incidental but central to understanding how LA function discursively as both enabling and disciplinary technologies.

As Jisc's *Student Analytics* report outlines, LA platforms frequently incorporate metrics for attendance, VLE logins, assignment submissions, and engagement scores—all of which contribute to early warning systems and risk modelling (2023c). These mechanisms ostensibly help institutions intervene earlier to support struggling students. Yet they also embed a surveillance infrastructure that constructs learners as knowable and governable subjects. Behaviour becomes legible to institutions in ways that invite categorisation and intervention, not simply to foster success, but to maintain order and compliance with institutional goals.

The Office for Students' *Gravity Assist* review, for example, illustrates this duality. While LA dashboards are described as empowering students, they also allow institutions to "flag" at-risk learners based on "patterns of engagement" (2021, p. 87). These flags serve a regulatory function, where students are not just supported but monitored and categorised through standardised behavioural metrics. Such classifications rely on predefined indicators of engagement and implicitly delineate what counts as acceptable academic behaviour. Similarly, Wonkhe's report emphasises the ability of dashboards to "identify where to direct finite resources" (2022, p. 5), embedding a form of value-based triage within pastoral and academic support systems.

Institutions, likewise, face pressure to embed analytics within their governance practices. Jisc's *How to Approach Digital Transformation in Higher Education* calls for a "data-led culture" across all levels of decision-making (2025, p. 6). Such a culture, while portrayed as forward-looking and strategic, also presupposes continuous monitoring, benchmarking, and alignment with external accountability frameworks. The institution is not merely using data—it is being shaped by it, compelled to act on insights and forecasts in order to maintain competitive standing, comply with regulation, and

demonstrate impact. In this context, the narratives of empowerment begin to take on a more ambivalent character. Empowerment is made conditional upon visibility, and visibility itself is a function of surveillance. The capacity to act—the core of empowerment—is increasingly defined in terms of data responsiveness. Staff and students must learn to navigate and respond to their own data profiles, which are shaped by algorithmic processes and institutional priorities. The same tools that expand institutional capability also extend institutional surveillance, creating *surveillance pedagogies*—a mode of educational governance in which analytics function as instruments of both insight and discipline (see Lyon, 2010).

While none of the documents explicitly frame LA as surveillance, the functions described—risk detection, performance monitoring, and behavioural categorisation—align closely with Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). For example, HEPI's *Rebooting Learning for the Digital Age* endorses predictive analytics to spot disengagement early, but this also entails defining disengagement in quantifiable, normative terms (2017, p. 30). In doing so, LA not only measure learning—they shape it, prescribing the contours of acceptable educational trajectories.

What is critical to recognise is that these systems often go unquestioned in policy discourse. The promise of analytics tends to overshadow considerations of data ethics, student agency, and the potential psychological or pedagogical impacts of being constantly monitored. Jisc's policy documents, for instance, celebrate LA's role in institutional transformation and resource allocation, yet rarely interrogate the assumptions built into algorithmic models or the implications of treating engagement as a calculable metric.

Ultimately, LA policies construct a model of educational governance in which control and empowerment are not opposites but co-constitutive. To empower is also to manage; to support is also to scrutinise. This duality underscores the importance of situating LA not only as a set of tools but as ideological artefacts that reflect and reinforce particular values and visions for HE.

It is within this tension between enablement and regulation that the ideological function of LA discourse becomes most apparent—a theme to which the following section now turns.

5.4 Ideology and the Construction of Policy Futures

In critical discourse terms, the promissory narratives of LA explored in the preceding sections do more than describe or advocate for technological interventions—they constitute an ideological project in that they are performative—enacting, reinforcing, and legitimising a particular vision of what HE

should be and how it should operate. Within the CDA framework, it is therefore necessary to ask: what values and assumptions are embedded within these policy texts, what social arrangements do they normalise, and in whose interests do these discourses function? This turn to ideology is important not only for understanding the implicit assumptions within policy narratives, but also for tracing how certain futures become naturalised while others are marginalised. Within a CDA framework, this move allows for a critical interrogation of how policy texts function to stabilise particular ways of thinking about HE, learning, and institutional responsibility—foregrounding some possibilities while foreclosing others.

Ideology, as understood within this analysis, is not simply a matter of political bias or partisan position. It refers instead to the tacit 'common sense' notions and value preferences (see Selwyn, 2013) embedded within discourse—assumptions so deeply normalised they often escape scrutiny. In this sense, LA policy discourse operates ideologically by presenting particular understandings of HE, success, risk, and responsibility as self-evident, while marginalising alternative perspectives or critiques. Framed in this light, LA become not just instruments of educational development and improvement, but artefacts of a wider political rationality that structures the university as a data-driven, performance-oriented institution.

A key ideological function of LA discourse is the construction of the university as a rational, responsive, and optimisable entity. Throughout the corpus, institutions are consistently portrayed as being capable of achieving greater efficiency, agility, and accountability through the implementation of analytical systems and data-oriented ways of working. In Jisc's *Digital at the Core* (2020) and Wonkhe and Solutionpath's *Using Data to Better Support Students* (2022) the promise of LA is closely linked to institutional competitiveness. Data use is not merely encouraged—it is presented as essential for institutional survival, effectively aligning strategic ambitions (such as innovation and market positioning) with external expectations around performance, accountability, and value for money.

Such language reflects what Shore and Wright (2015) describe as the audit culture of contemporary universities, in which performance is continually monitored, benchmarked, and used as a basis for resource allocation and reputation management. LA is positioned as central to this apparatus. Indeed, in HEPI's *Solving the Continuation Challenge*, for instance, LA is linked to financial protection, student retention, and improved continuation statistics, all of which can then be reinvested in student support (2025, p. 4). The logic here is circular—LA is used to achieve performance gains, which justify their continued use, and—to that end—this cyclical reinforcement constructs LA as both the means and the measure of institutional success.

Similarly, the ideological framing of LA normalises an instrumental view of education—where learning is understood as a measurable, optimisable process. The repeated emphasis on metrics (e.g., engagement scores, dashboard visualisations, risk alerts) constructs learning as a set of observable inputs and outputs. In this sense, students become data subjects whose behaviours can be categorised, predicted, and influenced. As Ball (2003) contends, such approaches instantiate a form of managerialist performativity, wherein judgement is displaced by indicators, and complex human processes are reduced to simplified data points.

This reductionism is evident in the portrayal of 'student engagement' across the corpus. In Wonkhe and Solutionpath's *Using Data to Better Support Students*, for instance, student engagement is quantified through activity within the LMS, attendance records, and library use, with dashboards enabling staff to identify those who fall outside the norm (2022, p. 5). Similarly, Jisc and Emerge Education's joint report *How can EdTech address some of the greatest challenges facing HE leaders?* conveys student engagement—in the digital space—as a transactional activity, reduceable to clicks, minutes viewed, links opened, and posts made (2023). Consequently, engagement becomes not a matter of intellectual or affective involvement in learning, but a traceable digital footprint. The ideological messaging here is subtle but powerful—what can be measured becomes what matters. The discourse risks sidelining unquantifiable aspects of education—curiosity, creativity, dissent—and elevates those behaviours that align with system logics and data science.

The same logic underpins constructions of empowerment, explored in previous sections. Empowerment is consistently framed in terms of a user's ability to respond to institutional data. Indeed, in the *Code of Practice for Learning Analytics*, Jisc implores students to understand their learning engagement via LA dashboards (2023a), but this understanding is always institutionally framed—it is the student's responsibility to adjust their behaviour in ways that align with the system's expectations. In this sense, empowerment becomes a euphemism for self-regulation, echoing neoliberal ideals of responsibilisation whereby individuals are tasked with managing their own risks and performance (see Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle, 2017).

In this configuration, LA systems operate as what Foucault (1988) termed *technologies of the self*—not merely disciplining bodies from without, but inciting subjects to monitor and reshape themselves in accordance with institutional norms. The ideological function, therefore, lies in the production of a particular kind of subject—one that is data-literate, self-monitoring, and accountable. This ideal learner or staff member is not just capable but compliant; empowered, but only within the confines of system design.

Importantly, this discourse does not emerge in a vacuum. It reflects—and reinforces—the broader neoliberalisation of HE. As funding becomes more constrained and student numbers grow, the pressure on institutions to demonstrate value, retain students, and meet regulatory expectations increases. The Office for Students' *Gravity Assist* report repeatedly references alignment with TEF and other quality frameworks (2021), linking LA not just to pedagogical enhancement but to institutional legitimacy. Similarly, Jisc's reports frequently invoke the language of 'digital maturity', implying that data competence is now a benchmark of institutional success (see 2020, 2023a, 2025). These framings contribute to the technocratic legitimation of knowledge (see Lemke, 2012; Friedman, 2019; Bandola-Gill, 2021)—where education is validated not through its cultural or civic contributions, but by its efficiency and output.

Taken together, therefore, the policy texts produce a vision of the university as a self-regulating, data-governed ecosystem. They naturalise the use of predictive analytics, normalise the collection and interpretation of behavioural data, and endorse continuous monitoring as a precondition of support; yet rarely do they interrogate the social or ethical implications of this shift. As Williamson (2017) warns, the rhetoric of data-driven reform often masks the political work these technologies perform—manufacturing problems in ways that make them (re)solvable by data, and in doing so, narrowing the horizon of possible (alternate) futures. In this sense, the ideological function of LA discourse is to render datafication both desirable and inevitable. The language of empowerment, innovation, and care contrives to soften the harder edges of surveillance and control inherent within the corpus, creating a narrative in which resistance appears irrational or even unethical. This discursive space is foreclosed because to question LA is to question improvement and insight—tenets of the imagined future of these documents.

5.5 Conclusion: Discursive Patterns and the Limits of Promise

This chapter has discussed the findings of a CDA undertaken of sixteen UK policy and sectoral publications to examine how LA is discursively constructed as part of HE's imagined digital future. Across these texts, a strikingly consistent promissory narrative emerges—one that positions LA as essential to institutional effectiveness, student success, and sectoral transformation. Through a recurring set of interlinked themes—personalisation, efficiency, data-informed decision-making, and digital modernisation—LA is framed as both the solution to HE's contemporary challenges and the mechanism by which a future-ready university will be achieved.

Yet, these promises are not ideologically neutral. Indeed, as the analysis has shown, the discourse surrounding LA is underpinned by particular assumptions about what constitutes value, success, and

responsibility in HE. The theme of empowerment, which threads throughout the corpus, is consistently articulated in ways that align with institutional priorities: students are empowered through dashboards that encourage self-regulation and compliance; staff are empowered to act on engagement metrics in ways that align with institutional performance goals; and institutions themselves are empowered to manage risk, optimise resources, and demonstrate accountability. Empowerment, in this sense, is not emancipatory but functional—contingent upon users' alignment with the data systems that structure their choices.

Moreover, this analysis has highlighted the entanglement of empowerment and control within the policy discourse. The very tools that are celebrated for their capacity to enhance insight and autonomy also operate as technologies of surveillance and governance. Students and staff are rendered visible through data, and their behaviours subject to categorisation, benchmarking, and intervention. Drawing on Foucauldian perspectives, this chapter has shown how LA function discursively as disciplinary technologies: they incite individuals to monitor and shape themselves according to institutional norms while positioning data responsiveness as the benchmark of responsible conduct. This duality—between care and control, empowerment and surveillance—is central to understanding the political rationalities embedded within LA discourse.

In addressing the first research question (RQ1), the CDA has revealed how promissory narratives are constructed and perpetuated across policy, sectoral publications, and vendor-linked reports. These narratives rely on technocratic logics, performance metrics, and a reductive view of educational engagement that privileges what can be measured and optimised. Importantly, they do so with minimal attention to ethical, social, or pedagogical tensions—foregrounding a vision of LA as inevitable and desirable while marginalising dissent.

The analysis also directly speaks to RQ3 by uncovering the ways in which LA discourse reinforces existing power asymmetries within HE. Power is not merely exercised through top-down mandates but embedded within the very design and framing of LA systems—systems that privilege institutional definitions of risk and success, that normalise monitoring, and that invite individuals to become self-governing subjects within a data-driven regime. While framed in the language of support, such mechanisms embed managerialist logics into the fabric of everyday educational practice.

Taken together, these findings foreground the ideological function of LA discourse in shaping not only how technologies are adopted, but how the very purposes and values of HE are being rearticulated in the process. What emerges is not simply a set of tools, but a vision of the university that is data-centric, risk-averse, and governed through continuous optimisation.

These insights lay a critical foundation for the next phase of the study. The following chapter turns to interview data with students, teachers, and institutional stakeholders to explore how these policy imaginaries map against the actualities of these claims. In doing so, it examines the lived realities of LA adoption and investigates the extent to which the promise of LA aligns with the experiences and perspectives of those who utilise and engage with these tools and systems.

Chapter 6: Interpreting the Lived Experience of Learning Analytics

6. Interpreting the Lived Experience of Learning Analytics

This chapter presents the findings of an IPA of nineteen interviews conducted with students, academics, support staff, and senior leaders across seven HEIs. Building on the previous chapter's CDA of sector-level policy, this chapter shifts focus from macro-level promissory narratives to the lived experience of LA as encountered by stakeholders within institutional settings.

This chapter explores how individuals interpret, negotiate, and respond to LA in practice, highlighting the situated and affective dimensions of its use. Guided by IPA's commitment to idiographic depth and interpretative engagement (see Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021), the analysis foregrounds participants' meaning-making, emotional responses, and reflexive positioning in relation to the promises and pressures of data-driven education.

While Chapter 5 traced the discursive construction of LA in policy as a mechanism of personalisation, empowerment, and efficiency, the accounts presented here offer a grounded counterpoint, illustrating how those ideals are embraced, contested, or reimagined in practice. This chapter argues that LA is not experienced in universal or uniform ways. Rather, it is interpreted through ongoing negotiations shaped by institutional role, relational context, ethical climate, and trust. The analysis that follows foregrounds this interpretative complexity, tracing how participants navigate tensions between empowerment and control, datafication and care, and between critique and resignation.

Four interpretative themes are presented: Empowerment and Agency; Compliance and the Internalisation of Surveillance; Ethical Ambiguities and Relational Tensions; and Resistance, Resignation, and Reimagining LA. These themes are not discrete, but overlapping, reflecting the complexity and contingency of experience. They offer a textured insight into how LA is embedded within wider institutional dynamics of power, care, and governance, and lay the groundwork for the integrative synthesis that follows in Chapter 7.

6.1 Empowerment and Agency

Across the interviews, many participants spoke to LA's potential to support decision-making, boost awareness, and enable timely responses. However, this perceived "empowerment" was rarely straightforward. Instead, it was negotiated—dependent on context, access, prior experience, and a sense of institutional trust.

> When I started getting the notifications about low engagement, it was a bit of a wake-up call. It made me think, right, I haven't been logging into the VLE, maybe I should go in and check things. But also—it's not like I was doing nothing. I was reading offline. So it was useful, but also a bit simplistic. [Student F, University 6]

This typifies a recurrent ambivalence: LA can prompt self-awareness, yet the metrics do not always map neatly onto actual learning practices. In this sense, engagement becomes legible through the system, but students' embodied and invisible labour often falls outside those logics.

For some students—particularly those navigating educational or situational transitions, such as foundation year learners—LA did have a noticeably empowering effect:

> In college I didn't really get much help. But here, I had someone from student support reach out after my engagement dropped. And it wasn't scary—it was actually quite helpful. I didn't even know people could see how I was doing, but they actually used it to support me. It made me feel noticed.
> [Student C, University 5]

This suggests that LA can serve a powerful pastoral function, especially when combined with relational human support. In such cases, empowerment arises not from the data itself, but from how institutions choose to act on it—and how students perceive that action.

Among staff, the term "empowerment" was far more contested. While some described the usefulness of real-time data for spotting trends or allocating resources, others resisted the implication that data alone conferred meaningful agency:

> It's another tool at our disposal, but I wouldn't say it empowers me, no. It doesn't tell me why a student's disengaged—it just tells me they are. So I still have to do the hard bit: reaching out, building trust, figuring out what's going on. [Academic A, University 1]

Academic staff often described LA as a starting point rather than a solution—helpful for triage, but insufficient for deeper pedagogical insight. Indeed, several emphasised that true empowerment comes from dialogue, not dashboards.

Nonetheless, one senior leader framed LA empowerment in more strategic, institutional terms:

> At the leadership level, it's about giving us a live sense of what's happening across the university—where the pressure points are, how initiatives are landing, how we're doing on continuation. That visibility allows us to be more agile. [Senior Leader B, University 7]

In this respect, empowerment shifts to a macro-level form of institutional intelligence, where LA supports responsiveness and decision-making. Yet this also introduces a tension: what counts as agency when it is distributed across levels—student, staff, leadership—and mediated by algorithmic representations?

Indeed, some students also internalised these complexities. For instance, one mature learner described LA dashboards as simultaneously informative and hollow:

> It's another thing to look at. I'll check it, but it doesn't really change what I do. I'm already managing deadlines, reading, balancing my work and stuff. It's a passive tool unless something triggers from it—an email, a tutor reaching out. [Student D, University 5]

Agency is unevenly distributed. For some, LA offers clarity, motivation, or intervention; for others, it sits passively in the background and only becomes meaningful when embedded within broader support and dialogic contact. Empowerment, then, is not an intrinsic feature of LA—it is an outcome shaped by use, perception, and institutional culture.

These findings suggest that empowerment through LA is not a static or inherent outcome of implementation but is instead dynamically produced through context, support structures, and individual interpretation. While students did report instances where LA tools enhanced their sense of control or clarity, these were closely linked to supportive environments or mentoring relationships. In other cases, data visibility was experienced as ambiguous or anxiety-inducing. This underscores Kitchin's (2014) argument that data systems must be understood not as neutral artefacts but as sociotechnical configurations—where empowerment emerges through complex negotiations between users, institutions, and technologies. The promises of personalised support, often foregrounded in policy, were not uniformly felt in practice, indicating the need for greater sensitivity in how empowerment is both framed and enacted.

While some participants described LA as a catalyst for empowerment—enhancing their confidence, sense of autonomy, or academic support—this was not a universal experience. Alongside narratives of enablement ran more ambivalent or constrained accounts, where institutional expectations and behavioural cues shaped engagement in more prescriptive ways. The next theme explores how such

pressures were internalised, particularly through the normalisation of monitoring practices and of data-driven compliance.

6.2 Compliance and the Internalisation of Surveillance

While some participants expressed feelings of empowerment and agency, others described experiences of subtle constraint and pressure. These accounts did not speak of overt surveillance, but of an internalised awareness of being watched and expected to behave in institutionally sanctioned ways. While many participants recognised LA's potential to support engagement and offer insight, an equally strong thread emerged around its disciplinary effects—how it reshaped behaviour through feelings of being watched, monitored, or evaluated.

> Even though I know it's just data, I can't help but feel like someone's checking up on me all the time. Like, if I don't log in, is someone going to email me? Am I going to be flagged? [Student E, University 6]

This quote exemplifies a sense of unease—students feel compelled to perform certain behaviours not because they are meaningful to their learning, but because they are being tracked. For some, this visibility prompted stress or changed study habits in ways that didn't always feel pedagogically authentic.

A second-year undergraduate described using the LA dashboard "like a Fitbit" for study, but with mixed feelings:

> You end up doing things just to bump up the numbers—opening documents you've already read, logging into the VLE just to look active. It's not really engagement, but it looks good on the dashboard. [Student F, University 6]

This kind of performative compliance appeared across interviews. Students understood what was being counted and, in turn, calibrated their actions accordingly. The power of LA here was subtle but potent: it didn't mandate behaviour, but it shaped the environment in which certain behaviours were rewarded or expected.

Several academics reflected on this dynamic from the other side of the relationship. One explained:

> The moment you show a student a dashboard with red flags or warning symbols, you're sending a message. And that message isn't always 'we care'—sometimes it's 'you're failing' or 'you're under surveillance'. [Academic C, University 3]

This observation highlights the affective consequences of LA. The data visualisation itself becomes a source of anxiety, regardless of institutional intentions. Where staff were supportive, students were more likely to interpret LA as caring. Where relationships were weaker, it could feel punitive.

Some professional services staff described being positioned in roles that were increasingly about "monitoring engagement" and responding to analytics alerts:

> It's become part of our job to contact students based on flags. But sometimes I hear questions about what we're actually doing—are we supporting students or just policing them? [Support Staff C, University 5]

This quotation reflects an ethical tension: even when support is well-intentioned, the logic of early intervention can slide into surveillance. Participants described feeling caught between a desire to care and the structural imperatives of risk management.

One academic, who had been initially optimistic about LA, expressed a gradual shift in perspective:

> At first, I thought it would help me be more proactive. But over time, it started to feel like I was just feeding the machine—clicking checkboxes, chasing students based on scores I didn't fully understand. It started to erode my professional judgement. [Academic D, University 4]

This erosion of trust in one's own judgement was echoed by others. A sense of being constrained by data, rather than informed by it, emerged particularly among more experienced educators, who viewed LA as part of a broader audit culture in HE. Even at leadership levels, there was recognition of this dynamic. One senior leader, while positive about LA overall, acknowledged:

> We have to be careful not to mistake visibility for understanding. Engagement scores are indicators, not diagnoses. If we start treating them as truth, we risk making bad decisions—or worse, dehumanising students. [Senior Leader A, University 5]

In several interviews, students described "second-guessing" their activity—considering how each action might be interpreted through the LA system:

> Sometimes I think—if I study with a textbook, does that count? Will the system think I'm disengaged? It makes you paranoid. [Student A, University 4]

This internalisation of surveillance—the way individuals begin to monitor themselves in anticipation of being monitored—closely aligns with Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power. The data gaze becomes ambient, reshaping behaviour in subtle but significant ways.

To that end, while LA is rarely described as overtly punitive, many participants experienced it as a soft form of control—shaping their practices not through mandates but through metrics. This produces a kind of behavioural alignment that may look like engagement but risks reducing education to what can be measured and managed. Participants also noted that outdated or partial data sometimes misclassified engagement, further incentivising performative behaviours.

Participant narratives here closely align with Foucault's (1977) theorisation of disciplinary power, where visibility functions as a mechanism of control. That students described altering behaviour in response to dashboards—even when data was outdated or misaligned—suggests the internalisation of evaluative norms embedded within LA tools. This also reflects Lupton and Williamson's (2017) portrayal of the *datafied student*, where educational subjectivity is increasingly mediated by performance scores, engagement ratings, and behavioural indicators. The normalisation of this monitoring can generate compliance without coercion, pointing to what Ball (2003) describes as the quiet "terrors of performativity" within educational cultures.

The internalisation of LA's logics often operated beneath the surface, with participants describing how they adjusted behaviours in anticipation of institutional observation. However, this compliance was not always unthinking. Indeed, for many, it was underpinned by discomfort—particularly when the boundaries of visibility, consent, and relational responsibility felt opaque. These tensions gave rise to ethical concerns about how LA data was interpreted, shared, and acted upon, prompting reflection on trust, care, and the moral responsibilities embedded in learning relationships.

6.3 Ethical Ambiguities and Relational Tensions

The tensions between perceived care and control often gave rise to deeper ethical uncertainties. Participants described an unease not simply with data collection, but with how such practices reframed relationships between students, teachers, and institutions. If control and compliance mark the background texture of many participants' experiences, so too did concerns around ethics, fairness, and the quality of human relationships within LA-enabled environments. While less immediate than

dashboard interactions or data scores, these considerations surfaced repeatedly as participants reflected on their feelings over time.

> It's the lack of transparency that bothers me most. I know they're collecting data, but I'm not always sure what they're using it for, or who's seeing it. [Student B, University 5]

For many students, the ethics of LA were not just about consent at the point of onboarding, but about an ongoing sense of control over their own data. While some recalled being introduced to LA formally, others said they "just sort of discovered it was a thing" midway through their studies. Indeed, one student noted:

> It was just there one day. No one explained it further. It wasn't really part of induction, there wasn't a policy shared. I found it because a lecturer said, 'check your dashboard.' It was weirdly casual for something so big. [Student F, University 6]

The notion of proportionality—the balance between what is collected and how it is used—was also questioned. Several students and staff pointed out that minor engagement lapses could trigger automated emails, leading to a sense of disproportionate response, with one academic explaining:

> We had a student miss a few weeks due to a bereavement. The system flagged her as disengaged, and she started getting generic messages. She was upset—it felt cold, impersonal. She wasn't failing. She was grieving. [Academic C, University 3]

This points to a wider issue: LA systems often lack contextual sensitivity, and without knowledge of a student's wider circumstances, the data becomes a blunt instrument. In turn, staff may be positioned as enforcers of system-defined engagement, rather than as professionals exercising nuanced judgement.

The same theme also emerged among professional-services staff, who are often tasked with acting on alerts. One participant described the process as feeling "robotic":

> You get the alert, you send the email, you tick the box. But you don't always know the full story. And the student just sees another system message. [Support Staff A, University 2]

The relational implications of this are profound; several staff described how LA had altered their relationships with students—not always for the better. While some felt better equipped to identify struggling students, others feared becoming too dependent on what could be tracked.

> It used to be you'd notice a student in class, or something they wrote would make you check in. Now it's a dashboard score. I worry we're losing that human sense. [Academic H, University 6]

Students, too, described this relational shift. Some felt LA undermined trust:

> I want to believe my tutor cares, not that a red flag told them to email me. [Student A, University 4]

Others, however, said that when handled well, LA could enhance relationships:

> I had a tutor who used my dashboard in a good way. She asked me how I was doing after a dip in engagement. It wasn't automated, it was real. I appreciated that. [Student C, University 5]

These contrasting accounts underscore a key insight—LA doesn't determine relational dynamics—it mediates them, and its effects depend on how staff engage with the data, how it is framed, and the relational culture of the institution. These findings reinforce Prinsloo and Slade's (2017) view that ethical practice in LA is not solely about informed consent or data governance, but also about sustaining relational trust. Students' uncertainty around who sees their data—or how it might be interpreted—exposed deep ambiguities in institutional communication and practice. The ethical landscape here appears to be one of under-articulation: ethical commitments exist in institutional rhetoric, but participants often experienced a disconnect between those commitments and their lived realities. Tsai et al (2020) observe how the ineffective communication of high-level policies fail to cascade meaningfully into practice. Indeed, in the findings, this gap appeared to be a source of frustration and mistrust for both staff and students.

Ethical discomfort also extended to staff experiences. Several expressed concern about being asked to act on data they didn't fully understand:

> We get the dashboards, the flags, but no training. I don't know how the algorithm works. What counts as engagement? I'm being asked to act on black-box outputs. [Academic E, University 4]

The lack of algorithmic transparency was a recurring theme. While many institutions had policies or principles in place, these were not always visible or meaningful at the ground level. This contributed to feelings of scepticism and caution, particularly among staff who had been in teaching roles before LA's introduction.

> I'm not anti-tech. But I want clarity. What's being collected, how's it calculated, and who decides what's high or low engagement? [Academic B, University 2]

In several cases, participants referred to their institution's broader digital strategy—but noted that these high-level aspirations rarely translated into detailed conversations about ethics, care, or the complexities of student lives. This gap created a sense of dissonance between policy rhetoric and lived practice.

In sum, this section reveals how LA—while rarely contested in principle—raises deep questions about transparency, context, and care. Where these are lacking, trust frays, and relational tensions emerge. These issues are not technical but ethical, demanding that institutions consider not just what LA can do, but how it feels to those being seen through its lens.

For some participants, these ethical and relational ambiguities became sites of critical questioning—of both the systems themselves and the institutional priorities they reflected. Yet not all responses were oppositional; indeed, some expressed resignation, a quiet withdrawal from engagement rooted in frustration, fatigue, or a lack of influence. Others looked forward, imagining alternative uses or models of LA that might better align with their values and lived realities. The final theme explores these expressions of resistance, disengagement, and reimagining.

6.4 Resistance, Resignation, and Reimagining LA

In response to these ethical tensions and normalised expectations, participants exhibited a range of reactions—some resisted, others resigned themselves, and a few attempted to reimagine LA in more dialogic and relational terms. These responses provide insight into the agentic possibilities within and against the system. While much of the discussion so far has focused on how students and staff navigate LA in practice—whether through efforts to comply, adapt, or mitigate its effects—there also emerged moments of active resistance, quiet resignation, and hopeful reimagining. These varied responses suggest that LA is not simply adopted or rejected, but encountered in ways that reflect personal, pedagogical, and institutional values.

For some participants, resistance was overt. One academic described deliberately avoiding engagement with LA, even when encouraged to do so:

> I rarely use the dashboard. I tell students they can check it if they want, but I don't build it into my teaching. It's reductive, if I'm honest. I don't believe meaningful learning can be tracked through clicks and so forth. [Academic C, University 3]

This type of principled resistance was echoed by others, particularly among experienced staff who recalled pedagogical relationships formed without digital oversight. Their resistance was not technophobic, but pedagogically grounded. Indeed, several spoke of concern that LA prioritised surface behaviours over deeper learning.

Some students also pushed back—either by consciously ignoring the dashboard or downplaying its relevance to their learning. One foundation-year student explained:

> Most people ignore it. Some laugh about it—like, "Oh, I got a red score again." Others find it stressful, especially if they're already under pressure. It's not really helping anyone, I don't think. [Student E, University 6]

Another student was equally dismissive:

> [The dashboard] is just background noise now. I study how I study. If I need help, I'll ask. I don't need a score to tell me. [Student B, University 5]

Yet, for others, resignation—not resistance—was the dominant mode of response. Several participants described feeling uneasy about LA but accepted it as inevitable, a symptom of a wider shift towards data-driven HE:

> You know the financial challenges and everything else. Student retention is obviously a significant thing at the minute. So there's a real push to try and use this data to improve student outcomes. [Academic G, University 6]

This sense of inevitability appeared especially strong among newer staff and students. While they occasionally raised ethical or pedagogical concerns, they often framed LA as "just another system" or "something you have to work with." One student commented:

> I don't love it, but it's not going anywhere. You adapt. That's university now I suppose. I think it'll keep growing and maybe get more intelligent. Like, it could personalise suggestions for students based on what we're doing. But I kind of hope it always stays supportive. [Student C, University 5]

This sentiment of powerlessness in the face of creeping datafication in HE was mirrored by one academic who observed:

> Maybe you become numb to the idea of it [big data in HE]…I haven't heard anything bad [from students] about all this kind of stuff, but what am I going to do? What can I do anyway? But from their perspective, I suppose it's a powerlessness because either I sign up to this with everything or I don't go to university. [Academic H, University 6]

Indeed, reflecting on why students are apparently apathetic to LA, one academic highlighted the institutional context as contributing factor:

> Maybe students just don't question things in education when it's in the education space. They're so used to just being, you know, in a school and saying, you know, yes, teacher. [Academic G, University 6]

Importantly, acts of resistance here are not reducible to rejection or failure to engage. Rather, they may represent forms of ethical positioning where stakeholders refuse to align with logics they perceive as reductive, extractive, or dehumanising. While narratives of resignation surfaced more frequently than hopeful alternatives, some participants did articulate alternate futures—visions of LA systems co-designed with students or used in ways that foreground care over categorisation. These moments resonate with Couldry and Mejias's (2019) notion of *data counterflows*—small, situated resistances that contest dominant data logics. Indeed, one academic described adapting LA to fit their teaching philosophy:

> I think there's a lot of it [LA], which is a waste of time, but I am using it as a way of having a conversation or starting a conversation as needed. If that means I can reach the harder to reach students, that's got to be a good thing. [Academic F, University 5]

This use of LA as a dialogical tool—rather than a monitoring device—was positively received by students. Several noted that when staff used LA to open up space for care, rather than enforce compliance, it made them feel seen rather than scrutinised.

> I think it flattens things a bit. Like, lecturers aren't just assuming things—they have some evidence to base conversations on. But it's more support than discipline, in my experience. [Student C, University 5]

Others spoke about how LA could be more useful if it better reflected the diversity of student lives:

> I'd rather have one good study session than ten pointless logins. If analytics is going to be used, it should show more than logins. Maybe let students self-report things—like health issues, work hours, caring stuff. Make the data about real life. [Student A, University 4]

This desire to "humanise the data" was echoed by support staff too:

> I just think we need to stop treating data and analytics as neutral. Data is never just data. We should build in space for students to tell us their context so it's more two-way. [Support Staff A, University 2]

Even at leadership level, there were signs of critical engagement with how LA might evolve. One senior leader spoke about their ambition to use LA in a way that respects student agency:

> [I want] a stronger focus on inclusive analytics—how we support diverse learning journeys without slipping into deficit narratives. And a more open conversation about the ethical boundaries of predictive modelling. [Senior Leader A, University 5]

6.5 Interpretative Fluidity

While the themes above present distinct interpretative categories, many participants expressed shifting, sometimes contradictory, perspectives on LA. The same individuals who viewed LA as a means of support also described its use as coercive or reductive. These interpretative shifts often reflected the context in which LA was encountered—its framing by institutional actors, the transparency of its implementation, or the immediacy of its consequences.

For example, students who appreciated the reassurance of engagement tracking also voiced concern that such monitoring could become punitive. Academics who saw value in identifying 'at-risk' learners simultaneously expressed discomfort about the assumptions embedded in such labels. These oscillations illustrate the interpretative fluidity of LA: it is not experienced as a stable or coherent system, but as a mutable and ambivalent presence in daily academic life.

This fluidity was especially pronounced among those occupying hybrid or marginal roles—such as foundation year students, associate lecturers, or pastoral support staff—whose positions placed them

at the intersection of care and compliance. Their accounts suggest that meaning-making around LA is not only contextual but also deeply shaped by institutional role, perceived agency, and epistemic stance.

6.6 Framing the Complexities of Lived Experience

Across the accounts presented, LA emerges as a multifaceted and emotionally charged presence within participants' academic and professional lives. It is not merely a tool or dashboard—it is experienced as an ambient force: sometimes empowering, sometimes intrusive, and often ambiguous. What begins as a story of nudges, notifications, and predictive flags frequently reveals deeper undercurrents of identity, autonomy, and trust.

Cross-institutionally, three configuration differences stood out: (i) **threshold governance** (adjustable indicators with rationales vs fixed traffic-lights); (ii) **triage design** (human-in-the-loop review vs auto-messaging); and (iii) **outreach tone** (care-first invitations vs audit-first checks). Where the former held, students and staff described support; where the latter held, they described surveillance, pressure to perform to metrics, or box-ticking.

Crucially, the meaning of LA was rarely fixed. Participants moved between conflicting positions—seeing LA as helpful, punitive, banal, or misunderstood, depending on context and role. For example, where students interpreted nudges as supportive prompts or institutional surveillance, staff described ethical disquiet or relational dilemmas in interpreting and acting upon student data. These variations highlight the deeply situated nature of experience and the interpretative flexibility embedded in LA systems.

This analysis also reveals the temporal dimensions of experience. Where earlier engagement with LA was described with optimism or curiosity, later reflections were often marked by fatigue, disenchantment, or critical distance. Resignation, in particular, appeared not as apathy but as an outcome of prolonged uncertainty, blurred ethics, or constrained agency.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that LA does not determine user behaviour, but interacts with it. Where participants felt disempowered or dehumanised, they resisted, ignored, or reluctantly complied. Where they felt respected and involved, they adapted or even embraced LA in cautious, contextualised ways. These responses illustrate how LA is not a finished product, but a contested practice—shaped by values, relationships, and power.

These findings reflect not a single, shared experience of LA, but myriad perspectives shaped by participants' roles, contexts, and values. The themes identified here emerged through careful attention to both commonalities and differences across the dataset. Recognising this diversity is essential—not only to preserve the integrity of individual voices but to challenge any homogenising narratives about how LA 'works' in HE. The multiplicity of interpretations offers a powerful reminder that LA is not experienced in the abstract, but in the everyday practices, pressures, and ethical landscapes of academic life.

A further dimension that surfaced across interviews concerned differential visibility. Students and staff often inhabited the same analytic environment but with uneven sightlines. Indeed, students saw simplified dashboards about their own engagement, while staff—especially those in support or leadership roles—had access to cohort- or institution-level views. This asymmetry shaped perceptions of power and trust—being visible without reciprocal visibility into how or by whom one was seen reinforced feelings of exposure, whereas shared or transparent access fostered a sense of partnership. These layered visibilities illustrate how the apparatus distributes not only data but also interpretive authority—an issue examined further in Chapter 7.

What emerges from these themes is not a binary of acceptance versus rejection, but a continuum of responses shaped by institutional context, individual agency, and ethical climate. Participants do not passively receive LA—they navigate, resist, reimagine, and, at times, resign themselves to its embedded presence. This complexity underscores the necessity of viewing LA as a sociotechnical practice, rather than a fixed system. The nuanced interplay between control, care, and critique explored here provides a critical foundation for the integrative discussion that follows in Chapter 7. These layered visibilities and shifting interpretations set the stage for Chapter 7's integrative analysis, where we place lived experience in direct conversation with sector-level imaginaries.

Chapter 7: Synthesis, Discussion, and Findings

7. Synthesis, Discussion, and Findings

7.1 Overview and analytic stance

This chapter synthesises the two empirical strands—the CDA of sector texts (Chapter 5) and the IPA of multi-actor interviews (Chapter 6)—to address the research questions as outlined. The aim is to show how the promissory narrative of empowerment around LA is constructed, how it travels into institutional arrangements, and how it is enacted, negotiated, and contested by students, academics, professional services staff, and senior leaders in everyday practice. The analysis proceeds from the theoretical position introduced earlier, namely the Foucauldian conception of power as relational, productive, and enacted through discourses and apparatuses rather than simply possessed (Foucault, 1977, 1982). In this sense, LA operates as a governing dispositif—an alignment of concepts, techniques, interfaces, and routines that renders learning visible and actionable, and in so doing invites particular forms of conduct, self-understanding, and intervention.

The following synthesis is presented in four stages. First, I outline how sector texts articulate empowerment (RQ1), situating those articulations within the wider corpus of educational technology discourse surveyed in Chapter 2. Second, drawing on the IPA, I examine how power is perceived and exercised in practice (RQ2/2.1), attending closely to the four themes developed in Chapter 6—empowerment and agency; compliance and the internalisation of surveillance; ethical ambiguities and relational tensions; and resistance, resignation and reimagining LA—and to three practical conditions that repeatedly shaped experience: knowledge, control, and voice. Third, I critically appraise the alignment and dissonance between promise and practice (RQ3) by specifying the "missing middle"—the artefacts, rules-in-use, and governance arrangements where discourse becomes lived reality. Finally, I answer RQ3.1 explicitly by reading the findings through governmentality and subjectification: whether LA reproduces or unsettles existing asymmetries, how it steers conduct, and where counter-conduct is visible.

Two claims anchor the chapter. The first is that LA's 'empowerment' is an institutional design outcome, not a property of the technology itself; it materialises only under particular configurations of knowledge, control, and voice. The second is that the empowerment paradox—where instruments designed to support also classify, normalise, and steer—appears not as an occasional failure but as a patterned feature of LA as a governing apparatus, unless deliberately countered by institutional design.

7.2 What is promised: sector narratives of empowerment (RQ1)

The CDA shows a striking coherence across the corpus of documents analysed: empowerment is promised as visibility (making the 'invisible' visible), as foresight (identifying 'at-risk' trajectories early), and as personalisation (targeted support at scale). LA is positioned as a neutral, rational, and inevitable response to the availability of data, with benefits distributed across students (self-awareness and self-regulation), academic staff (data-informed pedagogy and timely intervention), and institutions (quality enhancement, accountability, and reputational assurance). This rhetorical structure closely mirrors the discursive repertoire traced in Chapter 2: the technology-as-tool metaphor that presents systems as apolitical means to agreed ends (Ferreira and Lemgruber, 2018; Matthews, 2021), the solutionist tone that renders digital change commonsensical (Selwyn, 2013, 2016, 2021), and a lexicon of measurement ('evidence-based', 'real-time', 'early warning', 'impact') that normalises quantified ways of knowing learning (Williamson, 2016, 2018; Knox, Williamson and Bayne, 2020).

Within this grammar, empowerment is imagined as an effect *of metric visibility*: dashboards, indicators, thresholds, and nudges are framed as transparency devices that surface effort, progress, and risk. Wintrup (2017) notes that traffic lights and risk bands are often presented as commonsense representations of learning, while Beer's (2016) account of metric power helps explain how indicators become not just descriptions but instruments that structure what organisations notice and act upon. Sector texts also weave in an unmistakable political–economic undercurrent. Indeed, as Chapter 2 highlights, narratives of assetisation and re-infrastructuring recast LA outputs as institutional assets and position LA platforms as integral to HE technical apparatus, rather than as optional add-ons (Komljenovic, 2021; Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024; Williamson, 2025; Williamson *et al.*, 2025). Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, these texts establish a regime of truth (see Foucault, 1977) in which quantified visibility is the authorised basis for both care (support) and control (assurance), and 'empowerment' functions as a governing rationality that legitimates intervention and aligns conduct with institutional objectives.

The CDA also makes visible the porosity of policy and commercial genres. The same phrasings—'personalisation at scale', 'data-empowered decision-making', 'early warning'—recur across the sectoral policy ecosystem (Williamson, 2016). This intertextual circulation confirms the literature's contention that sector imaginaries are co-produced across public and private actors (Decuypere, Grimaldi and Landri, 2021; McGarr and Johnston, 2021), and helps explain why empowerment is often pre-authorised before any local evidence of benefit is established. As a consequence, the promise

of empowerment is not merely descriptive but constitutive: it sets the horizon within which LA appears necessary, reasonable, and good—narrowing the field of plausible alternatives, and priming decision-makers to treat adoption as due diligence rather than a discretionary choice.

7.3 How power is perceived and exercised in practice (RQ2 and RQ2.1)

The IPA foregrounds the lived ambiguities of LA. Indeed, across institutions and roles, participants spoke of genuine benefits—new forms of awareness, quicker referrals, better-framed conversations—alongside anxiety about constant visibility, role strain, classification risks, and the creeping substitution of metrics for judgement. The four themes reported in Chapter 6 structure the discussion here; across them, the three practical conditions—knowledge, control, and voice—operate as decisive inflection points.

7.3.1 Empowerment and agency

Participants frequently described moments where LA enabled action. Students appreciated alerts that coincided with difficult weeks and welcomed tutoring conversations based on the same, visible records of their study activity. Academics reported that dashboards made particular patterns easier to see, enabling timelier and more targeted check-ins with students whose engagement had dipped. Professional services staff valued the ability to triage and prioritise, especially at scale. These accounts parallel the conditional trust documented elsewhere whereby students and staff expressed openness to analytics where purposes were clear, data stayed close to academic relationships, and support followed visibility (Jones *et al.*, 2020; West *et al.*, 2020; Herodotou *et al.*, 2023).

Notwithstanding, empowerment here was *relational* rather than purely informational. Students felt 'noticed' when outreach conveyed care, and academics felt 'backed' when systems supported pastoral aims without scripting them. In Foucauldian terms, these are moments when the apparatus's prompts align with actors' purposes and priorities. In this sense, the invitation to self-manage is taken up as agency rather than submission because it is situated, intelligible, and open to negotiation. The interview evidence therefore tempers blanket scepticism and points to a more complex picture. Indeed, in some settings, LA widens the perceived room for manoeuvre—provided local arrangements respect professional judgement and student autonomy. Consequently, whether LA operates as support or constraint turns on the local power–knowledge configuration: the apparatus functions as resource or a restraint depending on how visibility, contestation, and discretion are organised.

7.3.2 Compliance and the internalisation of surveillance

The dashboards, risk scores and activity logs that supported tutoring also produced a sense of surveillance: several students described background anxiety about being constantly visible and not knowing how classifications were generated. Being flagged 'at risk' narrowed perceived options—one student considered dropping a demanding module to avoid another 'red' status—echoing work on self-fulfilling prophecies and self-monitoring (Ifenthaler and Schumacher, 2016; Roberts *et al.*, 2016; Schumacher and Ifenthaler, 2018; Gray *et al.*, 2021). Academics likewise reported moments when centrally set thresholds and scripted responses overrode contextual knowledge. In some departments, weekly auto-generated alert lists required staff to contact every flagged student, even when their qualitative judgement suggested the flag was misplaced; over time, outreach shifted from a pedagogical conversation to a compliance task. Indeed, several described teaching to the metric—shaping activities to drive dashboard indicators—rather than to learning outcomes, a pattern that resonates with Beer's (2016) analysis of metrics reorganising attention and with Knox *et al.'s* (2020) 'machine behaviourism', where behavioural traces become proxies for learning itself.

Opacity amplified these dynamics. In particular, very few participants knew how features were combined or why particular thresholds were set, making it difficult to contest outcomes or explain them to students. As Knox (2017) argues, when the workings of a system are hidden, its conclusions still carry consequences: interpretive authority sits with those who design and administer it, while others are left reacting to traffic lights and scores they cannot probe or materially challenge. In that setting, 'empowerment' shrinks from informed agency to compliance with prompts.

Read through a Foucauldian lens, this coupling of high visibility and low legibility organises conduct of conduct (see Foucault, 1982): dashboards and thresholds define what counts as normal and reasonable, prompting students and staff to align themselves with the indicators and—under these conditions,—'empowerment' is enacted as rule-guided self-regulation rather than as genuinely informed agency.

7.3.3 Ethical ambiguities and relational tensions

Participants framed LA as ethically ambivalent. Indeed, many valued prompts and early warnings where the tone of contact preserved dignity and choice; the same mechanism felt suspect when outreach resembled monitoring or when escalation occurred without consent. Among academics, the pastoral aspiration to help students sat uncomfortably alongside a sense that LA rendered them auditable. Alongside this, comparative dashboards on retention, attainment, or flagged students risked

becoming proxies for teaching quality, thereby reversing the gaze onto staff, as Jones (2019) also highlights. These tensions mirror the governance logics described in Chapter 2 in that continuation targets and student-success agendas can pull analytics toward institutional accountability even as the rhetoric emphasises student empowerment (Mandernach, 2015; Tomlinson, Enders and Naidoo, 2020; Williamson, Bayne and Shay, 2020).

In Foucauldian terms, LA reorders relations by formatting roles. In this sense, students are invited to become self-monitoring subjects; academics are invited to become data-led professionals whose discretion is exercised within the parameters set by dashboards and scripts; professional services become brokers of visibility whose decisions about thresholds, colour semantics, and escalation routes carry significant normative weight. In this sense, their role aligns with what Lipsky (1980) terms 'street-level bureaucrats'—actors who translate organisational policies into everyday practice through discretionary judgement under conditions of constraint and ambiguity. Their interpretive and affective labour mediates how institutional rationalities are enacted, often softening or re-shaping rules to fit the nuances of individual cases. Participants recognised care in these arrangements, but they also recognised governmentality—a mode of governance enacted precisely through such frontline discretion and norm translation—steering at a distance via norms and scripts.

7.3.4 Resistance, resignation and reimagining LA

Alongside accommodation, the IPA revealed subtle counter-conduct. Some academics bracketed thresholds and triggers purely as 'conversation starters' rather than verdicts, explicitly telling students that logs are limited and context matters. Some students described ignoring alerts if they felt misaligned with their situation, or using dashboards selectively (e.g., as reminders rather than performance measures).

In several institutions, professional services staff with administrative access to the LA platforms moved beyond default vendor settings. Where that capability existed (it was not universal), they re-tuned alert thresholds to reduce false positives—e.g., shifting from daily counts to rolling weekly averages, suppressing flags during assessment peaks, excluding 'login-only' clicks, and weighting substantive events (submissions, forum posts) over ambient activity. They also added human-in-the-loop checks so alerts queued to tutors for review before any message was sent, with suppression lists for students on approved leave or already in contact with student support. In parallel, they expanded the outreach metadata shown to staff (reason for flag, recent trend, assessment calendar context, last contact, preferred channel, notes), and fed this into editable templates so messages referenced the student's actual situation and offered genuine options rather than a single script. Staff reported fewer

spurious alerts, more targeted conversations, and higher student receptivity. These micro-configurations show how, where permissions and expertise allow, the apparatus can be tuned to shift some interpretive authority to frontline practitioners and make visibility actionable; where such control is absent, defaults persist, and the disciplinary perception is harder to displace.

Notwithstanding, participants also described a quieter, pragmatic stance—treating the LA system as 'here to stay' and something to be worked around rather than openly contested. Pushing back felt futile or risky because platforms had already been procured and embedded into pedagogic and governance cycles; escalation routes were opaque; and metrics were entangled with auditing and statutory reporting, so resistance could be read as opposition to accountability. In practice this produced differentiated responses by role. Some students practised selective compliance (e.g., modulating logins or clicks to avoid flags). Lecturers and tutors engaged in tactical reinterpretation, reading risk scores as soft prompts to be weighed against professional judgement rather than as instructions. Professional services staff, particularly those responsible for triage and case management, at times exercised quiet refusal—down-prioritising low-credibility alerts or maintaining parallel, non-dashboard forms of pastoral support. Read through a Foucauldian lens, these are forms of counter-conduct; indeed, people are neither wholly constrained nor fully in control but negotiate the invitations the apparatus makes by taking them up, bending them, or sidestepping them. In this way, the 'data-empowered' role is at times inhabited, at times refused, and at times re-signified as a starting point for dialogue rather than a command (see Jarke and Breiter, 2019; Tsai, Perrotta and Gašević, 2020; Jarke and Macgilchrist, 2021).

7.3.5 Perceived benefits and drawbacks by stakeholders (RQ2.1)

Across the dataset, students tended to value recognition and direction but worried about misclassification, secondary uses of data, and pressure to align with the 'engaged' profile—concerns widely reported elsewhere (Roberts *et al.*, 2016; West *et al.*, 2020; Herodotou *et al.*, 2023). Academics valued triage and a shared language for engagement, yet noted role conflict when scripts displaced judgement or when dashboards were used in staff performance conversations, echoing Tsai *et al.'s* (2020) account of tensions between enhancement and autonomy. Professional services and senior leaders valued cohort foresight and resource targeting but acknowledged implementation risks and reputational exposure from false positives/negatives, connecting with the political–economic observations about assetisation and dependency (Komljenovic, 2021; Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024).

Nevertheless, a cross-cutting equity concern was evident. Participants sensed that risk labels and visibility might adhere unevenly; this aligns with studies showing demographic variation in trust,

consent, and participation (Lim *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2022) and with warnings that pathologising labels can attach disproportionately (Parkes *et al.*, 2020). Prinsloo and Slade's (2017) 'data gift' framing helps interpret why some groups might withhold consent or disengage, particularly where the perceived exchange is historically situated and rational for those with reasons to distrust surveillance. Without explicit attention, LA risks reproducing blind spots and disproportionate impacts on particular groups.

7.4 Alignment and dissonance: how discourse becomes practice (RQ3)

This synthesis centres on what I term the *missing middle*—the chain that links promissory narratives to everyday arrangements—by tracing how sector claims are rendered operational as artefacts and rules-in-use, and how these, in turn, shape experience. The CDA showed that empowerment is not merely *promised through measurement* but pre-authorised by a solutionist and technocratic register that frames LA as neutral, inevitable and "evidence-based," and by intertextual tropes—*personalisation at scale*, *early warning*, *data-empowered decision-making*—that circulate across policy, advisory and vendor texts while assigning subject positions (e.g., the *at-risk student*, the *data-enabled tutor*). Measurement then crystallises these promises into dashboards, thresholds and indicators. The IPA indicated that when empowerment is felt, it is conditional and often fragile rather than given, depending on how these artefacts and rules are configured in local practice.

A key move in this chain is *translation*. Sector keywords—*personalisation at scale*, *evidence-based insight*, *early warning*—are taken up locally as procurement rationales and then expressed in design defaults (which actions count as 'engagement', how they are visualised, which comparisons are shown by default). In Foucauldian terms, these steps enact governmentality by specifying what becomes visible and actionable; they also invite particular subject positions (the *at-risk student*, the *data-savvy tutor*) that people may take up, negotiate or resist (Foucault, 1982; Williamson, 2016; Matthews, 2021). Consequently, discourse becomes practice not only in what is said but in what is *shown* and what must be *done*.

At the level of the LA artefacts themselves, dashboards legitimise a grammar of measurement. Indeed, by elevating digital traces over more tacit forms of study, they stabilise a partial view of learning while offering convenient summaries. Participants treated these summaries as useful wayfinding devices when they were intelligible and open to discussion, echoing Wintrup's (2017) point that visual encodings can function as *transparency devices* rather than verdicts. Yet the same logics can elicit optimisation toward what the platform can see, confirming Beer's (2016) argument that metrics reorient attention and action. This is the hinge on which alignment or dissonance turns: the artefact

as heuristic (to support judgement) versus the artefact as proxy decision-maker (that pre-empts it). Indeed, some students described feeling they had to *perform* online presence to make their studying visible. One academic treated the dashboard as a secondary prompt, prioritising listening and coaching over click-count readings of 'engagement'. Equally, a member of professional services added that alert workflows could drift into box-ticking—sending templated emails because a flag appeared, even when the flag looked questionable.

Rules-in-use mediate this hinge. For instance, when LA engagement cut-offs are visible and adjustable at the point of use—with the rule itself shown (e.g., 'Amber = bottom 25% for two weeks'), a plain-language rationale provided, who set it identified, the next review date stated, and a simple way to add context or challenge a flag—and when staff can trial and tune those cut-offs against cohort patterns, they work as signposts for triage and support. Conversely, when thresholds are treated as fixed, opaque traffic lights, they read as *verdicts*. Similarly, outreach protocols feel supportive when messages invite conversation, acknowledge uncertainty, and allow tailoring of tone and timing; they feel disciplinary when templates presume fault and turn contact into a compliance exercise. Seen through Macgilchrist's (2019) account of 'cruel optimism', the promise of help reorients conduct toward meeting metrics, so people self-manage to satisfy the dashboard rather than address the conditions that produced the risk.

These operational layers are entangled with political–economic dependencies. Indeed, once dashboards are woven into monitoring procedures, student-success schemes or regulatory compliance activities, they acquire inertia and path dependency—where past decisions constrain future options—and begin to function as governance devices in their own right. This helps explain why empowerment talk can default to managerial visibility unless deliberately counter-balanced, a pattern consistent with analyses of assetisation and platform dependency in HE (Komljenovic, 2021; Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024; Williamson *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, stepping back is not simply a technical choice but a political one, because LA infrastructures are now tightly coupled to numeric accountability regimes such as institutional audits and key performance indicators (KPIs).

Taken together, the alignment between promise and practice occurs where three conditions are built into the local configuration of LA. First, LA artefacts are explainable and contestable (knowledge): people can see what counts as evidence, how conclusions are reached, and have credible ways to challenge them. Second, rules-in-use preserve discretion and choice (control): thresholds guide rather than decide, messages invite rather than instruct, and access is proportionate to purpose. Third, routines are care-first rather than audit-first (voice in shaping and enacting practice): support is offered as a partnership, not audit. Dissonance appears when the inverse holds. In other words, when

measures are treated as realities, thresholds are rigid, automated scripts/nudges prescriptive, and governance unilateral. Whilst the literature anticipates these patterns (Beer, 2016; Wintrup, 2017; Macgilchrist, 2019; Knox, Williamson and Bayne, 2020), the present findings show how they are assembled locally and how they are experienced in practice.

Viewed through the Foucauldian lens, this *missing middle* shows LA operating as a governing arrangement whose effects are configured by institutional design rather than fixed by technology. Where visibility, contestation and discretion are organised to enlarge the scope for informed action, empowerment is experienced as support; where they are organised to enforce alignment with modelled norms, empowerment contracts into compliance. Thus, discourse becomes practice through the everyday coupling of narratives, artefacts and rules, and it is at this coupling—rather than in abstract claims—that empowerment is either realised or undone.

7.5 Power, governmentality and subjectification in the data (RQ3.1)

RQ3.1 asks whether LA reproduces or unsettles existing asymmetries of power in HE. Read through the Foucauldian lens, the combined findings indicate that LA tends to reproduce asymmetries by installing new forms of visibility and scripted action that align conduct with institutional priorities; however, those effects are not technologically fixed. Where knowledge, control, and voice are extended, the same apparatus can modulate relations—supporting shared judgement and opening space for counter-conduct (Foucault, 1982).

The first dynamic that emerges is disciplinary visibility. Students described adjusting routines to avoid 'red' scoring within dashboards, and several shared how being flagged altered self-understanding and perception (i.e., feelings of being behind or off-task even where their offline study was substantial and within expectations). Academics described becoming visible to managers, as retention dashboards and response-time reports travelled upward, with analytics used as shorthand for diligence. Alongside this, professional services similarly felt seen through management reports on outreach volumes and closure rates. In Foucauldian terms, these are not mere surveillance effects; they are *productive* in that they help constitute the very subjects they purport to describe—the 'at-risk' student, the 'data-responsive' tutor, the 'efficient' professional service team. This is consonant with literature showing how metric visibility shapes attention and action (see Beer, 2016) and how LA dashboard visualisations can be taken as definitive judgements unless explicitly framed otherwise (Wintrup, 2017). Crucially, this visibility is one-way: students rarely have reciprocal access to see who views their data, at what granularity, or for

what purpose, whereas staff—particularly those in support or leadership roles—often access cohort- or programme-level overviews unavailable to students. The effect, therefore, is asymmetrical—those who are most visible in LA dashboards (students and frontline academic staff) often have the least influence over how visibility is configured or interpreted.

The second dynamic concerns governmentality enacted through rules and routines. Engagement cut-offs, automated nudges, and standard email templates steer behaviour indirectly by defining what counts as 'normal' participation and prescribing what happens when someone falls outside it. Students are encouraged—and at times pressured—to adopt platform-friendly habits (log in more often, submit early, reply quickly). Added to this, academics are expected to build regular dashboard cycles into pastoral work—e.g., review flags, contact red/amber students, and record actions—while professional services staff are tasked with clearing alert queues and evidencing throughput. Whilst the language of empowerment frames these activities as care, the *choice architecture*—the set of options the system makes most salient and easiest to enact—tightens as defaults solidify into obligations, echoing analyses of efficiency, measurability and accountability in HE data infrastructures (Lawson, 2011; Selwyn, 2014, 2021). Crucially, the IPA showed that the ratio of steering to support is set locally. Indeed, where thresholds were explainable and revisable, where uncertainty was acknowledged in scripts, and where discretion was preserved, participants experienced guidance; where cut-offs were opaque and outreach templated to prove diligence, they experienced rule-guided self-regulation. In other words, the same techniques can either open or constrict action depending on how they are configured and authorised.

The third dynamic concerns subjectification and counter-conduct. Subjection was never complete; indeed, students sometimes treated alerts as reminders rather than verdicts or ignored flags that clashed with context; academics explicitly re-framed dashboards as conversation starters, telling students what the system could and could not see; professional services staff—with administrative access—quietly re-tuned alert rules (e.g., weighting substantive events over ambient clicks, suppressing peak-assessment noise) and inserted human checks before messages were sent. These practices do not abolish the apparatus, but they bend it, redistributing interpretive authority toward those who live with its consequences. They exemplify the everyday counter-conduct through which people negotiate the system's prompts and expectations—accepting some, sidestepping others, and reframing still others as starting points for dialogue (Foucault, 1982; see also Jarke and Breiter, 2019; Tsai, Perrotta and Gašević, 2020; Jarke and Macgilchrist, 2021). Notwithstanding, that negotiation is unevenly available, and only some actors could alter thresholds and/or templates, and escalation routes for contesting classifications were often unclear. To that end, while counter-conduct was visible, its distribution itself reflected existing hierarchies.

Taken together, the pattern is asymmetrical but contingent, and in default configurations, LA tends to reinforce managerial visibility and student responsibilisation—the centre sees more, the periphery adapts more—mirroring the literature's cautions about the coupling of LA with audit and performance regimes (Tomlinson, Enders and Naidoo, 2020; Williamson, Bayne and Shay, 2020). Nevertheless, the data also show designable points of leverage. Indeed, when institutions render rules legible (what counts, who set it, why), provide credible channels to contest inferences, preserve discretion for frontline judgement, and include students and staff in governance, LA can re-configure relations toward partnership rather than policing. This is consistent with work that documents conditional trust when purposes are clear and data stay close to educational (Jones *et al.*, 2020; West *et al.*, 2020; Herodotou *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, power is patterned by equity. Participants worried that risk labels and visibility might adhere unevenly across groups and disciplines—a concern aligned with findings of demographic variation in trust and consent and with warnings about pathologising labels (Parkes *et al.*, 2020; Lim *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2022). In Foucauldian terms, therefore, those distributions matter because they decide whose conduct is most governed by the apparatus and who has practical means to negotiate it. Where knowledge, control, and voice are thin, empowerment contracts into compliance; where they are thickened, the same techniques can be re-purposed as shared tools. RQ3.1 is therefore answered in qualified terms: LA, as currently assembled, more often reproduces existing asymmetries, but it also contains levers—at the level of artefacts, rules and governance—through which institutions can redistribute interpretive authority and make 'empowerment' something enacted with users rather than for them.

7.6 Cross-case synthesis: when empowerment holds

Across sites, empowerment moved from rhetoric to lived experience when three conditions coalesced. Knowledge mattered first; indeed, participants described markedly different atmospheres where institutions adopted layered transparency: plain-language summaries of data scope and purposes, high-level accounts of how features combine, who sees what, how long labels persist, and what a 'red' score actually means. Transparency of this kind—rather than dense policy alone—reduced background anxiety, enabled purposive engagement, and reframed alerts as shared tools rather than managerial instruments. These accounts echo survey findings that trust hinges on knowing what is collected and why, and on minimising secondary uses (Slade, Prinsloo and Khalil, 2019; West *et al.*, 2020; Herodotou *et al.*, 2023)

Control mattered next. Tangible levers—such as opt-in/opt-out for non-essential analytics, granular access controls, programme-level threshold tuning, and routes to correct or contest classifications—shifted participants from feeling done-to, toward feeling addressed as agents. Where such levers were present, academics reframed thresholds as heuristics rather than mandates, and students treated dashboards as resources rather than judgements. Where absent, even well-intended outreach felt compulsory, confirming Tsai, Perrotta and Gašević's (2020) caution that claims of empowerment can coincide with diminished autonomy.

Finally, voice mattered most in sustaining change. Indeed, where students and staff sat on oversight groups with real authority over configuration (e.g., thresholds, colour semantics, escalation routes) and policy (e.g., access matrices, retention of flags), LA was experienced as co-authored. Participants described learning how indicators were assembled, pushing back on misleading encodings, and re-shaping scripts to foreground invitation and context. Co-governance of this kind converts the apparatus from a one-way address into a site of dialogue, answering directly Slade and Prinsloo's (2013, 2014) early calls to include student voice and extending later observations that participatory governance reduces paternalism (Whitelock-Wainwright *et al.*, 2021). As a consequence, empowerment was experienced where knowledge, control, and voice formed a mutually reinforcing ecology; remove any one element and LA slid back toward prescriptive visibility.

7.7 Positioning the findings within—and against—the literature

The synthesis both corroborates and complicates the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It corroborates the observation that LA discourse is saturated with a measurement grammar that naturalises quantified ways of seeing learning (Williamson, 2016; Knox, Williamson and Bayne, 2020), and that the narrative of educational technology is frequently presented as neutral and inevitable (Selwyn, 2013, 2016, 2021; Matthews, 2021; Clark, 2023). Yet this also invites reflection on what 'learning' itself has come to signify within such a regime. When activity traces and outcome metrics are privileged as the visible signs of learning, more relational, affective, and interpretative forms of intellectual labour risk being marginalised. This hierarchy of value is not new: it mirrors long-standing institutional patterns in which measurable, instrumental forms of knowledge—often aligned with employability discourses—are foregrounded, while slower, reflexive, or critical modes of learning associated with the arts, humanities and social sciences are increasingly devalued (Biesta, 2009). If universities valorise metrics, LA will inevitably thrive, because it reflects and amplifies that same epistemic preference. The challenge, then, is not only to question how LA measures learning, but what kinds of learning HE continues to value

and sustain. Alongside this, it also corroborates lived experience studies recording conditional trust, low awareness, and nudge fatigue (Ifenthaler and Schumacher, 2016; Roberts *et al.*, 2016; West *et al.*, 2020; Herodotou *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, the IPA's accounts of students both welcoming support and fearing misclassification sit squarely within this empirical pattern.

Notwithstanding, the findings eschew binary framings by showing how the same participants oscillate between empowerment and constraint depending on local arrangements. Rather than treat empowerment as either emancipatory or disciplinary, the analysis demonstrates that it is contingent and reversible: it stabilises into support only when knowledge, control, and voice are thickened, and it thins into discipline when they are not. This provides a more granular explanation for the ambivalence that the literature often reports but rarely specifies at the level of LA artefacts, rules and routines. The findings also extend political–economic discussions by showing how valuation stories and platform logics do not simply shape procurement decisions abstractly; they materialise as dependency and inertia in everyday practice, making it difficult for institutions to recalibrate even when evidence is mixed (Komljenovic, 2021; Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024; Williamson, 2025).

Finally, this study addresses directly the scope, specificity, and contextualisation gaps identified in the literature review. Indeed, by pairing the CDA (sector imaginaries) with IPA (multi-actor lived accounts), and continually specifying the missing middle (dashboards, indicators, thresholds, escalation scripts; access matrices; oversight forums), the analysis connects discourse to practice in a way that single-institution, single-actor or decontextualised studies struggle to do. This methodological coupling also advances the Foucauldian conversation beyond abstract critique by documenting concrete points of reconfiguration—the mechanisms through which governmentality can be moderated and subjectification negotiated.

7.8 Implications for governance, design and assurance

The implications do not require abandoning LA; they require reconfiguring how LA is governed. First, governance should be co-authored. Standing oversight groups with student, academic, and professional services representation should hold real authority over configuration and policy decisions, publishing rationales for thresholds, encodings, and escalation routes. This does not eliminate governmentality; it makes it answerable and revisable. Second, transparency should be layered and intelligible. Plain-language disclosures about data scope, purposes, high-level feature logic, access matrices, and consequences of flags should be routinely available in the same spaces where dashboards and alerts are encountered. Doing so reframes LA as a shared instrument and reduces the background anxiety that fuels self-surveillance.

Third, configuration should treat thresholds as heuristics under uncertainty, not determinations. Programme-level tuning, uncertainty-aware visual encodings, and easy-to-use mechanisms to correct classifications can preserve the usefulness of triage while protecting against coercion. Outreach should be care-first: scripts as prompts rather than prescriptions, with space for context and consent. These design moves reflect the literature's concerns about 'machine behaviourism' and metric power (Beer, 2016; Knox, Williamson and Bayne, 2020) but translate them into operational cues.

Fourth, institutions should invest in interpretive capacity. Training that foregrounds uncertainty, bias, and the limits of data, alongside time to follow up relationally, helps prevent the outsourcing of pastoral care to LA dashboards. Without this capacity, even well-intentioned systems will be experienced as rote compliance. Finally, equity should be treated as a design and governance constraint, not a downstream evaluation. Monitoring participation, consent patterns, and label distributions, and adjusting features and thresholds in dialogue with affected groups, can mitigate the reproduction of blind spots documented in emerging studies (Parkes *et al.*, 2020; Lim *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2022). In each case, the aim is not to make LA apolitical but to politicise it responsibly: to acknowledge its governing force and to distribute that force more fairly.

These design and governance recommendations address the technical and organisational dimensions of LA, yet a broader cultural question remains. The challenges observed here are not unique to LA—they reflect a deeper managerial orientation within HE that privileges measurable form over relational substance. In this sense, LA simply makes visible what institutions already value: efficiency, performance, and evidential compliance. If the purpose of HE is to cultivate learning as a relational, dialogic, and ethical practice, then the counterbalance lies not only in redesigning LA dashboards but in revaluing the human work of teaching, care, and collegiality that such systems too often obscure. Efforts to develop relational pedagogies and relational leadership (see Nixon, 2011; Gravett, 2023; Hickey and Riddle, 2024) offer potential avenues for shifting focus from metrics to meaning—recognising that learning, in its fullest sense, is co-constructed across people, materialities, and technologies. Although this study focuses on the UK context, similar tensions are evident globally as HEIs converge on platformised, data-driven governance models (Williamson & Komljenovic, 2021). Embedding relational and care-based practices within these infrastructures is therefore essential if the promise of empowerment is to translate into genuinely humanised and sustainable forms of learning.

7.9 Answering the research questions

The findings allow explicit answers to each research question. **RQ1**: Sector texts construct empowerment through a technocratic grammar of measurement and inevitability, circulating across

public and private genres and establishing a regime of truth in which LA appears self-evidently beneficial. **RQ2 and RQ2.1**: Stakeholders perceive power as situated and ambivalent. Benefits cluster around awareness, recognition and triage; drawbacks around visibility anxiety, misclassification, prescriptive scripts and managerial gaze. These perceptions vary systematically with three practical conditions—knowledge, control, and voice—that shape whether LA is felt as support or as discipline. **RQ3**: Alignment between promise and experience is most evident where transparency is layered and intelligible, classifications are contestable, scripts are adaptable, and users co-govern configuration and policy; dissonance dominates where measurement is reified and governance unilateral. **RQ3.1**: LA tends by default to reproduce asymmetries by centralising interpretive authority and inciting self-discipline, but redesigned governance and configuration can redistribute power by sharing the gaze, opening scripts to judgement, and making classifications contestable—evidence of counter-conduct within a governing apparatus rather than outside it.

7.10 Contribution to knowledge

The chapter contributes conceptually, empirically and methodologically. Conceptually, it offers an empirically grounded specification of the empowerment paradox in LA, showing how empowerment claims are made discursively, materialised as artefacts and rules, and felt in practice, and naming the conditions—knowledge, control, and voice—under which the paradox tilts toward support rather than discipline. Empirically, it provides multi-actor, multi-institution evidence that connects sector imaginaries to the "missing middle" of configuration and governance and to the lived experiences of students and staff, addressing the scope, specificity and contextualisation gaps identified in the review. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of combining CDA and IPA to trace how regimes of truth are enacted and negotiated in practice; this approach can be replicated across institutions and over time to compare how different configurations modulate governmentality.

In sum, LA's promise of empowerment in UK HE is not illusory, but neither is it assured. It is contingent on institutional decisions about what is made visible, who may interpret it, and how scripts invite or constrain action. When those decisions distribute knowledge, control, and voice, LA can be experienced as dialogic care; when they do not, the same instruments will be felt as disciplinary visibility under a language of support. The task, then, is less to decide whether to use LA and more to decide how to govern the apparatus we already have.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

8. Conclusions

This thesis set out to examine how the promissory narrative of empowerment surrounding LA in UK HE is constructed in sector discourse and how it is enacted, negotiated, and felt in everyday institutional practice. I brought together a CDA of policy, advisory, and vendor texts with an IPA of multi-actor interviews across several institutions, read through a Foucauldian lens of power as relational, productive, and enacted through discourse and apparatuses (Foucault, 1982). Throughout, I have treated LA not as a neutral tool but as a governing arrangement—an assemblage of ideas, indicators, interfaces, and routines—that renders learning visible and actionable, inviting particular forms of conduct, self-understanding, and intervention.

The synthesis in Chapter 7 demonstrates two overarching insights that shape the conclusions that follow. First, LA's 'empowerment' is an institutional design outcome, not a property of the technology itself; it materialises only under particular configurations of knowledge (explainability and contestability), control (proportionate visibility and discretion), and voice (participation in rules and oversight). Second, the empowerment paradox—where instruments introduced as support also classify, normalise and steer—appears as a systemic feature of LA unless deliberately counter-balanced by institutional design. The remainder of this chapter answers the research questions directly, articulates the theoretical and practical contributions, and reflects on limitations, reflexivity, and options for future research.

8.1 Direct answers to the research questions

Building on the synthesised answers outlined in Chapter 7.9, the following section restates those answers in fuller thesis-wide terms to signal their contribution to the overall argument.

RQ1: What are the promissory narratives surrounding LA, and how are these narratives articulated across UK HE sector texts? In what ways do these texts construct problems, solutions, and subject positions?

The CDA shows a coherent promissory register in which multiple deficits are problematised at once: the invisibility of engagement and progress; fragmented, slow data practices; uneven academic support and variable teaching quality; limited capacity to personalise at scale; thin evidence for decisions; exposure to regulatory and reputational risk (continuation, attendance, differential outcomes, wellbeing); and competitive and cost pressures. Across the corpus, the solution is consistently positioned as quantified visibility delivered through integrated data infrastructures, dashboards,

thresholds, early warning, and nudging, accompanied by new subject positions—the 'at-risk student' who must self-manage, the 'data-enabled academic' who acts on indicators, and the 'assured institution' that demonstrates value through metrics.

The repertoire is solutionist and technocratic, presenting LA as neutral and inevitable while legitimising measurement as the authorised basis for both care and control. Alternative ways of knowing—professional judgement and contextual understanding, including learning not legible to the platform—are marginalised as inefficient or unreliable.

Political–economic notes surface implicitly: analytics outputs are recast as institutional assets and platform services as infrastructural necessities, further narrowing the space of plausible choices. In Foucauldian terms, this discourse establishes a regime of truth around quantification and an anticipatory rationality of risk, pre-authorising intervention and delimiting what counts as reasonable action. By defining what must be seen and what must follow, it renders particular ways of governing students and staff both thinkable and necessary.

RQ2: How do stakeholders—including students, academics, professional services staff, and senior leaders—perceive the ways in which LA shape the distribution and experience of power within HE?

Across roles, power was experienced as visibility coupled with obligation, organised by who defines the rules, who can see whom, and who must act. Students generally welcomed recognition and direction when contact felt dialogic, yet many described a background pressure to perform to indicators and little insight into how labels were produced or how to contest them; empowerment was felt when explanations, options, and routes to challenge were available, and as surveillance when traffic-light judgements arrived without context.

Academics valued LA for triage and shared language but reported role strain where centrally set thresholds and templated outreach displaced professional judgement or doubled as performance scrutiny; in those moments, influence seemed to migrate upward to "system owners," leaving staff to operationalise decisions made elsewhere.

Professional services staff perceived themselves as brokers of visibility: where they had configuration rights, they exercised meaningful power by tuning thresholds, sequencing alerts, and shaping message tone; where they did not, they became conduits for defaults, while being measured in turn through throughput and compliance metrics.

Senior leaders tended to view LA as an instrument for assurance and resource targeting, reading dashboards as legitimate optics on risk and progress; this vantage point increased strategic control but could distance decision-makers from the situated ambiguities felt at the front line.

Taken together, stakeholders perceived power as concentrated with those who design and administer the apparatus (platform vendors, analytics teams, policy owners), diffused downward as expectations of self-management, and variably buffered—or intensified—locally by the discretion afforded to practitioners. Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, LA reconfigures the conduct of conduct: when knowledge (explainability and transparency), control (proportionate access and real discretion), and voice (participation in rule-setting and review) are present, visibility functions as support; when they are thin, visibility becomes a channel for normalisation and compliance.

RQ2.1: What benefits and drawbacks do different stakeholder groups perceive in the use of LA, and how do these map onto conditions of knowledge (clarity about collection, purpose, and consequence), control (influence over visibility and action), and voice (participation in governance)?

Students reported benefits when knowledge conditions were strong—clear explanations of what was collected, why flags appeared, and what options followed—because visibility then translated into timely feedback, a sense of being noticed, and concrete next steps. Drawbacks surfaced when legibility was low (opaque thresholds, unexplained labels) and control was thin (no way to correct data or mute irrelevant alerts), producing anxiety, pressure to 'perform to the dashboard', and occasional self-limiting choices to avoid 'red' status.

Academics valued cohort triage, shared language for engagement, and quicker referrals where control included discretion to tune or override thresholds and tailor outreach; the same tools were experienced as constraining when scripts were mandatory, access was broad and upwardly visible, and analytics seeped into performance conversations—conditions where voice in setting rules had been minimal.

Professional services staff highlighted efficiency gains (prioritising cases, coordinating care) when they possessed configuration rights—practical control—and were involved in governance forums—meaningful voice—to adjust cut-offs, suppress false positives, and refine templates; without these, they became conduits for defaults and bore compliance burdens.

Senior leaders pointed to benefits in assurance, targeting resources, and surfacing institutional risk where knowledge arrived as robust, explainable indicators and voice mechanisms (steering groups,

periodic reviews) kept uses proportionate; drawbacks emerged when metrics hardened into proxies for quality, narrowing local discretion and crowding out contextual judgement.

Across groups, perceived value tracks the three conditions: high knowledge (explainability), real control (discretion and proportionate access), and enacted voice (co-design and review) yield empowerment as support; weak conditions flip the balance toward surveillance, misclassification, and audit-first routines.

RQ3: How do stakeholders' lived experiences of LA align with or diverge from the promises attributed to its functionality and impact within HE settings, and under what organisational arrangements are these alignments most evident?

Alignment is strongest where LA is implemented as a *supportive* apparatus rather than a judging one. In practice that means: dashboards that are explainable and contestable (clear data scopes, visible rules for cut-offs, plain-language rationales, and easy ways to add context or challenge a flag); thresholds used as heuristics (guides for triage, not fixed verdicts), with human-in-the-loop review; dialogic outreach (messages that invite conversation and acknowledge uncertainty rather than presume fault); proportionate access (need-to-know visibility that stays close to teaching, advising, and care); role-specific discretion (staff can tune views, suppress spurious alerts in peak weeks, and weigh indicators against contextual knowledge); and shared governance (students and frontline staff involved in setting/red-lining uses, periodic review of indicators, and documented escalation rules). Under these arrangements, students report timely feedback and a sense of being noticed, academics experience analytics as a prompt for better-timed pastoral work, professional services can prioritise effectively, and leaders gain a more trustworthy view for targeting support—i.e., lived experience tracks the promise of "empowerment" as informed action and care.

Divergence appears when LA hardens into an audit device. Typical patterns include: opaque rules and fixed traffic-light thresholds that read as final judgements; prescriptive scripts and auto-nudges that convert contact into compliance; broad upward visibility that repurposes dashboards as proxies for staff diligence; and unilateral governance (vendor defaults and performance agendas crowd out local judgement). In these settings, students describe pressure to "perform to the dashboard," academics report teaching to metrics and role strain, professional services shoulder box-ticking workloads, and leaders face false-positive/negative risks and reputational exposure. Organisationally, alignment with the promise is most evident where configuration rights sit close to practice, review cycles are routine (with sunset/adjust rules), and LA is decoupled from staff performance management; divergence

clusters where platforms and KPIs are tightly coupled, defaults are difficult to change, and participation in rule-setting is minimal.

RQ3.1: To what extent do LA systems reinforce existing power asymmetries or enable challenges to traditional power structures within HEIs, when analysed through a Foucauldian lens of power?

Read through a Foucauldian lens, LA tends to reproduce existing asymmetries by making subjects governable through visibility, classification, and normalisation. Dashboards, thresholds, and scripted nudges enact governmentality: they define what counts as 'engagement', set the tempo of appropriate response, and position actors—the 'at-risk student', the 'data-enabled academic', the 'assured institution'—within a hierarchy of seeing and acting. Opacity over data scopes and cut-offs concentrates interpretive authority with system custodians; upward reporting repurposes student-facing tools as instruments of managerial oversight. In this configuration, empowerment is often responsibilisation: students are incited to align with modelled norms, academics to fold indicators into practice, and professional services to evidence throughput. Thus LA stabilises the *conduct of conduct* and tends to reinforce prevailing power/knowledge relations.

At the same time, LA can interrupt these asymmetries when its governing arrangements are redesigned. As the data show, asymmetry softens where (i) knowledge is shared—rules for flags are visible in plain language, rationales and authorship are shown, and there are credible pathways to correct or contest; (ii) control is distributed—thresholds function as adjustable heuristics with human-in-the-loop review, access is proportionate to purpose, and staff can tune views and suppress spurious alerts; and (iii) voice is institutionalised—students and frontline staff co-set purposes, red lines, and review cycles, and LA is decoupled from staff performance management. Under these conditions, LA becomes a *resource for situated judgement* rather than a proxy decision-maker, and "empowerment" is experienced as shared authorship of rules rather than scripted compliance. In Foucauldian terms, LA remains a dispositif, but one in which counter-conduct—questioning, reframing, and selective uptake—has been made procedurally legitimate.

To that end, LA is neither inherently emancipatory nor inevitably disciplinary. By default, it extends managerial visibility and *normalises* modelled behaviours, thereby reinforcing asymmetries. By design, it can *redistribute* power/knowledge—making classifications legible and contestable, preserving discretion, and embedding co-governance—thereby challenging traditional hierarchies in limited but meaningful ways.

8.2 Theoretical contribution

This thesis advances three interlocking contributions to critical scholarship on educational data and LA. Where Chapter 7.10 outlined the study's empirical and analytic contributions, this section turns to the broader theoretical implications for Critical EdTech, Foucauldian scholarship, and studies of educational datafication.

(1) Empowerment as a design-dependent outcome. Sector discourse casts empowerment as a by-product of quantified visibility; the evidence here shows it is contingent on institutional configuration. The triad of knowledge (explainability and contestability), control (proportionate visibility and preserved discretion), and voice (participation in rules and oversight) provides an actionable analytic for diagnosing when LA is experienced as agency-enhancing and when it contracts into compliance. This extends, with empirical granularity, Selwyn's account of data infrastructures aligned to efficiency and accountability (2014, 2021) and complements Beer's (2016) analysis of metrics by identifying the organisational conditions that keep metrics in a supporting role.

(2) The empowerment paradox as a systemic property of the apparatus. Rather than treating instances where support morphs into surveillance as local failure, the findings show this to be a systemic tendency of LA as a governing dispositif. Dashboards and thresholds are productive of subjects (Foucault, 1982) in that they classify, invite self-alignment, and make particular interventions thinkable. This resonates with Knox *et al.'s* (2020) notion of 'machine behaviourism' and Macgilchrist's (2019) 'cruel optimism', and extends them with multi-actor, multi-institutional evidence that specifies how classificatory signals harden into norms—unless deliberately counter-balanced by institutional design.

(3) Tracing discourse-to-practice translation ('the missing middle'). The analysis maps how sector keywords (e.g., *personalisation at scale*, *early warning*) travel as procurement rationales, sediment as design defaults (what counts as engagement; how comparisons are shown), and crystallise as rules-in-use (access control, escalation, outreach tone). This translation operationalises Williamson's (2016, 2018) work on policy imaginaries and connects it to accounts of assetisation and platform dependency (Komljenovic, 2021; Komljenovic *et al.*, 2024; Birch *et al.*, 2025) showing how valuation stories turn into day-to-day routines and how path dependency links LA tightly to assurance regimes.

Taken together, these contributions offer a Foucauldian specification of how LA governs: not by coercion, but by shaping what is visible, sayable, and doable—and by inviting subjects to inhabit roles

aligned with institutional aims. On this view, 'empowerment' is not found *in* the technology; it is *made* by the institutional configuration.

8.3 Practical implications for policy and practice

The findings imply that institutions should treat LA as a governance design problem—a matter of arranging **visibility, discretion, and participation**—rather than as a technical procurement. The recommendations below translate the knowledge–control–voice triad into actionable institutional moves. They are deliberately design-agnostic and can be applied to different platforms.

Explainability and contestability (knowledge). Institutions should surface the rules that generate flags at the point of use—for example, display 'Amber = bottom 25% for two weeks', alongside a plain-language rationale, the date of last review, and who set the rule. Risk scores should come with brief 'why this flag?' notes (e.g., model cards) that state the main input features, known limitations, and common error modes. Crucially, there must be a straightforward challenge pathway so staff or students can add context, pause, or correct a classification, and have the outcome recorded.

Proportionate access and human-in-the-loop discretion (control). Visibility should be calibrated to purpose. In this sense, tutors need fine-grained traces to support individual students; senior role-holders should see aggregates; default cross-module comparisons that invite league-tabling of staff should be removed. Alerts ought to enter a review queue so a human checks relevance before any message is sent. Thresholds should be tuned on a regular schedule by mixed teams (teaching, student support, analytics) empowered to change cut-offs, suppress flags during assessment peaks, and weight substantive activity (e.g., submissions, forum posts) over ambient clicks.

Participation and co-governance (voice). A joint governance group—students, academics, professional services, and data specialists—should hold remit over purposes, red lines, access controls, escalation protocols, and evaluation metrics. Outreach templates are best co-designed with students so tone invites conversation, acknowledges uncertainty, and offers genuine options (for instance, 'reply when ready', 'book a chat', or 'resources you might try'). A short rights-style statement should be published and reviewed annually with student representatives, stating what is collected and why, who sees it, any opt-outs for non-essential analytics, and how to challenge decisions.

Equity and evaluation. Routine parity checks should test for differential flagging and outcomes across demographic groups and disciplines, with corrective actions where disparities appear. Experience metrics—perceived clarity, fairness, and usefulness—should be tracked alongside

performance metrics and reported to governance groups. Data minimisation should be the norm, including the avoidance of feature creep into location data or device telemetry unless a clear educational rationale is established and consented.

Procurement and platform governance. Procurement and platform governance should insist on plain-English explanations for flags and scores: including institution-side configuration control (not vendor-only toggles) and data portability. Alongside this, new features should be piloted in a sandbox environment with mixed-method evaluation before any institutional scaling-up.

A further implication concerns the accelerating introduction of AI-enhanced and model-driven analytics. Although this thesis focused primarily on the dominant forms of LA currently in use (rules-based thresholds, traffic-light interfaces, and activity dashboards), many institutions are now adopting predictive models and automated outreach systems. These systems expand the governing force of LA by increasing the opacity of inferences, intensifying the coupling between classification and intervention, and weakening opportunities for contestation. The knowledge–control–voice framework therefore becomes even more important in AI-supported contexts: explainability must extend to model logic; discretion must include human-in-the-loop review for automated predictions; and co-governance must determine acceptable uses, red lines, and review cycles for algorithmic outputs. In this sense, AI does not render the framework obsolete; it amplifies its relevance.

Taken together, these are modest moves: they do not reject LA; they re-arrange it. Done consistently, they make it more likely that LA supports care, judgement, and student agency, and less likely that it drifts into audit and compliance.

8.3.1 Broader implications for educational technology research

The analysis suggests implications that extend beyond LA to the wider educational technology landscape in UK HE. First, the permeability of institutional boundaries is evident. The CDA shows how policy bodies, advisory organisations, and vendors circulate a shared rhetorical repertoire that recurs across genres and begins to stabilise what counts as improvement, transformation, or innovation (see Chapter 5). This circulation echoes the debates mapped in the literature review around platformisation and sector imaginaries (see Chapter 2). Taken together, these observations suggest that technologies rarely enter universities as neutral or freely chosen tools; rather, sector narratives, policy templates, and vendor framings pre-authorise procurement and delimit what is perceived as feasible or desirable before local deliberation even begins.

Second, the findings foreground assetisation and dependency as governance questions, not merely procurement choices. The CDA traces how educational technologies are cast as institutional assets and as infrastructural necessities, while the IPA shows such technologies become intertwined with quality processes, risk registers, and assurance routines (Chapter 6). The synthesis explains how this produces path-dependency whereby past decisions constrain future options, and where stepping back is politically costly once educational technologies are embedded within the HE technical apparatus (Chapter 7). For Critical EdTech research, this study shows that key sites of discourse and imaginary-building sit not only in statutory policy but in the broader sectoral policy ecosystem of vendor roadmaps, advisory reports, and other arm's-length publications. Treated as 'policy by other means', these artefacts shape what institutions can see, change, and contest (see Chapters 2 and 7).

Third, there are methodological implications. The 'missing middle', as I describe it, argues for multi-sited analyses of apparatuses rather than tool-centric evaluations, enabling the chain from sector text to procurement rationale to configuration defaults to local rules-in-use to lived experience to be followed holistically (Chapters 5–7). Resources and materials that sit outside conventional pedagogic evaluation can elucidate how power is exercised in practice (Research Design, Chapter 4).

Fourth, the results raise ethical and epistemic questions for the evaluation of educational technologies. Indeed, platform-produced metrics become reputational currency, claims of 'effectiveness' risk being folded into performance management and vendor success criteria. The design conditions in the previous section double as sector-wide research standards, and embedding these expectations enables independent, reproducible evaluations that help to surface differential impacts across groups and settings.

Finally, a Foucauldian orientation reframes how the effects of educational technology are theorised. Rather than asking whether a tool 'empowers', the analysis asks how empowerment is organised—what is made visible, who can interpret and intervene, what credible paths exist to dissent or refuse. The IPA's accounts of accommodation, resistance and re-signification (Chapter 6) and the synthesis of knowledge, control, and voice (Chapter 7) show that subjects are neither powerless nor in full control; they negotiate invitations within specific arrangements. For Critical EdTech scholarship, this redirects attention from artefacts to arrangements and from abstract claims to the coupling of narratives, artefacts and rules that make particular ways of governing students and staff thinkable and actionable.

8.4 Limitations and reflexivity

This study was designed for analytical rather than statistical generalisation. I worked across multiple UK HEIs and with multiple actor groups (students, academics, professional services, and senior leaders), but the institutions differed in platform, maturity, and governance. I therefore do not claim that the findings represent sector-wide prevalence. The intention is to offer theoretical transferability—conditions and mechanisms that readers can recognise, test, and adapt in their own settings—rather than universal statements about effects.

The work is also temporal. It captures a moment in a rapidly evolving field. Post-pandemic adoption, shifting regulatory demands, and continuous vendor updates mean that local configurations—and experiences—continue to change. For that reason, the claims made here are framed at the level of arrangements (e.g., how explainability, discretion, and participation are organised) rather than at the level of particular tools or platforms. A longitudinal or ethnographic extension could track how empowerment waxes or wanes as platforms and governance settle, and whether the same dynamics recur as new features (e.g., AI-driven risk modelling) are introduced.

Participation was voluntary, which introduces the risks of self-selection. People with stronger views—positive or critical—may be over-represented. I sought role balance in recruitment, but senior decision-makers were necessarily fewer in number, and student participation was shaped by local timetables and access routes. To mitigate these effects, I sampled purposively across roles and institutions, triangulated interview accounts with sector texts, and actively looked for deviant cases that challenged early interpretations. Even so, readers should bear in mind that the analysis privileges the perspectives of those who chose to participate.

The CDA deliberately targeted outward-facing sector texts (regulator, advisory/sector bodies, vendor materials, think-tank reports). On their own, these genres do not evidence how narratives are converted into internal rules—for example, local analytics policies, privacy notices, and DPIAs, tutoring and escalation protocols, procurement specifications, or minutes from analytics governance groups. That translation is examined in the IPA strand (Chapter 6), where participants describe the rules-in-use they work to. However, I did not analyse those internal documents directly; consequently, while I explain how rules-in-use are experienced and enacted, I cannot triangulate them against the formal paperwork and decision trails. A natural extension would be to add a multi-site institutional documentary layer (policies, DPIAs, procurement and governance records) to test how sector talk is negotiated into local rulemaking and to identify where it is resisted or revised.

Reflexivity

My professional background is in HE educational technology leadership. This reflexive stance is integral to interpretivist work, where the researcher is a co-producer of meaning rather than a neutral observer. That proximity brought practical insight into institutional arrangements and helped with access; it also carried risks—reading LA through managerial logics, or over-privileging critical caution given familiarity with sector debates. I addressed these risks by making positionality explicit in early memos; by bracketing assumptions during interviews (using open prompts and participant-led examples); by keeping an audit trail of coding and interpretive moves; and by inviting member-checking of emergent themes with participants. These steps do not remove my positionality, but they render it visible and accountable to the data and the argument.

Taken together, these limitations are the direct trade-offs of the study's design. Indeed, I sought breadth across institutions and roles rather than depth within a single site; cross-sectional snapshots rather than a longitudinal analysis; interpretive attention to governance and experience rather than measurement of outcomes. The resulting thesis provides a specification of how empowerment in LA is assembled—and when it is felt—that readers can test in their own settings.

8.5 Future research

This study opens several productive lines of inquiry.

- Longitudinal governance studies that follow programmes over multiple terms as governance is reconfigured (e.g., shifting from fixed to adjustable thresholds, introducing human-in-the-loop triage) and assess how these changes alter user experience, equity patterns, and student outcomes over time.

- Intervention trials of the knowledge–control–voice triad. This might include the co-design of particular features and an evaluation of these against status-quo implementations using mixed methods.

- Equity analytics and consent dynamics. Conducting parity audits of who is flagged, contacted, and escalated, and the study of consent propensity across groups and categories, thereby building on Prinsloo & Slade's (2017) 'data gift' framing.

- Professional services ethnographies. Undertaking ethnographic studies of LA and case-management teams to document how thresholds are tuned in practice, how tensions

between retention targets and pastoral care are negotiated, and where discretion is exercised or constrained.

- Comparative and cross-national analyses. Compare the UK with systems operating under different funding, regulatory, and vendor regimes to identify how those configurations shape the coupling between discourse and practice.

- LA beyond students. Investigating staff-facing analytics (e.g., retention dashboards or response-time reports) to understand risks of proxy performance measures, role drift, and knock-on effects for academic autonomy.

- AI-driven and generative analytics. Future research should test whether the knowledge–control–voice framework scales to predictive and AI-supported advising, specifying what explainability, discretion, and participation look like when model logic becomes more complex and outputs more prescriptive. As institutions adopt machine-learning-based risk models, automated messaging, and generative-AI interventions, distinct questions arise around explainability, error propagation, bias, and human–machine collaboration. These developments will further test—and potentially extend—the governance principles proposed in this thesis.

8.6 Closing: from promise to practice

This thesis began with a paradox. LA is sold and governed through a promissory narrative of empowerment, yet users' experiences are mixed, often oscillating between support and surveillance. Drawing on a corpus of sixteen documents and nineteen interviews across seven universities, I brought discourse and practice into conversation and—viewed through a Foucauldian lens—showed why both are true. LA can enable agency when institutions make visibility intelligible and contestable, preserve discretion in action, and share voice in rule-making. LA can also narrow agency when indicators are treated as realities, thresholds solidify into verdicts, and scripts subordinate judgement to audit.

The deeper lesson is not to abandon LA but to design it differently. Empowerment is not an inherent feature of the platform; it is made through governance. Read within a wider relational turn in HE, the task is not simply to tighten control loops but to re-centre care, reciprocity, and shared responsibility as design values for LA. In this sense, LA is reconfigured as a mediator of relationship rather than an instrument of optimisation: explainability becomes an act of care (making classifications legible and

contestable), discretion protects context (preserving judgement over scripted response), and voice institutionalises participation (co-authoring rules and review). A relational orientation also balances the onus of care—between students and staff, teaching and management, innovation and wellbeing—so that support does not collapse into surveillance and assurance does not crowd out pedagogy (see Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017). Indeed, if institutions want LA to act as a tutor rather than a tether, they must attend to the missing middle where narratives harden into defaults and defaults become rules. The practical steps are within reach—explainability at the point of use, adjustable thresholds, human-in-the-loop review, care-first outreach, participatory oversight—and they are as much organisational as technical.

These design principles remain essential as LA evolves. As predictive modelling and AI-supported advising become more prevalent, the stakes of explainability, discretion, and co-governance increase. The challenge for the sector is not only how to implement AI responsibly, but how to ensure that automated visibility supports relational care rather than intensifying managerial surveillance. In this sense, AI magnifies rather than alters the central insight of this thesis: empowerment is made in the arrangement, not in the technology.

Educational technology has long traded on romantic narratives (Selwyn, 2013). The contribution here is to replace romance with arrangement: to show, empirically, how empowerment is assembled, when it is felt, and how it can be sustained. If taken up, this would move the sector from promise-led adoption to practice-led governance—an approach equal to the ethical, pedagogical, and political stakes of LA.

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Appendix 1: Ethics

Appendix 1 provides the ethical documentation underpinning this study. It includes the participant information sheets, and consent forms used across all stakeholder groups (students, teaching staff, professional services staff, and senior leaders), the research overview circulated during recruitment, and confirmation of ethical approval granted by the Department of Educational Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University. These materials set out the study's ethical foundations, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, data protection, and the right to withdraw.

Appendix 1: Ethics

1a Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Project title: Learning Analytics and the Empowerment Paradox: A Foucauldian analysis of sector policy versus lived experience

Researcher: Daniel Clark

Contact details: dan.clark@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box in the table below

atement	ck box
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 4 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 4 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher(s), but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be stored securely in accordance with the maximum completion date of my studies which is up to and no longer than 30 September 2028.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

Participant's details

Participant's name_____

Participant's Signature_____

Date_____

Declaration of researcher/person taking the consent

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Name of Researcher/person taking the consent _____

Signature of Researcher/person taking the consent _____

Date (Day/month/year) _____

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University.

1b Participant Information Sheet (Staff)

Participant information Sheet

Title: ***Learning Analytics and the Empowerment Paradox: A Foucauldian analysis of sector policy versus lived experience***

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the use of Learning Analytics at your university. Learning Analytics is a collective term used to describe the collection, measurement, analysis, and reporting of data about students and their learning environments to assist organisations, teachers, and students themselves, in tracking engagement, monitoring activity, improving attainment, and boosting retention. Learning Analytics typically capture data from within the Virtual Learning Environment, the Student Information System, lecture recording platforms, library borrowing and access records, and class attendance.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to understand your experiences of using Learning Analytics, and how these experiences compare with how Learning Analytics are described in policy.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because your university makes extensive use of Learning Analytics.

I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decide to take part, I would like to interview you for no more than 90 minutes. The interview will be with me (the researcher), it will be one-to-one, and it will take place online. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your experiences of using Learning Analytics at your university.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Taking part in this study will give you an opportunity to share your experiences, and this in turn will help me to better understand the individual and nuanced experiences of Learning Analytics.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

If you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your position in the organisation and your relations with your employer.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. while you will have the enduring right to withdraw from the research at any time, I can only reliably identify and delete your own data up to four weeks after your participation, after which it will have been anonymised and pooled with other responses. There is a possibility that withdrawing after four weeks means that I cannot extract your anonymised and pooled data.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part, although you will be required to be available for up to 90 minutes for a one-to-one interview with me.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me. The interview data will only be shared with my PhD supervisor *after* it has been anonymised and collated with other people's data.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example, journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences,

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in my publications.

In the highly unlikely event that anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my PhD supervisor. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that no one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with the maximum completion date of my studies, I will keep the data securely up to and no longer than 30 September 2028.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself Daniel Clark (dan.clark@lancaster.ac.uk) or my PhD supervision Jan McArthur (j.mcarthur@lancaster.ac.uk).

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact the programme director Natasa Lackovic (n.lackovic@lancaster.ac.uk).

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

1c Participant Information Sheet (Students)

Participant information Sheet

Title: ***Learning Analytics and the Empowerment Paradox: A Foucauldian analysis of sector policy versus lived experience***

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the use of Learning Analytics at your university. Learning Analytics is a collective term used to describe the collection, measurement, analysis, and reporting of data about students and their learning environments to assist organisations, teachers, and students themselves, in tracking engagement, monitoring activity, improving attainment, and boosting retention. Learning Analytics typically capture data from within the Virtual Learning Environment, the Student Information System, lecture recording platforms, library borrowing and access records, and class attendance.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to understand your experiences of using Learning Analytics, and how these experiences compare with how Learning Analytics are described in policy.

Why have I been invited?
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What will I be asked to do if I take part?
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What are the possible benefits from taking part?
Taking part in this study will give you an opportunity to share your experiences, and this in turn will help me to better understand the individual and nuanced experiences of Learning Analytics.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

If you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your studies and the way you are assessed on your course.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. while you will have the enduring right to withdraw from the research at any time, I can only reliably identify and delete your own data up to four weeks after your participation, after which it will have been anonymised and pooled with other responses. There is a possibility that withdrawing after four weeks means that I cannot extract your anonymised and pooled data.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part, although you will be required to be available for up to 90 minutes for a one-to-one interview with me.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me. The interview data will only be shared with my PhD supervisor *after* it has been anonymised and collated with other people's data.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example, journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences,

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in my publications.

In the highly unlikely event that anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my PhD supervisor. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that no one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with the maximum completion date of my studies, I will keep the data securely up to and no longer than 30 September 2028.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself Daniel Clark (dan.clark@lancaster.ac.uk) or my PhD supervision Jan McArthur (j.mcarthur@lancaster.ac.uk).

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact the programme director Natasa Lackovic (n.lackovic@lancaster.ac.uk).

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

1d Research Overview

Research overview

Title: Learning Analytics and the Empowerment Paradox: A Foucauldian analysis of sector policy versus lived experience

Researcher: Daniel Clark (dan.clark@lancaster.ac.uk)

Affiliation: Lancaster University (PhD candidate), Canterbury Christ Church University (Employee)

Introduction

As the use of technology to deliver, facilitate, and administer learning, teaching, and assessment in Higher Education (HE) has become more sophisticated and embedded, so too have the possibilities for harnessing the data captured by, and derived from, such systems and tools. This has led to significant development in the field of Learning Analytics (LA) - a broad and collective term used to describe the collection, measurement, analysis, and reporting of data about students and their learning environments to assist organisations, teachers, and students themselves, in tracking engagement, monitoring activity, improving attainment, and boosting retention.

With the development of interoperable systems, and the exchange of data between these, the provision of 'big' data within HE has created possibilities for drawing upon data from a range of sources, aggregating it, and then using sophisticated algorithms and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to monitor activity, model behaviour, and predict outcomes.

LA are often presented by vendors, policymakers, and some educational development scholars as tools that 'empower' staff and students through informed decision-making, and through learner-centred approaches that foster wellbeing and inclusion. This is aligned with broader concepts of the digitally-empowered teacher and student – concepts that are a mainstay in the rhetoric of educational technology in HE, and in recent UK HE policy. Furthermore, LA play a critical role in fulfilling the social imaginary of the neoliberal individualism of the student consumer, engendering agency, self-regulation, and personal responsibility, all underpinned by numeric measurement and accountability on the part of the teacher and their organisation.

Nevertheless, such promises do not go unchallenged; there is a growing chorus of criticality that highlights the inherent complexities concerning the asserted benefits of LA, specifically claims of LA's capacity to *empower* its users.

It is this complexity, between the promissory power that LA systems purportedly afford and the actualities and lived experiences of this claim, that is the focus of this research study. Related studies have tended to focus on more generalised attitudes towards LA; these have typically been student-focussed and in the context of a single organisation. This study therefore seeks to delve deeper into the purported promise of LA's capacity to empower, triangulating this with the lived experiences of students and teachers. Adopting a multi-organisational approach, and combining a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of sector policy (including vendor literature) with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of lived experience, this study offers a richer and more nuanced appraisal of the complexities of power relations in HE as viewed through the lens of LA.

Research requirements

Three to four participants per organisation (five to six organisations in total), including a mixture of students, teaching staff, and other appropriate roles. Interviews will be semi-structured, undertaken online, and will be one-to-one with the researcher.

In the presentation of findings, all names and other identifiable information will be anonymised. Organisational names will also be removed. All data captured will be shared with the participating organisation.

1e Ethical Approval

Research Ethics Application Form v1.9.9.2 202503

Research Ethics Application Form v1.9.9.2 202503 **EdAp**

Learning Analytics and the Empowerment Paradox: A Foucauldian analysis of sector policy versus lived experience - Approved

Information Regarding this Research Project

Are you conducting a research project?

(for more information on research projects please see our ethics pages)

(•) Yes ( ) No

Does your research only involve animals?

( ) Yes (•) No

Are you undertaking this research as/are you filling this form out as:

( ) Academic/Research Staff
( ) Non Academic Staff
( ) Staff Undertaking a Programme of Study
(•) PhD or DClinPsy student or MPhil
( ) Undergraduate, Masters, Master by Research or other taught postgraduate programme

Which Faculty are you in?

Faculty of Arts and Social Science

Which department are you in?

Educational Research

3 November 2025

Reference #: EdRes-2024-4596-EdAp-2

Appendix 2: Participant Overview

Appendix 2 provides an overview of all nineteen participants included in the IPA strand of the study. Participants are anonymised through a two-part identifier that refers to their institution (University 5) and their role (e.g., Student C). Additional contextual descriptors (e.g., year of study, role seniority) are included where relevant to provide idiographic clarity and support the interpretative orientation of the IPA. No identifying information is included.

Appendix 2: Participant Overview

#	Role (and identifier)	Context
University 1		
1	Academic A	Senior Lecturer
University 2		
2	Academic B	Senior Lecturer & Programme Leader
3	Support Staff A	Student Success Advisor
University 3		
4	Academic C	Lecturer
University 4		
5	Academic D	Senior Lecturer & Personal Tutor
6	Academic E	Lecturer
7	Student A	Final year student
University 5		
8	Student B	Final Year student
9	Student C	Foundation Year student
10	Student D	Final Year student & mature learner
11	Academic F	Senior Lecturer, Year 1 Programme Lead, & Personal Academic Tutor
12	Support Staff B	Attendance and Engagement Support Officer
13	Support Staff C	Attendance and Engagement Team Manager
14	Senior Leader A	Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching)
University 6		
15	Student E	Foundation Year student
16	Student F	Second Year student
17	Academic G	Senior Lecturer and Foundation Year lead
18	Academic F	Lecturer and School Director of Education
University 7		
19	Senior Leader B	Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education)

Appendix 3: Interview Schedules

Appendix 3 contains the semi-structured interview schedules used for each participant group in the IPA strand of the study: teaching staff, professional services staff, senior leaders, and students. The schedules outline the thematic areas explored in interviews, including experiences of Learning Analytics, perceptions of empowerment and surveillance, ethical considerations, and reflections on institutional practices. While the core structure was consistent across groups, questions were tailored to participants' roles, responsibilities, and proximity to LA systems. The schedules served as flexible guides rather than fixed scripts, allowing interviews to remain responsive to participants' interpretations and meaning making in line with IPA's idiographic and exploratory orientation.

Appendix 3: Interview Schedules

3a Interview Schedule (Teaching Staff)

Introduction

- Thanks
- Introduce study
- Confirm informed consent
- Confirm permission to record
- Clarify that participation is voluntary
- Highlight that questions are grouped into different themes

Opening Questions

Background Information

1. Can you tell me about your current role and responsibilities at the University _____?
2. How long have you been involved in teaching, and how did Learning Analytics first enter your practice?

Note: Confirm with interviewee the name and/or vendor of Learning Analytics at their institution. When addressing specific use cases, try to use local nomenaclature.

Main Questions

1. Experiences with Learning Analytics

1. How did you first begin using Learning Analytics in your teaching?

2. What motivated you to use it? (e.g., institutional policy, curiosity, peer influence, perceived benefits).

3. How does LA fit into your everyday teaching or module management activities?

4. Can you describe a moment when LA genuinely influenced a teaching decision?

5. What emotions or reactions do you associate with using LA (e.g., reassurance, frustration, pressure, curiosity)? *(IPA prompt: explore felt experience and sense-making)*

2. Perceptions and Meanings

1. What does Learning Analytics mean to you in your own words?

2. How would you describe your relationship with the data produced by LA?

3. What kinds of insights do you feel LA offers—or fails to offer—about your students?

4. How do you balance quantitative data with your own professional judgement or intuition?

5. To what extent do you feel LA changes what "good teaching" looks like? *(Probe for perceived shifts in professionalism or pedagogy.)*

3. Power, Agency, and Decision-Making

1. How do you think LA influences your decision-making as a teacher?

2. In what ways, if any, does LA empower or constrain you? *(Note: Define empowerment)*

3. Can you recall a situation where LA data contradicted your own assessment of a student or group? How did you handle that?

4. Have you noticed any changes in the power dynamics between staff and students—or between staff and management—since LA was introduced?

5. Who ultimately controls how LA is interpreted or acted upon? (Probe for perceptions of hierarchy, governance, or autonomy.)

4. Institutional Narratives and Expectations

1. How is LA presented to you through institutional channels (e.g., policy documents, training, vendor materials)?

2. What promises or expectations are attached to its use?

3. What are your perceptions of how LA is talked about more broadly within HE?

4. Do these align with your lived experience of using LA?

5. How do colleagues generally talk about LA—more as an opportunity, a burden, or something else?

6. What forms of support or guidance are provided to staff around LA interpretation?

5. Impacts on Teaching and Learning

1. Can you describe a specific instance where LA significantly influenced your teaching approach or a student's engagement?

2. How do students typically respond to LA-driven feedback?

3. Have you observed any unintended consequences (positive or negative) of LA use in teaching?

4. How, if at all, has LA affected your sense of connection or care toward students? *(IPA prompt: explore relational or ethical dimensions.)*

6. Ethics and Privacy

1. What ethical issues come to mind when thinking about LA in HE?

2. How are privacy and consent handled in your context?

3. Do you feel students understand how their data are used? *(IPA prompt: explore views on the use of their own data).*

4. What responsibilities do you think teachers have in mediating these issues?

5. How do you navigate tensions between institutional expectations and your personal values?

Reflective and Forward-Looking Questions

1. How has your perception of LA changed over time?

2. What, if anything, have you learned about yourself as a teacher through working with LA? *(IPA prompt: identity and reflexivity.)*

3. If you could redesign LA to better support teaching, what would that look like?

4. What do you see as the future role of LA in higher education?

5. What advice would you give to a new lecturer being introduced to LA for the first time?

Closing

- Invite any final thoughts or reflections.

- Thank the participant for their contribution and reiterate confidentiality.

- Explain the next steps in the research process and offer to share a summary of findings once available.

3b Interview Schedule (Support Staff)

Introduction

- Thanks
- Introduce study
- Confirm informed consent
- Confirm permission to record
- Clarify that participation is voluntary
- Highlight that questions are grouped into different themes

Opening Questions

Background Information

1. Can you tell me about your current role and responsibilities at the University _____?
2. How long have you been working in student support, data, or analytics-related areas, and how did Learning Analytics first enter your practice? *(Note: change phrasing based on answer to Q1).*
3. What are your main points of interaction with Learning Analytics systems or data? (e.g., dashboards, reports, interventions, communications with students or academic teams.)

Note: Confirm with the interviewee the name and/or vendor of Learning Analytics at their institution. When addressing specific use cases, try to use local nomenclature.

Main Questions

1. Experiences with Learning Analytics

1. How does Learning Analytics feature in your day-to-day work?

2. What initially motivated you to engage with LA in your role? (e.g., institutional policy, student support aims, personal interest, managerial requirement.) *(Note: change wording based on context of their role)*

3. Can you describe a typical example of how you use LA to support or advise students?

4. Can you recall a moment when LA genuinely influenced a decision or intervention you made?

5. What emotions or reactions do you associate with using LA (e.g., confidence, anxiety, pressure, empowerment)? *(IPA prompt: explore felt experience and sense-making.)*

2. Perceptions and Meanings

1. What does Learning Analytics mean to you in your own words?

2. How would you describe your relationship with the data produced by LA systems?

3. What kinds of insights do you feel LA provides—or fails to provide—about students?

4. How do you balance what the data tells you with your professional judgement, experience, or pastoral knowledge?

5. Has LA changed how you understand what "effective student support" looks like? *(Probe for shifts in professional identity or values.)*

3. Power, Agency, and Decision-Making

1. How does LA influence your decision-making or priorities within your role?

2. In what ways, if any, does LA empower or constrain you? *(Note: define empowerment in context.)*

3. Can you think of a time when LA data contradicted your own perception or knowledge of a student's situation? How did you respond?

4. Have you noticed any changes in power dynamics between professional services staff, academics, or students since LA was introduced?

5. Who ultimately controls how LA data is interpreted or acted upon in your institution? *(Probe for perceptions of hierarchy, governance, and autonomy.)*

4. Institutional Narratives and Expectations

1. How is LA presented to you through institutional channels (e.g., strategy documents, briefings, training sessions, vendor materials)?

2. What kinds of promises, expectations, or goals are attached to its use?

3. What are your perceptions of how LA is discussed more broadly across higher education?

4. Do these narratives align with your everyday experience of using LA?

5. How do colleagues across teams talk about LA—more as an opportunity, an obligation, or something else?

6. What forms of training, support, or professional guidance are provided to staff around LA interpretation and action?

5. Impacts on Student Support and Institutional Practice

1. Can you describe a specific instance where LA significantly influenced a support intervention or conversation with a student?

2. How do students generally respond when contacted based on LA data or risk scores?

3. Have you noticed any unintended consequences (positive or negative) from using LA in your role?

4. How, if at all, has LA affected your sense of care or connection with students? *(IPA prompt: explore relational and ethical dimensions.)*

5. Has LA changed how you interact or collaborate with academic colleagues? *(Probe for cross-role implications.)*

6. Ethics and Privacy

1. What ethical issues come to mind when thinking about LA in HE?

2. How are privacy and consent handled in your area of work?

3. Do you feel students understand how their data are being used? *(IPA prompt: explore perceived transparency and fairness.)*

4. What responsibilities do you think support staff have in managing these issues?

5. How do you navigate tensions between institutional directives and your personal or professional values?

Reflective and Forward-Looking Questions

1. How has your perception of LA changed since you first began working with it?

2. What, if anything, have you learned about yourself or your role through using LA? *(IPA prompt: identity and reflexivity.)*

3. If you could redesign LA to better support staff and students, what would that look like?

4. How do you see the future role of LA in supporting student engagement and wellbeing?

5. What advice would you give to someone new to a support role involving LA?

Closing

- Invite any final thoughts or reflections.

- Thank the participant for their contribution and reiterate confidentiality.

- Explain the next steps in the research process and offer to share a summary of findings once available.

3c Interview Schedule (Senior Leaders)

Introduction

- Thanks
- Introduce study
- Confirm informed consent
- Confirm permission to record
- Clarify that participation is voluntary
- Highlight that questions are grouped into different themes

Opening Questions

Background Information

1. Can you describe your current role and main areas of responsibility at the University _____?
2. How long have you been involved in institutional leadership, and when did Learning Analytics become part of your remit?
3. What is your primary point of interaction with Learning Analytics (e.g., dashboards, governance committees, strategy development, risk management, student success oversight)?

Note: Confirm the institutional name/version of LA. Use local terminology where possible when asking follow-up questions.

Main Questions

1. Strategic Role and Institutional Context

1. How did Learning Analytics become part of your institution's strategy or practice?

2. What were the main drivers or motivations for adopting LA? (e.g., retention, attainment, regulatory pressures, digital transformation, wellbeing, student experience.)

3. How do you see LA fitting into the broader institutional mission, priorities, or KPIs?

4. What promises or expectations were attached to LA at the point of adoption?

5. To what extent have those expectations been realised? *(Probe for gaps between strategy and experience.)*

2. Perceptions and Meanings

1. In your own words, what does Learning Analytics mean to you as a senior leader?

2. What kinds of insight or value do you feel LA provides at the institutional level?

3. What kinds of insight do you feel it cannot provide?

4. How do you interpret the relationship between LA and evidence-based decision-making?

5. Has LA changed how you understand concepts such as quality, retention, student support, or assurance?

3. Power, Governance, and Decision-Making

1. What governance structures are in place for LA at your institution, and how effective do you think they are?

2. Who do you see as key decision-makers in shaping how LA is interpreted and acted upon?

3. Where does authority lie when it comes to defining thresholds, access rights, risk categories, or escalation routes?

4. In what ways does LA redistribute power within the institution (upwards, downwards, sideways)?

5. To what extent does LA empower staff and students—or conversely, constrain their autonomy? *(IPA prompt: encourage interviewee to reflect on meaning-making, not just policy.)*

4. Institutional Narratives and Sector Context

1. How is LA framed or narrated in your own institution's strategy, policy, or communications?

2. How do external bodies (e.g., OfS, Jisc, HEPI, vendors) shape institutional thinking about LA?

3. Do you perceive LA as a competitive imperative within the sector?

4. How do sector narratives compare with what you see happening on the ground in your institution?

5. To what extent do you view LA as an inevitable development in HE, or as a choice?

5. Impacts on Students, Staff, and Institutional Culture

1. What impact do you believe LA has had on students' engagement, experience, or outcomes?

2. What impact has it had on staff—academics or professional services?

3. Have there been any unintended consequences, positive or negative?

4. Has LA influenced institutional culture (e.g., accountability, surveillance, care, performance)?

5. How do you think LA affects trust relationships between staff, students, and leadership?

6**. Ethics, Privacy, and Risk**

1. What ethical issues concern you most in relation to LA?

2. How are privacy, consent, and transparency handled institutionally?

3. Do you think students and staff understand how their data is used for analytics?

4. How do you balance the desire to act (e.g., retention, risk management) with the need to avoid over-surveillance or coercion?

5. What risks—strategic, reputational, operational—do you associate with LA?

Reflective and Forward-Looking Questions

1. How has your understanding or stance on LA evolved over time?

2. What have you learned about leadership, governance, or institutional change through the process of adopting LA? *(IPA prompt: identity and reflexivity.)*

3. If you could redesign LA—or its governance—from scratch, what would that look like?

4. What future role do you see for LA in the next 5–10 years?

5. What advice would you give to other senior leaders planning to implement or expand Learning Analytics?

Closing

- Invite any final thoughts or reflections.

- Thank the participant for their contribution and reiterate confidentiality.

- Explain the next steps in the research process and offer to share a summary of findings once available.

3d Interview Schedule (Students)

Introduction

- Thanks
- Introduce study (use plain English)
- Confirm informed consent
- Confirm permission to record
- Clarify participation is voluntary and unrelated to academic progression
- Highlight that questions are grouped into different themes
- Reassure the student that there are no right or wrong answers

Opening Questions

Background Information

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself—your course, year of study, and how long you've been at the University _____?

2. From what I understand, your University uses a system called _____ - this is used to record your online activities like when you last accessed the Virtual Learning Environment, or when you last borrowed a book from the library. When did you first hear about this system?

Note: Confirm the institutional name/version of LA. Use local terminology where possible when asking follow-up questions.

IPA note: Early questions aim to establish context and encourage comfortable narrative flow.

Main Questions

1. First Encounters and Everyday Use

1. Can you remember the first time you used the _____ system? What was that experience like for you? *(IPA prompt: ask for emotions, bodily reactions, immediate interpretations.)*

2. How often do you use it now, and what do you typically use it for?

3. Has your use changed over time? If so, how?

4. Can you describe a moment when the dashboard or engagement data made you think differently about your studies?

5. How do you usually feel when you check your engagement score? (e.g., reassured, anxious, motivated, confused, indifferent).

    - Probe: "Can you say a bit more about what that feeling is like for you?"

    - Probe: "Where do you think that feeling comes from?"

2. Perceptions and Meanings

1. What does [system name] mean to you in your own words?

2. What do you think your engagement score actually represents?

3. Do you feel the data reflects your real effort, learning or circumstances?

    - Probe for mismatches between lived experience and system representation.

4. How do you make sense of changes in your score (going up, down, staying the same)?

5. What do you think the dashboard wants you to do—or be—as a student? *(IPA prompt: explore identity shaping, subjectification.)*

3. Impact on Study Behaviour and Self-Perception

1. Has the engagement data influenced how you study or prioritise tasks?

2. How, if at all, does it affect your motivation? (e.g., pressure, encouragement, guilt, clarity, stress.)

3. Has it changed how you see yourself as a learner?

    - Probe: "Can you describe what it feels like to see yourself represented as a data score or traffic-light colour?"

4. Has [system name] ever made you more or less confident?

5. Do you compare your score with your peers?

    - Probe: Explore social comparison, hidden competition, or normalisation.

4. Relationships, Support, and Contact with Staff

1. Has any member of staff ever contacted you based on your engagement data?

    - Probe: "How did you feel about that initial contact?"

2. Did it feel supportive, intrusive, surprising, expected?

3. Did the conversation change how you see the use of [system name]?

4. Has the dashboard influenced your relationship with your tutors or advisors?

5. Do you feel you have any say in how [system name] is used to make decisions about you?

    - Probe: experiences of agency or lack thereof.

5. Power, Control, and Visibility

1. Who do you think sees your engagement data?

    - Probe: Explore perceptions of surveillance or uncertainty.

2. How does it feel knowing that staff can view this information about you?

3. Do you ever change your behaviour because you know your activity is being tracked?

4. Do you feel LA empowers you—or does it feel more like something done to you? *(Note: Define—in simple terms—empowerment).*

5. Have you ever disagreed with what the data said about your engagement?

    - Probe: "How did you handle that?"

    - Probe: "Did you feel able to challenge it?"

6. Ethics, Privacy, and Understanding

1. What do you understand about how your data is collected and used?

2. Do you remember being given information about consent or privacy?

3. Do you feel the system is transparent?

4. Are there parts of the system you find confusing or concerning?

5. What feels fair—or unfair—about being monitored in this way?

    - IPA prompt: encourage personal, emotional, value-laden reflections.

Reflective and Forward-Looking Questions

1. How has your view of [system name] and the use of LA changed since you first encountered it?

2. What have you learned about yourself through using the dashboard?

3. If you could redesign the system to make it more supportive or fair, what would you change?

4. Do you think Learning Analytics should play a bigger or smaller role in higher education?

5. What advice would you give to a new student using [system name] or LA for the first time?

Closing

- Invite any final thoughts or reflections.
- Thank the participant for their contribution and reiterate confidentiality.
- Explain the next steps in the research process and offer to share a summary of findings if they'd like to see them.

Appendix 4: IPA coding—worked example

Appendix 4 provides a worked example of the IPA conducted in Chapter 6, using Student C (University 5) as an illustrative case. It demonstrates the analytic progression from initial descriptive commentary, through linguistic and affective attention, to deeper interpretative insights, consistent with the idiographic and phenomenological commitments of IPA. All extracts are drawn verbatim from the interview data reproduced in Chapter 6.

Appendix 4: IPA coding—worked example

Extract 1: Feeling "noticed" through LA-enabled outreach

> In college I didn't really get much help. But here, I had someone from student support reach out after my engagement dropped… it wasn't scary—it was actually quite helpful. I didn't even know people could see how I was doing, but they actually used it to support me. It made me feel noticed.

Descriptive comments

- Student C contrasts past educational experiences ("in college I didn't really get much help") with the proactive support offered at university.
- LA-enabled outreach is framed as care rather than surveillance.
- Emphasis on feeling "noticed" and supported at the right time.

Linguistic / affective comments

- The phrase "it wasn't scary" reveals an anticipated possibility of fear or judgement.
- The shift from "I didn't even know people could see" to "they used it to support me" shows surprise resolving into reassurance.
- "Noticed" carries strong affective weight—signalling visibility, recognition, and belonging.

Interpretative insights

- Visibility is experienced as *care* rather than *control*, suggesting that the relational framing of LA mediates its emotional impact.
- The student reinterprets institutional monitoring as attentiveness, generating a sense of mattering.
- LA functions as a bridge between vulnerability and institutional responsiveness, countering prior feelings of neglect.

Emergent theme: Recognition and care through visibility.

Extract 2: Learning Analytics as a reflective "nudge"

> I do check it quite regularly… it's like a visual nudge for me to get back on track. I wouldn't say it drives my learning, but it definitely helps me reflect.

Descriptive comments

- LA is incorporated into routine study habits, especially during demanding periods.
- Seen not as a directive tool, but a prompt for self-checking.

Linguistic / affective comments

- "Visual nudge" suggests something gentle, prompting awareness rather than enforcing behaviour.
- "Get back on track" implies the data helps restore perceived academic alignment.
- The contrast between "doesn't drive my learning" and "helps me reflect" signals autonomy.

Interpretative insights

- Student C positions LA within a self-regulatory framework: the tool enables reflection rather than compliance.
- This implies compatibility between analytics and personal autonomy when the student retains control over interpretation.
- The student constructs a narrative of being an active manager of their learning rather than a passive data subject.

Emergent theme: Autonomous self-regulation supported (but not determined) by LA.

Extract 3: Negotiating the limitations of the data

> Sometimes the score doesn't reflect everything… I might be revising from printed notes or external books, and none of that is counted. I take it with a pinch of salt.

Descriptive comments

- Student C identifies mismatch between the system's metrics and their lived study practice.
- A sense of incompleteness or misrepresentation emerges.

Linguistic / affective comments

- "Doesn't reflect everything" highlights representational limits.
- "Pinch of salt" indicates a pragmatic, critical stance—not rejecting the system, but moderating its authority.
- Emphasis on invisible labour ("printed notes", "external books").

Interpretative insights

- The student is able to decouple LA from self-worth or academic identity.
- This demonstrates epistemic agency—the student imposes their own interpretive boundaries on the system.
- It reveals a form of resilience: the student maintains confidence despite algorithmic simplification.

Emergent theme: Critical acceptance of data's partial view of learning.

Extract 4: Flattening power dynamics through shared evidence

> I think it flattens things a bit. Like, lecturers aren't just assuming things — they have some evidence to base conversations on. But it's more support than discipline, in my experience.

Descriptive comments

- Student C sees LA as creating more informed, less hierarchical dialogue.
- Staff-student interactions are perceived as more equitable because assumptions are replaced with shared indicators.

Linguistic / affective comments

- "Flattens things" signals levelling—a reduction in perceived hierarchy.
- "Not assuming" suggests that, previously, staff judgements may have felt arbitrary or uninformed.
- Repetition of "support" contrasts sharply with "discipline".

Interpretative insights

- LA becomes a relational mediator—reducing asymmetry in teacher–student interactions.
- The data becomes a conversational artefact rather than a disciplinary trigger.
- Student C expresses trust that staff interpret data with care.

Emergent theme: Supportive reconfiguration of power relations

High-level themes for Student C

Across the extracts, Student C's meaning-making centred on four interconnected experiential patterns:

- **Recognition and Care Through Visibility**—feeling "noticed", supported, and valued when data-enabled outreach coincided with real need.
- **Autonomous Self-Regulation**—using LA as a self-managed reflective prompt rather than a coercive driver.
- **Negotiating the Limits of Data**—maintaining autonomy by contextualising the dashboard, acknowledging its incompleteness.

- **Supportive Power Reconfiguration**—interpreting LA as enabling more equitable, evidence-informed conversations with staff.

Contribution to Cross-Case Analysis

Student C provided a powerful counterpoint to more ambivalent or negative experiences in the wider dataset. Their account exemplifies:

- **Empowerment & Agency** through self-monitoring, contextual interpretation, and autonomy.
- **Ethical Ambiguities** through recognition of data limitations while still valuing relational use.
- **Relational Care** through the feeling of being "noticed" and supported.
- **Resistance (soft, interpretive)** in the form of critically moderating the authority of the engagement score.

Their narrative strongly illustrates how LA systems can be experienced as supportive rather than disciplinary when embedded within caring institutional cultures.

Appendix 5: Policy Document Screening and Selection

Appendix 5 lists the final sixteen documents included in the CDA alongside a wider set of relevant reports, strategy documents, and grey literature that were reviewed but ultimately excluded. For each document, the table notes its type, whether it was included in the corpus, and a brief rationale for inclusion or exclusion. This is intended to demonstrate the transparency and rigour of the selection process, and to clarify the boundaries of the policy discourse under analysis.

Appendix 5: Policy Document Screening and Selection

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
2013	European Commission	*Opening up Education: Innovative teaching and learning for all through new Technologies and Open Educational Resources*	EU communication	**No**	Reviewed to situate UK developments within wider European digital policy, but excluded from the corpus as it is transnational rather than specific to the UK HE sector and makes only passing reference to LA.
2014	Jisc	*Learning analytics: the current state of play in UK higher and further education*	State-of-play report	**No**	Early mapping of LA activity in UK HE and FE; useful for contextual background, but descriptive rather than discursively rich in terms of policy imaginaries, and largely superseded by later Jisc reports included in the corpus.
2014	Jisc	*Code of practice for learning analytics: A literature review of the ethical and legal issues*	Literature / ethics review	**No**	Draws together ethical and legal considerations around LA, but functions as a background review rather than a sector-level policy or strategy text articulating promissory narratives.
2014	UCISA	*2014 Survey of Technology Enhanced Learning for higher education in the UK*	Sector survey	**No**	Offers useful data on institutional TEL adoption and touches tangentially on analytics, but does not substantively construct or legitimise LA; used as contextual evidence rather than as a focal policy text.

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
2015	New Media Consortium	*NMC Horizon Report: 2015 Higher Education Edition*	International foresight report	**No**	Consulted to understand global edtech discourses and the positioning of analytics as an emerging technology, but excluded as it is international in scope and not specific to UK HE policy.
2015	OECD	*Students, Computers and Learning: Making the Connection*	International comparative report	**No**	Provided background on international debates about data, technology and learning outcomes, but was excluded as it is an analytic report rather than a policy or strategy text for UK HE or LA specifically.
2015	Jisc	*A Code of Practice for Learning Analytics* (original edition)	Sector code / guidance	**No**	Early Jisc code consulted for historical comparison; excluded from the main corpus in favour of the updated 2023 *Code of practice for learning analytics*, which better reflects current discourses and is analysed in detail.
2016	Policy Connect	*From bricks to clicks: The potential of data and analytics in higher education.*	Cross-party inquiry / policy report	**Yes**	Included as a foundational UK report that explicitly frames LA and student data as tools for sector transformation, efficiency and value for money; highly influential and frequently cited in subsequent UK work.
2016	Jisc	*Learning analytics in higher education: a review of UK and international practice.*	Jisc research / evidence review	**No**	Heavily used as secondary literature and for context on implementation models, but excluded from the CDA corpus as it synthesises practice rather than articulating a distinct policy imaginary or strategic vision.

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
2017	HEPI	*Rebooting learning for the digital age: What next for technology-enhanced Higher Education?*	Think-tank policy report	**Yes**	Included because it links technology, data and student outcomes in explicitly political and economic terms and constructs a strong promissory narrative about digital transformation and analytics in English HE.
2017	Jisc	*Learning analytics: A guide to ethics and data protection*	Guidance / good practice	**No**	Reviewed as part of the ethics landscape around LA; excluded from the corpus as it focuses on operational guidance and regulatory compliance rather than on sector-level strategic discourse.
2018	Jisc	*Written evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee (Value for money in higher education)*	Parliamentary evidence submission	**Yes**	Included because it positions data and analytics as key mechanisms for improving value for money and student outcomes, and exemplifies how intermediary bodies seek to influence parliamentary debate on HE.
2018	Jisc	*Curriculum analytics: report from Jisc LA Cymru workshop*	Workshop / practice report	**No**	Helpful in demonstrating emerging institutional use cases, but excluded as its focus is localised and practice-oriented rather than presenting sector-wide policy narratives.
2018	European Commission	*Digital Education Action Plan* (2018–2020)	EU strategy	**No**	Screened to understand broader European digital education priorities; excluded because it is transnational and only indirectly relevant to UK HE LA policy following Brexit.

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
2019	Department for Education	*Realising the Potential of Technology in Education: A Strategy for Education Providers and the Technology Industry.*	Government strategy	**Yes**	Included as the main UK government EdTech strategy, which explicitly references data, analytics and personalised learning, and links LA to industrial strategy and system-level modernisation.
2019	UCISA	*2018 Survey of Technology Enhanced Learning for higher education in the UK.*	Sector survey	**No**	Considered for potential inclusion but excluded as LA appears only as one strand of a broader TEL adoption picture; used instead to corroborate sector-level patterns.
2020	Advance HE	*Digital Leadership in Higher Education*	Leadership / strategy guidance	**No**	Provides insights into leadership capability and digital strategy but does not substantively engage with LA or its associated narratives of empowerment, risk, or surveillance.
2020	The Russell Group	*Principles for Effective Digital Education*	Sector report	**No**	Although situated within UK HE and influential within prestigious institutions, the document addresses *digital education practices* broadly and makes only peripheral reference to LA. It lacks sufficient discursive depth regarding LA's role in governance, empowerment, or surveillance.
2020	Jisc	*Digital at the core: a 2030 strategy framework for university leaders*	Strategic framework	**Yes**	Included in the CDA corpus. While LA is only a minor element, the document's broader digital transformation framing is integral to contextualising how analytics

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
					is imagined and legitimised within sector strategy narratives.
2020	Universities UK	*Universities UK Framework for Digital Transformation*	Sector framework	**No**	Discusses digital transformation broadly; LA only referenced tangentially and without discursive depth. Focuses on institutional capability rather than sector-level imaginaries.
2020	OECD	*Seizing the Opportunities of Digital Transformation in Education*	International policy analysis	**No**	High-level international perspective; not UK-specific and provides minimal dedicated discussion of LA as a governance technology in HE.
2021	Universities UK	*Adapting to the Future: Digital Transformation in Universities*	Sector report	**No**	Covers system-level digital strategy and organisational infrastructure but contains only passing references to analytics. It lacks the specific conceptualisation of LA as a governance or empowerment technology necessary for CDA and thus did not meet the "substantive engagement with LA" criterion.
2021	Office for Students	*Gravity assist: propelling higher education towards a brighter future.*	Regulator strategy / futures report	**Yes**	Included as a key text in which the English regulator articulates data-driven futures for HE, including the use of analytics to support continuation, risk management and enhancement.
2021	Emerge Education	*The Dawn of the Higher Education Data Infrastructure*	Sector insights report	**No**	Highly relevant to EdTech marketisation, but the discussion of LA is indirect and framed primarily through

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
					investment and infrastructure logics. As such, it lacked the necessary discursive focus on LA as a governance device and was excluded.
2021	QAA	*Flexible learning pathways in British higher education.*	Sector review	**No**	Reviewed to explore how data and flexibility are framed in quality debates; excluded as LA is not a central focus and references to analytics are sparse.
2022	Jisc	*From Technology-Enabled Teaching to Digitally Enhanced Learning: A New Perspective for HE.*	Sector report	**Yes**	Included because it sits at the intersection of post-pandemic recovery and digital transformation, with LA presented as part of a re-imagined, data-enabled HE ecosystem.
2022	Wonkhe & Solutionpath	*Using data to better support students: Action research report.*	Action research / sector report	**Yes**	Included as a hybrid policy–practice text that normalises engagement analytics as a core component of student support, explicitly linking LA to continuation, wellbeing and "what works" narratives.
2022	Office for Students	*Student Outcomes and Teaching Excellence: A Review of Metrics.*	Regulatory review	**No**	Although concerned with metrics and performance regimes, it does not explicitly or substantively address LA systems or the discourses through which they are legitimised.
2023	Jisc	*Student analytics – A core specification for engagement and wellbeing analytics.*	Technical / standards specification	**Yes**	Included because it codifies an infrastructure for engagement analytics, making visible the assumptions and categories through which

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
					students are rendered as data objects.
2023	Jisc	*Digital Strategies in UK Higher Education: Making Digital Mainstream.*	Sector review / strategy analysis	**Yes**	Included as it synthesises institutional digital strategies and highlights how data and analytics are being mainstreamed into strategic planning, providing a cross-institutional imaginary of digital maturity.
2023	Jisc	*Code of Practice for Learning Analytics* (updated edition)	Sector code / governance framework	**Yes**	Included because it provides an updated normative framework for LA, articulating sector-level expectations around ethics, governance and student support, and is widely referenced in UK HE.
2023	Jisc & Emerge Education	*How can edtech address some of the greatest challenges facing HE leaders?*	Thought-leadership / sector report	**Yes**	Included because it explicitly links analytics, dashboards and student data infrastructures to the imagined solutions to sectoral challenges, and foregrounds intermediary–commercial entanglements.
2023	UCISA	*2023 Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Survey.*	Sector survey	**No**	Consulted to corroborate trends in digital and analytics adoption, but excluded because it reports usage statistics rather than offering a discursive framing of LA.
2024	TASO	*Using Learning Analytics to Prompt Student Support Interventions: Findings from two randomised controlled trials.*	Evidence report / impact evaluation	**Yes**	Included as it explicitly tests the effectiveness of LA-triggered interventions, foregrounding a causal, experimental logic that informs how LA is

Year	Author	Title	Type	Corpus?	Rationale for inclusion / exclusion
					legitimated as an evidence-based tool for retention.
2024	QAA	*Measuring educational gain (Imperial College London).*	Case study / quality enhancement report	**Yes**	Included because it connects analytics, dashboards and educational gain metrics, illustrating how LA is woven into quality assurance and enhancement discourses.
2024	UCISA	*2024 Digital Education Survey for Higher Education in the UK*	Sector survey	**No**	Used to contextualise sector-wide digital trends post-pandemic; excluded as LA features only peripherally and the document does not sustain an extended discourse on analytics.
2025	Jisc	*How to approach digital transformation in higher education.*	Strategic guidance	**Yes**	Included because it frames digital transformation as an institutional journey with data and analytics at its core, and exemplifies contemporary intermediary-led narratives around LA-enabled change.
2025	HEPI	*Solving the Continuation Challenge with Engagement Analytics.*	Policy / think-tank report	**Yes**	Included due to its explicit focus on engagement analytics as a solution to continuation, making visible the logics of risk, prediction and responsibilisation central to current LA discourse.

Table 3. Policy Document Screening and Selection

Appendix 6: CDA Coding

Appendix 6 outlines the coding process used in the CDA presented in Chapter 5. It summarises how policy propositions were identified, grouped into mid-level conceptual clusters, and synthesised into the high-level themes reported in the chapter. The tables provided support methodological transparency and show how discursive patterns were derived from the corpus, including a final mapping that links CDA themes to the interpretative categories developed in Chapter 6, clarifying the analytic bridge between discourse and lived experience.

Appendix 6: CDA Coding

6a Illustrative CDA Coding Matrix

The table below provides an illustrative sample of how policy excerpts from the 16-document corpus were coded, moving from textual features to mid-level discursive groupings and high-level thematic/ideological readings, aligned with Fairclough's (1989, 2003) three-dimensional model.

Policy document	**Verbatim policy excerpt (from corpus)**	**First-cycle / textual code (surface meaning)**	**Mid-level discursive grouping (discursive practice)**	**High-level theme / social practice**
HEPI (2017) – *Rebooting Learning for the Digital Age*	"learning technologies and data-rich approaches can help identify what works in learning and teaching"	Analytics reveals "what works" in teaching	LA as evidence-based improvement tool; optimisation of pedagogy through data	Student success & retention; technocratic rationality; evidence-based governance
HEPI (2017) – *Rebooting Learning for the Digital Age*	predictive LA enable staff to "spot disengaged and underachieving students at the earliest possible opportunity"	Early identification of "disengaged" students	LA as early-warning system for risk and attrition	Student success & retention; risk management; responsibilisation of learners
HEPI (2025) – *Solving the Continuation Challenge*	universities using student engagement analytics are "bucking [a] downward trend" in continuation	Analytics as key to "bucking" negative continuation trends	LA framed as competitive advantage and financial safeguard	Institutional empowerment; performance culture; neoliberal competitiveness
Policy Connect (2016) – *From Bricks to Clicks*	LA provide "targeted and personalised support and assistance to each student"	Personalised support for "each student"	LA as engine of personalised intervention and care	Personalisation & support; caring-but-calculative institution
Jisc (2023c) – *Student Analytics: A Core Specification*	scaling student support through data is "vital to the future success of the HE sector"	Analytics as "vital" to sector's future	LA as necessary infrastructure for system survival	Digital transformation & inevitability; infrastructural dependence on data
Jisc (2023c) – *Student Analytics: A Core Specification*	expansion of LA will create "more responsive and caring student services"	More "responsive and caring" services via analytics	Datafication of care; support mediated through metrics	Care/control nexus; welfare through surveillance infrastructures

Policy document	Verbatim policy excerpt (from corpus)	First-cycle / textual code (surface meaning)	Mid-level discursive grouping (discursive practice)	High-level theme / social practice
Department for Education (2019) – *Realising the Potential of Technology in Education*	dashboards "help build better working relationships between students and personal tutors"	LA strengthens tutor–student relationships	LA as relational bridge and communication aid	Personalisation & pastoral governance; relational reconfiguration through data
Office for Students (2021) – *Gravity Assist*	LA tools "can help students visualise how they are engaging… and how they are progressing in relation to their peers"	Students compare engagement to peers via dashboards	Visualisation of engagement; normalisation through peer comparison	Student empowerment / responsibilisation; subtle norm enforcement
Office for Students (2021) – *Gravity Assist*	dashboards "help students to manage their own learning"	Students "manage their own learning" through data	Self-regulating learner produced through analytics	Empowerment discourse; technologies of the self; neoliberal subjectivity
Jisc (2023a) – *Code of Practice for Learning Analytics*	students are invited to "manage your learning experience" and "understand your learning engagement"	Students addressed as data-managing subjects	LA as self-management tool; invitation to internalise metrics	Self-governance; responsibilisation; Foucauldian technologies of the self
Wonkhe & Solutionpath (2022) – *Using Data to Better Support Students*	engagement data helps to "identify where to direct finite resources"	Directing "finite resources" via analytics	LA as triage system for resource allocation	Efficiency & data-driven management; audit culture; scarcity governance
Jisc (2023b) – *Digital Strategies in UK HE*	"Universities that get to grips with the digital and data-driven future will succeed. Universities that do not will find it harder… to operate cost effectively."	"Getting to grips" with data as condition of success	Data adoption framed as survival strategy and efficiency mandate	Digital transformation & inevitability; marketised competition; managerialism
Jisc (2025) – *How to Approach Digital Transformation in HE*	one recommendation is to "collect data and make decisions based on evidence"	"Collect data" and base decisions on "evidence"	Institutional decisions legitimated through analytics; intuition displaced by metrics	Audit culture; evidence-based governance; technocratic authority

Policy document	Verbatim policy excerpt (from corpus)	First-cycle / textual code (surface meaning)	Mid-level discursive grouping (discursive practice)	High-level theme / social practice
QAA (2024) – *Measuring Educational Gain*	LA should be used "to empower students", enabling them "to reflect and gain insights into their own educational experience" and become "active agents in their own learning"	Students as "empowered" and "active agents" via LA	Empowerment through reflective use of personal data	Empowerment narratives; agentic learner under institutional metrics
TASO (2024) – *Using Learning Analytics to Prompt Student Support Interventions*	students reported increased clarity and an "increase [in] confidence in self" after LA interventions	LA boosts "confidence in self"	Analytics-mediated interventions as psychological empowerment	Affective governance; empowerment via risk categorisation and nudging
Jisc (2020) – *Digital at the Core*	many educators "have the necessary digital skills and creativity but aren't always empowered to apply them or recognised for it"	Staff not "empowered" to use digital skills	Case for empowering staff through digital/analytic infrastructures	Staff empowerment; professionalisation through data; managerial framing of agency
Office for Students (2021)	LA "enable[s] university staff to better support students"	Staff "better support" students via analytics	LA as staff-facing decision-support tool	Staff empowerment & responsibilisation; care enacted through monitoring

Table 4. Illustrative CDA Coding Matrix

6b CDA—IPA coding bridge

The table below demonstrates how the high-level CDA themes map onto the four interpretative themes developed through the IPA in Chapter 6, making explicit the analytic bridge between discourse and lived experience.

High-Level CDA Theme (Chapter 5)	**How This Appears in Lived Experience (evidence from Chapter 6)**	**Corresponding IPA Interpretative Theme (Chapter 6)**
Student Success & Retention	Pressure to "perform to the dashboard"; fear of being flagged; behaviour shaped by retention logic	Compliance & Internalised Surveillance
Personalisation & Support	Students feeling "noticed", supported by tutors who use data dialogically; pastoral triage	Empowerment & Agency
Efficiency & Data-Driven Management	Staff feeling constrained by scripts, templates, mandatory outreach; professional judgement displaced	Ethical Ambiguities & Relational Tensions
Digital Transformation & Inevitability	Staff and students describing resignation ("you adapt…that's university now"); sense of inevitability	Resignation (within Resistance & Reimagining)
Empowerment (student, staff, institutional)	Experienced as conditional, dependent on knowledge, discretion, voice; sometimes anxiety-inducing	Empowerment & Agency / Ethical Ambiguities
Surveillance & Control	Students self-monitor behaviour; staff concerned about visibility and oversight; ambient data gaze	Compliance & Internalised Surveillance
Neoliberal Rationalities / Ideology	Data interpreted as performance expectation; feelings of audit pressure; normalisation of metrics	Ethical Ambiguities & Relational Tensions
Policy Futures & Inevitable Progress	Interpretative fluidity; future imagined as more automated/predictive; critique mixed with acceptance	Resistance, Resignation & Reimagining

Table 5. CDA and IPA coding bridge