English higher education policy in uncertain times: An argumentative exploration of political speeches during the Global Financial Crash, Brexit, and COVID-19 crises

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Abstract

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Since 2010, the British government has responded to the global financial crash, Brexit, and a global pandemic, COVID-19. These crises have brought many challenges for the country, but they also provide a unique opportunity to examine how politicians respond and form higher education (HE) policies in uncertain times. Crisis responses can generate social and political change and shift societal values, norms, and practices, so examining emerging discourses can provide insight into the rationale for policy changes. HE policy in England has become subject to increasing state steering and micro-management, so it is a fascinating site for investigation. Education and skills discourses in England frequently intertwine with crisis rhetoric and concerns about potential economic downturns. The study applies Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) to nine political speeches from senior politicians in three consecutive Governments formed by the same right-leaning political party. PDA focuses on the reason for action, describes the problem that needs addressing, and sets a goal that imagines a better future informed by values. The study found a trajectory toward the marketisation of education and a coherent approach called 'Discursive Strategies of Neo-austerity'. Politicians use these strategies to justify change even if the content of the discourse varies according to the circumstances of the crisis. The discursive strategies comprise three phases: First, building a consensus

for change through allocating blame and responsibility for the crisis and by playing on people's fears and the risks of not taking action. Secondly, the realignment of the purpose of HE to economic and individual benefits. Finally, the advancement of marketisation through funding changes and perceptions about value for money in HE education justify increasing state intervention, regulation and monitoring in the HE sector.

To the proudest Mum and Dad in dreamland.

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Acknowledgements

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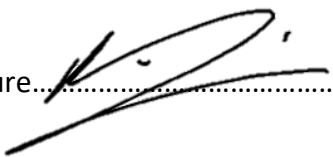
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Chapter 1: Uncertain Times in Higher Education

British higher education… has been in a 'never-ending' series of crises

since the end of the Second World War (at least). (Finn, 2018, p. 106)

1.1 Introduction

This thesis investigates how a series of crises have provided a rationale for reforming higher education (HE) in England. It will focus on how three different UK governments of the same political party – The Conservative and Unionist Party – have used the Global Financial Crash (GFC), Brexit and COVID-19 crises to legitimise policy shifts in HE from 2010 to 2020. The study applies Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) to critique the strategies that attempt, in 'the context of the failure of existing' policies, 'to transform them in particular directions' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 14).

This introductory chapter begins situating this study within the research field of higher education and the political sciences; this includes the identification of knowledge gaps and a challenge of a current orthodoxy in HE policy studies. It then outlines the study's rationale, methodological approach and research questions. The research questions are then contextualised by exploring the contemporary research sites within the broader political and ideological context in uncertain times. It also discusses the different definitions of crisis and how they apply to the events under study. The final section concludes by summarising each chapter.

1.2 Higher Education Knowledge and Gaps

To understand the contribution this thesis is trying to make to the field of HE research, it is crucial to situate it in the wider body of HE knowledge. Scholarship on HE has increased significantly in terms of volume and vibrancy since the turn of the 21st century and 'now occupies an important place within the wider educational research' (Brooks, 2023, p. 521). The exponential growth in HE enquiry has been linked to the expansion of HE and the increasing number of providers, staff and students (Tight, 2019a).

As the HE research field has matured, there have been increasing attempts to synthesise and present an overview of the themes and topics covered in the scholarly work. Macfarlane's, (2012) tongue-and-check but still thought-provoking HE research archipelago identifies a split in scholarship between the 'teaching and learning island' and the 'policy island', with researchers on each being divided by the sea of disjuncture. In the updated version, Macfarlane (2022, p. 108) says it is just as important to understand '*why* topics are chosen rather than just describing *what* is being researched and written'. The new map offers an ideological seascape of HE island: 'Pragmatists Peninsula, Reformists Rock and Dystopians Retreat', which researchers hop between according to their experience and backstory (Macfarlane, 2022, p. 108). The ideological underpinnings of this research are explored in Chapter Two and the beginning of Chapter Three, while the author's positionality is briefly addressed in Chapter Four.

However, others have taken a more serious and robust approach to mapping HE scholarship. For example, Daenekindt and Huisman (2020) analysed 16,928 article

abstracts and identified 31 topics in the literature. Tight's (2019a) synthesis of HE

research provides eight more manageable topics: teaching and learning, course

design, student experience, quality, system policy, institutional management,

academic work, and knowledge and research. This thesis spans two topics: system

policy research concerning 'HE policy at national and international levels' and the

student experience research that discusses 'student access to and exit from HE and

their broader life experience while they are studying' (Tight, 2019a, p. 2). These

themes are explored in greater detail in Chapters Two and Three.

HE research is a multidisciplinary field best conceptualised as a theme of research

rather than a discipline (Tight, 2013a). Therefore, the HE scholarship greatly relies on

disciplines such as 'psychology, political science, sociology, business administration,

and humanities' (Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020). The study of political sciences, which

examines the 'distribution, exercise, and consequences of power' (Hay, 2002, p. 3), has

significantly influenced this thesis, especially the link between politics and language,

known as political discourse (Kranert & Horan, 2018). Rooted in Aristotelian concepts,

the research field of political discourse is substantial and varied but generally involves

the analysis of political artefacts such as policy documents (Charteris-Black, 2018;

Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Chapters Two and Four explore these concepts further

and propose how they can be understood and explored within the HE context.

Tight's (2013a) examination of methodologies used in HE research showed that the

examination of political discourse has become a locus of interest, with over a quarter

of all studies examined seeking to investigate some form of political or policy

discourse. Political discourse and its analysis are synonymous with Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA), a multidisciplinary method that applies theory to investigate the

'intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture'

(van Dijk, 1993, p. 253). Since the mid-1990s, educational researchers have

increasingly turned to CDA 'to make sense of ways in which people make meaning in

educational contexts' (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 366). However, many studies were CDA in

name alone, with little understanding of CDA's analytical procedures (Rogers et al.,

2005).

However, this study moves from traditional critical linguistics and the theorisation and

analysis of language found in CDA to PDA, which enables the theorisation and

conceptualisation of discourse, politics, and power through dialectical reasoning

(Finlayson, 2013a). The methodological approach, PDA, is laid out in Chapter Four,

along with the rationale for its application. Given the breadth of research proceeding

this study, it is helpful to identify what contribution this research will make to the

fields of HE and the political discourse of HE.

1.2.1 Knowledge Gaps

In England, political or policy discourse analysis in HE tends to lean towards two

approaches. The first approach undertakes a retrospective analysis of national

government policy products or outcomes (Bell & Stevenson, 2006) to establish

theories about how HE is being transformed by political actors or by economic, social,

or global change (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Jones, 2016; Marginson, 2011a;

McCaig, 2018). The second approach uses policy products produced and published by

HE providers to explore how government policy has influenced the behaviour of universities (McCaig, 2016; Pickering, 2019; Rainford, 2019). However, this study aims to provide a contemporary analysis by examining documents that contributed to the policy process rather than the final product. Chapter Two explores concepts of power and how it operates in the policy process. This study is also contemporary in nature because it was undertaken in 'real-time' as the events in the speeches were being lived and experienced.

The field of political discourse research is dominated by studies exploring oral monological speeches (Randour et al., 2020). Politicians in Britain 'deliver a lot of speeches about whatever it is that they are initiating, opposing, or managing — and about a lot more besides' (Finlayson & Martin, 2008, p. 445). Political speeches are concerned with making political decisions and establishing shared values, the former being a type of policymaking and the latter a type of consensus building (Charteris-Black, 2018). However, the policy choices proclaimed in these speeches may bear little resemblance to the final policy products or outcomes (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). The volume of speeches and their accessibility as a data source could explain their popularity in political discourse research.

However, the use of speeches as research artefacts is limited in HE political discourse analysis studies; this thesis will address this gap. Studies that have used political speeches in HE research tend to use them deductively to assess discourses to confirm existing theories (Brooks, 2018; Hensley et al., 2013). However, speeches still provide a crucial site for understanding policy. They are a nexus - drawing together existing

discourse, testing new ideas, rejecting existing perspectives, and setting the direction of travel for policy (Finlayson & Martin, 2008). This study will bring new insights by inductively exploring political speeches to understand how HE policy and fairness are discursively framed in uncertain times. Chapter Four describes how the political speeches will be sampled, used and analysed in this study.

The final point this wants to address is not a knowledge gap but rather a challenge to neoliberalism's dominance in HE policy discourse. According to Tight (2019b, pp. 273-274), there has been a 'neoliberal turn' in HE research where it has become the go-to critique, presenting it as the 'context for the policy or practice' or as the explanation for 'its insidious nature'. In CDA, it has ' become a ubiquitous concept' (Flew, 2014), which is unsurprising given CDA's commitment to challenging power and inequality (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). The application of neoliberalism in discourse studies 'implies a negative evaluation of the object', becoming attributed to everything terrible and unpleasant in HE (Bacevic, 2019, p. 386).

However, times of austerity have always caused 'turbulence in [HE] systems' (Shattock, 2010, p. 29); the austerity of 2010 is no different as it escalated the neo-liberalisation of HE (Mendick et al., 2018). Austere HE reforms have resulted in a funding restructuring that aligns degree qualifications predominantly as a private good, moving the sector to a fully competitive marketised system with increased monitoring and regulation (Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2018; Marginson, 2011b; Whitfield, 2012). Despite its pervasive nature, there has been limited research into the effect of austerity on English HE policy compared to other European countries.

These studies have explored how a sustained period of austerity imposed by the EU has changed HE in Greece, Ireland, and Portugal (Koulouris et al., 2014; Mercille & Murphy, 2017; Teixeira & Koryakina, 2016). Other studies (Antonucci, 2016; Mendick et al., 2018) have focused on how austerity shaped young people's lives and their education experiences in England. More recently, Steer et al. (2021) explored how civil society and the civic university collaboratively resisted neoliberal austerity and brought hope to communities. However, none of these studies has looked at the longer-term effect of austerity on the English HE policy process, which this study intends to rectify. Chapter Three provides a detailed outline of both neoliberalism and austerity.

In summary, this thesis aims to address gaps in HE policy discourse by being a contemporary study that examines policy as a process rather than a product. It will achieve this through the examination of political speeches, an underused data source in HE studies. Finally, it wants to challenge the dominance of neoliberalism and explore austerity's role in English HE policymaking. The following section sets out the rationale for this study and the research questions.

1.3 Rationale and Research Questions

Crisis is an important research site in political discourse inquiry; it is a point that can intensify a direction or redirect policy altogether, which can unfairly affect certain groups. Times of crisis provide governments with opportunities to usher in radical reforms to education (Jones, 2016, p. 208). In Britain, but 'particularly in England, the discourse on education and skills has often been associated with a rhetoric of crisis

and a fear of economic decline' (Granoulhac, 2018, p. 5). The UK has gone through three consecutive significant periods of radical uncertainty, the GFC, Brexit, and the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in 'an extended period of instability and insecurity' (Shariatmadari, 2022). Uncertainty challenges assumptions about governance and the capabilities of leaders to effectively respond to 'societal challenges' (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021, p. 552).

Radical uncertainty dissolves fundamental ideas into multiple perspectives so no one view can 'be supposed accurate', opening up the opportunity to 'filter ongoing streams of events' and narratives into a discourse that 'provides explanations and actionable expectations' (Collier & Tuckett, 2021, p. 110). However, the resulting action often entrenches 'current divisions of inequality along class, racial and gender lines' (Nunn, 2016, p. 482). Global threats also do not affect 'the rich and poor' equally, 'nor the West and the Rest' (Vankovska, 2020, p. 73), as demonstrated by GFC, Brexit, and COVID-19, which affected some groups more than others by magnifying existing inequalities or creating new ones (Antonucci, 2016; Burki, 2020; Marginson et al., 2020).

A crisis is not 'exclusively or inherently negative' (Brambilla, 2019, p. 271). Some see a crisis as an 'opportunity for radical reform' (Klein, 2007, p. 5) as it can 'be simultaneously destructive and productive', dissolving existing norms and creating new ones (Raaper & Brown, 2020, p. 344). Crisis opens up a space for leaders and policymakers to suggest significantly different strategies that direct or redirect the course of policy. However, the strategies or actions that prevail depend 'upon

'discursive struggles' between different 'narratives' of the nature, causes and significance of the crisis and how it might be resolved' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, GFC, Brexit and COVID-19 provide a unique opportunity to examine discursive strategies and how external events, political rhetoric and policy interact to reform HE.

The Neoliberalist Milton Friedman (2002, p. xiv) said, 'Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change', and the 'actions taken depend on the ideas that are lying around'. Since the 1970s, policy ideas in Britain have become associated with the neoliberal tenets - 'the elimination of the public sphere, total liberation for corporations and skeletal social spending' (Klein, 2007, p. 15). Neoliberalism 'effectively precedes the problems' in HE policy; it is not the 'timely strategy for the specific problems facing' HE but the 'omnibus solution waiting to be employed when any opportunity arises', helping to define the problems in the first place (Kleinman et al., 2013, p. 2398). Therefore, a crisis accelerates neoliberal policy or justifies a move in that direction (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017).

Griffiths (2020) argues that the GFC intensified pro-market neoliberal perspectives in English HE reforms and policies. However, in responding to the GFC, the UK took 'a vanguard position on austerity', cutting deeper and harder than other countries (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 302). Since then, austerity has been the 'post-crisis prescription, but also acts to define the problems that caused the crisis in the first place' (Berry, 2016, p. 7). Therefore, it is essential to know if the rationale for action in the speeches aligns with neoliberal discourses, something else like austerity, or

neither. The examination of political speeches delivered over a decade at times of crisis will hopefully provide insight into what ideas are 'lying around' and how they are used discursively in the policy process.

The PDA method enables researchers to analyse the ideas used and strategies and choices politicians 'make in response to circumstances and events… in light of certain goals and values' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 11). This study understands politics and political discourse as fundamentally about deliberation and 'making choices about how to act' according to various arguments 'before arriving at the right course of action' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 87). The systematic analysis of political discourse demands moving beyond 'how events, circumstances, entities and people are represented' to analysing what 'agents do in response to the crisis, including what they do discursively (in what they say or write)' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 4).

It is assumed from the rationale above that crisis has a significant influence on the discursive strategies employed in the policy process by senior politicians in government. This assumption informed the three research questions that seek to explore political discourses and HE policy in times of crisis. With a particular focus on the political deliberation between different options according to values before pursuing a course of action to reach their goals for the HE sector. The research questions are:

1. How is crisis discursively framed in nine political speeches about higher education?

2. What discursive political strategies do these speeches employ during three major crises to construct and justify higher education policy changes?

3. How do these speeches discursively frame educational fairness during three major national crises?

The following section contextualises these questions further by exploring the contemporary events that constitute this study's research sites.

1.4 Research Sites

This section sets out the contemporary research sites this study engages with to answer the research questions. This study focuses on English HE because the authority for policy and funding was devolved to the four UK nations in 1999. While each nation's sector possesses similarities, they also have unique characteristics (Raffe & Croxford, 2015). However, the nine speeches analysed are from the British government's elected members of parliament (MP). Therefore, they often refer to Britain even though the policy they discuss applies only to England. The thesis spans a turbulent and fractious decade of British politics. The following sections set out each crisis within its political and ideological context, then define the term crisis and its application to the events in this study.

1.4.1 Cameron and the GFC

The 2007/2008 global economic crash 'has been the most severe international economic crisis since the Great Depression' (Wyn & Wilson, 2012, p. 1). The crisis began in the first half of 2007 with 'the emergence of problems in the US market for sub-prime housing loans' - high-risk loans for borrowers with poor credit (Edey, 2009,

p. 186). The fallout reverberated around the globe, with governments nationalising private companies to ensure fiscal stability (Hodson & Quaglia, 2009). There was 'no precedent for this combination of a worldwide collapse in asset values, a global run on banks and the freezing up of all credit markets' (Rawnsley, 2018). In response, a new consensus developed among policymakers from 'enacting stimulus to pursuing austerity' - the shrinking of the size of the state instead of raising taxes (Wren-Lewis, 2018, p. 14).

The Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown's initial 'management of the recession' was viewed as 'successful' (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017, p. 54), and by 2010 'the green shoots of economic recovery had appeared' (Wren-Lewis, 2018, p. 8). Since 1997, the centre-left 'New Labour' initially led by Tony Blair had been in government offering an alternative to traditional social democratic policies, a third way that harnessed markets, choice and privatisation to reduce social injustices (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012; Lunt, 2008).

However, in May 2010, the right-leaning Conservative Party (known colloquially as the Tory Party) and their junior partner, the centrist Liberal Democrats (LD), formed the first Coalition government in 65 years, as no party won an overall majority of seats in the House of Commons. During the election, the Conservatives exploited the crisis as an opportunity to focus on the 'economic catastrophe left behind' by Brown and to 'advance a radical alternative approach' - austerity (Taylor-Gooby & Stoker, 2011, p. 12). The Tory leader David Cameron (2009a) declared that 'the age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity'. The LD ran a more optimistic election campaign

promising to abolish tuition fees. However, their notorious U-turn and the subsequent tripling of student tuition fees to £9000 would cost them dearly in the next elections (Butler, 2020).

The Tories deliberately introduced the word austerity into the country's lexicon to evoke 'the country's sober rebuilding after the Second World War' (Knight, 2024). It became the narrative that explicitly drove the newly formed 'government's broader policy agenda', leading to radical policy change (Williams, 2019, p. 18). The Coalition cited the profligation of the welfare system and public sector debt as the reason for austerity cuts, welfare 'retrenchment and fiscal consolidation' (Edmiston, 2017, p. 262). The Coalition's aim to cut the £150 billion national deficit (Cabinet Office, 2010) was core to their 'economic vision' that 'linked immediate austerity with future growth' (Taylor-Gooby & Stoker, 2011, p. 12).

The austerity programme was wrapped in an apparent 'liberal and reasonable cloak of fairness' (Hoggett et al., 2013, p. 568). However, the resulting cuts disproportionately affected 'those at the bottom of society while the wealth of the richest has grown rapidly'(Mendick et al., 2018, p. 6). A newly elected Conservative parliamentarian in 2010 has recently said, 'With hindsight, we were entering a radically different era… after a period of global stability and democratic growth, we were about to enter an era of democratic decline, and increasing violence, displacement and poverty' (Stewart, 2023, p. 50).

Cameron's longstanding scepticism about the Big State's 'ability to achieve desirable social ends' was intricately linked with austerity (Griffiths, 2020, p. 19). His flagship

policy, the Big Society, challenged 'big government' because it undermined 'the personal and social responsibility that should be the lifeblood of a strong society' (Cameron, 2009b). The 'anti-statism of the Big Society combined with austerity' to revive 'ideas of morality' and the risks of social 'moral collapse' (Clarke, 2018, p. 28). The Big Society would fix the moral crisis caused by an overbearing state by creating 'a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, [and] social action' (Espiet-Kilty, 2018, p. 2).

The Big Society intended to strengthen the third sector through a 'modernised and more competitive voluntary sector' with a market-based approach to delivering social services associated with social enterprises (Espiet-Kilty, 2016, p. 4). The policy's 'liberal premise that state activity 'crowds out' civil society' (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012, p. 32) was a 'triumph in articulating and updating the neoliberal settlement' (Scott, 2011, p. 132). The Big Society 'failed to deliver against its original goals' and consequently faded away (Woodhouse, 2015, p. 12). Policies like this one might aim to absolve the state of responsibility, but ultimately, they fail without sustained active state intervention (Nunn, 2016).

However, the Big Society's political goal persisted, transforming the 'relationship between public services… the state, private companies… third sector agencies' and individuals (Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015, p. 118). HE funding reform was not a Big Society policy but mirrored many arguments about the Big State and personal responsibility. The Browne Report (2010), set up by the previous Labour government, 'recommended that government stop funding university teaching' and 'instead, universities should rely on students' fees, which would make them compete for

income' (Wright, 2016). Chapter Six will address the rationales for the rise in fees and the relationship with the values of the Big Society.

In January 2013, Cameron promised an in/out referendum on European Union (EU) membership if the Conservatives won a majority in the next election. This move was 'interpreted as an attempt to 'appease the anti-EU wing of his party, and to stop the drift of voter support' to the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP) (Wren-Lewis, 2018, p. 164). The Labour opposition leader Ed Miliband said, 'The Prime Minister is going to put Britain through years of uncertainty and take a huge gamble with our economy. He is running scared of UKIP; he has given in to his party' (Hansard, 2013, p. 305). However, Cameron never expected to have to keep his promise because he did not think he would win a majority and their Coalition partner, the LD, would 'block any such move' (Boffey, 2019).

During the 2015 election, Cameron campaigned on the 'inescapable choice – stability and strong government with me, or chaos with Ed Miliband' – a statement that would become somewhat ironic (Cameron, 2015). The Tories won a surprise 12-seat majority, and the LD lost 41 of their 49 MPs. The referendum would go ahead, everyday politics would grind to a halt, and Tory infighting over the EU would damage their ability to govern as a united party for the years to come (Jones, 2022).

1.4.2 May and Brexit

On 23 June 2016, 52% of the 72% of the British electorate that turned out to vote decided the UK should leave the European Union (EU). The EU Referendum campaigners split into two camps: the Remainers, led by Cameron, who wanted to

stay within the EU and the Leavers, led by Boris Johnson, who wanted Britain to exit (Brexit). The referendum also emblematised a period of peak post-truth politics that ushered in a new era of distrust in experts, politicians and government (Mance, 2016; Marshall & Drieschova, 2018). Much of the Leave vote would 'end up being largely a protest... against the government' (Jones, 2022, p. 138) and a rejection of the condescending, educated, urbanised global liberal elite establishment (Hobolt, 2016).

Cameron resigned the day after the referendum, and Theresa May won the uncontested leadership race for the Tory Party and the country. Her maiden speech as PM openly acknowledges the existence and scale of 'burning injustices' in society, which is remarkable given that most Tory governments avoid 'specificity in favour of platitudes about tackling' disadvantages (Dorey, 2023, p. 12). However, May failed to directly acknowledge the impact of austerity policies in broadening a 'range of existing economic grievances' (Fetzer, 2019a, p. 3) and the increased inequalities that contributed to the 'pressures to hold an EU referendum... and why the Leave side won' (Fetzer, 2019b, p. 2)

Mayism mixed 'an ideological tonic of One Nationism, Christian democracy and Red Toryism' (Jennings et al., 2021, p. 306). May's soft pro-statist 'one-nation social policy agenda was enshrined in her advocacy of 'the shared society' (Dorey, 2023, p. 227). The 'shared society' launched in early 2017 comprised a 'reduced central state; greater social co-operation; increased mutual responsibilities; and social mobility for all' (Wray, 2023, pp. 296-297). It differed from the Big Society, which was wilfully ignorant of the effect of social inequality on communities, while inequality drives

policy in the Shared Society (Espiet-Kilty, 2018). May held ideological reservations about 'doctrinal neoliberal claims that privatisation, global free markets, light regulation and low taxes were wholly beneficial for British society '(Page, 2018, p. 117). Instead, she believed in a moral interventionist state that had a positive function in compensating for the failures in the market (Cowley, 2017).

However, May made little progress on her social agenda, as her three years in office were beset by a 'biblical curse, a rolling, unstoppable, slow-motion catastrophe' - Brexit (Jones, 2022, p. 506). Parliament had come to a standstill as it debated and rejected May's plans for leaving the EU. Her solution was a snap election in 2017 to strengthen the UK's hand in Brexit negotiations with the EU and undermine the opposition political party's ability to subvert Brexit (Ross & McTague, 2017).

The Conservatives were predicted to win a general election landside, led by May's 'strong and stable' leadership (Bale & Webb, 2017, p. 20). The opposition leader, Jeremy Corbyn, offered a variant of 'leftwing populism' that was deeply unpopular with some factions of his own Labour Party and the general electorate (Dorey, 2017). However, Corbyn's 'positive, optimistic and even idealistic' (Bale & Webb, 2017, p. 22) manifesto, 'For the Many, Not the Few' (Labour Party, 2017),' which promised free university tuition, proved to be a vote winner, especially among younger voters.

May led a disastrous campaign resulting in a hung parliament as she failed to secure a majority by eight seats. May formed a minority government supported by the traditional Protestant right-wing Northern Ireland Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). A confidence-and-supply agreement was signed, meaning DUP MPs would support the

Government on Brexit votes in the House of Commons. In return, the Northern Ireland Executive received an additional £1 billion of funding over five years.

Initially, Brexit threatened HE in several ways: 'loss of research funding from EU sources; loss of students from other EU countries; the impact on the ability of the sector to hire EU academic staff; and the impact on the ability of UK students to study abroad' (Mayhew, 2017). However, the Brexit election exposed the most pressing problems facing HE - dissatisfaction with funding and voter disenfranchisement (Pickard, 2019). Brexit and HE funding had become intertwined.

Voter analysis indicated that the Conservatives had lost some of their traditional graduate-educated middle-class vote in South England because of Brexit (Heath & Goodwin, 2017). The impact of the financial crisis, austerity politics and the EU referendum 'combined to set off a youthquake in political participation' (Sloam & Henn, 2019, p. 19). The mobilisation of young people not voting Conservative is not a new phenomenon but a continuing trend that started in the 2010 election (Sturgis & Jennings, 2020). Nevertheless, May felt that cutting or freezing tuition fees was a way to ingratiate Conservatism among younger voters and counter the anti-Brexit sentiment in that part of the population (Sloam & Henn, 2019; Watts, 2017). However, not everyone shared this view, leading to tensions between Number 10 and the Department of Education (Buchan, 2018; Johnson, 2017).

The 2017 election was the beginning of the end for May. Her inability to secure an EU withdrawal agreement through the Commons, losing votes by the 'largest majority… in parliamentary history' (Goodlad, 2019, p. 38). May's government also had multiple

waves of ministerial resignations from both sides of the leave / remain divide – her 'Brexit policy was both too hostile to the EU for some Conservative ministers, while insufficiently hostile for others' (Gordon, 2024, p. 5). May's position as PM was untenable, and she resigned as party leader on 7 June 2019, kicking off another Conservative party leadership contest.

1.4.3 Johnson and COVID-19

On 24 July 2019, Boris Johnson became the leader of the Tories and PM of the UK. Johnson's opinion polls continued to rise over the next few months, so much so that the third election in four years was set for 12 December 2019. Running on the slogan 'Get Brexit Done' and a promise to level up the country, Johnson gained a majority of 80 seats. In less than three years, the Conservatives transformed from 'being a pro-EU and socially liberal party under David Cameron to… a pro-Brexit and more socially Conservative Party led by a populist leader' (Evans et al., 2021, p. 1000).

Johnson's 'carefully constructed celebrity personality, his willingness to break rules and flout conventions, his strained relationship with the truth and his questionable work ethic make him a very unusual' PM (Gamble, 2021, p. 987). The ideological positioning of PM Johnson lacked clarity and was difficult to 'pin-point' (Espiet-Kilty, 2022, p. 21) because he would 'wear whatever ideological clothes' suited the current circumstances and assured his 'political dominance' (Jennings et al., 2021, p. 306). His approach, perhaps, aligned best with the 3Ps – 'populism, polarisation, and post-truth' (Naim, 2022).

Johnson said Levelling Up was his 'defining mission' in government (Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, 2022). The Conservative (2019, p. 7) manifesto promised 'investment prudently and strategically to level up every part of the United Kingdom, while strengthening the ties that bind it together'. The Levelling Up concept took on a populist hue, appearing as a bipartisan policy initiative (Espiet-Kilty, 2022). Levelling Up has a somewhat fuzzy conceptualisation, imbued with 'significantly different meanings to different people' (Fransham et al., 2023, p. 2342). The term became a catch-all substitute for narrowing the attainment gap, equality of opportunity, social mobility, career and educational prospects (Espiet-Kilty, 2022; Struthers, 2021).

Levelling Up sought to redefine the interests of the working classes into matters of local identity and geography (Maslen, 2022, p. 109; Tomaney & Pike, 2020) and was an articulation of places rather than about people (Espiet-Kilty, 2022; Newman, 2021). Levelling up weaponised localised low social mobility and high economic unfairness caused by austerity by promising higher state spending and intervention (McCann, 2023; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021). Public opinion on Brexit has become heavily polarised with 'strong political identities formed around 'Leave' and 'Remain'' (Evans et al., 2021). Johnson capitalised on this polarisation by forging 'a new electoral coalition out of voters who supported Leave and identified as English', effectively engaging national identity over class identity (Gamble, 2021).

It could be argued that the global pandemic blew Johnson's premiership off course. The first official case of SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 was reported in China on 31

December 2019; the virus soon became a global pandemic, resulting in the British government closing workplaces and educational establishments and ordering its citizens to stay home to protect the National Health Service (NHS). The legacy of the austerity cuts significantly impeded the country's ability to respond to Brexit and COVID-19 (Glover & Maani, 2021; James & Thériault, 2020; Navarro, 2020).

COVID-19, primarily a public health crisis, affected all aspects of society, including HE. Initial fears focused on potential financial strains due to loss of income and potential reimbursement of tuition and accommodation fees (Kaufman, 2020). The pandemic disrupted universities' core teaching and research missions, potentially exacerbating 'existing inequalities' within the global HE community (Marinoni et al., 2020, p. 39).

However, the impact on HE has not been as severe as feared (Hillman, 2022), with an increase in young people entering university during the pandemic (The Economist, 2021; UCAS, 2021). Nevertheless, many students have faced disruptions, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Concerns also persist about the long-term impact on the access of underrepresented groups to HE, with predictions that disadvantaged students will face more significant challenges in reaching HE at the same rates as their more advantaged peers (Pickering & Donnelly, 2022; UPP Foundation, 2022). The Government's pandemic recovery plan, *Build Back Better,* praised universities for contributing to the national economy and society. However, it also identifies that the country lacks technical and basic adult skills. As a result, it commits to reforming the 'technical skills system' so it can 'respond to employer

needs', signalling a shift away from skills gained through a university education (HM Treasury, 2021, p. 45).

During Covid-19, Johnson was 'widely criticised not only for the substance of his government's plans but for the more elusive aspects of his own leadership presence and his failure to inspire confidence' (Tomkins, 2020, p. 335). However, 'a series of spectacular scandals concerning ministerial integrity and honesty – not least concerning the standards adhered' to by the PM himself – led to his downfall and resignation on 6 September 2022. Since then, there have been two further Conservative PMs: Liz Truss, who crashed the economy and then became the shortest-serving PM in UK history (Stewart & Allegretti, 2022) and Rishi Sunak, who, as Chancellor, oversaw the biggest increase in inequality ever (Neate, 2022), and is on course to lead his party to their worst election defeat ever (Leach et al., 2024).

1.4.4 Crisis

A crisis is an event that comes from outside of a leader's control and is 'different from political and social issues confronted on a normal basis', often portrayed as requiring a 'sacrifice from all to overcome or deal with it' (Sandaran & De Rycker, 2013, p. 187). Disasters are often unexpected and unpleasant, with unprecedented implications for societies. A catastrophe can pose a danger at an individual, group, organisational or societal level, often requiring the urgent introduction of non-routine procedures to mitigate its effects (Racaj, 2016, p. 135).

At a societal level, 'the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a social system' can be threatened and reshaped (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997, p. 280).

Societal emergencies can undermine democracy and citizens' freedoms as 'democratic institutions and their checks and balances' are suspended or destroyed, undermining collective bargaining power and resistance to draconian policies and laws (Bieber, 2022, p. 17). High levels of uncertainty are also defining characteristics of crisis, with people responding to and making decisions with incomplete, inaccurate, or unreliable information (Rosenthal et al., 2001).

Crisis events raise questions about the 'ineffectiveness of governmental agencies and authorities in preventing occurrences' (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997, p. 287). Leaders must take 'a moment of decisive intervention' before the emergency becomes 'politically and ideationally mediated' and their response becomes inadequate (Hay, 1999, p. 324). Nevertheless, governments can provoke and exploit crises to serve their interests, implementing policies to transform social and political change in alignment with their desired societal values, norms, and practices (Rosenthal et al., 2001).

Bacchi (2000, p. 48) suggests that those with power and authority – *governments* - are not 'responding to problems that exist out there' in society; rather, 'problems are created or given shape in the very policy proposals that are offered as responses'. It is how problems are 'represented or constituted' that matters because this determines how the 'problem is thought about and how the people involved are treated'; it also establishes the *right* course of action while excluding others (Bacchi, 2009, p. 1). So, while a crisis may appear as an external phenomenon from governments, how they are 'represented or framed is informed by assumptions, ideological dispositions and the political and other interests of the actors involved' (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015, p. 34).

The legacy of preceding policy shapes a crisis response; earlier decisions constrain subsequent choices of possible or permissible policy responses (Weir, 1992). Policy inheritance can considerably impact policymaking, and small choices 'can have remarkable consequences at a later date' (Peters et al., 2005, p. 1287). However, while policy legacies may influence and constrain responses, they do not entirely determine action, as 'political pressure to undertake social reform' can exert much more significant influence over politicians and other organisations (Peters et al., 2005, p. 1288).

The characterisation of crisis takes many forms, often trying to address the complex and interconnected world in which disasters occur. Permacrisis 'denotes a static and permanently difficult situation' (Turnbull, 2022), or the 'lurching from one unprecedented event to another' (Shariatmadari, 2022). One crisis merges into the next, becoming so complex that it can only be managed rather than resolved (Turnbull, 2022). Polycrisis addresses the entanglement and interaction of events that 'produce emergent harms that are different from, and usually greater than, the sum of the harms they would produce separately' (Lawrence et al., 2024). Britain's turbulent political environment and concurrent events of the GFC, Brexit, and COVID-19 are separate entities that increase societal risks (Glass et al., 2023), creating a sense of a poorly managed permacrisis undermining political and social reality (Musolff, 2023).

However, the combination of GFC, Brexit and COVID-19 is perhaps better understood as a polycrisis. The GFC resulted in austerity cuts that defunded public services and increased inequality (Cavero & Poinasamy, 2013; Davies & O'Callaghan, 2014;

Edmiston, 2017). The lack of public services and increased health inequality contributed to Brexit, leading to stalled political processes, questionable leadership, and a divided country (Fetzer, 2019b; Tomkins, 2020; Yates, 2019). Austerity cuts, inequality and poor leadership significantly impacted the response to COVID-19 (Leruth & Taylor-Gooby, 2021; Struthers, 2021).

Permacrisis and polycrisis speak to the modern world's globalised nature, meaning threats can become transboundary *mega-crises* (Helsloot et al., 2012). Since 2010, contemporary societies have experienced two transboundary mega-crises: the GFC and COVID-19 (Boin et al., 2020). Before COVID-19, there was the 1918 influenza pandemic, but the spread of COVID-19 was unprecedented because of the scale of today's international travel and high-density urban areas, making it a mega-crisis (Lee et al., 2021). Brexit cannot be categorised as a mega-crisis, but it has transboundary implications both in and outside Britain.

The speed at which a crisis appears demands different responses. Firstly, *acute crises* such as flooding, a pandemic, and economic crashes require immediate responses. Secondly, a *creeping crisis* such as global warming or social or political crises like Brexit may take some time to manifest and respond to and can create forms of collective inertia (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997).

Minor crises often arise from how governments or organisations have responded to acute or creeping crises (Boin et al., 2020). Therefore, it would be erroneous to reduce the Brexit crisis to the referendum event (Finn, 2018, p. 3) because it was a series of creeping periodic events that coalesced into a broader predicament known as Brexit

(Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). These include the shortages of heavy goods vehicle drivers (Pocock, 2021), trade frictions between Northern Ireland, Ireland, and England threatening the Northern Irish peace deal (Edgington & Kovacevic, 2023), disputes over fishing rights (Whale, 2023), and a loss of university research funding from the EU (Mckie, 2023) that have coalesced into a crisis known as Brexit.

1.5 Thesis Outline

The thesis consists of eight chapters, with Chapters Two-Four taking an analytical expository stylistic approach, while Chapters Five-Eight have a much stronger critical narrative style where the presence of the author's voice and views of events is evident. This shift in style was necessary because of the contemporary nature of the study being undertaken during fast-moving political events and change. Therefore, this thesis needed to be anchored to existing literature so it could critique political and policy discourses in turbulent times. Without this anchoring, providing a coherent analysis of the speeches would have been challenging.

This introductory chapter situates the theses within existing HE knowledge and identifies gaps in knowledge it aims to contribute to. Next, the rationale and research questions are outlined. It also explores a decade of political uncertainty and defines the term crisis. Chapters Two and Three provide an in-depth overview of the literature relevant to the research and use extensive quotes to highlight key points. The former delves into what policy means and establishes the difference between policy as text and policy as discourse. It also establishes the connection between policy and ideology. It concludes by setting out the operationalisation policy in HE.

Chapter Three examines discourses in English HE; it begins with an overview of neoliberalism and its influence on British society and HE policy. It proceeds to look at the emergence of austerity since 2010, the expansion of HE in England, and the influence of the knowledge economy and globalisation on this growth. It considers how expansion in the sector has intensified institutional hierarchies that reproduce existing social structures, resulting in the introduction of fees and the increased marketisation of HE. It concludes by discussing fairness and HE access.

Chapter Four quotes extensively from the work of Fairclough and Fairclough to outline the rationale for this study's methodological approach, PDA and how it differs from CDA. It sets out the philosophical underpinnings of PDA practical argumentation and positions it within social ontology and critical realism. It addresses criticism of PDA and the rebuttal of those concerns. The chapter then sets out the Practical Argumentation Framework (PAF) that PDA uses to establish the arguments. It concludes by discussing the application of PDA in this research, how the text was selected and analysed, and the ethical considerations.

Chapter Five shifts to a critical narrative style that brings in the author's perspectives. This chapter gives an overview of the application of the PAF to the nine speeches with diagrams and reconstruction summaries of the speeches. It then summarises the analysis of the speeches. It identifies the discourses in each PAF category: ***Claim for Action, Circumstances, Goals, Values and Means-Goals*** and discusses the speeches' discursive framing of crisis.

Chapter Six addresses the second research question and explores the discursive political strategies employed to construct and justify HE policy changes during three crises. It finds three core strategies: Austere Consensus Building, The Purpose of Austere HE and Austere Marketisation. It concludes that changes to HE policy can be understood through a neo-austerity lens, augmenting the insights provided by neoliberalism.

Chapter Seven addresses the third question and explores the discursive framing of educational fairness in the speeches through the strategies identified in the previous chapter. It finds that fairness discourses secure consent for policies that result in inequalities and that the egalitarian purposes of HE are realigned with economic and individual benefits. Finally, it finds that austere marketisation has resulted in an unfair funding system, leading to significant state intervention in the HE sector. Chapter Eight summarises the thesis and identifies the findings and contributions to knowledge. It also highlights the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Discursive Policy in Uncertain Times

Today, educational policies are the focus of considerable controversy

and public contestation… Educational policymaking has become

highly politicised. (Olssen et al., 2004, pp. 2-3)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses critical areas that will provide the thesis's underlying

theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. It begins by defining policy, its political

nature and its relationship with power and resistance during formation. The following

section, Ideologies, explores political beliefs and policy association. The final section

examines the operationalisation of policy within the higher education (HE) sector and

the groups that influence its inception and implementation.

2.2 Policy as Discourse

Prime Minister Johnson's (2021) speech at the 2021 Conservative Party conference

received criticism from across the political spectrum for being heavy on puns, slogans

and optimism but light on policy (Fisher, 2021 - The Telegraph; Walker, 2021 - The

Guardian). Johnson does address several policy areas in his speech: tax, the NHS, social

care, wages, immigration, crime, education, and housing. However, given the

turbulent economic and social pressures on the country because of Brexit and COVID-

19, it was viewed as insufficient because of its lack of new initiatives, its overtly

ambiguous goals, and its lack of a clear strategy about how these goals would be

achieved.

While this demonstrates the expectation that political speeches are a method used to announce or reiterate government policy, it also highlights the contentious and elusive nature of policy and what is meant by the term. Why was Johnson's speech judged as inadequate? Despite the wide array of policy areas mentioned, is it because he failed to clearly define initiatives, goals, and strategies for achieving them? Furthermore, the term policy is used across public and private spheres and permeates all types of language, from the everyday vernacular to scholarly writings. Therefore, it is necessary to define what policy means, particularly education policy, and how it will be used and applied within this research.

2.2.1 Defining Policy

The broad conceptualisation of policy is a 'programme of action or a set of guidelines that determine how one should proceed given a particular set of circumstances' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 14). Social policies proposed by governments exist to tackle social problems and 'aim to improve human welfare… and to meet human needs for education, health, housing, and social security' (Blakemore & Warwick-Booth, 2013, p. 1). For Herman (1984, p. 13), a policy is the 'implicit or explicit courses' of action taken in response to a 'recognised problem with specific goals'; it can also be a 'position or stance developed in response to a problem or issue of conflict, and directed towards a particular objective'.

Herman's description aligns with functionalist ideas and positivistic approaches that conceptualise policy as a government's ability to deal with problems systematically and emphasise 'policy as a product – as an outcome' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 14).

The reduction of policy to a product or outcome gives the impression that policies are generated and implemented through a linear process 'in a straightforward and unproblematic way' based on a consensus of shared values and equal access to power within society (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 24). However, a policy can be both a process and product that is nonlinear and 'reflects the political nature of policy as a compromise which is struggled over at all stages by competing interests… at a number of levels within a number of arenas' (Taylor et al., p. 24). The struggle of competing interests is core to understanding the discursive political strategies used to justify policy change in the nine speeches.

In recent years, values have become increasingly important in defining educational policies and their operation, especially within highly globalised economies (Olssen et al., 2004). The end of the Second World War ushered in the Anglo-American settlement, a philosophical consensus that the economic order should be multilateral 'with monetary and trade practices subject to international agreement and that the overall system would work to facilitate Keynesian economic policy and social welfare goals' (Ikenberry, 1992). In Britain, broad political consensus empowered the Left to 'reshape the economy in a more collectivist way and to strengthen whatever kind of provision had previously existed for the welfare and education of the majority of the population' (Jones, 2016, p. 7).

Underpinning the British Keynesian post-war educational settlement were values of social justice and equality that promoted the expansion of education at all levels (Callinicos, 2012; Flew, 2014; Slaughter & Taylor, 2016). While the extent and impact

of the post-war consensus have been challenged (Addison, 1993; Callinicos, 2012; Toye, 2013), it is still considered to have set in motion a dynamic set of values about education that would inform change and expansion over the coming decades (Jones, 2016). Herman's definition of policy sits within this historical context - located in pluralist traditions where the 'policy process would result in the coalescing of views and values' where 'conflict is not denied, but is not seen as inevitable' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 15).

The conceptual shift from policy as a product to policy as a process focuses on the conflict of values during policy formation and their manifestation in the policy texts themselves (Taylor et al., 1997). In PDA, the conflict or deliberation over values determines the course of action taken in response to a crisis (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Policy generation and implementation are equally essential and viewed as a cyclical rather than a linear process of 'policy contexts' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 17).

Stephen Ball's (1993, 1994, 2006, 2015) work proposes two policy conceptualisations: *policy as text* and *policy as discourse.* This approach aims to 'balance the modernist theocratical project of abstract parsimony against a somewhat more post-modernist one of localised complexity' and moves from a pure to applied sociology (Ball, 2006, p. 43). For Ball (1994, p. 15), policy is neither text nor discourse, but both and 'implicit in each other'. Policy discourses 'produce frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is thought, talked, and written about'. In contrast, 'policy texts are set within these frameworks which constrain but never determine all of the possibilities

for action' (Ball, 2006, p. 44). In his later works, Ball (2015) expands further on the dichotomy between discourse and text, stating:

> Policies are 'contested', mediated and differentially represented by
> different actors in different contexts (policy as text), but on the other
> hand, at the same time produced and formed by taken-for-granted
> and implicit knowledges and assumptions about the world and
> ourselves (policy as discourse). (Ball, 2015, p. 311)

The application of PDA engages policy both as text and discourse. It begins with investigating the policy texts, in the case of this study, the speeches of politicians, to explore their deliberations within different contexts (crisis). Then, it moves onto the implicit by asking questions about power and dominance in society that may not be directly observable but may have an impact on the observable (Danermark et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Policy and Power

Policy as discourse allows for the exploration of text and the 'discursive processes that are complexly configured, contextually mediated and institutionally rendered' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3). Policy arises 'not from language but from institutional practices, from power relations, from social position', with words and concepts changing their 'meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different discourses' (Ball, 2012b, p. 18). Words, language, and propositions are embodied in discourse and are 'ordered and combined in certain ways' while other 'combinations are displaced or excluded' (Ball, 2006, p. 46). Discourse creates the possibilities for thought and action,

as discourse 'systematically forms the objects' or reality of 'which they speak' (Foucault, 2002, p. 50). For Foucault, there is *more* taking place in discourse that is irreducible to just language and speech, and it is this *more* that he exhorts us to 'reveal and describe' (Foucault, 2002, p. 50).

For Ball (1994, p. 21), the *more* in policy as discourse is power and knowledge. He states it is 'about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority'. Therefore, policy construction is 'not value-neutral, but reflect the structural balance of power in society' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 18). According to Foucault (1980, p. 131), 'each society has its own régimes of truth', which establishes the discourses that it 'accepts and makes function as true'. Statements of truth are made by 'authorised people' or experts in power, and those not in a position of power will be 'considered not to be speaking the truth' (Mills, 2003, p. 58). In his inaugural speech for the Collége de France, Foucault explains that:

> It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would
>
> only be 'in the true'; however, if one obeyed the rules of some
>
> discursive 'policy', which would have to be reactivated every time
>
> one spoke. (Foucault, 1971, p. 17)

In this sense, truth is not subjective but a system of 'ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements' (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). Through these procedures, régimes of truth become the processes through which 'people govern themselves and others'; in education, this is

accomplished through the problematisation of issues like 'standards, discipline, the quality of teaching and effective use of resources' (Ball, 2006, p. 49).

This view of discourse places considerable emphasis on the capacity of those with power to control the policy agenda (Dowding, 2006; Lukes, 2005). Those with power and authority determine 'precisely what issues are, or are not, opened up for discussion and debate, and ultimately for possible decision making' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 20). A component of PDA is the analysis of how those in power control the description of the context or circumstances to justify their policy decisions.

Discourses have the capacity to get things done and embody authority; we become the 'subjectivities, the voice, the knowledge, the power relations that discourse constructs and allows' (Ball, 1994, p. 22). So, within a policy as discourse context, we are 'spoken by policies', and 'we take up the position constructed for us within policies' (Ball, p. 22). Therefore, our actions and responses to policy are determined by the creation of problems and their proposed solutions by those with power and authority.

However, policy as discourse is also restricted by or acts to sustain existing power relations within states, such as racism and patriarchy (Rabinow, 1991). Thus, they also function within a historical context of the discourses, decisions, and actions that have preceded them. Approaching policy as discourse means that particular attention needs to be given to the state of power and how 'particular fields of knowledge are sustained and challenged in these settings, and particular events' (Ball, 1994, p. 22). This study

seeks to do this by exploring the discursive strategies sustained or challenged by politicians in times of crisis.

Foucault, through his work, was attempting to detach the 'power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates' or trying to get 'behind capitalism to explore the institutional and individual practices that sustain its organisation' (Chaput, 2009, p. 100). Likewise, Ball sought to recognise and analyse the existence of 'dominant discourses — like neo-liberalism and management theory — within social policy' (Ball, 1993, p. 15; see also, Ball, 2015). His i-spy guide to the neoliberal university shows how dominant economic discourses reformed HE into a business entity that 'seeks profit from the buying and selling of education services' (Ball, 2012a, p. 18).

2.2.3 Policy Resistance

This portrayal of discursive practices paints a somewhat bleak and dystopic world where those in authority wreak power to exclude and control different groups (Ball, 2015). However, where there is power, resistance can also be found. Foucault (1981, p. 101) states that as 'discourse transmits and produces power', it also 'undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it'. Therefore, 'the discursive process… cannot simply be reduced to the intentions and ambitions of a few key actors' as it is both ad hoc and cumulative (Ball, 2012b, p. 155). The discursive process attempts to reconcile the tension between discourse as a 'conceptual schema attached to specific historical, institutional and cultural context' where no actor is 'completely free to construct or reconstruct them' and institutionally located discourse

that draws 'attention to differential power of some actors in their production' (Bacchi, 2000, p. 52).

Discursive practices in policy can be viewed as the 'struggle between contenders of competing objectives, where language—or more specifically, discourse—is used tactically' (Taylor, 1997, p. 26). The policy process is 'inherently political in character and involves compromises, trade-offs and settlements' (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 26). Even among the most powerful of politicians and senior bureaucrats, conflicting interests need to be resolved, which PDA attempts to bring to the forefront through the analysis of deliberation. So, while those with power may define the problem, limit actions or impose specific solutions through policy, these will 'inevitably be contested, and its outcomes shaped by the consequences of macro and micropolitical processes in which competing groups seek to shape and influence policy' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 22). Ball (1998) proposes that:

> most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that
> are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex
> processes of influence, text production, dissemination and,
> ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice. (Ball, 1998, p. 126)

This thesis is chiefly interested in policy as discourse, particularly discursive practices observed in political actions (political speeches) at times of crisis. It endeavours to trace how crisis management, 'economic and social forces, institutions, people, interests, events, and chance interact' and investigate 'issues of power and interests' (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 20). Exploring how the power of those in a position of authority

(politicians) can set the agenda to reproduce, contest or innovate new policy according to their values (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

2.3 Ideology

Gale (1999, p. 396) criticises Ball (1994) for his lack of acknowledgement of the role of 'interdiscursive politics' or 'policy as ideology' in his work on policy, as ideology cannot be 'divorced from policy producers'. 'Political discourse is eminently ideological' (van Dijk, 2003, p. 208). It represents the beliefs shared by a group or groups and are the motivation or reason for acting or pursuing a particular course of action (van Dijk, 1998). For Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 100), when beliefs are present and used in discourse to argue for change or affect social life, 'they are ideological'. Therefore, it is essential to draw attention to ideology in policy and how interrelated sets of concepts, beliefs, assumptions, and values are incorporated and actioned to allow events and situations to be interpreted to uphold those ideologies. Moreover, exploring ideology can help explain the dominance of a particular discourse:

> First, by reconstructing text and discourse representations to
> include, or rather emphasise, ideology that informs policy discourse;
> and secondly… by exploring strategies which theories of ideology
> offer to explain how ideologies establish and sustain their
> 'hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971) and challenge the dominance of others.
> (Gale, 1999, p. 397)

The strategies adopted in a crisis depend upon ''discursive struggles' between different 'narratives' of the nature, causes and significance of the crisis' within the

existing ideological structures (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). The response to COVID-19 by governments worldwide demonstrates how ideology is enacted to define the crisis, the actions taken, and the policies formulated (Glover & Maani, 2021; Ruisch et al., 2021).

Countries took various actions against the same threat according to a 'multitude of contextual factors, such as cultural orientation, economic development level, and political institution, influence national governments policymaking' (Yan et al., 2020, p. 762). For example, the liberal social democracy of Sweden did not fully lock down in 2020 but pursued a nudge strategy to change behaviour without imposing or restricting an individual's freedom of choice (Yan et al., 2020). In contrast, the authoritarian one-party dictatorship of China pursued a zero-covid policy until 2023 through a mandate strategy involving strict lockdowns, coercive forces and social consensus (Yan et al., 2020).

Ideologies permeate all aspects of social life and are 'part of the way in which the dominance of dominant social groups is achieved, maintained and renewed through particular directions of social change' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 100). They also 'embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimise existing power relations' (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 27). However, their power does not come from their overt presence in discourse but from their ability to become *naturalised*, accepted or taken for granted within the wider public consciousness. For example, neoliberalism has been naturalised in the public consensus, as it has reconceptualised the role of markets in the state, shifting the public expectation from the welfare state to a

competitive one (Jessop, 2002). Neoliberal thinking has transformed English compulsory education from publicly run, locally governed schools to 'independent schools' (academies) run by large national private companies (Benn, 2018; Reay, 2017).

The naturalisation of ideologies legitimises existing power structures and helps support unequal power relations. For example, academies 'are run like businesses, the responsibility for outcomes placed firmly on teachers' shoulders, with little reference to the impact of widespread poverty, inequality or ethnic segregation' (Benn, 2018, p. 74), reinforcing existing social strata. However, 'this does not mean that they are necessarily or even nominally naturalised for everyone: they need to be naturalised for a significant number of people, and for a sufficient number of people, to have these effects' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 101). Academisation continues to be government policy, and as of the 2022/23 academic year, 41.6% of schools are academies, and 54.4% of pupils attend one (Haves, 2023). The ideological belief in privatising schools is a reality for many but not everyone, and resistance against academisation suggests that the policy has not become wholly naturalised (National Education Union, 2022).

Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish the intentional acts of policymaking that 'promote discourses which might work in an ideological way from the non-intentional character of ideologies, as manifested in the beliefs and actions' of policymakers for whom 'they appear as common sense' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 101). Politicians enact and represent numerous ideologies in text and talk to rationalise an

action. These broadly align with 'professional ideologies' that underline their function as politicians and 'socio-political ideologies' drawn from their membership of political parties or social groups (van Dijk, 2003, p. 208). However, these different ideologies can clash, and contradictory values can be held simultaneously. For example, politicians can profess a professional ideology aligned with democratic principles because the 'dominant consensus requires it' while also promoting 'ideologies based on principles of inequality', such as racism (van Dijk, p. 208).

Ball (1994) acknowledges the limitations of policy as discourse since it is complex and unstable, maintaining or being a point of resistance to power. However, he encourages using multiple tools to 'construct one half-decent explanation or account' of 'dominant discourses, regimes of truth, [and] erudite knowledges' (Ball, 1994, p. 24). The following section will explore operationalisation policy discourse in HE.

2.4 Operationalisation of Policy

This section examines the operationalisation of policy as discourse in HE, the domains in which it operates, and the actors and groups that influence its inception and implementation. The intention is to highlight the complexity of HE policy and contextualise Ball's (1998) assertion about the nature of policy being ramshackle and consisting of compromise and influence. This knowledge will support the analysis of the nine speeches, providing context for how political actors can operate in specific domains.

Watson (2014) claims that HE in England is the most politically *tinkered-with* system globally. However, in all parts of the UK, HE providers are autonomous institutions; this autonomy is enshrined in law and gives institutions control over their internal operations, such as admissions policies, curriculum, teaching standards, research, spending, and degree awards (Calhoun, 2006; J. Williams, 2016). In 2010, politicians wrestled with how to protect universities' autonomy and strengthen them and their finances while challenging and putting them 'under pressure' to provide a better student experience (Willetts, 2017, p. 3).

However, this 2010 autonomy is of a particular kind, based on the freedom to compete in a market; universities gained financial responsibility and independence but came under increased monitoring and regulation (Wright, 2016). The first Chief Executive of the English HE sector regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), sums up this approach – 'we prescribe outcomes, not process... we tell providers where we want them to improve, but we are not prescribing exactly how they must do this' (Dandridge, 2019, p. 159). The Government and OfS have many sticks but few carrots to influence the sector. Those they do have stem from the significant financial income universities receive from Government-backed student loans, ever-evolving regulatory frameworks, and increased marketisation to increase competition, standards, and student choice (Bowl, 2018; Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2018).

Since 1970, successive governments have positioned universities as part of the 'third-party government' or 'new governance', in which governments collaboratively engage with a wide 'array of third parties… to address public problems and pursue public

purposes' (Salamon, 2002, p. 8). New governance moves away from Keynesian state-centric political-institutionalism that 'steered society and public policy' to a society-centric approach which 'places the focus on the ability of society to govern itself' (Capano et al., 2015, p. 313). The state's power should reduce as markets deliver public services, thereby reducing the burden of the policy process as third parties take control. However, paradoxically, marketisation multiplied and fragmented the policy networks it was meant to replace. It not only created new ones 'but also increased the membership of existing networks, incorporating both the private and voluntary sectors' (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1245).

Governments have utilised a new governance approach to influence and steer HE policy across various domains using various mechanisms and sites. *Figure 2.1* shows four domains within HE that politicians are concerned about or want to influence, either through policy as text (legislation) or policy as discourse (Bagshaw & McVitty, 2020). These domains are not silos but are interconnected and sit both within and outside the HE sector; the domains are permeable and influenced by internal and external forces, which leads to change both inside and outside the sector (Bagshaw, 2020). The relationships between domains change over time or as new concerns and problems emerge (Bradshaw & Dunn, 2020). The domains identified relate essentially to *teaching* or *student experience* activity and do not include areas related to university research activity or funding because that is beyond the scope of this thesis (McKinley et al., 2021; Tight, 2016).
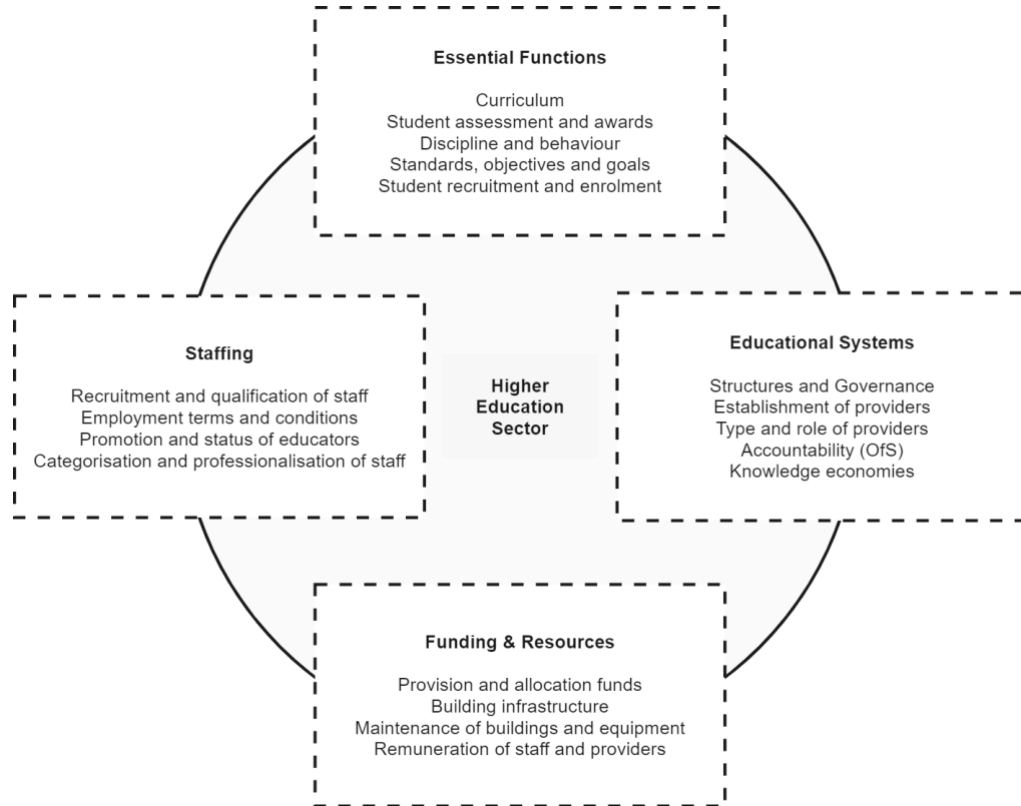
Figure 2.1 Domains of English Higher Education Policy[1]

The problems and policy solutions raised in political speeches under analysis inhabit all four domains. Charteris-Black (2018) states that political speeches are concerned with political decisions and establishing shared values, the former being a type of policymaking and the latter a type of consensus building. There are multiple examples of these activities in the thesis sample. The politicians delivering the speeches use them to establish discourses to cajole, influence, implore, exhort, and criticise the sector in domains they cannot legislate. Jo Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit), a government

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[1] Influenced by public policy for education from Herman, G. (1984). Conceptual and theoretical issues. In J. R. Hough (Ed.), *Educational policy: An international survey* (pp. 13-29). Croom Helm. .

minister, used a speech to suggest that Vice-Chancellors (VC) act selfishly and unfairly when they accept such high remuneration levels. Here, a politician tries to influence behaviour by shaping a discourse around a moral injustice in a domain in which they have little control (Walker et al., 2019, p. 451).

Widening access policies - encouraging a broad range of students to enter HE - exemplify how Government engages with different domains to influence university behaviours and practices (Millward, 2021, 2022). The Government cannot directly stipulate the groups of students that universities should recruit (essential function) (Griffiths, 2020; Martin, 2015). So, they endeavour to change university practices by introducing accountability on access targets through the sector regulator (educational system) and attaching conditions to funding and fee levels (funding and resources) based on those targets (Leach, 2013; McGettigan, 2013).

As already noted, policy is not a linear but an ongoing dynamic process that is 'struggled over at all stages by competing groups' until a compromise is reached (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 24). However, the discursive process operates differently amongst competing groups at different stages of the policy process depending on the power and influence they embody, which can change over time. *Figure 2.2* visualises the competing groups in HE trying to control or influence the policy agenda. Taylor (1997, p. 32) suggests that researchers need to account for the macro, meso, and micro levels of the policymaking process, but perhaps more crucial is the need to 'emphasise the many-layered nature of policymaking and the importance of exploring

the linkages between the various levels of the policy process with an emphasis on
highlighting power relations'.
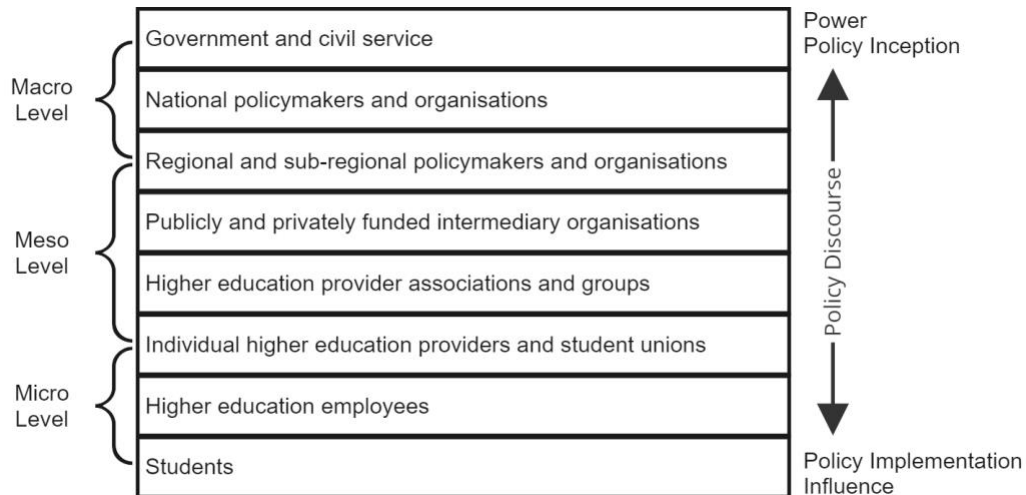
Figure 2.2 Levels of Power and Influence in Policy Discourse

Authority is 'bound by bureaucratic rule-making processes', and its 'power source is
invested in the role an individual holds and their location in the hierarchy' (Bell &
Stevenson, 2006, p. 21). Authority has a downward flow of power where those placed
highest in the hierarchy have an acceptance that those lower down will implement
their inception of the policy. Different groups with different norms, values, and aims
will try to shape the policy agenda, making the process a site of complex conflict
(Dunlop & Radaelli, 2022). Coalitions and groups will 'emerge, develop and potentially
fade in response' or be in opposition to changing policy discourses (Bell & Stevenson,
2006, p. 22). The flow of power and influence 'can be multi-directional, rather than
simply and mechanistically flowing from the top down' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 21).
However, those at the macro-level typically have the power to shape and set the
policy agenda by defining what problems addressed (Bacchi, 2009). They also set the

parameters of how other groups can influence and offer other solutions to the policy problem.

The Government and ministers are at the macro level, as shown in *Figure 2.2,* because their authority comes through democratic procedures. National policymakers, such as civil servants and organisations, including the Department for Education and the OfS, with lawful duties, also operate at the macro level. The political speeches under examination operate at the macro level and set the agenda. However, their deliberation will also show how and if they engage with those at a lower level.

The meso level has a wide range of stakeholders and perhaps the most considerable disparity in influence and power. For example, prestigious universities are viewed to have significantly more influence over problem and policy formation than other providers at the meso level because of their perceived status and reputations (Douglass, 2005; Filippakou & Tapper, 2019). Lobbying groups and think-tanks operate at this level, but their influence and power are predicated on their ideology and political leanings. These groups produce a steady stream of reports which, while ostensibly public, 'are primarily targeted at policymakers inside government (McVitty, 2020, p. 8). None of these groups are 'truly independent or impartial, speaking for different parts of the HE sector according to their different 'origins, values and ambitions' (Beech, 2020, p. 47). The regulatory regime created by OfS means influence over the external environment and policy is 'no longer an optional extra' but a core function of the university (Bagshaw, 2020, p. 163)

Finally, those at the micro level are often responsible for policy implementation or are the beneficiaries (for good or bad) of policy changes. Their power and influence are more restricted than at other levels; they still contribute to policy formation through formal consultation processes, protests, and subversion of policy implementation. Times of crisis can also shift power and influence, as was seen during COVID-19. Students' concerns about fees and accommodation costs led the Government to provide extra funding to support students (Department for Education & Donelan, 2021). As policy travels, the levels of policy, its meaning and implementation can change according to groups and individuals 'agendas, attitudes, values and sets of meaning' (Trowler, 2014, p. 12).

2.5 Conclusion

The first section of this chapter provided an overview of the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of *policy as discourse*. This study classifies the nine political speeches as policy discourse because they are produced and formed by taken-for-granted and implicit knowledge and assumptions about the world and ourselves as part of the nonlinear policy process. They also symbolise political power because politicians use speeches to set the policy agenda and control how a problem is articulated. The section on ideologies discussed the interconnection of ideologies, beliefs, and values and how these influence policy. This understanding will inform analysis as PDA directly addresses identifying implicit and explicit values to explain political goals and discourses.

The section on the operationalisation of policy explored the domains of HE policy and how politicians try to influence different areas. Politicians have authority and power because of their elected position, which places them at the macro policymaking level. However, they must still work with other groups to gain consent for their goals. Therefore, the speeches will involve deliberation, for which PDA provides the framework for investigating. The next chapter will examine the prominent discourses in English HE.

Chapter 3: English Higher Education Discourses

It has been said that the British are exceptionally skilled at creating

hierarchy from diversity. That seems particularly apt in considering

the British higher education system (Savage et al., 2015, pp. 232-233)

3.1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 1980s, the government's higher education (HE) policy was 'obscure, ambiguous and incomplete', and ultimately, the policy was to 'have no policy short of giving autonomous institutions as much or as little money as the Government thinks it can afford' (Maclure, 1982: 259). However, HE policy has become 'unequivocally the subject of public governance', state steering and micro-management (Shattock, 2008: 184). Policy reform has consisted of 'brittle certainty, uncertainty, and evidence-free gambling on the outcome', resulting in the 'most politically tinkered with system in the world' (Watson, 2015: 551-556). This chapter explores and discusses prominent discourses that have steered HE policy in England.

The discourses discussed in this chapter have been selected based on their perceived connection to the research questions. This chapter does not intend to provide a chronology of HE policy in England, of which there are already numerous sources (Jones, 2016; Shattock, 2012). Instead, it explores how neoliberalism, expansion of HE and educational fairness discourses have contributed to changes in HE. These discourses capture the social, cultural, and economic elements rather than epochs of governments and their administrations (Mandler, 2020).

The first section explores neoliberalism and its effect on British politics and HE policy since the 1970s. It sets out the tenets of neoliberalism and how it differs from classical liberalism—exploring the application of neoliberalism by the state in the British context. It also considers whether austerity has replaced neoliberal discourses in Britain. Finally, it considers whether neoliberalism has become an overused discourse in explaining HE policy.

The second section explores the motivations and consequences of HE expansion in England. It begins by suggesting that globalisation and the emergence of the knowledge economy fundamentally changed society and increased the need for highly educated and skilled workers. It then considers how perceived HE institutional hierarchies reproduce social inequalities. It then explores the relationship between increased access, HE funding, the introduction of fees, the marketisation of HE and the transformation of students into consumers.

The third section explores discourses of fairness in HE. It considers how meritocratic and social mobility discourses have influenced the rhetoric of fairness and individualised risk, especially for the most disadvantaged students. It also examines discourses of fair access and widening participation. The final section summarises the discourses discussed in this chapter and their relevance to this study.

3.2 British Neoliberal and Austerity

This section explores neoliberalism and austerity in English society and HE policy. The 1970 Keynesian economic crisis initiated the aggressive pursuit of a neoliberal political

agenda in Western economies (Hall, 2011). After winning the 1979 election, British

Conservative Prime Minister (PM) Margaret Thatcher began an epochal restructuring

programme for what they saw as a bloated and ineffective welfare state (Mitrea,

2018; Peck & Tickell, 2002). The subsequent state reforms were so radical that

neoliberalism fundamentally changed British politics and has come to dominate, if not

define, policy discourses ever since (Peck, 2013).

For many, the ascension of neoliberalism has become so pervasive that it has become

naturalised within the public consciousness, becoming the modern age's

unquestionable ideology (Jessop, 2002). It is the *beast* that 'gets into our minds and

our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social

relations with others' (Ball, 2012a, p. 18). However, what exactly constitutes

neoliberalism, and the extent of its hegemonic power is contested because of its

unstable nature and public resistance to its effects (Flew, 2014; Jessop, 2002; Peck,

2013).

The disputed nature of neoliberalism is also one of its strengths, as it is constantly in

process, evolving, diversifying and remaking itself according to the circumstances (Hall,

2011). Therefore, it should not be 'treated as a concrete economic doctrine' or a

'definite set of political projects' but rather as a 'complex, often incoherent, unstable

and even contradictory set of practices' (Shamir, 2008, p. 3). However, it aims to

dissolve the distinction between the economy and the state and create self-regulating

markets that secure monetary, fiscal and social stability (Callinicos, 2012). Klein (2007,

p. 15) refers to the goals of neoliberalism as the Holy Trinity: 'the elimination of the

public sphere, total liberation for corporations and skeletal social spending'. Neoliberalism shares similar tenets to classical liberalism: the self-interested individual, free-market economics, a commitment to laissez-faire, and to free trade; nevertheless, neo- differs from classical- liberalism (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neo aims to restructure state services and involves a significant transfer of responsibility for outcomes from the state to citizens (Taylor, 1997). As a result, neoliberal citizens become enterprising and competitive consumers who are free to make economic-rational choices rather than individuals with an autonomous human nature who practise freedom from the classical perspective (Burchell, 1996). The individual's function becomes purely economic, and the state's role is to create the 'appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary' for individuals to exercise economic choices, which becomes the only rationale for doing anything (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 315). People are calculating and responsible subjects, wholly accountable for their own life outcomes, thereby absolving the state of their duty of care (Brown, 2003; De Benedictis & Gill, 2016; Duggan, 2003). Markets are so pervasive that they are the only way to distribute all public and private goods (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012).

While classical liberalism framed the state as a negative conception and aimed to reduce its functions, the neoliberal state now has a 'positive role through the development of auditing, accounting and management' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 315). The state's new role is to oversee everything at arm's length, having created circumstances to enforce market conditions (Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2018). The "neo"

prefix is there to distinguish it from classical liberalism and because it 'depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as *achieved and normative*, as promulgated through law and through social and economic policy' (Brown, 2006, p. 694).

The British variant of neoliberalism has taken on a distinct form compared to other countries because its 'principal target has been the reformist social-democratic Keynesian Welfare State' (Hall, 2011, p. 107). In education policy, neoliberalism has reduced HE to an 'input-output system' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 324), emphasising the sector's economic function and linking it to national growth, which has radically changed how 'academic work was funded, organised and motivated' (Jones, 2016, p. 137).The trajectory of neoliberal policy in the UK has led to the slow erosion of the welfare state by incremental and irreversible step changes 'towards a smaller state that incorporates a greater reliance on the private sector for the delivery of public services' (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012, p. 107).

New Labour's third way attempted to mitigate the evils of neoliberalism by 'squaring the circle between social equity' and economic prosperity (Finn, 2018, p. 27). Their educational policy embraced Thatcherite neoliberal tenets of choice and diversity, devolving 'education from the state to an… marketised civil society', transforming citizen rights into consumer rights (Whitty, 2002, p. 79). Neoliberalism governs mainstream thought on HE and provides the 'blueprints for [HE] reform' (Marginson, 2011b, p. 421). Reforms have an economic, political and business dynamic that 'seeks to profit from the buying and selling of… education services', thereby competitively

marketising and commodifying all academic practices and altering relationships with students, colleagues, pedagogy, and 'knowledge production' (Ball, 2012a, p. 18).

Some wonder if neoliberalism has become a 'secret handshake' among fellow travellers or a 'mythical enemy' conjured up by the Left (Dean, 2014, p. 154). Leftist fears of neoliberal hegemony give rise to 'paranoid theorising' about 'the zeitgeist of global capitalism or as a conspiracy of ruling elites' (Flew, 2014, p. 67; Gibson-Graham, 2008). However, this view is extreme, especially given that the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism 'remains a 'thwarted totalisation' and that the vagaries of neoliberal policy depart routinely and raggedly from the pristine vision of neoliberal ideology' (Peck, 2013).

Twenty years ago, neoliberalism barely registered in the English language but has become the 'linguistic omnivore of our time' (Rodgers, 2018, p. 78), swallowing all other words and is in danger of becoming a 'detached signifier' (Ball, 2012a, p. 18) because of its vast and loose usage and application to everything. Neoliberalism is now a 'rhetorical trope' and a 'conceptual trash-can, into which anything and everything… [is] dumped, as long as it is done so with suitable moral vehemence' (Flew, 2014, pp. 67; see also Bacevic, 2019). Hall (2011, p. 706) sympathises with the critics who say neoliberalism 'lumps together too many things to merit a single identity; it is reductive, sacrificing attention to internal complexities and geo-historical specificity' but argues it can support the provisional conceptualisation of a problem (Bacevic, 2019).

3.2.1 Austerity

Initially, the 2007/2008 Global Financial Crash (GFC) that caused a recession in many countries appeared to have shaken the supremacy of neoliberalism (Centeno & Cohen, 2012). However, austerity programmes seeking to address deficits in national budgets around the world were 'entangled with neoliberal rationalities and philosophies', and many consider it to be just neoliberalism by another name (De Benedictis & Gill, 2016, p. para. 1). Understanding the interplay between neoliberalism and austerity since 2010 is essential for answering this thesis research questions.

Neoliberalism principles remain ideologically 'unchallenged by any serious alternatives and continues to shape post-2008 policy' (Centeno & Cohen, 2012, p. 318). Under the guise of moral austerity, the 2010 Coalition Government unleashed neoliberal economic policies that privatised, deregulated and rolled back the state (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012; Mendick et al., 2018). Despite the inequalities caused by austerity, governments openly pursued austerity policies, while the pursuit of neoliberalism was always clandestine (Peck, 2013). Farnsworth and Irving (2012, pp. 133-134) argue that the current 'age of austerity' has become a 'matter of fact' (achieved and normative) in many advanced economies and, therefore, should be referred to as neo-austerity (see also Farnsworth & Irving, 2021).

Austerity moves beyond the abstract ideology of neoliberalism because it is 'manifested in different domains of everyday life' that people identify with austerity discourses (Hitchen, 2016, p. 102). It permeates the sociocultural and is a discursive object that contains 'distinct subject positions, aesthetics and mean-making practices' (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 10). Modern austerity is a heterogeneous and 'complex

discourse, which calls for further analyses to examine the argumentative practices of justification adopted by politicians in times of crisis' (Brambilla, 2019, p. 284) and the array of interrelated elements and processes that come together in its production (Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015, p. 120). PDA was developed in response to the 2007/2008 economic crisis and the need for a methodology that enabled researchers to explore argumentative practices in a crisis (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

An austerity discourse also has a 'distinct character depending on the particular' country's economic, political, historical, and cultural context (Bramall, 2013; Bramall et al., 2016; Farnsworth & Irving, 2012). British austerity is rooted in the Second World War and the commitment to 'universal sacrifice, egalitarianism, and common purpose' (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000). The 2010 austerity programme echoed World War nostalgia discourses: hard work, thrift, entrepreneurship, resilience, self-realisation, and deservingness (Allen et al., 2015; Mendick et al., 2018). These discourses translate structural inequalities into individual problems, anthropomorphising responsibility for consumption and future success (Mendick et al., 2018; Mitrea, 2018; Olssen & Peters, 2005)

The Coalition presented austerity as a fair, non-ideological, 'no-alternative' solution to a set of economic circumstances that were borne out of a global financial crisis' (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021, p. 21). However, it was a profoundly ideological project that reworked the GFC from the fault of bankers into a moral crisis of the welfare state (Dowling & Harvie, 2014). Austerity 'combines an economic logic with a particular moral appeal' (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 309) that 'masked a reinvigorated

ideological reframing' of the excessive social settlement (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021, p. 21). The moral crisis was not caused by poorly regulated global markets and bankers but by irresponsible behaviours of certain groups, such as the poor, who acted selfishly and exploited the nanny state (Dowling & Harvie, 2014). The Coalition austerity programme was a 'political choice' rooted in cultural and moral arguments 'rather than a fiscal necessity' (Griffiths, 2020, p. 30). Bramall et al. (2016) argued that austerity was never an economic endeavour but purely a moral exercise that acted to obscure the 'structural conditions of a deep social, political and economic crisis' (Dowling & Harvie, 2014, p. 872).

This section has explored discourses of neoliberalism and austerity in the British context. It finds that neoliberalism has transformed views on the welfare state and individual responsibility. However, austerity has accelerated the slow march to neoliberalism because it promised to solve the national deficit, the economic slowdown, and the welfare state itself (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021). Despite the impact on the English HE sector, there is little research into the effects of austerity. This study intends to rectify that by acknowledging that neoliberalism is not the '*only* occupant of the political stage' (Peck, 2013, p. 139), and other discourses, such as austerity, can help explain the complex and changing social world.

3.3 Higher Education Expansion

The section engages with discourses that have contributed to the expansion of HE in England. It begins by discussing the role of globalisation and the knowledge economy in the growth of the HE sector. It then considers what a mass HE system is and its

effect on existing institutional and societal hierarchies. Finally, it explores how expansion transformed how HE was funded and organised.

3.3.1 Globalisation and the Knowledge Economy

The political interest in HE policy has coincided with modern globalisation and the emergence of the knowledge economy, making HE a crucial resource and industry for national competitiveness in global markets (McArthur, 2011; Olssen et al., 2004). Globalisation is the interconnectedness of economies, cultures, and societies worldwide. It breaks down traditional nation-states, making borders more porous, and accelerates the 'multi-directional flows of people, objects, places and information' across the globe (Ritzer, 2011, p. 2). In the modern age, globalisation has intensified the integration of national economies through advances in information technology and the rise of supranational organisations and policy (Naidoo, 2003). It has also rapidly intensified the migration of people, knowledge, and services, amplified 'electronic mediation' and the 'movement of economic and cultural capital', and changed political power nationally and internationally (McCarthy et al., 2011, p. 39).

Globalisation is not a 'homogeneous or a universalising process [and] will manifest differently in different nation-states' (Olssen et al., 2004, p. 11). However, it always affects a nation-state's sovereignty and undermines its autonomy and capacity to produce private and public goods at a national level as the state increasingly adheres to global regulation and competition (Marginson, 2007). In Britain, the relocation of industries and manufacturing to more competitive economies created winners and losers of globalisation, increasing regional inequalities and resentment (Hudson, 2022;

Jennings et al., 2021). These groups were also affected by the acceleration of the knowledge economy, which has been as transformational to societies and individuals as those ushered in by the Industrial Revolution (Sidhu, 2007).

In the UK, the knowledge economy moved the country away from 'material production and manual work and towards knowledge-related products and services' (Naidoo, 2007, p. 2) and reframed education as crucial to 'building a post-industrial, globally competitive economy' (Mulderrig, 2012, p. 705). The expectation is that HE needs to conform to government and corporate demands to equip people with the advanced skills, knowledge, and credentials to succeed in a competitive global economy (Giroux, 2011). This reduces HE to a *functionalist* narrative, where education '*should* logically coordinate with the requirements of work because that is how societies function' (Saunders, 2006, p. 3, emphasis in original). In a knowledge-based economy, human capital – competencies – are the key to economic growth and productivity (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

The *age of human capital* theory promotes a functionalist view of education. It proposes that individual human 'knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health' are the most crucial forms of capital in the modern world (Becker, 2002). While other forms of capital remain important, it is 'no longer ownership of capital that generates wealth creation but the application of knowledge' (Brown & Lauder, 2006, p. 26). Knowledge capital relocates power from owners and managers to *knowledge workers*, marking a new stage of capitalist development (Drucker, 1993). The *new factories* at the forefront of knowledge production and the search for competitive advantage in a

globalised knowledge-based economy are 'schools, colleges, universities, think-tanks, design centres and research laboratories' (Brown & Lauder, 2006). How education facilitates the economy and competition is a key point of deliberation in the nine speeches.

3.3.2 Mass Higher Education

The political classes saw the expansion of HE as crucial for the economic and social modernisation of the country in an increasingly competitive global economy and the antidote for geopolitical decline (Finn, 2018; Jones, 2016). The British postwar era ushered in liberal-idealist reforms and expansion of HE (Smith, 2018), which 'reached its apotheosis' in the 1963 Robbins Report (Finn, 2018, p. 22). The report argued there was an untapped pool of potential that had no access to HE; therefore, places 'should be available to all those suited by ability and attainment and wished to attend' (Moser, 2014, p. 27).

Robbins 'inaugurated Great Britain's version of mass HE' (Watson, 2014, p. 125), changing it from an 'elite to a mass experience' (Smith, 2018, p. 164). When the sector eventually reaches 50% of young people entering HE, it will become a universal experience (Brant, 2019; Trow, 1974). Expansion transforms the purpose of HE; an elite system shapes the minds of a small ruling class, a mass system facilitates the development of professional and technical skills for a larger group, and a universal system equips a whole population to social and technological change (Marginson, 2016c).

The establishment of a new type of university in 1968 - polytechnics, brought exponential growth of students by delivering vocational, professional and industrial-based courses which could respond to societal and local needs that existing universities could not or did not want to meet (Pratt, 1997). By 1990, 'more students were studying for first degrees in polytechnics and colleges than in universities' (Cheung & Egerton, 2007, p. 197). The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act abolished the binary system; all HE institutions would now be called universities and brought under one regulatory and funding system (Jones, 2016). The Act also set in motion the divergence and devolution of the British HE sector into separate semi-autonomous systems controlled by each nation of the United Kingdom (Raffe & Croxford, 2015).

The 'dissolution of the binary system' attempted to 'create a comprehensive system, in which vocational qualifications, in particular, would be held in greater esteem' (Cheung & Egerton, 2007, p. 198) and create a unitary system 'in which all [HE] institutions have a common mission' (Marginson, 2016b, p. 13). However, institutional hierarchies have been resistant to change and have increased over time (Raffe & Croxford, 2015). More often than not, hierarchical status is based on the date an institution was founded or became a university and its students' backgrounds (Marginson, 2004). Globalisation and the knowledge economy have also resulted in a global hierarchy of world-class universities that compete internationally for status, funding, and students (Wolf, 2002).

In Britain, influenced by multiple stakeholders, a new expanded, fragmented, and incremental 'ecology or university-industrial complex made up of a wide array of private firms and institutions of governance' has emerged (Wright, 2016, p. 128). The ecology consists of a 'mix of institutions that are stratified by prestige, resources and selectivity of both faculty [staff] and students' representing a diversified system rather than a unified one (Arum et al., 2007, p. 5). Stratification in English HE represents a tripartite system of 'great research universities, the outstanding teaching universities, and those that make a dynamic, dramatic contribution to regional and local economies' (Archer, 2007, p. 638).

However, for laypeople and politicians, powerful external forces associated with measures used in league tables, staff and student class backgrounds, and perceived institutional prestige, coalesce into categorising universities as good or bad. The assumption that there is only 'one type of university', and they are either good or bad, sacrifices what should be a 'crucial strength of any HE system – diversity' (Willetts, 2017, p. 191). The nine politicians in this study engage discursively with the perceived hierarchies and stratified status of universities to justify their policies.

3.3.3 Funding and Marketisation

HE researchers have argued that HE is in a perpetual crisis (Macfarlane, 2024). The 1979-1997 Conservative Governments oversaw a funding crisis narrative through lurches in policy and increased expansion. Cost and funding narratives, especially for undergraduates, now dominate policy and shape all other concerns about the role and purpose of HE (Watson, 2014). The continued growth of HE presented a 'dilemma for

governments' about who should be responsible for funding the expanding student numbers (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009, p. 34). Between 1987 and 1997, participation more than doubled from around 15% to 33%, resulting in university funding per student being effectively halved by the government, which did not increase state funding (Lunt, 2008). By 1995, the sector was experiencing a severe funding crisis that needed an immediate resolution, and it was also experiencing an identity crisis about the nature and purpose of mass HE. There was also a sense of unease that the already overstretched HE system could not rise to the challenges of globalisation and the knowledge economy and provide the advanced skills base the country needed (Lunt, 2008).

In response to the 'threat of some universities to impose top-up fees' of their own in 1995 (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2016, p. 47), the Conservative government appointed the Dearing Committee to make recommendations on 'the purpose, shape, structure, size and funding of [HE]' (NCIHE, 1997). The main thrust of the Review argued for a new compact between society, represented by the government, students and their families, employers, and universities, that required individual students who are the primary beneficiaries of a university education to meet part of the cost.

The New Labour Government introduced tuition fees of £1000 in 1998, which later increased to £3000 in 2004. In 2009, a combination of a HE funding crisis and the GFC led to the introduction of student number controls that capped the number of students institutions could recruit (McCaig & Taylor, 2017). The Browne Review into HE funding and student finance was also launched. In response to the Review, the

newly elected Coalition Government tripled fees in 2012 to £9000 through state-backed loans for English students (Millward, 2021, 2022). Fees have redefined HE from a public benefit to a private benefit, which was used rhetorically to justify shifting the cost from the taxpayer to students (Marginson, 2007). Chapters Six and Seven will explore how politicians justify fees in more detail.

The introduction of fees and the continued commodification of HE has transformed prospective and current university students into individual consumers and, more recently, entrepreneurs (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; McGettigan, 2013). The aim was to create both a diversity of institutions and students; universities were encouraged to locate themselves in the market and target specific groups of students (Archer, 2007). The fledgling market would supposedly drive competition between institutions, improve diversity (institutions and students) and ensure value for money for students, the government, and taxpayers (Brooks, 2013). It was also meant to increase student choices and opportunities and improve quality and standards as providers compete against each other (Bell & Stevenson, 2006).

The government is no longer the provider or purchaser of HE but the steward of a market and provider of information. The 'government as informer' ensures that applicants can make well-informed choices about whether to participate in HE, which subject to study, and which university to attend (Davies, 2012, p. 262). An 'economic instrumentalised perspective of decision making' has underpinned HE policy; the goal was to make the 'provision of more information to provide opportunities for students to make the same choices' (Baker, 2019, p. 1). In the HE market, students become

individualised and rational consumers or customers, although the rhetorical metaphors used for the conception of students shifts according to the policy needs (Tight, 2013b).

The marketisation of the social world has increased individual risk associated with successes and failures (Beck, 1992). A student's outcomes are hugely variable according to discipline, subject, institution, class, gender, geography and race, increasing the risk of failure more acutely for students from specific backgrounds (Boliver, 2016; Cunningham & Samson, 2021; Owens & de St Croix, 2020). It has also created an 'opportunity trap that is forcing people to spend more time, effort and money trying to access the education, certificates and jobs they want, with few guarantees that their aspirations will be realised' (Brown & Lauder, 2006, p. 47). The diversification of institutions and the student body followed existing structures already inherent in the sector that obfuscates and reinforces old and creates new inequalities (Ball et al., 2002).

This section has explored the expansion and changing purpose of the HE sector because of external forces: neoliberal ideologies, globalisation, and the knowledge economy (Brooks, 2018; Brown, 2018; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012; Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004). Despite government changes, HE policy has been on a cumulative, non-linear, contradictory journey towards marketisation (McCaig, 2018). The continuities between governments include interconnected principles of 'choice and competition', 'autonomy and performativity', 'centralisation and prescription' and 'equality of opportunity' added by New Labour (Ball, 1999, pp. 196-197). The consequences of

these issues, policies, and discourse all play out in the nine speeches. The following

section will examine the impact of expansion on educational fairness and access to HE.

3.4 Fairness in Higher Education

This section explores the discourses around fairness in HE. Firstly, it sets out the

literature about social mobility and meritocracy. It then examines how fair access to

HE has developed over the last 20 years.

3.4.1 Social Mobility and Meritocracy

Despite the dominance of neoliberal politics in Britain, 'ideas of justice, social justice,

equity, rightness, and fairness continue to circulate as significant organising principles

in social and political life' (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 314). Therefore, it 'would be

difficult to envisage a government policy position which (on paper at least) did not

advocate that [HE] should be available to all' (Bowl, 2018, p. 3). The egalitarian pursuit

of increasing HE participation indicates a belief in the creation of a fairer and more

'open society… enabling social mobility, and thereby life chances to be determined by

ability rather than background' (Millward, 2021)

However, since the turn of the millennium, and the GFC, there has been a discourse

and policy shift of educational fairness 'from seeking a wide-ranging good of 'social

justice' to a narrower target of 'social mobility' for a far smaller number' (Waller et al.,

2015, p. 619). Therefore, the advocation for fair access is predominately only

concerned about widening opportunities to access HE (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009) to

facilitate the arming of the 'workforce with the credentials, knowledge and skills' for a

global and competitive labour market (Brown & Lauder, 2006, p. 28). Nevertheless, today's political discourse entrenches the language of meritocracy: the idea that whatever our social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for 'talent' to combine with 'effort' in order to 'rise to the top'' (Littler, 2013, p. 52). Meritocratic discourses also 'holds that social mobility is the prime function of education' (Mandler, 2020).

In policy, social mobility is a route to a good life that encodes middle-class behaviour as morally correct and aspirational (Littler, 2017, pp. 91-92). Fairness as social mobility resulted in a deficit model of working-class achievement and aspirations discourse (Payne, 2012). Therefore, reducing the deficit involves giving the disadvantaged 'more of what the middle classes already have… without disturbing the privileges of the middle classes' (Brown, 2013, p. 679). Since the 2010s, politicians have portrayed social mobility as declining, despite being relatively static (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022). However, it suits a discourse that promotes increasing fair access to opportunities and making more room at the top for the hard-working. Discourses of equal access to opportunities have a high tolerance for outcome inequality because they are a 'just and fair consequence of individual effort and hard work' (Donnelly & Evans, 2019: 101).

Meritocracy and social mobility supposedly create a 'fairer and more efficient society' through individuals' merit and hard work (Marginson, 2017, p. 2). However, the stratified and hierarchical nature of the HE sector reproduces existing social strata and inequalities (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). Socio-economic background significantly

influences attainment in compulsory education, with lower attainment correlated with lower economic status (EEF, 2018; Gorard & See, 2013). Despite this, previous attainment determines what institution students are eligible for, thereby protecting 'elite' providers in favour of the middle classes with higher economic and cultural capital (Pickering, 2019). The graduating 'elite' then become overrepresented in elite professions with higher earnings, resulting in a circle of educational *homogamy* that adds to class inequalities (Savage et al., 2015).

At the same time, access to perceived lower-status universities reflects 'endemic educational disadvantage that may begin in the earliest years of school' (James, 2007, p. 2). Reay (2012, p. 596) suggests the failure of social policy to address and find solutions to structural inequalities shows 'poverty of aspiration' with the government rather than those experiencing inequalities. Institutional hierarchies have profound social consequences and mean that 'participation in a low-status university is not the same as… in high-status universities' (Marginson, 2011a). Therefore, HE customers are not buying a product with the perceived same value in the graduate marketplace (Marginson, 2017).

Failure to enter or maximise HE benefits is an individual's responsibility and reflects their inability to perform as successful consumers in a competitive market. Success and failure are shifted from 'structural frameworks' to 'intimate personal and individualised ones' (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 54). However, those from less privileged backgrounds do not have the same resources or knowledge to navigate this unpredictable world; risk in this situation becomes increasingly individualised (Reay,

2017). HE marketisation and austerity have accelerated the 'privatisation of social risk' (Antonucci, 2016, p. 21). English HE policy that 'emphasises… improving 'access' to, and 'success' within, a hierarchically stratified HE system… not only takes for granted the deeply unequal HE system but also actively endorses and approves it' (Donnelly & Evans, 2019, p. 104).

3.4.2 Widening Access

In the run-up to the 2001 election, PM Blair (2001) committed to achieving a 'university participation rate of over 50 per cent among the under-30s' by 2010. However, New Labour's implementation of fees and subsequent removal of maintenance grants seemed to subvert and threaten the social mission of widening participation (McCaig & Taylor, 2017). This target began a twenty-year orthodoxy of expansion and access (Atherton & John, 2020). Estimations suggest that half of all people under thirty have or are accessing some form of HE (DfE, 2019). For many, going to 'uni' is a commonplace activity, a rite of passage into adulthood, while for others, it is 'virtually an expectation' (Savage et al., 2013, p. 224). Successive increases in tuition fees seem to have had little impact on participation rates (UCAS, 2021). Debt aversion has declined over time (Callender & Mason, 2017), but financial situations constrain choices before and after graduation (de Gayardon et al., 2020; de Gayardon et al., 2019).

While access has increased across all social groups, significant inequalities remain regarding what groups participate in HE, what type of institution they access, what profession they enter, and the salary they receive (Social Mobility Advisory Group,

2016). A system based on meritocracy will inevitably result in rewarding the 'privilege of birth and, ultimately, legitimises differentials' (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009: 4). Harrison (2018, p. 62) speculates that the gains made by disadvantaged students are due to the plateauing of demand within certain middle-class groups and areas. The inequalities in access have put widening participation in HE at the top of the policy agenda. These policies 'seek to improve access to, and participation of, a wider range of students at university, specifically those from disadvantaged backgrounds' (Budd, 2017, p. 111).

Promoting HE as a 'desirable good' means denying access because of background would be unfair and socially unjust (Whitty et al., 2015, p. 28). Therefore, fair access and widening participation should be a project of social justice that pays 'attention to the patterns of social inequality in [HE]' (Burke, 2012, p. 35) and makes every effort 'to ensure individuals and groups all enjoy fair access to rewards' (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009, p. 3). However, tying 'the struggle for social justice to economic and institutional expansion' wrongly equates 'equality with equality of opportunity' (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2003, p. 108). Since 2010, there has been a narrowing of widening participation policy to focus on making sure the 'bright but poor' students choose to apply to high-status universities (Harrison, 2018, p. 60). This changes widening participation from a generic activity to merit aid that aligns with meritocratic ideals (McCaig, 2016). The solution to fair access is increasing access to 'top universities' and never dismantling the stratified and hierarchical sector.

Widening participation policies construct deserving and undeserving groups that should be included or excluded in HE. Value judgments around admissions and

support construct and reconstruct the ''problem' of widening participation in classed, gendered and racialised ways' (Burke, 2012, p. 37). While group categorisation can be helpful, existing power and political relations also frame and constrain thinking about 'access, equity and participation' (Burke & Lumb, 2018, p. 19). For example, the framing of the educational underachievement and lack of access to HE of white working-class males, compared to other racial working-class groups, engages power discourses to distract from racial injustices. This group indeed experience significant educational injustices, but much of the debate has been 'shaped by ill-informed and inaccurate assumptions that owe more to racist stereotypes than to an understanding of the research data' (Gillborn, 2009, p. 15). Furthermore, the classification of social groups that have low participation rates 'are also often associated with a range of other 'social problems', for which education is a possible 'cure' within policy rhetoric (Archer & Yamashita, 2003, pp. 53-54).

Critics of widening participation policies claim it takes a deficit model approach that makes victims and scapegoats of students (Watts, 2006), shifting blame for non-participation onto individuals 'lack of information, aspiration and motivation', rather than social problems such as poverty (Archer & Yamashita, 2003, p. 54). This results in underrepresented groups becoming 'pathologised… as the 'causes' of unequal patterns of participation' (Archer, 2007, p. 643). Widening participation focuses on raising the aspirations of prospective applicants is a 'subtle sleight of hand pointing the finger of blame away from social policy, and instead to a deficit in educational aspirations' (Francis & Mills, 2012, p. 256). The deficit discourse not only places 'the locus of responsibility for progression on the individual' but also neglects to

'acknowledge the role of structure in reproducing social inequalities' (Hannon et al., 2017, p. 1228). Widening participation research has also been criticised for failing to account for the 'intersectionality of student characteristics, identities, lifestyles, social structures' and relationships and their impact and inhibiting factors on access (Kettley, 2007, pp. 343, see also Austen et al., 2021).

In England, widening participation policies have been dominated by a 'utilitarian need for the economy to remain competitive in an ever-increasing competitive global marketplace' (Bickle, 2018, p. 15). However, there are insufficient numbers of the middle classes to fill the skills gap and secure Britain's place on the global stage (Watts, 2006). Therefore, students from other socio-economic backgrounds must fill the graduate-level skills gap. Widening access activities act as an introduction to encoded middle-class behaviours, 'changing individual attitudes and compensating for their lack of academic skills and qualifications' (Burke, 2012, p. 30). This creates a 'double deficit model', emphasising the association between HE and the economy (Jones & Thomas, 2005). The utilitarian framework reduces the purpose of HE to 'enhancing employability, entrepreneurialism, economic competitiveness and flexibility' (Burke, 2012, p. 30).

The neoliberal flexible student entrepreneur is expected to seize the opportunities available to them, which means it is the individual's responsibility to change (Watts, 2006) and correct the social injustices they have experienced (Reay, 2012). Widening participation policy has also increasingly imposed a frame of reference in which responsibility for social outcomes is 'transferred from government to autonomous

institutions which can then be blamed for failing to 'play their part'' (Marginson, 2011a, p. 32). Moving responsibility for access to institutions has resulted in institutions primarily 'promoting enrolment to their own programmes rather than to promote HE generally', undermining the fair access agenda and reducing it to a marketing exercise (McCaig & Adnett, 2009).

In England, the rise in fees in 2004 ushered in greater scrutiny of institutional-specific targets and action plans for improving access. The introduction of financial levers meant the ability to charge the maximum fee was contingent on access plans approved by the regulator, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Expectations were that part of the additional fee should be used to deliver outreach activities and other initiatives with prospective students.

The Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017 established the Office for Students (OfS) as the HE sector's regulator. OfS has subsumed the duties of OFFA and has enhanced powers to hold HE providers accountable concerning their Access and Participation Plans (APP) and inequalities in their organisations. Aligning fees to institutional access targets has had little impact on institutional behaviours as Post-92 institutions (ex-polytechnics) still take the primary responsibility for widening participation, and as of 2016, seven 'top' universities now admit fewer disadvantaged students than they did a decade before (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018; Mian & Richards, 2016).

This section has explored how fairness is discursively framed in HE policy in England. A 'brutish notion of fairness mostly prevails' in HE policy that reduces fairness to

'whatever unequal result is thrown up by competition' (Marginson, 2011b, p. 424). It also discussed the role of widening participation in ensuring fair access and how a utilitarian framework has reduced the purpose of HE to an economic one and outreach activities to little more than a marketing strategy. Fairness appears to be a slippery discourse that changes according to the policy needs. It is as much about shifting blame responsibility and widening access to HE under the guise of social progressiveness but is, in fact, about the economy.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored discourses relevant to providing context and answers to the research questions. The first section examined the rise of neoliberalism in Britain and its impact on HE policy. However, it concluded that neoliberalism is not the '*only occupant of the political stage*', and other discourses, such as austerity, might provide critical insight (Peck, 2013, p. 139). Therefore, the analysis of HE policy in Chapters Six and Seven will engage with austerity discourses to explain changes in the sector. The second section explored the expansion of the English HE and the influence of globalisation and the knowledge economy on the growing sector. However, the stratification and hierarchical nature of the sector reproduced social inequalities on a grander scale. It concluded that successive governments have been on a cumulative journey towards marketisation.

The final section explored fairness discourses concerning HE policy and the role of widening participation. It concluded that fairness is a veneer for a sector reproducing social inequalities. The discourse in this chapter will provide the foundation of

understanding when analysing the speeches as they all touch on these areas in one

way or another. The next chapter sets out the research methodology.

Chapter 4: A Crisis Methodology: Political Discourse Analysis

In a crisis, people have to make decisions about how to act in

response and to develop strategies for pursuing particular courses of

action or policies. (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 3)

4.1 Introduction

The methodology chosen for this project must allow for the investigation into how

policy choices are rationalised and made in response to crisis moments. Therefore, this

thesis needs an analytical and evaluative framework for critically examining political

speeches to illuminate the underpinning discourses and ideologies. This chapter

presents the methodological decisions made for the project.

The Methodological Rationale explores the choice of Fairclough and Fairclough (2012).

The following section, Practical Argumentation, sets out the study's philosophical,

ontological, and epistemological underpinnings. It discusses the positioning of

argumentation and practical reasoning in PDA. It sets out the criticisms of PDA and the

'Faircloughian' (Rhodes, 2019) rebuttal to those concerns.

The chapter then takes a more practical turn and outlines the Practical Argumentation

Framework (PAF) that PDA uses to structure and represent practical argumentation in

political discourse. Finally, the chapter describes the application of PDA in this study,

how the speeches will be analysed and selected, and the researcher's positionality and

ethical considerations.

4.2 Methodological Rationale

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 12) developed PDA to aid the investigation of 'the political question of what is to be done in response' to a crisis. Understanding the representation of a crisis is crucial as it 'determines the lines of action that people argue in favour of or against', which are 'strongly dependent upon the premises they argue from' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 83). Thus, PDA is a suitable method for this study because through its application the premises politicians start from and the discursive strategies deployed to justify policy changes can be understood.

If the premise individuals argue from determines their actions, the interpretation of a crisis could lead to vastly different responses. For example, the Coalition's premise for the Global Financial Crash (GFC) positioned the crisis as a moral one made significantly worse by a bloated and inefficient welfare state, requiring the reduction of the state until government spending is under control. However, if the Coalition had premised the GFC on bad regulation and practice of banking and financial services, the action would have been the transformation of those regulations and practices. Government cuts and a period of austerity might be necessary, but they will be less severe because financial losses are recouped through a new regulatory framework.

PDA 'is predicated on a simple and, in a sense, obvious pair of premises – that political discourse is different in kind from other forms of discourse in that it is political, and that it should be analysed primarily as such' (Hay, 2013, p. 321). Fairclough and Fairclough characterise this method as a theoretical and analytical continuity of CDA and an innovation that bridges the fields of linguistics and politics to provide an

approach that can be used across multiple academic communities when investigating political discourses.

In comparison with other approaches in the research field of 'political discourse analysis', their approach conceptualises 'political discourse as primarily a form of argumentation, and as involving more specifically practical argumentation, argumentation for or against particular ways of acting' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 1). Rooted in Aristotelian conceptions of political deliberation, they suggest:

> Politics is most fundamentally about making choices regarding how to act in response to circumstances and goals; it is about choosing *policies*, and such choices and the actions… [that] follow from them are based upon practical argumentation. (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 1)

The suggestion is not that political discourse only contains or consists of practical argumentation; instead, that argumentation allows analysts to fully explore the political significance and effectiveness of more familiar analytical approaches in political discourse: representation, identities, narratives, and metaphors. The conceptualisation of practical argumentation as a political act aligns with how this thesis views HE policymaking as political (see Chapter Two). PDA as a methodology enables the exploration of argument construction to justify specific courses of policy action by politicians.

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) believe that there is a gap in many CDA approaches because they omit the process of logical argumentation in political discourse. Therefore, CDA may fail to show how the 'power of social and institutional structures manifests itself in the reasons for action' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 81). The focus on deliberation or reasoning between different alternatives is a significant departure from previous approaches to CDA that focused on 'social, textual, cognitive and historical aspects' (Altameemi & Bartlett, 2017, p. 69).

The exploration of deliberation in the nine speeches will provide vital insight into constructing discursive strategies to justify policy change. PDA provides a framework for an analyst to identify the political 'argument for action that is being made, starting from a description of the context of action and a desirable goal, informed by values' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 81). Unlike CDA, PDA offers the opportunity to ask 'questions that challenge the argument', its soundness, its validity, or both (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 65). The following section explores practical argumentation and positions it within CDA, as well as examining its philosophical underpinnings, and criticisms.

4.3 Practical Argumentation

This section explores the conceptualisation of practical argumentation in PDA. It begins by positioning PDA within the CDA theoretical framework, social ontology, and critical realism. It then examines argumentation and practical reasoning and their application in PDA. Finally, it addresses some of the criticisms made of PDA and rebuttals to those criticisms.

Traditional CDA can be viewed as a theoretical framework as much as a research method, as it is 'geared to illuminating the problems which people are confronted with by particular forms of social life, and to contributing resources which people may be able to draw upon in tackling and overcoming these problems' (Fairclough, 2001a, p. 125). Therefore, CDA 'seeks to understand how discourse is implicated in relations of power' (Taylor, 2004), influenced by several traditional areas such as 'Marxist-inspired linguistics' (Rogers, 2011, p. 12). CDA also 'draws on upon a new canon of social-theoretical work – in particular, the writings of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas' (Slembrouck, 2001, p. 36). Critical analysis is rooted in the critical theory of these thinkers, and attempts 'to locate the multiple ways in which power and domination are achieved' (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 367). Therefore, CDA firmly commits to social justice, social action, and challenging power and inequality (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

PDA is positioned within 'Searle's social ontology… [and] critical realism which underlines CDA' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 73). Searle (2006, p. 13) suggests that social reality 'exists only because we think it exists' or that 'there is collective acceptance or recognition or acknowledgement' of objective facts—a piece of paper is worth £5 because, in Britain, there is collective recognition of it as legal tender. Some facts 'exist independently of any human institution', called brute facts (Searle, 2010, p. 11). However, social objective facts are still not matters of opinion but do 'require institutions for their existence' (Searle, 2010, p. 11). Brute facts are *observer independent* – mass or gravity - and social objective facts are *observer relative* – citizenship of a country, or football has eleven players (Searle, 2006, p. 13).

Social ontology argues 'that society has a logical (conceptual, propositional) structure that admits of, indeed requires, logical analysis' (Searle, 2010, p. 6). Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 73) see social ontology aligning with PDA as it 'offers a very plausible explanation of the relationship between agents and structures, and of the role of language in the creation and reproduction of social reality, including power relations'. The politicians in government roles are the apex of power relations, shaping the reality of the context and the solution. Therefore, analysing their political speeches is a crucial investigation site because they are widely available, disseminated and translated into policy. The following section expands on PDA's exploratory tool argumentation.

4.3.1 Argumentation

In critical realism, explaining something is 'identifying the structures and powers that produced it' (Gorski, 2013, p. 669). PDA uses argumentation as the exploratory tool for understanding how language justifies or refutes a standpoint to secure an 'agreement in views' (Van Eemeren et al., 2011, p. 108). Generally, argumentation encompasses two active types: 'interactions in which two or more people conduct or have arguments such as discussions or debates; or texts such as speeches or editorials in which a person makes an argument' (Van Eemeren et al., p. 109). The intention is not to study abstract arguments per se, but rather only those that happen in specific contexts of deliberation 'where someone is being persuaded of something' (Finlayson, 2013a, p. 316).

Argumentation is a complex verbal social activity where different alternatives for 'action are explored for the perlocutionary effect of convincing others of the speaker's rightness' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 23). During monological acts, the speaker represents alternative standpoints of other groups to show that their argument results in the soundest conclusion (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 92). This project will explore how the nine political speeches strategically portray these standpoints in policy discourse.

van Dijk (1997, p. 29) suggests that structures and strategies of argumentation are most pervasive in political text and talk where a political dispute 'in which opposed standpoints of the political Others are systematically attacked, and those of the political ingroup defended'. In political speeches, the speaker takes on the role of champion for a group they have defined as being mistreated; for example, it is unfair that taxpayers pay for a graduate's education when most graduates earn more than most taxpayers (see Chapter 7.2).

The process of 'persuasion by argumentation… is the hallmark of democracy' (van Dijk, 1997, p. 29). In PDA, persuasion is a deliberative act intrinsic to democracy and politics because it offers choices and reasons for action (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). Therefore, PDA must illuminate the deliberation between different choices and actions. Deliberation occurs in existing structures, organisations, and communities in which established values and norms shape how the circumstances for action are defined and 'applied to questions of policy' (Finlayson, 2013a, p. 315). It is also about the premises used to justify action; these include the conceptualisation of situations or

problems and the social world's 'circumstances' or 'facts' (Finlayson, 2013a, p. 318). The following section sets out how PDA combines practical reasoning with argumentation.

4.3.2 Practical Reasoning

The philosophical underpinning of argumentation is practical reasoning, denoted in PDA as practical argumentation. While theoretical reasoning concerns what is or is not true, practical reasoning concerns how people decide and justify actions in response to a given situation or process (Coleman, 2013). Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 39) suggest that practical arguments are also plausible arguments, based on '*presumptions*' which, in principle, are '*defeasible*'- assumed to be true based on the evidence available but still open to defeat. A presumption is a 'qualified, tentative assumption of a proposition as true that can be justified on a practical basis provided there is no sufficient evidence to show that the proposition is false' (Walton 2006: 72). Therefore, the only logical response to the GFC is austerity when assuming cutting public spending is the only viable answer for economic recovery. However, this may change as evidence of the social inequalities or economic stagnation caused by austerity emerges.

Plausible arguments use presumptions when 'tentative conclusions need to be drawn, in conditions of uncertainty and incomplete knowledge' and often under time constraints (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 39). The claims made should still be plausible and defensible even if arguments are based on presumptions, and therefore, imperfect (Finlayson, 2013a). For example, austerity measures are justifiable because

historical examples show such measures contributed to economic recovery and reduced fiscal deficits. In times of crisis, many of the arguments made by politicians use presumptions in the absence of firm knowledge or evidence; therefore, the role of argumentation is to test and challenge these presumptions critically. The following section will discuss the criticisms and challenges of PDA.

4.3.3 Criticism of PDA

Critics of PDA suggest politics as deliberation reinforces a 'narrow conception of politics in a way that might cause researchers to become inattentive to more general social powers' (Finlayson, 2013b, p. 12). Hay (2013) also shares reservations about the interpretation and application of his work by Fairclough and Fairclough. Hay (2007, pp. 61-62) has built a 'broad and inclusive conception of politics' based on four features: 'choice, the capacity for agency, (public) deliberation, and a social context' or activity. Directly or indirectly, power negatively or positively shapes the environment and conduct in these four areas (Hay, 2002).

Hay (2013) also states that all situations of deliberation are political, but not all political situations are deliberative; therefore, you cannot define politics and political discourse as solely deliberative in the way PDA does. Defining politics as deliberation or practical argumentation 'fails to see situations in which power is exercised without due deliberation' (Hay, 2013, p. 325). This deliberative ideal artificially narrows the scope of PDA. It also reinforces the exclusive nature of politics that privileges 'formal and elite political discourse over other forms of political discourse' (Hay, 2013, p. 322).

Fairclough and Fairclough (2013, p. 338) rebut the claim that all deliberative situations are political, as people deliberate all sorts of 'non-political private issues'; a private issue only becomes political when 'individuals engage with it as *political actors*'. Crucial to PDA is the conceptualisation that 'argumentation is oriented towards the resolution of differences about what to do, through critical testing of a practical claim, by attempting to think of reasons that would count against it' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 338). An example is the argument that it is false that raising fees to £9000 will discourage disadvantaged students from accessing university because the existing fees of £3000 did not affect access. However, the power in elite political discourse can marginalise and ignore reasons for not acting in a certain way – raising fees despite mass student protests (Kale, 2019; Smoke, 2020). Therefore, actions can be arrived at without deliberation because of existing power structures and the power of those in certain positions to set the agenda and make the arguments that suit them (Finlayson, 2013a; Hay, 2013).

Fairclough and Fairclough (2013) concede that power can be exercised without due deliberation, but it is never 'exercised without deliberation altogether' in a democracy (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 238). The raising of fees only happened after a debate in the British parliament by elected members, who deliberated for and against the change. They see all political power as *deontic power* because it provides reasons for action, independent of an individual's inclinations and desires (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 237). Deontic powers are 'rights, duties, obligations, authorisations, permissions, privileges, authority, and the like' (Searle, 2010, p. 165).

Therefore, it manifests in status functions, such as government roles, institutions or organisations that 'rest on collective recognition or acceptance' and are enforceable through non-violent means, while 'democratic governments are by their very definition committed to the permanent acceptance of disagreements' (Searle, 2010, pp. 163-164). This disagreement is manageable and sustainable through non-violent means because of a 'recognition of a set of institutional facts' that are binding and which 'creates desire-independent reasons for action' (Searle, p. 169). A parliament vote on fees is an institutional fact that binds future behaviours and reasons for action.

Power is the 'ability to get people to do something whether they want to or not', which can be achieved by presenting a limited range of options as the only ones available so that the subject is unaware of alternatives (Searle, 2010, p. 147). Deontic power between politicians and citizens flows both ways. Governments can come under the obligation to make policy U-turns because of public opinion; other times, the public has to accept policies from politicians they did not vote for or fundamentally disagree with. According to Searle (2010, p. 174), politics exists in the public sphere and requires 'the existence of group conflicts settled by non-violent means, and it requires that the group conflict be over social goods'. This aligns with Fairclough and Fairclough's conceptualisation of argumentation, and Chapter two's conceptualisation of policy as nonlinear, ramshackle, and full of compromise. The following section explores PDA's analytical framework for structuring and representing political discourse.

4.4 Practical Argumentation Framework

PDA applies an original PAF for structuring and representing 'practical reasoning in political discourse' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 39). PAF (*Figure 4.1*) builds on existing proposals of practical reasoning frameworks by Audi (2006), and Walton (2006, 2007), that outline agents' goals 'as future states of affairs, underlain by values or concerns'.
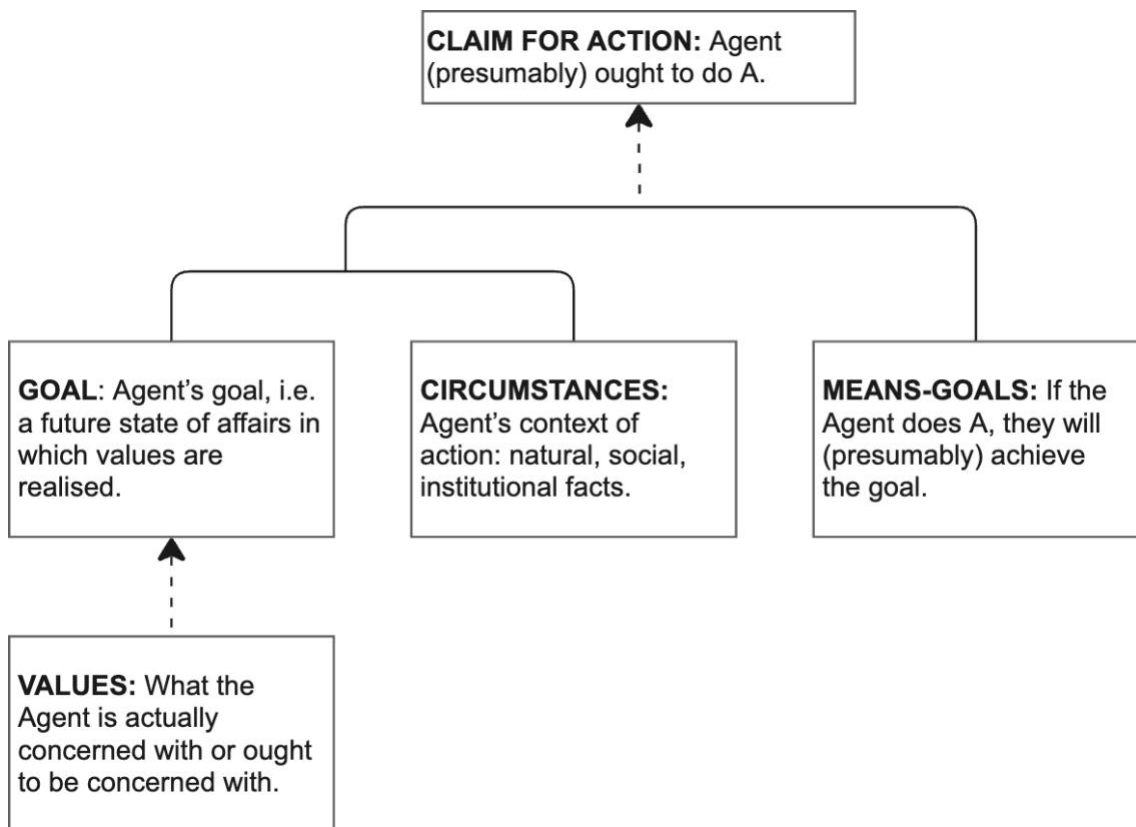
Figure 4.1 PDA's Proposal for the Structure of Practical Arguments

However, Fairclough and Fairclough add a 'factual, circumstantial premise', differentiating it from existing frameworks (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 40). The circumstantial premise can include institutional or socially constructed facts based on discourses and ideologies and are also connected to agents' values or concerns

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(Altameemi, 2019). However, these facts are not necessarily *true or neutral* and can be constructed and used to manipulate an audience to the rightness of an argument.

The structure of practical reasoning, shown in *Figure 4.1*, begins with the 'hypothesis that action A might enable the agent to reach his **Goals,** starting from his **Circumstances,** and in accordance with certain **Values,** leads to the presumptive claim that he ought to do A' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 44). For example, The Government can no longer afford to subsidise students' time in HE (**Claim for Action**), the GFC has increased the national deficit so cuts on spending are needed, HE is already underfunded, on average, graduates earn more than non-graduates (**Circumstances**), transfer the cost of HE to graduates and make HE financially stable (**Goal**), it is fair that those that benefit from HE should pay for the cost (**Value**). Therefore, the government should save money by transferring the cost of HE to graduates (**Means-Goals**).

In practical arguments, **Circumstances** and **Goals** are premises that influence and determine the actions (**Means-Goals**) – raising fees through loans will bring financial stability. For example, current circumstances or context might dictate which actions are chosen over others rather than the aspirational goals or values. However, actions aim to transform current **Circumstances** into the agent's **Goals**, which are informed by their **Values**. **Goals** are the imagined possible future of things; these may be the actual desires of an agent or what they think they ought to desire, because 'they are normatively appropriate, they correspond to moral values that we think are right'

(Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 45). Therefore, some goals are imposed on agents externally and independently of their desires.

Values can also determine *Goals*; therefore, the value premise supports the *Goal* premise. *Goals* are set by what matters to people, their values and concerns, and agents can use them to gain support for their *Claim for Action* as part of an effective rhetorical strategy. *Values* can be *actual concerns* such as an agent's health, family's wellbeing, or honesty or integrity (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). They are also *moral values* or *commitment values* that 'individuals are bound by in virtue of being part of a moral, social, and institutional order' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 45). Moral and commitment values can be recognised as *facts*: it is a *fact* that honesty is an accepted social norm, or that a promise binds an individual to an obligation. These facts belong to the 'circumstantial premise and may also be actual concerns of the agent, things he actually values: the agent may actually want to act honestly or fulfil his promise' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 46).

As well as informing the *Goals, Values* also inform how the *Circumstance* is described and selected. According to Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 46)

> Circumstances are described in ways that fit in with the claim that is
> being made. We not only imagine goals in relation to values, but we
> 'see' problems around us in relation to our values… Often, the
> situation is described in highly value-laden terms, but even when this
> is not apparent, the circumstances of action in a practical argument

are inherently seen as a problem to be resolved and are therefore

negatively evaluated from the point of view of the agent's goals.

Therefore, if an agent has different **Values**, they may arrive at a different course of

action or no action. The agents' **Values** and concerns define their **Circumstances** and

motivate why they act in certain ways and how they justify their **Goals** and actions. For

example, the causes and solutions to educational inequality differ according to

someone's values. Politicians who believe in individual responsibility and hard work

might argue for meritocratic education that equalises access to opportunities.

However, others might believe that structural inequalities like poverty negatively

affect educational achievement, so aim for equity through providing free school meals

for all students.

Figure 4.2 provides a more detailed presentation of the structure of practical

reasoning that captures an agent's motivation between desire and obligation. This

type of argument based on **Circumstances** and **Goals** can only justify a claim

tentatively; therefore, it 'is always open to defeat if new considerations… [are]

brought to light' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 49).

The second structure for practical reasoning (*Figure 4.3*) 'takes probable consequences

of the action as a premise… and infers, given the agent's commitment to achieving the

goals, that the action should not be performed' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, pp. 49-

50).

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ CLAIM FOR ACTION: Agent         │
│ (presumably) ought to do A.     │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
```

| GOAL: Agent's goal is a future state of affairs in which Agent's actual concerns or Agent's value commitments are realised. | CIRCUMSTANCES: Agent's context of action is composed of the following relevant facts: (a) natural facts; (b) social, institutional facts, e.g. Agent's value commitments (e.g. duties, promises, socially recognised (moral) values and norms). | MEANS-GOALS: Action A is the means that will (presumably) take the Agent from Circumstances to Goal in accordance with Values. |

VALUES: Agent is actually concerned with the realisation of Values, or Agent ought to be concerned with the realisation of Values (Values designates Agent's actual concerns or Agent's Value commitments).

Figure 4.2 The Structure of Practical Reasoning: A Detailed Representation

Figure 4.3 shows the **Counter-Claim** and *Negative-Consequences.* The agent explores alternative arguments but discounts them if the 'consequences are exposed that undermine the stated goals of the action, then not doing the action is a more rational decision if one maintains one's commitment to those goals' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 50). For example, the argument for increasing fees could have a **Counter-Claim** that fees should not increase; however, this means the **Goal** is unachievable because the **Negative-Consequences** would mean HE remains underfunded, and non-

graduates would continue paying for HE even though they do not benefit directly from it.
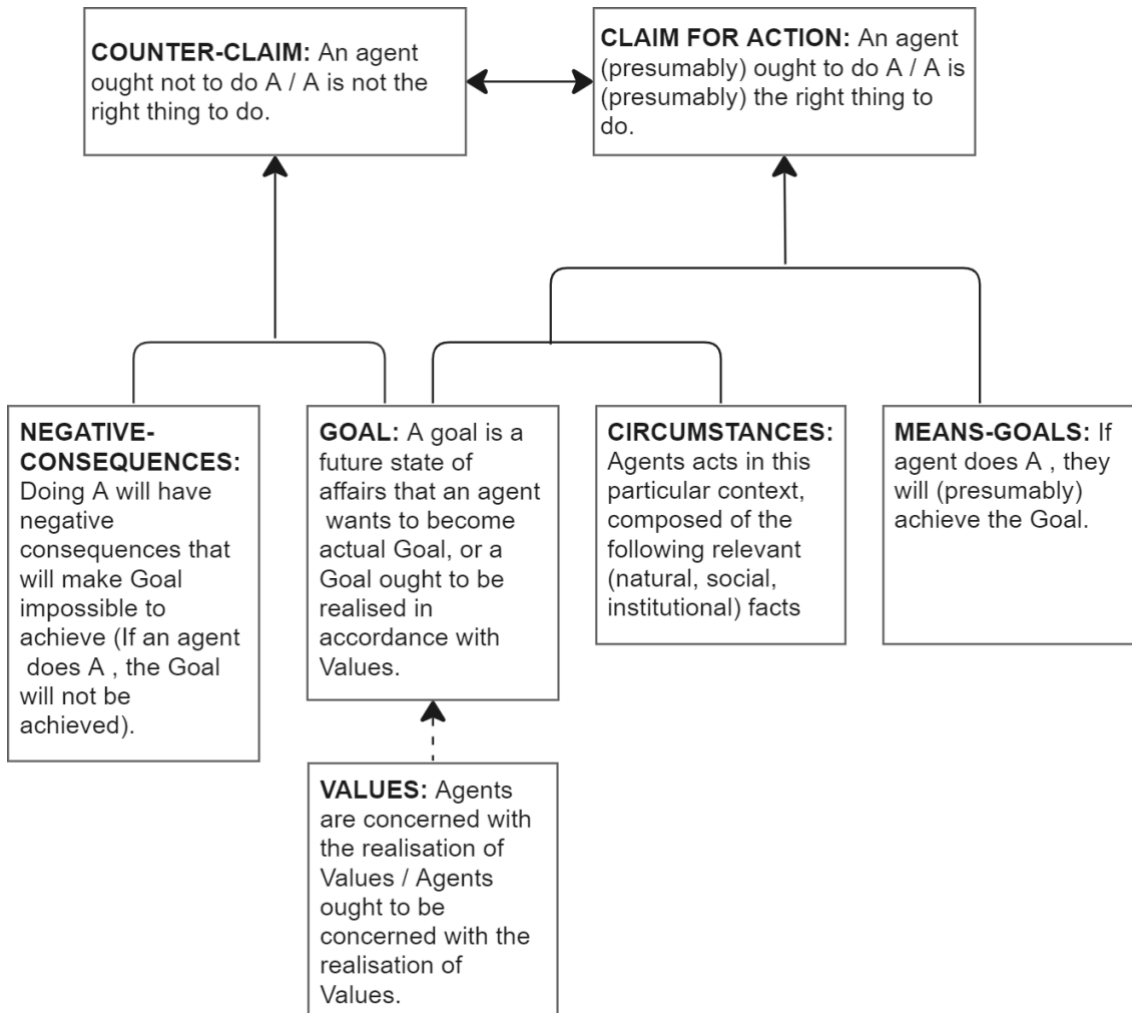
Figure 4.3 Deliberation: Argument and Counter-Argument

The PAF diagrammatic model simplifies the complexities of a particular political argument. Therefore, Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) expand the model through multiple examples that extend the conceptualisation of deliberation within practical argumentation. These include *Counter-Arguments, Objections/Alternatives to the argument*, *Positive-Consequences* of the *Goal*, *Unreasonable* situations, and

Arguments from Authority or ***Other Countries*** that support the ***Circumstances*** or

Goals (*see Appendix 1 for full descriptions*).

The application of the PAF categories is ambiguous in the Faircloughian proposal and

other analysts' work (Altameemi, 2019; Altameemi & Bartlett, 2017; Harmon, 2017;

McCaig, 2018; Rhodes, 2019; Whigham, 2017). This ambiguity is demonstrated in

Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) analysis of a parliamentary debate on university

tuition fees; the ***Claim for Action*** —'tuition fees ought to be increased to £9000'—

aligns the premises with the solution (***Goal***) of what the government should do rather

than stating the reason for action – the deficit means the government cannot fund HE.

The ability of categories allows for changes in discourse over time or in different

situations. The tuition parliamentary debate was the last step in raising fees; the

government's policy (***Goal***) to raise fees was well-established, and in this situation, the

Claim for Action is a directive to members of parliament to vote with the Government.

This study applies the latter approach, as the study is looking at the initial response to

a crisis. The flexibility means the analytical focus can be tailored to the 'specific

content of the discursive form under scrutiny' but also 'comes at the price of analytical

clarity, given the ambiguity which emerges due to these required elaborations'

(Whigham, 2017, p. 125). Therefore, the analyst must rationalise their methodological

choices, which the following section will explore in more detail.

4.5 Application of PDA in this Study

The role of the PDA analyst is to identify and interrogate the normative and explanatory types of practical arguments in political discourse and establish if an agent's reasoning is sound or can be rebutted or rejected. They do this from a dialectical perspective that involves the 'critical questioning of Claims and of Circumstantial and Goal premises' (N. Fairclough, 2018, p. 42). Critical questioning also involves investigating the inferences about the facts (i.e. discourses, ideologies, beliefs and values) used to frame the problem or current situation (I. Fairclough, 2018). The critique of the premises involves both normative and explanatory critique; the former 'refers to the evaluation of social practices and beliefs as objectively good or bad, beneficial or harmful,' and the latter 'investigates why social realities are as they are, and how they are sustained or changed' (Altameemi & Bartlett, 2017, p. 17).

A normative critique distinguishes between what is false and true; it is about making judgements about 'behaviour, actions and social practices as being… just or unjust, fair or exploitative, racist or non-racist, sexist or non-sexist' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 79). Normative critique is also the 'analysis of manipulation in discourse' (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 116). Manipulation is 'intentionally deceiving one's addressees by persuading them of something that is foremost in one's own interest through the covert use of communicative devices' (Van Eemeren, 2005, p. XII).

An explanatory critique builds on the normative as 'it tries not only to identify false beliefs and the practices they inform but to explain why those false beliefs are held' (Sayer, 2011, p. 221). For N. Fairclough (2018, p. 37), explanatory critique explains *why* and *which* 'features of discourses' and ideologies are 'necessary for maintaining the

social order'. The discourses and ideologies invoked frame premises or claims, and their selections are linked to the 'diverse interests and social positions (e.g. positions in relations of power) of particular groups of social agents' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 116). The role of critical questions in practical argumentation is to explain 'how reasons for action… contribute to causing social change' and how structures like the welfare state shape reasons for Action (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 101).

4.5.1 Data Analysis

This thesis is particularly interested in the arguments presented in the speeches, then moving beyond the PAF to the 'abduction stage' of analysis, which redescribes categories into theoretical concepts that explain how discourses justify policy change (Fletcher, 2017). Unfortunately, 'thick descriptions of the empirical entities' do not provide the theoretical engagement needed to move beyond the explicit meanings in the text (Fletcher, 2017, p. 188). Further analysis is needed for the 'development of new explanatory theories' or, in the case of this thesis, the discovery of the underlying discourses and strategies for change (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021, p. 171).

Theoretical engagement moves beyond the 'empirically observable by asking questions about and developing concepts' concerning discourses, power and dominance relationships in a society that are not directly observable but have a causal impact on the observable (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 117). The theoretical concepts explore the causal explanations of the discourses in the speeches by applying existing literature and theories (Fryer, 2022). *Appendix 2* provides a complete description of the three-stage approach to analysing the speeches.

4.5.2 Text Selection

In CDA, there is no standardised approach for gathering a sample (Reisigl, 2018; Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), and the PDA method provides no guidance on selecting text for a study. In CDA, data collection depends on what is being investigated and, as such, should be informed by theory until the 'topic can be refined so as to construct the objects of research' (Fairclough et al., 2011, p. 395). Fairclough (1992, p. 230) suggests selecting texts from moments of crisis as they 'make visible aspects of practices which might normally be naturalised, and therefore difficult to notice' and demonstrate 'change in process' in action. Titscher et al. (2000) offer less opaque advice by suggesting four questions that researchers of discourse should consider when selecting materials to be analysed:

- From what material is the selection made?

- What is selected from this?

- How much of this selection is analysed?

- What are the units of analysis?

The latter two questions are straightforward, as Fairclough and Fairclough say the whole text should be analysed so the researcher can establish the development of argument across the text. The former two questions need further consideration as there is a large pool of potential materials. The research questions specify political speeches as the material of this thesis. A political speech is a 'coherent stream of

spoken language that is usually prepared for delivery by a speaker to an audience for a specific purpose on a political occasion' (Charteris-Black, 2018, p. xiii).

In particular, the thesis is interested in the political speeches about HE delivered by an elected member of the UK Parliament in a senior Government position during three crises between 2010 and 2020. Also, it is interested in government roles that presumably have the most direct control and influence over discourse (van Dijk, 2015) and responsibility for HE policy. The roles are the apex of power relations, with their words affecting the policy process more than others. Therefore, the following roles were chosen:

- A Prime Minister (PM) is responsible for the whole government's agenda and delivering their Party's election manifesto. During the specified period, there were three Conservative Prime Ministers: David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson.

- A Secretary of State (SoS) is responsible for a specific government department. During the specified period, responsibility for HE and universities sat in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and then later in the Department for Education (DfE). Three different Secretaries of State were in scope for this study.

- A Minister of State (MoS) has a smaller portfolio of responsibility within departments. Four people held Ministerial responsibility for HE and universities during the specified period.

A sample of nine speeches, one for each political role during each crisis, was chosen

from the official British government website www.gov.uk/government/speeches,

which contains all the official speeches by government officials. The open-access

website has filter options for topic, name, and date. These filters were applied to

identify the sample, and *Figure 4.4* outlines the four stages of the data selection; a

more detailed table is available in *Appendix 2*.

	Search Criteria	Results
Stage One	Monological speeches, not given in parliament by a PM, SoS or MoS referencing HE between May 2010 to September 2020.	122 speeches 3 PM, 20 SoS, & 99 MoS
Stage Two	SoS & MoS Speeches delivered within a year of each PM's speech (Cameron, May, and Johnson).	38 speeches 3 PM, 16 SoS, & 19 MoS
Stage Three	Speeches were read for relevance to discourses from chapter three.	17 speeches 3 PM, 4 SoS, & 10 MoS
Stage Four	Speeches were read for relevance to research questions and study.	9 speeches 3 PM, 3 SoS, & 3 MoS

Figure 4.4 Stages of Text Selection

It will be essential to specify the topic in stage one because PMs, SoS, and MoS have a

much broader portfolio of responsibility than just HE. The results only returned three

PM speeches, one for Cameron, May, and Johnson, who all made their speeches at a

particularly critical point of the crisis. Therefore, the SoS and MoS speeches had to

occur within 12 months of the PM speeches, so that they were also relevant to the

crises. In stage three, the speeches were assessed for their relevance to the crises

under investigation and the discourse discussed in the previous chapters. The final

stage involved an in-depth read of the speeches to choose the most relevant ones for

this study. *Figure 4.5* summarises the chosen speeches for the study; the next chapter outlines the speeches in more detail.

A criticism of critical discourse analysts is that they project their political biases and prejudices onto their data and analyse them accordingly (Schegloff, 1997), and also, there can be a tendency to 'find what you seek' (Fryer, 2022, p. 371). The intention of stages two and three was to find what was sought – the discourses and speeches that are relevant to the study. However, what remains unknown is how those discourses are strategically used to justify policy changes. Nevertheless, the discourse researcher should consider positionality/reflexivity to the study and acknowledge potential biases and influence on the findings (Mullet, 2018). Rogers (2004) suggests that reflexivity is about acknowledging the role and location of the researcher in the process of knowledge construction and theory development. Therefore, reflexivity 'means that, at one and the same time, an utterance influences what we take the context to be and context influences what we take the utterance to mean' (Gee, 2005, p. 57).

Language and discourse transform societies; therefore, the researcher is not immune to the effects of social struggles and is shaped by the language practices they study (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). In the case of this thesis, I lived through each of the crises being studied and have reservations about how governments have responded to them because of that lived experience. My experiences mean I am positioned within a 'form epistatic double bind' where my research is trying to provide a critical account of discursive strategies during times of crisis while living in the context in which those *discursive strategies* are being produced (Bacevic, 2019, p. 381). Therefore, 'the

epistemological implications' mean discourse is 'simultaneously a subject and an

object of knowledge' (Bacevic, p. 381).

	Name and Role	Tile, Date and Location	Speech Summary
GFC	Vince Cable: SoS for Business, Innovation & Skills	Cutting Spending on Universities: 15 July 2010 at London South Bank University	Delivered to senior HE leaders about potential changes to the sector because of spending cuts
GFC	David Cameron: Prime Minister	Unsustainable, Uncompetitive & Unfair HE: 8 December 2010 at CentreForum	Delivered to the press and HE to explain changes to HE funding the day before the parliamentary vote on fees.
GFC	David Willetts: MoS for Universities, Science &Cities	Sustainable & Progressive HE: 17 February 2011 at the University of Nottingham	The speech argues for a sustainable and progressive HE system that connects fee increases and social mobility.
Brexit	Justine Greening: SoS for Education	Brexit & Social Mobility: 20 March 2017 at the Social Mobility Commission	Delivered the day after the UK notified the EU of its intention to leave the Union. It sets out the future of education and social mobility in Britain after Brexit.
Brexit	Jo Johnson: MoS for Universities, Science Research & Innovation	A Fair Deal: 17 September 2017 at the UUK annual conference	Delivered to senior leaders in HE, arguing that universities are not delivering value for money and need to change.
Brexit	Theresa May: Prime Minister	The Great British Meritocracy: 19 February 2018 at Derby College	Delivered to the press and educational leaders about creating a new tertiary education system that values HE and FE.
COVID-19	Michelle Donelan: MoS for Universities	Access Regime has Failed: 1 July 2020 at the NEON conference	Delivered to widening access practitioners and researchers online and argued the access regime had failed and universities had taken advantage of people.
COVID-19	Gavin Williamson: SoS for Education	The Forgotten 50%: 9 July 2020 at the Social Mobility Foundation	Delivered online and argues that FE has been undervalued and underfunded compared to HE, which will now change.
COVID-19	Boris Johnson: Prime Minister	Radical Change: 29 September 2020 at Exeter College.	Delivered to the press and educational leaders promoting FE, arguing that it is crucial to levelling up the country.

Figure 4.5 Summary of Sampled Speeches

The critical discourse researcher must explore their role in 'empirical data gathering,

the framework, and the method of analysis' and their 'different intentions, positions,

and reflexive locations' given their reality (Rogers, 2004, p. 250). My background and

experience have undoubtedly influenced my choice to undertake a PhD and my

research topic. Coming from a working-class background with a negative experience of

compulsory education, I found HE to be a transformational and life-changing

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experience as a mature student. My professional life has been spent working in educational settings, and I have seen how excellent educational experiences can have an impact on the lives of people of all backgrounds. Like Freire (2000), I see education as a form of liberation that is essential for an active and functional democracy, and this is what led me to undertake a PhD in Education and Social Justice. I also agree with Fairclough (2001a, p. 125) that 'social science [is] geared to illuminating the problems which people are confronted with by particular forms of social life, and to contributing resources which people may be able to draw upon in tackling and overcoming these problems'.

4.5.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the University's ethics committee. This involved reflecting on the research process of collecting, storing, and analysing the data and what impact this could have on the researcher. The study was deemed low risk because it used text sources available in the public domain under the Open Government Licence (OGL). The OGL allows for the copying, adaptation, publishing, distribution and transmission of information as long as the source of information is acknowledged (The National Archives, 2019). Therefore, there was no need to anonymise the data; actually, accrediting who said what and when is crucial to understanding the changes in discourses during a crisis (Titscher et al., 2000). Ethical approval was granted on 8 October 2021 by Lancaster University's Ethics Committee (*Appendix 3*).

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter sets out the methodological approach for the thesis. It provided a rationale for choosing PDA, and explored the PAF and its role in structuring and representing political discourse in detail. It also discussed the study's philosophical underpinnings – social ontology and critical realism- and their implications for knowledge generation. The rebuttal to criticism of PDA was set out and provided insight into the role of deontic power in political discourse.

The chapter then looked at the practicalities of applying PDA in this study. It provides an overview of how the data will be analysed and selected. *Appendices 1 and 2* summarise the analysis and text selection stages, respectively. Finally, the researcher's positionality and ethical implications of the study are considered. The next chapter applies PAF to nine speeches by politicians during crises and discusses how the speakers construct a crisis.

Chapter 5: Ramshackle Policy Discourse

Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that

are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex

processes of influence. (Ball, 1998, p. 126)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter applies the Practical Argumentation Framework (PAF) and

methodological approach described in the previous chapter, and presents the

empirical arguments. Doing so lays the foundation for the following two chapters,

which explore the implicit discourses that are not always directly observable but

manifest through their causal impact on the observable (Danermark et al., 2019). The

first three sections, Global Financial Crash (GFC), Brexit and COVID-19, present the

empirical arguments from the sampled speeches delivered by a Prime Minister (PM),

Secretary of State (SoS), and Minister of State (MoS). As recommended by Fairclough

and Fairclough (2012, p. 125), these sections contain selective reconstructions (see

appendices 1-3 for full reconstructions) of the arguments, drawing on the original

wording of the text to show the premises of the arguments.

The following section provides an overview of the arguments by exploring the

prominent discourse in the main categories of the PAF and insight into the first

research question: How is crisis discursively framed in nine political speeches about

HE? The analysis shows that crises enable politicians to construct discourses that allow

them to achieve their aims and justify radical policy reforms.

The striking finding was the progressive shift from HE participation to Further Education (FE) over the crises. FE in England offers a 'wide range of full-time and part-time provision at all levels from the most basic to degree level programmes' for those over 16 years old; its 'primary focus is on technical and vocational education and second chance learning' (Spours et al., 2020, p. 350). The chapter then concludes by summarising the findings from the PAF and discourses. It concludes that the policy from speech to speech, while having some commonalities, is also driven by events making policy discourse a ramshackle affair.

5.2 Global Financial Crash

This section presents the findings from the applications of the analytical framework to three speeches about HE delivered during the GFC crisis and the British Coalition Government's first year in power. The Coalition rhetoric worked hard to secure the 'meaning of austerity' (Bramall, 2013, p. 20), placing it at the core of their policy agenda (Williams, 2019) as not only necessary but as the only responsible way forward. They were so successful at *naturalising* austerity in public consensus that the word was not even used explicitly in the speeches because it had become known and accepted (Bramall, 2013; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Jessop, 2002). The speeches invoke austerity ideas – the only way to reduce the deficit was to reduce state expenditure – without ever using the term (Clarke et al., 2013; Clarke et al., 2018).

Figure 5.1 summarises the arguments from the speeches of SoS Vince Cable, PM David Cameron, and MoS David Willetts. The GFC speeches predominately address the HE funding crisis and the need to find a fairer funding solution for students, taxpayers,

and the government. They assert that HE is predominantly a private individual benefit, so students should contribute to its cost.

Claim for Action	Circumstances	Goals	Values	Means-Goals
Unsustainable HE funding model because country is in debt.	Global Financial Crash, HE underfunding, no competition & stalled social mobility.	Fair HE funding for all stakeholders & increased social mobility.	Fairness, social mobility, market competition, & HE a private benefit.	New funding model, increased information, scrutiny & monitoring.

Figure 5.1 GFC Argument Summary

They use fairness and social mobility discourses to justify the increased graduate contribution. At the same time, they are arguing that competition between providers will drive up quality and make them responsive to students' needs. Competition will also increase choices and opportunities, and the government's role is to ensure students have the information they need to make informed decisions.

5.2.1 Cable: Cutting Spending on Universities

The SoS for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Liberal Democrat Vince Cable (2010 - SoS GFC) delivered his speech on 15 July 2010 at London South Bank University. The address was to an audience of predominantly senior university leaders and was the first time the Coalition government formally speculated on the future of HE. Delivered before the Browne Review (2010) publication, Cable's argument *(Figure 5.2)* offers slightly different policy solutions to the other GFC speeches, such as stopping HE expansion, and a graduate tax.
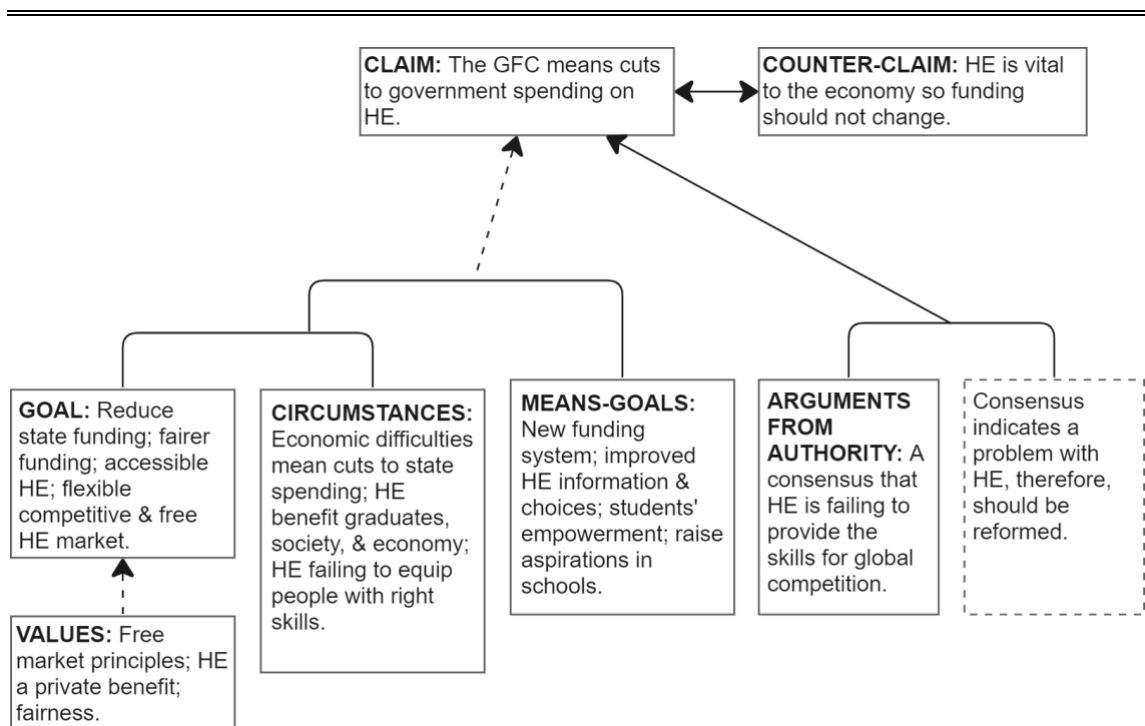
Figure 5.2 Cable: Cutting Spending on Universities

Cable's **Claim for Action** uses the GFC and the need for the government to urgently reduce the deficit as the reason to cut public spending on HE and the need for universities to do more for less.

His **Circumstances** outline the country's challenging finances and the need for an austerity programme of deep cuts. Universities are central to "modern economies" but cannot continue to grow; therefore, the "case for universities needs rethinking".

Cable says HE benefits graduates, society, and the economy, but fails to equip people with the necessary skills, unlike FE (according to **Arguments from Authority**). In addition, he argues that the HE funding mechanism is unfair and not progressive and supports privileged groups to gain higher earnings. The sector's inefficiencies

rationalise the dismissal of the ***Counter-Claim*** - "caution over cuts" because of universities' "vital contribution" to the economy.

Cable's ***Goals*** envision a free, high-quality, and "flexible" sector that encourages "competition for students", and "diversification of funding" that is "fairer" and provides "certainty over resources". Universities should also remove "barriers to access" and try to "reach… an even wider pool of potential students".

The ***Values*** he promotes are institutional "autonomy" and free market principles that create "competition", "improved choices", and "fair funding". Cable's envisaged ***Means-Goals*** outlines proposals for a fairer, more sustainable, and private funding model like a "graduate tax", creating a competitive free market and improving information about HE choices.

5.2.2 Cameron: Unsustainable, Uncompetitive & Unfair Higher Education

On 8 December 2010, Conservative PM David Cameron (2010 - PM GFC, see also Education Policy Institute, 2011a, 2011b) delivered his speech at the Liberal Democratic think-tank CentreForum (formally named Education Policy Institute). The speech, delivered two months after the publication of the Browne Review (2010), was part of a final push by senior politicians to secure the parliamentary vote to triple tuition fees the next day. Cameron's argument (*Figure 5.2)* has many of the same sentiments as Cable's but is predominately interested in justifying the need for increased fees.
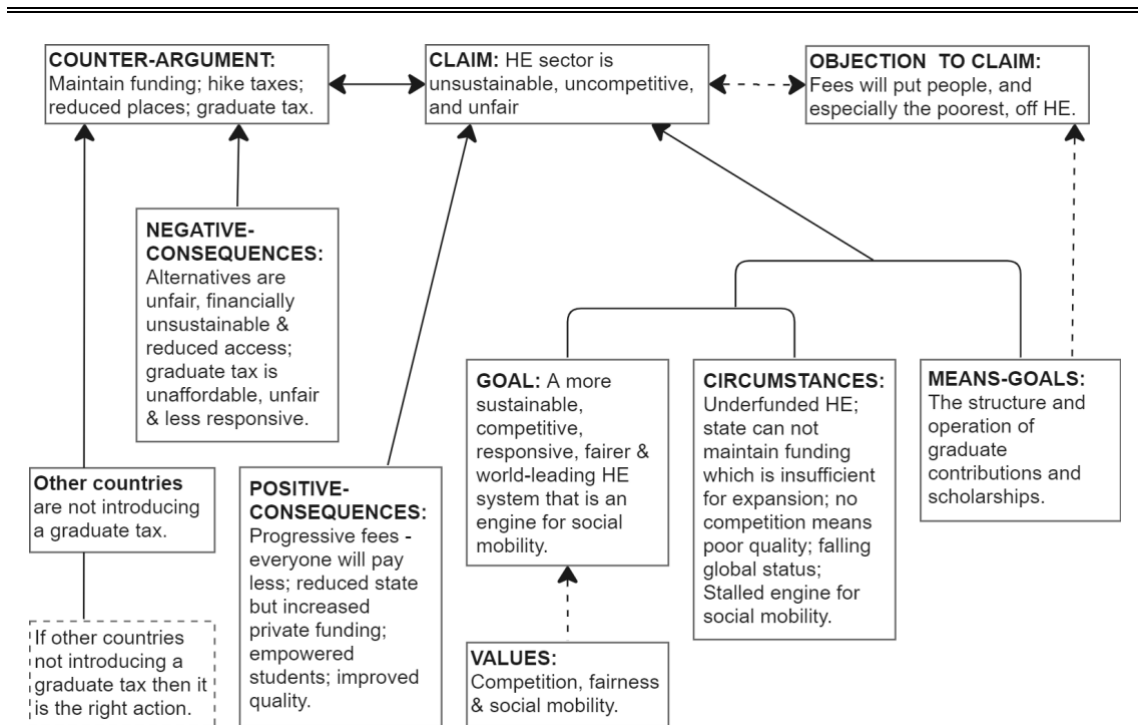
Figure 5.3 Cameron: Unsustainable, Uncompetitive & Unfair HE

Cameron's **Claim for Action** is that the current HE system is unsustainable,

uncompetitive, and unfair and needs to change.

His **Circumstances** describe a country that can no longer afford to fund universities

because of its debt. He argues that the "massive increase" in HE participation and 20

years of underfunding means British universities are "falling behind… international

rivals". The lack of competition damages the quality of HE as there is "no real incentive

for universities to give students want they want". Universities should be an "engine for

social mobility… [but] that engine… it's stalled".

Cameron's **Goal** is for a world-leading, well-funded HE sector that is "more

sustainable… competitive … responsive… and fairer", and that is also "an engine for

social mobility" that "enables more people to go to university, not less". Cameron

expresses *Values* that favour market competition, a "fairer society", and "social mobility".

The *Means-Goal* outlines the operation of the new "Graduate Contribution Scheme" and scholarships. Cameron deliberates on the *Objection* that increased fees mean "people, especially the poorest, will still be put off by the fees". However, the *Positive-Consequences* dismiss this objection because raising fees will be more "progressive" as the "rich will pay more and the poor will pay less". Cameron argues that the government's proposals will improve quality, increase "sustainable funding", and make "savings for the taxpayer" while also making "future expansion" possible. Fees will also give "students the greatest possible influence over the service they receive" and improve quality.

Counter-Arguments to increased fees: The "status quo" of funding should be maintained; taxes should be raised to fund HE; student places should be reduced, and a graduate tax would be a better alternative to fees. However, Cameron argues that these agreements would have *Negative-Consequences* because they would be unaffordable, unfair, or unsustainable, especially the graduate tax, which no *Other Country* has introduced. Also, improved access and expansion would not be possible.

5.2.3 Willetts: Sustainable & Progressive Higher Education

The Conservative, David Willetts (2010 - MoS GFC), MoS for Universities, Science and Cities, delivered his speech on 17 February 2011 at the University of Nottingham in honour of Ron Dearing. He argues *(Figure 5.4)* for a more sustainable and progressive

HE system, and justifies fee increases because they will support widening access and social mobility.
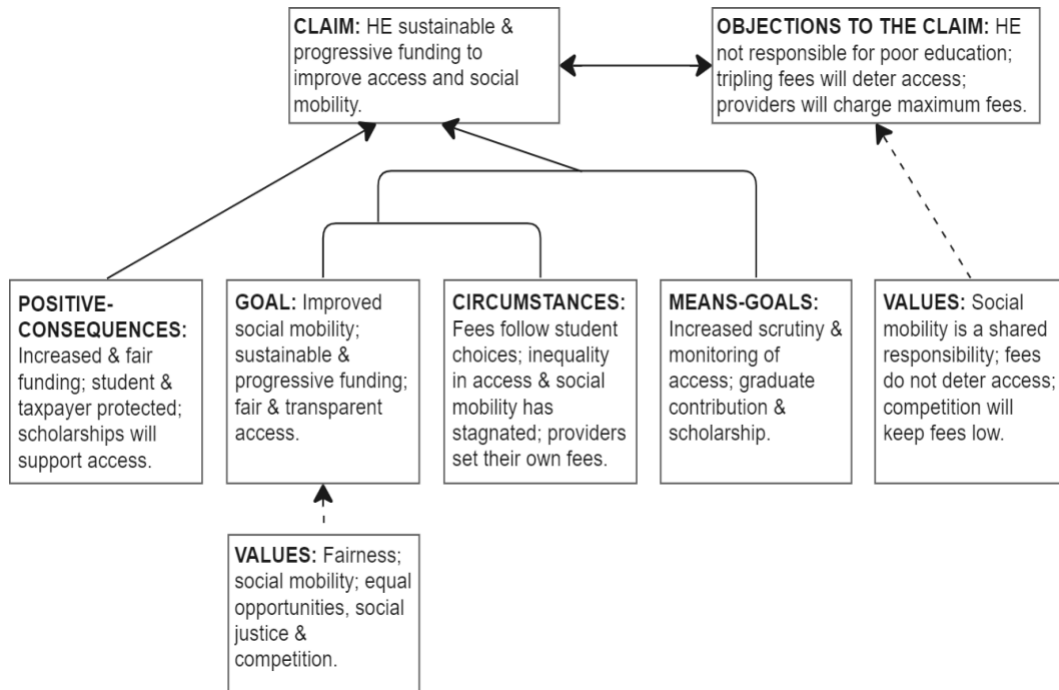
Figure 5.4 Willetts: Sustainable & Progressive Higher Education

Willetts's **Claim for Action** is that HE needs "sustainable and progressive" funding so providers can broaden access and "improve social mobility without compromising academic integrity".

His **Circumstances** describe the move "away from [a] block grant towards a system in which funding follows the student… [through] student loans". There has been a "proportionate increase in participation by people from poorer backgrounds" going into HE, but access at "more selective… universities" has not increased, hindering social mobility, which "is no greater or less since 1970". The Government "respect[s]

the autonomy of institutions concerning admission" and "about how much to charge" in fees.

Willetts's **Goal** is to "improve social mobility" and provide "sustainable and progressive" funding that does not put "people… off from applying to university. Therefore, universities need to broaden access in a "fair, transparent, and evidence-based" way considering "both prior attainment and future potential of students".

His **Values** put fairness and social mobility "at the heart of the Government's agenda" and "universities must be part of this". The "aims of social justice, in the sense of equality of opportunity" are not incompatible with "effective competition". Willetts's **Means-Goals** describe how "progressive" graduate contributions and scholarships will work and how competition and access monitoring will influence provider behaviour.

Willetts addresses three **Objections***:* universities cannot compensate for poor educational experiences elsewhere in the system, the fee increases will discourage HE participation, and all universities will choose the maximum fee. However, he dismisses these objections because of three ideological **Values**: "social mobility is very much a shared responsibility", "fees and loans" do not discourage participation, and "universities should not ignore the competitive challenge that they will face" from other providers that will drive down prices.

The **Positive-Consequences** also justify the funding policy as it will increase funding in a fair way that protects the "financial interests of graduates and taxpayers", and scholarships and fee waivers will support access.

5.3 Brexit

This section presents the findings from applying the analytical framework to three speeches on HE delivered under the omnipresence of the creeping polycrisis - Brexit. Figure 5.5 summarises the empirical arguments from SoS Justine Greening, MoS Jo Johnson, and PM Theresa May's speeches. Responsibility for HE, apprenticeships and skills, moved from BIS to the Department for Education (DfE) in July 2016 - changing how the speeches portray HE and its role in tertiary education with a growing emphasis on FE, vocational and technical training.

Claim for Action	Circumstances	Goals	Values	Means-Goals
Britain is not working for everyone & HE is not delivering value.	Inequalities resulted in Brexit, tertiary education failing & legitimacy of HE at risk.	Improve equality, social mobility & HE alternatives, fair funding & value for money.	Fair & meritocratic opportunities & relegated HE is an economy output.	Empower people, increased regulation & accountability & a funding review.

Figure 5.5 Brexit Argument Summary

These three speeches show how inherited policies bind and determine future permissible choices and solutions (Weir, 1992). Prior policy choices not only 'alter reality' (Zaki & George, 2022, p. 130) but have 'remarkable consequences at a later date' (Peters et al., 2005, p. 1287). Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) and May (2018 - PM Brexit), in particular, directly address the continued opposition to graduate contributions that gained momentum because of the Labour Party's 2017 manifesto pledge to abolish university tuition fees and reinstate maintenance grants (Labour Party, 2017). These three politicians also use their speeches to co-opt points of resistance and opposition for their *Goals* (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Birkland, 2017)—

whether that is reframing the causes of Brexit as social inequalities, or ingratiating conservatism among anti-Brexit younger voters.

A prominent discourse in the speeches addresses perceived societal unfairness, such as tertiary funding, stalled social mobility, a failing education system, and universities not delivering value for money. The solution is to regulate and monitor universities and further government intervention in funding. Fairness discourses justify changing the education system and approach to social mobility, so it works for everyone and creates a meritocratic society.

5.3.1 Greening: Brexit & Social Mobility

Unsurprisingly, the speech (*Figure 5.6*) presented by Justine Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit), the SoS for Education at the annual conference on 20 March 2017, of the Social Mobility Commission, an independent statutory body, centred around the topic of social mobility. The address occurred the day after the PM formally notified the European Council of Britain's intention to withdraw from the European Union (EU). Therefore, it was an opportunity to discuss the future of Britain outside of the EU.

Greening's ***Claim for Action*** is that Brexit has made social mobility "a cold, hard, economic imperative for our country". This "profound moment" is an opportunity for the "generation who made this choice on Brexit" to take "responsibility to make sure that that choice is the best possible choice".
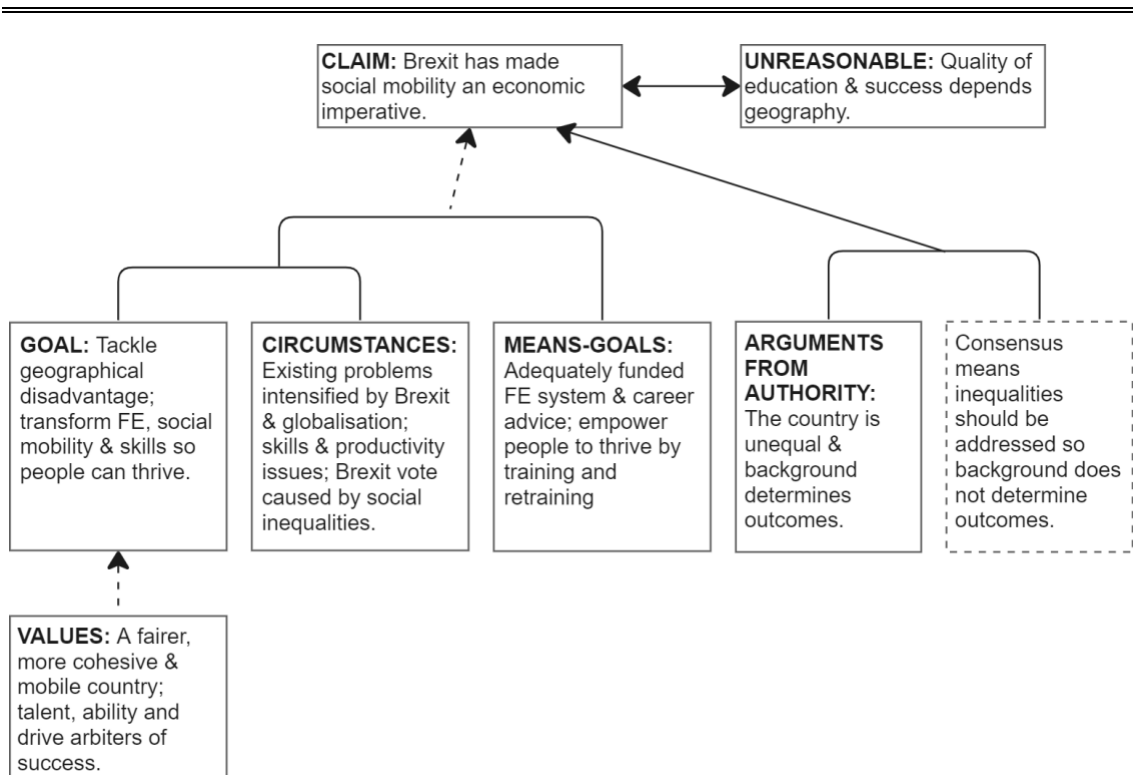
Figure 5.6 Greening: Brexit & Social Mobility

Her ***Circumstances*** describe how Brexit intensified the "burning platform" the country was already facing. The "impacts of technology… [and] deepening globalisation" have transformed "the nature of work". Britain's "productivity lags behind many advanced economies". The education system does not "enable people to reach their full potential" or develop the necessary skills. The country "settled for second best for students… going to FE colleges".

Greening thinks it is ***Unreasonable*** that there is a "postcode lottery of education funding" and the "chances of going to a good school or a good college… depend on where you live". Her ***Arguments from Authority*** show that background determines outcomes, and there is an "attainment gap at the heart of our economy," causing the Brexit vote outcome.

Greening's ***Goal*** is to "transform technical education" and "social mobility and opportunity". She says social mobility for everyone needs to be at the heart of "education policy" and become the country's "biggest competitive advantage" in "building a post-Brexit Britain". Therefore, we need to "level up those parts of the country where that talent isn't being tapped into" so "society… opens up opportunity to everyone" and gives them the "skills they need to thrive in the future economy".

The ***Values*** Greening espouses are for a "fairer, more cohesive country; we all want people to have the chance to be able to succeed" and "go as far as their ability and drive will take them, and social mobility is for "everybody all over the country". Her ***Means-Goal*** is to put "long-term investment" in "human and social capital", skills development, FE and "careers advice", as well as supporting "adults to continue learning and retraining throughout their lives". HE access will not just be about "getting in university, but [about]… accessing the… best of our world-leading universities".

5.3.2 Johnson: A Fair Deal

Jo Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit), the MoS for Universities, Science Research and Innovation, delivered his speech (Figure 5.7) on 17 September 2017 to senior HE leaders at the annual conference of the sector advocate body, Universities UK. The conference hosted at Brunel University was in the constituency of his fellow MP and brother, the future PM Boris Johnson. Jo Johnson's Ministerial role sat across two Government Departments: the newly formed Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), and DfE.
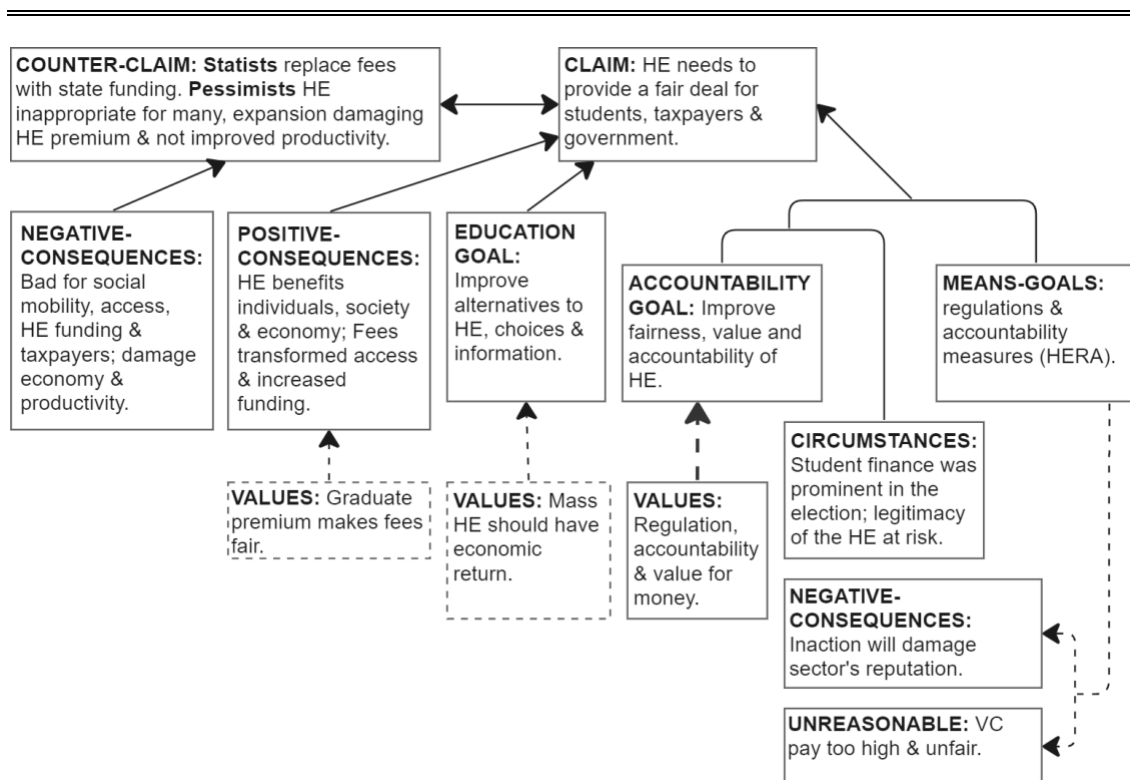
Figure 5.7 Johnson, J: A Fair Deal

Johnson's **Claim for Action** addresses whether or not "universities are providing students [taxpayers and government] with a fair deal". This question "has become ever more pressing" since the 2017 election, where "student finance… played a prominent role".

His **Circumstances** warn universities that their "legitimacy is at risk of draining away" if they do not address concerns about "poor value for money" and "poor or questionable outcomes for a significant minority" who "end up… in non-graduate jobs". "The university sector is under considerable public scrutiny"; however, "universities sound self-serving". There are three areas of particular concern: "grade inflation", a lack of "accelerated degrees", and the high "levels of vice-chancellor pay".

Johnson's **Goal** is to improve "alternatives to university"; there is "no target for the proportion of… people… entering HE" as "the percentage of 18-year-olds choosing to go to university [will] fall" as alternatives improve. There is also a **Goal** for providers to take "urgent steps to ensure that a higher proportion of students feel their time and money was well invested", and government reforms will hold "unis to account for [performance], outcomes and value for money".

His **Values** show that the "transition from an elite to a mass system of [HE] brings… an expectation of a strong economic return too". Johnson refers to accountability and the importance of demonstrating value for money. The government has a "legitimate interest in questions around institutional efficiency, both in our role as stewards of the [HE] system and as its most significant single funder".

The **Means-Goals** is the "Higher Education and Research Act [that] sets an entirely new regulatory framework for the HE sector and marks the start of a new era". However, universities have a "clear responsibility to take ownership" of problems. According to Johnson, if they do not, the **Negative-Consequences** "will undermine the reputation of the entire UK HE sector, creating a dangerous impression of slipping standards", and VC pay will be viewed as **Unreasonable**.

Johnson discusses the **Counter-Claims** of the "Statists and the Pessimists". The Statists (the Labour Party) want to replace fees with "100 per cent of state funding". The Pessimists argue for a reduction in students because "university is inappropriate for many students", the growth of students has "eroded" the graduate premium, and HE expansion has not benefited the economy as "productivity… has stagnated".

These claims have **Negative-Consequences** because they would be "bad for social mobility, bad for university funding, [and] bad for taxpayers". The Pessimist would reduce HE participation to a "narrow elite" and "deprive thousands of young people of routes into fulfilling careers".

Johnson **Values** HE as "not just financial[ly] but social and intellectual[ly]"; therefore, graduate contributions are fair. The **Positive-Consequences** of HE expansion have "real economic benefits" and "productivity uplifts". Graduate contributions have meant funding sustainability for providers and allowed the government to "remove student number controls", which has started to "transform access".

5.3.3 May: The Great British Meritocracy

PM Theresa May (2018 - PM Brexit, see also 10 Downing Street, 2018) delivered her speech (Figure 5.8) at Derby College on 19 February 2018. May argues for the reform of tertiary education (TE) to create a Great British Meritocracy. It also sets out a vision for post-Brexit Britain. An unsuccessful cabinet reshuffle meant to reassert her authority had the opposite effect, resulting in Greening resigning as Education Secretary (Rayner, 2018).

May's **Claim for Action** is that "new technologies… are shaping the economy of the future will transform the world of work and [will] demand new knowledge," and "Britain outside of the EU" requires an education system that works for everyone. She argues that it is **Unreasonable** for someone's background to determine their opportunities and educational route.
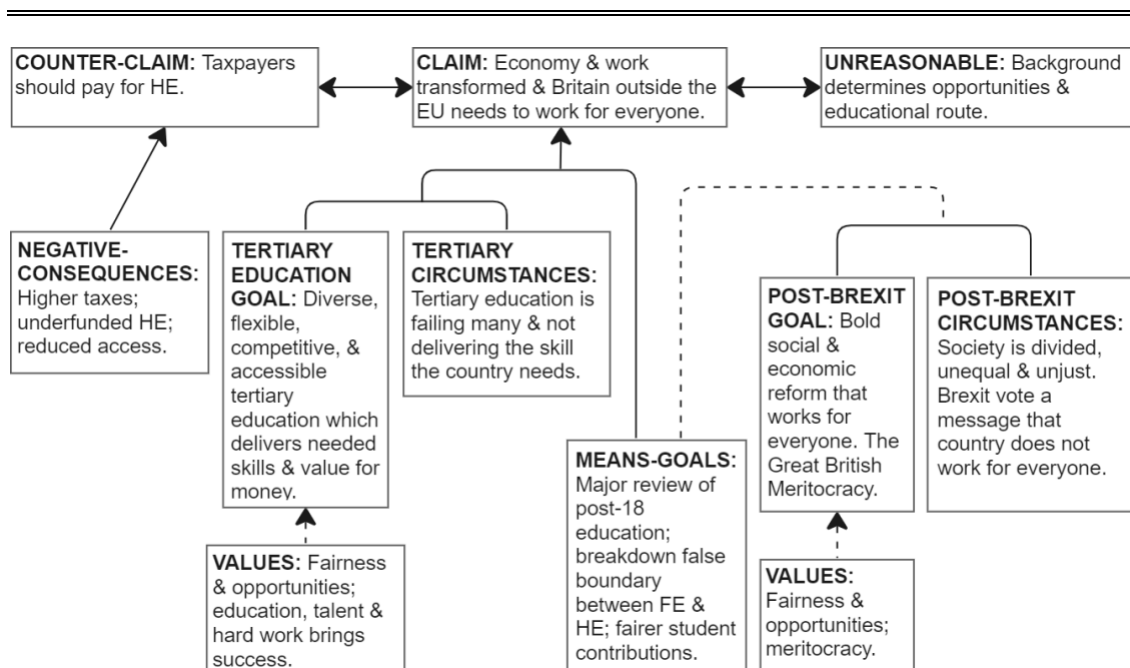
Figure 5.8 May: The Great British Meritocracy

Her **Circumstances** describe the result of the 2016 referendum not just as a choice to "leave the [EU]" but a "clear message about how our society and our economy works – or rather doesn't work – for many communities". She says for the last 20 years, the "public debate on [TE] has been dominated by… how we fund and support" HE, with little discussion about "how we support the" other half of "young people who do not" go to university.

May's **Goal** for post-Brexit Britain is that the "country… is fit for the future" because of "bold social and economic reform". It should "make the most of all of our talents" in a thriving economy that "drives up living standards and creates greater security and opportunity for everyone". Economic growth will be "more fairly shared", so the "country… truly works for everyone", creating a "classless society… where everyone can go as far as their talents will take them… Britain a Great Meritocracy". Her other

Goal, which will enable the first, is to create a TE system that promotes choice and competition and is "accessible to all". That also delivers "the skills our economy needs... [and] value for money".

May believes ***(Values)*** "education is the key to opening up opportunity for everyone" and "unlocks the door to a better future". Everyone should have access to "education and training" that "suits their skills and aspirations" and helps them "go as far as their hard work will take them". The government must "reconnect everyone in our society to a sense of fairness and opportunity". It is a fair "principle that students... [and] taxpayers should contribute to the cost of their studies".

The PM's ***Means-Goal*** is to launch a "major and wide-ranging review into post-18 education". The review would be groundbreaking because for the "first time... the whole post-18 education sector in the round" would be examined together. Therefore, "breaking down false boundaries between further and higher education [to] create a truly joined-up" system.

She addresses a ***Counter-Claim*** that the taxpayer should pay the total HE cost. The claim is dismissed because the ***Negative-Consequences*** would mean raising taxes for "the majority of people who did not go to university", HE would be "competing... for scarce resources", and it "would mean the necessary re-introduction of a cap on numbers".

5.4 COVID-19

This section presents the findings from applying the analytical framework to three speeches sandwiched between the end of the first COVID-19 lockdown and the beginning of the second one. Like the Brexit speeches, the Covid-19 ones continue to focus on FE as a priority, but under the guise of levelling up the country rather than social mobility. Boris Johnson and colleagues do not appear to be bound by policy inheritance; instead, they ignore or 'encourage others to 'forget' issues for their own strategic convenience' (Stark & Head, 2019, p. 1525). During COVID-19, policymakers commonly feigned ignorance or cultivated 'amnesia out of some combination of self-interest, perceived necessity, convenience… in pursuit of public good' or to avoid blame (Hannah et al., 2023, p. 120).

In the counternarratives expressed in the COVID-19 speeches the truth is not necessarily 'falsified or contested, but of secondary importance' in the argument (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018, p. 91). The role of the counternarrative is to sidestep responsibility, discredit critics or experts and blame others for the crisis while denying 'more or less plain facts' (Rietdijk, 2021, p. 1). They differ from the **Counter-Claims/Arguments** in the PAF as they are not deliberations about possible alternative **Goals** and **Values** but act to manufacture alternative realities (Giroux, 2018). The manufacturing of counternarratives in the COVID-19 **Circumstances** replaces any form of deliberation.

This approach aligns with post-truth politics – the 'toxic combination of policy blunders on austerity, war and globalisation coupled with a new hybrid media and political system dominated by reality TV, social media and filter bubbles' (Suiter, 2016, p. 25).

Whether or not post-truth rhetoric 'indicates the coming of an era in which the truth has indeed lost its symbolic authority' (Conrad & Hálfdanarson, 2023, p. 4) is highly debated, especially given Foucault's regimes of truth. However, this type of politics has played a crucial role in recent research explaining both Brexit and COVID-19 (Conrad et al., 2023; Marshall & Drieschova, 2018; Nally, 2022; Rietdijk, 2021; Vankovska, 2020).

The empirical arguments *(Figure 5.9)* from MoS Michelle Donelan, SoS Gavin Williamson and PM Boris Johnson have little deliberation with alternative arguments, but these speeches have the most consistent arguments. Donelan and Williamson's speeches were delivered online because of COVID-19 restrictions, while Johnson's speech was to an in-person audience. Each speech argues for improved and expanded FE that delivers practical and technical skills. There is a rejection of HE as a route to improving the economy, productivity, and social mobility. Fairness and social mobility discourse are still present, but the focus is now on levelling up all parts of the country.

Claim for Action	Circumstances	Goals	Values	Means-Goals
COVID-19 exposed disparities between FE & HE, & failures in HE.	COVID-19 brought social changes, skills shortage, & too much focus on HE.	Level up Britain, transform & invest in FE, & a new era in HE access.	Fairness, meritocratic opportunities, & education provides skills.	Drive up standards & investment in FE, FE study loans, & legislation.

Figure 5.9 COVID-19 Argument Summary

5.4.1 Donelan: Access Regime has Failed.

Michelle Donelan (2020 - MoS C19, see also NEON, 2020) MoS for Universities addressed the NEON summit on widening access and mobility on 1 July 2020. NEON is

a professional organisation that supports those working in widening access to HE.

Donelan's arguments (*Figure 5.10)* 'sparked a response of confusion and frustration'
amongst conference delegates who were predominantly access practitioners and
researchers (Blower, 2020).
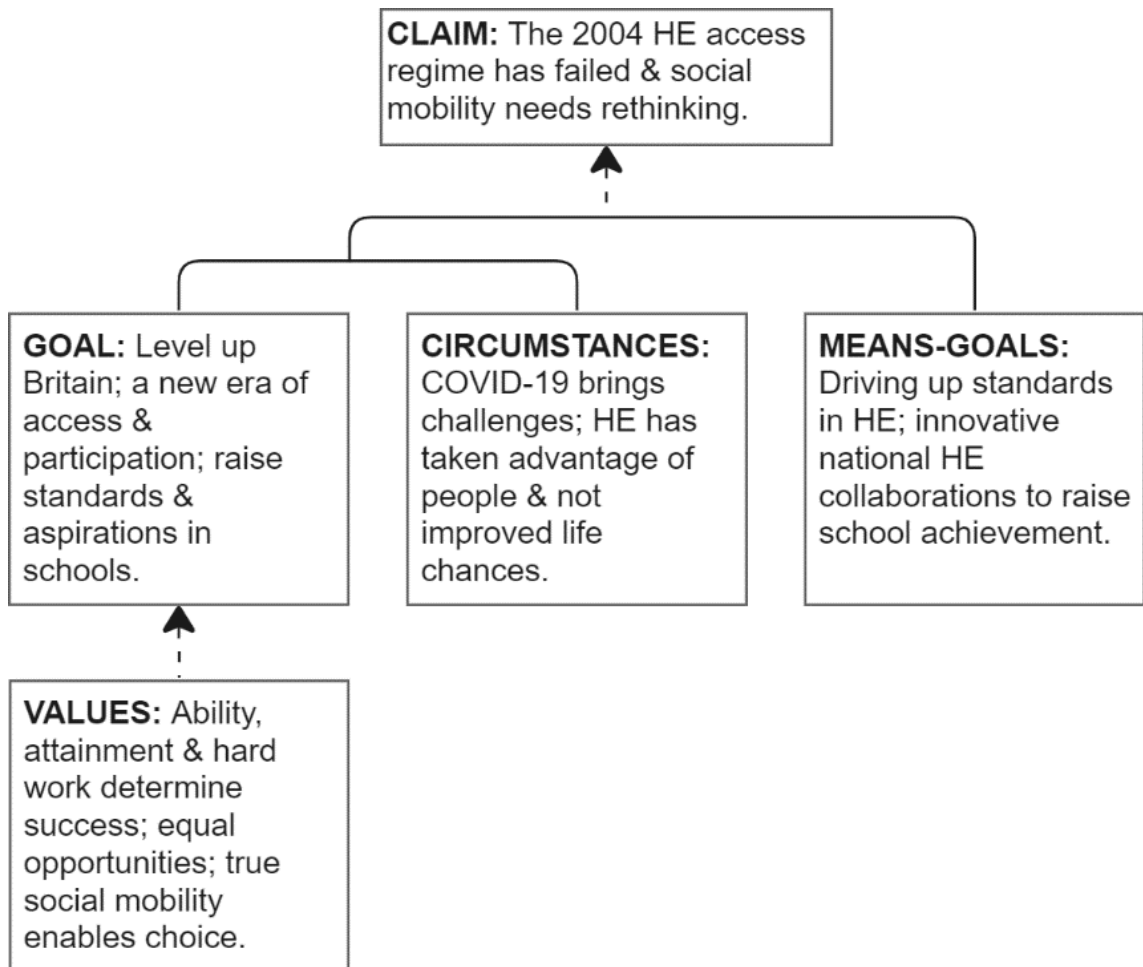
Figure 5.10 Donelan: Access Regime has Failed.

Donelan's ***Claim for Action*** is that the "2004 access regime" has failed, and "we need
to think again" about social mobility and HE.

Her ***Circumstances*** describe the impact of COVID-19 on education. She argues that
there has been too much focus on "getting more people into" universities, and

providers have taken "advantage of" people, especially "those without a family history" of HE. According to her, providers have overrecruited to "popular sounding courses" that do not improve students' "life chances or help with their career goals", and the significant graduate debt is not "worth its value". Providers have felt "pressured to dumb down" and paid too little attention to student retention and employment outcomes.

Donelan's **Goal** is "to level up Britain, to deliver greater opportunities to every person and every community in the UK". She envisages a "new era" of access and participation "based on raising standards", "results", and "impact" in HE and schools.

Her **Values** express a desire for a level "playing field" and that HE "should be open to all… qualified by ability and attainment". Donelan argues that "true social mobility" is people choosing "the path that will lead to their desired destination… be that in HE, FE or apprenticeships".

Donelan's **Means-Goals** require universities to use "access budgets not… on marketing but on raising standards" in HE and schools by "providing the role models, the information, encouraging aspiration and highlighting the high-quality opportunities available". Universities should also undertake "new, innovative forms of collaboration at the national level", helping the government to achieve the levelling up and "transformation of lives".

5.4.2 Williamson: The Forgotten 50%

In his virtual speech on 9 July 2020, Gavin Williamson (2020 - SoS C19, see also DfE, 2020), SoS for Education, aimed to align his argument (*Figure 5.8)* with his host, the think-tank – the Social Mobility Foundation pro-market orientation ethos that champions social justice, with his focus on local communities, FE and levelling up.
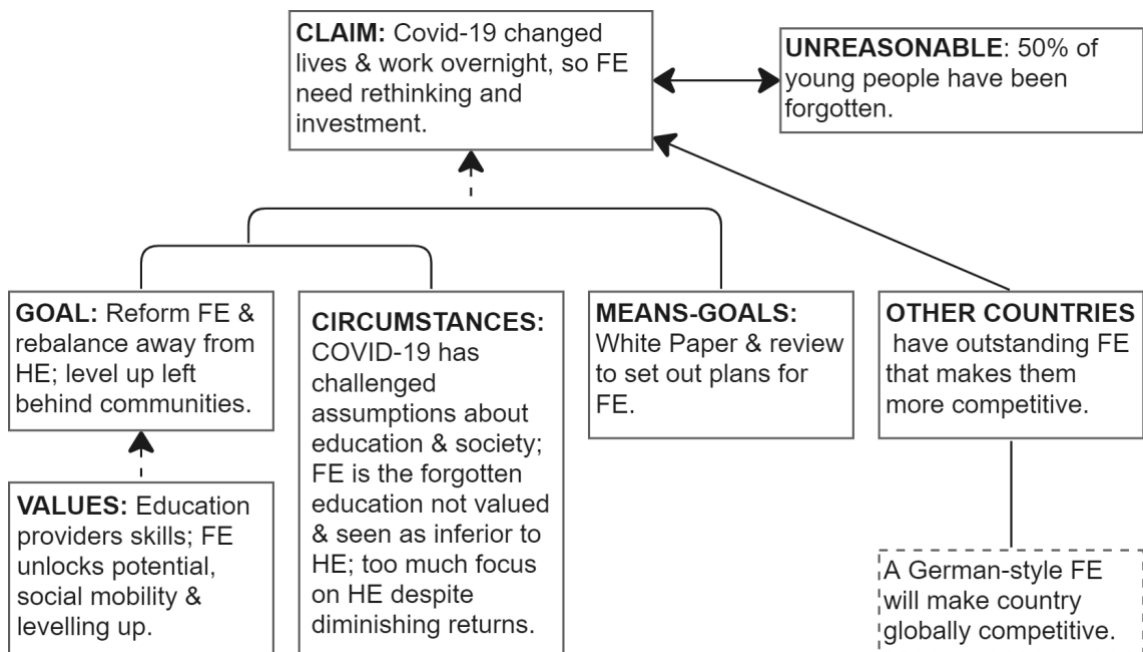
Figure 5.11 Williamson: The Forgotten 50%.

Williamson's ***Claim for Action*** describes "the unprecedented challenge posed by the pandemic has made it even more important to invest in long-term change and to think seriously about the post-16 education system we need".

His ***Circumstances*** describe how COVID-19 has "thrown many of our assumptions" about education and society "into sharp relief". According to Williamson, "[FE] will be even more important" in the post-pandemic era, but "too many people... don't value

it". It is the "forgotten education"; the students are the "forgotten 50%... who choose another path", which is *Unreasonable*. There is "an inbuilt snobbishness about higher being somehow better than further" and too much focus on getting "more people into [HE]", even though it "is not always what the individual or our nation needs". Universities have "been training people for jobs that don't exist", leading to "low productivity and lost opportunity". Britain should look to *Other Countries* where FE is valued and contributes to the economy.

His *Goal* is to "stand for the forgotten 50%", for "fundamental reform", and a "wholesale rebalancing" away from higher to "further and technical education", which will be the "heart of our post-16 education system", "levelling up", and the post-pandemic recovery. Modelled after the "German-style further education system", England will have a "high-quality system" that is "adequately funded". Colleges will "act as centres for business development and innovation", giving "people meaningful careers".

He professes *Values* that "education is a keystone of our society," and its "purpose… is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job". FE is fundamental to "unlocking this country's potential", "to social mobility", and "to levelling up every part of our great nation".

Williamson's *Means-Goal* is a White Paper that proposes comprehensive plans and fundamental changes to "England's further education landscape". The paper will "give colleges the powers and resources" they "need to truly drive change" and "transform many of our left-behind towns and regions".

5.4.3 Johnson: Radical Change

On September 29, 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2020 - PM C19, see also

Guardian News, 2020), delivered his speech at Exeter College, a further education

provider. His arguments, depicted in *Figure 5.12*, were perceived by some as 'radical'

(Diver, 2020), while others saw them as a rebranding of previously announced policies

(Crace, 2020).
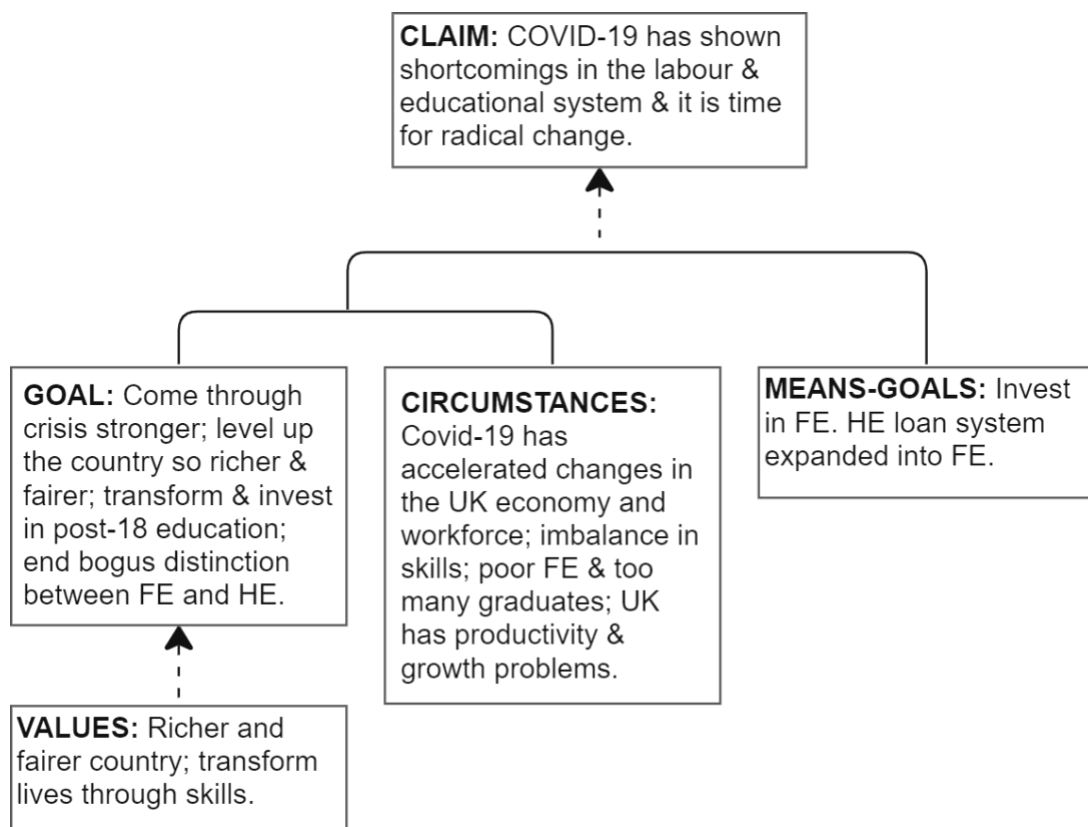
Figure 5.12 Johnson, B: Radical Change

Johnson's **Claim for Action** is that COVID has shaken the "economy" and shown the

"shortcomings of our labour market – and our educational system". "It is time… for

radical change".

According to his assessment, COVID-19 created *Circumstances* that "massively accelerated" "changes… already happening in the UK economy". "Old types of employment" are falling away as "new opportunities are opening up", requiring many to "change jobs – to change skills". He argues that there has been a "lack of investment in infrastructure" and science and "failures in technical education" that have "hamstrung" the country. There are "fundamental problems in our economy of productivity and growth", a "shortage of… crucial skills", and too many graduates with the wrong skills. "The problem is that not every FE college is… superb", and funding "propels… people into universities" despite a degree leading to debt.

Johnson's *Goal* is to come "through this crisis" and "build back better", levelling up the country while tackling the "fundamental problems in our economy… productivity and growth". Therefore, FE needs investment and transformation "so everyone has the chance to train and retrain". Universities should be open to all with the "aptitude and the desire to go", but there should be "real choice" and an alternative "route to success". Therefore, the "bogus distinction between FE and HE" should end.

Johnson asserts *Values* that assume skills "transform" people's "lives" and will make the country "richer" and "fairer."

His *Means-Goals* will involve "huge capital investment" to improve "colleges across the country" and increase apprenticeship availability. The university loan system will be expanded "so it's as easy to get a loan" for a "specific list of valuable" FE. Colleges will be able "to access funding on the same terms as… universities," enabling them to

"compete" with HE institutions. The availability of loans will open up a "new vista of choice" and "help people to train and retrain".

5.5 Argumentation Summary: Constructing a Crisis

The last three sections explored the speeches of nine politicians at times of crisis through the PAF. The arguments and resulting policy often appear disjointed and reactionary, tailored to specific moments and circumstances. Nonetheless, amidst this variability, consistent themes shed light on the first research question: How is crisis discursively framed in nine political speeches concerning higher education?

The following section discusses and summarises each PAF category across each crisis (*Figure 5.13)*. It shows how the **Claim in Action** uses crisis as a catalyst to describe **Circumstances** in which post-compulsory education is in crisis. The **Goals** are to improve or make a fairer education system, thereby improving social mobility or levelling up to create a fairer society. Each speech evokes **Values** of fairness and sets out their beliefs about the purpose of education, which changes during each crisis. Their **Means-Goals** entail changes to educational funding mechanisms or investment, increased accountability, or the regulation of providers and new legislation or reviews of the education system. The rest of this section explores these categories to provide the foundation for the more detailed exploration of the discourses in the following two chapters.

	GFC	Brexit	COVID-19
Claim for Action	Unsustainable HE funding model because country is in debt.	Britain is not working for everyone & HE is not delivering value.	COVID-19 exposed disparities between FE & HE, & failures in HE.
Circumstances	GFC, HE underfunding, no competition & stalled SM.	Inequalities resulted in Brexit, HE failing & legitimacy of HE at risk.	COVID-19 brought social changes, skills shortage, & too much focus on HE.
Goals	Fair HE funding for all stakeholders & increased SM.	Improve equality, SM & HE alternatives, fair funding & value for money.	Level up Britain, transform & invest in FE, & a new era in HE access.
Values	Fairness, SM, & market competition, HE a private benefit.	Fair & meritocratic opportunities & relegated HE is an economic output.	Fairness, meritocratic opportunities, & education provides skills.
Means-Goals	New funding model, increased information, scrutiny & monitoring.	Empower people, increased regulation & accountability & a funding review.	Drive up standards & investment in FE, FE study loans, & legislation.

Figure 5.13 Comparison of Arguments

Claims for Action: Politicians use one crisis to legitimise the diagnosis of a crisis in the education system. The GFC was used to emphasize the funding crisis in HE. Brexit and the 'UK's future position on the global scene" were used to draw attention to failures in educational policy "from school to university" (Granoulhac, 2018, p. 24). As May (2018) argues, the country does not have an education system that works for everyone and "the need for such a system has never been greater… because… will be a Britain outside of the [EU], pursuing a new course in the world". The health crisis of COVID-19 became a crisis about vocational skills and HE access. The ability to dissolve and reconstitute problems is a form of deontic power invested in those at the macro-level of policymaking, allowing them to control the policy agenda (Foucault, 1980; Searle, 2010).

Politicians often begin their arguments with the need to create a fairer and more sustainable funding mechanism for HE/FE and a tertiary system that offers value for money for students, taxpayers, and the government. They also highlight the need to reset the dual purpose of post-compulsory education: to provide a productive and skilled workforce for economic gain or its function in creating a fairer and more socially mobile society.

The focus on FE was somewhat surprising, with seven of the nine speeches arguing for increased participation in FE and reduced HE access. A persistent discourse from the macro policymaking level aims to shift the roles of HE and FE in delivering the skills the economy needs. The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 (SPEA) is an accumulation of these discourses representing 'a general deepening of neoliberalism in adult education… that increasingly subsumes learning under labour-power production' (Cogavin, 2023, pp. 3-10).

However, there is a lack of engagement in FE policy from the media and researchers because HE funding and participation debates have dominated the general discourse (Watson, 2014). This focus has resulted in limited knowledge about FE outside the sector (Baldwin et al., 2022). There is also an impression that FE and HE are policy silos at a national level (Shattock & Hunt, 2021). However, the speeches indicate that this is not the case.

Circumstances: Politicians use their position and power to neutralise 'what could be otherwise' and determine what is and is not as feasible in response to a crisis in the population's psyche (Lukes, 2005, p. 149). Policymakers exert 'power over' the truth of

the crisis so they can set the **Goals** they want to achieve (Foucault, 1980). They use power coercively but non-violently to secure compliance through the omission of alternatives (Searle, 2010) or by impeding people from 'living as their own nature and judgment dictate' (Lukes, 2005, p. 85). Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) undermines and dismisses the student protesters and exerts his truth over the problem when he accuses them of "drowning out some of the truth" with their passion. However, he can "explain the real truth about what's going on, why we need change and why the change we are proposing is the best option we've got" (Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC).

Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 113) would call this "power behind the discourse" as it demonstrates how "semiotic aspects of social practice emerge and are... changed within particular relations of power and through the application of power". Less powerful groups at the meso and micro levels of policymaking eventually comply willingly or begrudgingly with the government's new fee regime (*Figure 2.2*). Therefore, options for future resistance diminish as the new regime becomes a normalised social practice, but it does not entirely disappear.

The adverse effects of the GFC, Brexit and COVID-19 provide an alternative to government policy for societal and educational problems. Therefore, crises become opportunities for change and are used to justify radical reform that would have been unimaginable before the emergency (Bacchi, 2009; Klein, 2007; Rosenthal et al., 2001). An overarching discourse in this category is about the value of HE to individuals, taxpayers, and the government, as well as who benefits most, and, therefore, who should fund it. Particularly in the Brexit and COVID-19 speeches, the value and

economic return of HE have become a negative discourse because of concerns about the diminishing graduate premium (Brooks, 2013; Marginson, 2007). Connected to this are discourses about the qualifications and skills the country needs, the structure, shape and size of HE, and the tertiary education system.

The politicians also describe inequalities and unfairness in society, education, and access to opportunities and skills. The speeches also pitch different groups against each other - for example, taxpayers vs students, wealthy vs poor students or higher vs further education - to emphasise or highlight problems of unfairness. Creating rivals among different groups is an intentional policy tool for creating consent and diminishing group solidarity and resistance to change (Clarke, 2018; Hoggett et al., 2013). This focus on societal divisions becomes more pronounced after Brexit and even more so during COVID-19. The analysis does not present the politicians' celebration of government successes because it does not show how they justify policy change.

Goals: Address the problems articulated in the ***Circumstances***. The politicians commit to creating progressive, fair, and sustainable funding and investment initially for HE, but increasingly, this includes FE. They also want to transform HE and FE by dismantling anachronistic distinctions between vocational and academic routes. This transformation will improve quality and competition, provide students with real choices, and give them the necessary skills for successful employment. Chapter Two highlighted the role of competition and choice in neoliberal discourses and education

policies shaped by those discourses (Ball et al., 2002; Brooks, 2018; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

HE and FE reform is needed to create a fairer society and economy. The policy actors want to enable social mobility or "levelling up" to create a great meritocracy which rewards hard work with economic success. Since 2010, 'the language of social mobility has been increasingly utilised by UK politicians… to denote a commitment to 'fair access' to opportunity in education' (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022, p. 189). Only Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) sets a goal to increase access to HE; while others would like high-status universities to diversify their intake with the brightest but poorest students, they do not necessarily want to increase participation overall. This discourse has become increasingly prominent as financial support policies focus on the brightest but most disadvantaged students (Harrison, 2018; McCaig, 2016).

Values: There is a strong belief in education's power to improve and benefit individuals' lives and society and enable social mobility, with each speech attempting to define the purpose of education. Values accompany this belief that competition, market forces, and increased regulation and accountability will improve the education system. Social mobility is a key value, but the term's meaning develops and changes across the speeches. It is replaced and used interchangeably with levelling up in the COVID-19 speeches. Levelling up feeds into discourses about geographical divides that enticed Labour voters to the Conservatives in 2019 (Hudson, 2022; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021). Connected to social mobility and levelling up are values about creating a fairer society and opening up access to opportunities so people can improve their

lives. Finally, linked to the beliefs about social mobility and access to opportunities is the desire to build a meritocratic country where individuals can go as far as their talent and hard work will take them.

The stated values reflect the criteria used to select the text, which means the selection process facilitated a tendency to find what was sought (Fryer, 2022). In addition, however, the ***Values, Goals, and Circumstances*** have a range of unspoken values and beliefs that permeate the discourses used in the speeches; for example, individual responsibility, as understood through a neoliberal lens, where responsibility for success and risk is on individuals rather than the state (Littler, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Means-Goals: The speakers identify a range of instruments, means or "tools of public action" to be employed to accomplish their ***Goals*** (Salamon, 2002, p. 1). The speeches utilize a mix of hard tools "like legislation and other forms of binding regulation" and soft tools "based on voluntary compliance" to achieve their goals. Increasingly, governments are using soft "non-binding tools like recommendations or guidelines" in place of legislation (Blomqvist, 2016, p. 267). During the COVID-19 crisis, "over 400 pieces of guidance and regulations were created" by governments in England and Wales (Sorabji & Vaughan, 2021, p. 158). However, hard policy tools remain important because soft tools often presuppose the existence of or the credible threat of formal legislation or regulation if compliance or government objectives are not met (Héritier & Rhodes, 2011). This approach is seen in Johnson's (2017 - MoS Brexit) speech when he implies that the government will take more severe steps if universities fail to

address the issues he has identified. This study's predominant focus is on how discourses influence policy formation, so there will be a limited focus on the types of tools used.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an in-depth empirical analysis of nine speeches delivered during different crises using the PAF. The analysis showed that each speech had unique arguments and discourses which changed over time. The synthesis of the arguments did show some common themes but also showed that policymaking is a ramshackle process influenced by the winds of a crisis. There was also an unexpected focus on the role and need for FE, technical, and vocational skills in a post-compulsory system.

The PAF showed how political actors use their speeches to construct and control the meaning of a crisis so they can 'identify problems' (Bacchi, 2000, 2009) and construct discourses that allow them to achieve their aims. Furthermore, political actors often commandeer crises to diagnose another crisis. These secondary crises become the foci for policy change and the foundation for social transformation. Those at the macro level of policymaking may have the extreme power to set the 'systematic policy agenda' or prioritise 'issues meriting public attention' (Birkland, 2017, p. 65). While those at the micro level have minimal power, they can also compel politicians to defend and shift policy, even if that change is sometimes slow and difficult to achieve (Birkland, 2017, p. 68). However, politicians do not just have the power to set the

agenda but can manufacture alternative realities that bypass inconvenient truths or shift blame for past blunders to others.

This chapter explored what role crises play in policymaking. It concluded that a crisis plays a crucial role, allowing politicians to construct discourses that justify radical policy reforms. A crisis also masks or bypasses the truth of a problem, reducing people's ability to resist. However, effective policy responses are increasingly challenging as 'contemporary crises are typically complex, multidimensional, and socially embedded' and made even more so by shifting political discourses (Zaki & George, 2022, p. 130). The next chapter will explore the discourses in the *Circumstances* and *Goals* category to answer the second research question. Chapter Eight will then focus on the discourses from the *Goals* and *Values* categories to answer the third research question.

Chapter 6: A Neo-Austerity Turn in Higher Education Discourses

Only a crisis-actual or perceived-produces real change. When that

crisis occurs, the actions… taken depend on the ideas… lying around…

it is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies…

until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.

(Friedman, 2002, p. xiv)

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on answering the second research question - What discursive political strategies do these speeches employ during three major crises to construct and justify HE policy changes? Therefore, it will examine the discursive strategies used in the speeches for each crisis, and their enlistment in providing the rationale for HE policy change. The empirical text coded into the ***Circumstances*** and ***Goals*** categories was re-analysed (*Appendix 1*) to understand the underlying discourses and ***Values*** (*Figure 6.1*) of the politicians (Danermark et al., 2019; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).
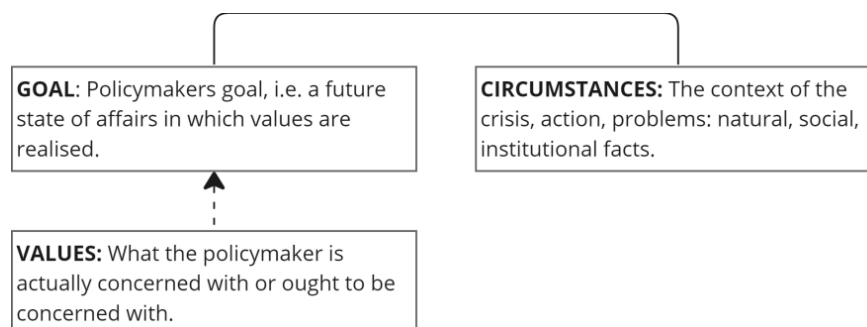
Figure 6.1 PDA Circumstance, Goal and Values Premises

The Practical Argumentation Framework (PAF) helped identify how the GFC moved beyond solely fiscal adjustments or retrenchment to a 'contemporary politics of austerity' that 'combines an economic logic with a particular moral appeal' (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 309). The main argument of this chapter is that austerity or neo-austerity augments neoliberalism and provides additional critical insight and understanding of the discourses in the speeches within an English context.

It comprises three main sections (*Figure 6.2*) that discuss the discursive strategies used to build a rationale and justification for change in the nine political speeches. The first section, Austere Consensus Building, analyses how these politicians' *Circumstances* describe events to try and gain support for their *Goals* (policies) by allocating blame and responsibility for the crisis to others, such as opposition political parties or HE providers. The *Circumstances* also amplified the fears and risks associated with economic and social changes, especially concerning globalisation.

Austere Consensus Building	The Purpose of Austere HE	Austere Marketisation
Blame & Responsibility	Economic Contribution	Funding & Value
Fear & Risk	Cultivation of Individualism	State Intervention
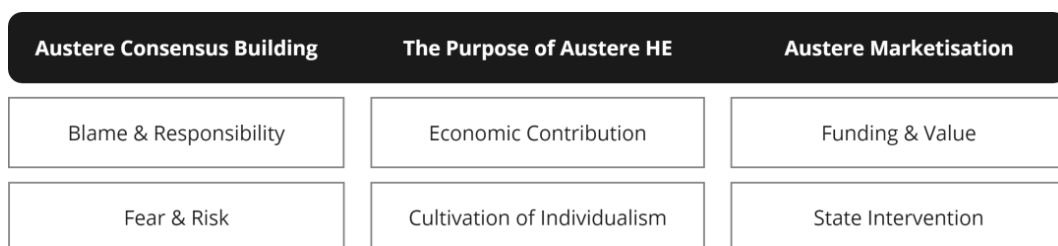
Figure 6.2 Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity

The section Purpose of Austere HE examines the discursive framing of the HE sector's role according to the nine politicians who present the economic function of HE *(Circumstances)* and its role in securing the country's financial success and increasing productivity *(Goals)*. The speeches also discursively cultivate individualism

(Circumstances) because HE predominately benefits and empowers private individuals *(Values)*.

Next, Austere Marketisation draws on the theory of neo-austerity - the obfuscation of state responsibility to markets and private individuals for HE while increasing state surveillance and monitoring of the sector (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021). It examines how the *Circumstance* describes an HE funding crisis to justify increased graduate contributions and concerns about value for money. Finally, it assesses the state's role as the HE market overseer, leading to more significant state intervention and regulation to make the market operate effectively. The chapter concludes by arguing that these findings bring new insight and knowledge about how discourses of austerity have shaped and transformed policy in English HE.

6.2 Austere Consensus Building

While politicians and policymakers have power over defining and controlling a crisis, in a democratic state, they still need to gain popular consent from the public and operate within the deontic structures in non-violent ways (Searle, 2010; Taylor et al., 1997). This section explores how consent for change is constructed by identifying blame and responsibility for the crisis and playing on fears and risks of not acting according to the proposed policy. Politicians use the *Circumstantial* premise to develop a collective recognition of the problems and a consensus for the resulting *Goals*. This new consensus redefines societal *Values*, often in small incremental ways that can build over time into radical policy transformation.

6.2.1 Blame and Responsibility

Willetts (2010 - MoS GFC) says, "[T]his Coalition is at last sorting out" the country's

"finances and giving it a secure future". The rhetorical disparagement of the previous

government ideologically reworked austerity from a financial crisis into a moral crisis

of 'how to allocate blame and responsibility' (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 300),

thereby, transforming the GFC from a financial crisis rooted in the private financial

sector into a fiscal crisis based on public sector mismanagement. This approach is not

new, as austerity tropes have always used beliefs about excessive state intervention

and 'government mismanagement' to justify change (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000, p.

254).

Willetts (2010 - MoS GFC) also speculates that the "history of [HE] in this country

might have been different" if the "first official report to recommend income-

contingent loans" – the 1997 Dearing Report – had been implemented by Labour.

Immediate action is required because "there's a crisis in the public finances now" due

to previous fiscal mismanagement (Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC). The Coalition also

recycled old tropes that New Labour was as socially irresponsible as they were fiscally.

These blame discourses not only 'contributed… to the change of government in the

2010 General Election' (Nunn, 2012, p. 87) but have become so successfully

entrenched that there were echoes of it in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections (Clarke

et al., 2016; Goes, 2020; Ross & McTague, 2017).

Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) describes the ***Negative-Consequences*** and "damage" the

2017 manifesto promise of the metaphorical Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn, the

'Statist' (*Figure 5.5*), would have had on HE:

Make no mistake: if fees were abolished, we would soon see the

reintroduction of student number controls. And the return of

rationing demand for 'free' [HE] would see the poorest and most

disadvantaged would miss out. Life chances would be irreparably

damaged, social mobility thrown into reverse.

Brambilla (2019, p. 275) argues that laying the 'blame on the deficit crisis on the previous government' is a uniquely British phenomenon called 'deficit inheritance'. Even after ten years of Conservative Governments, tenuous deficit inheritance discourses are deployed to discredit Labour. Such as Donelan's (2020 - MoS C19) declaration that "the 2004 access regime has let down too many young people", again placing blame on the Labour government while ignoring the significant reforms made to the access regime by three consecutive Conservative administrations since 2010 (Millward, 2021).

Across the three crises, there is also an unmistakable trajectory towards intentionally undermining trust in universities to shift responsibility away from the government to the HE sector for policy failures. Johnson (2020 - PM C19) established a narrative that his government could not effectively respond to the COVID-19 outbreak because the country did not have the "right skills" and as a result, "business isn't happy [and] the economy is under-productive". According to this narrative, the skills shortage was the fault of previous governments and universities that erroneously focused on HE participation (HM Treasury, 2021).

While Johnson (2020 - PM C19) says he does not "for a second want to blame our universities" for the country's skills gaps because he "love[s] our universities", the rest of his speech consists of a mix of policy amnesia and counternarratives to demonstrate HE failures. Donelan (2020 - MoS C19), the most vociferous critic of universities, blames them by saying, "Quite frankly, our young people have been taken advantage of – particularly those without a family history of going to university".

This opinion reflects an increasingly common portrayal of universities – predominantly by right-wing think-tanks and media - as a cartel, with lazy and over-privileged academics that have sold students a lie (Tice & Al-Humaidhi, 2017). Academics and universities were characterised as out-of-touch liberal elites who came out on the wrong side of the Brexit debate (Goodhart, 2017). However, the liquidation of trust in HE (Lybeck, 2018) and the anti-establishment sentiment that 'helped shift the scales… in favour of Leave' was rooted in the 2010 austerity programme (Fetzer, 2019b, p. 1). The resulting 'crisis of trust' (Finn, 2018, p. 106) in academic authority diminishes universities' ability to 'exercise academic autonomy and freedom' and hold governments accountable (J. Williams, 2016, p. 623).

This section showed how the *Circumstantial* premise in these speeches established discursive strategies to blame and shift responsibility for failures to the political opposition and universities despite a decade of Tory governments. Blame allocation also allows a crisis to be constructed as foreseeable and avoidable if only policy design or implementation had been better ('t Hart & Tindall, 2009b). These politicians used their positional deontic power within the policy hierarchy (Figure 2.2) to create

collective recognition or acceptance of their interpretation of the crisis and the response (Searle, 2010) and undermine trust in HE. The following section will examine how fear of a crisis worsening or a new one arising from inaction builds agreement around new initiatives.

6.2.2 Fear and Risk Talk

This section explores how crisis discourses and their 'decadent' causes construct a 'climate of fear' with 'the promise of continued precarity' and risk if action is not taken (Mitrea, 2018, p. 54). The ***Circumstantial*** premises articulate the seriousness of a crisis, such as the GFC, described as the "most serious" economic event "within living memory" (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC). Collective trauma is exploited to create 'fear and disorder', which is the modus operandi of neoliberalists who use a crisis as a 'catalyst for each new leap forward' (Klein, 2007, p. 9) towards radical reengineering of societal values, norms, and practices (Rosenthal et al., 2001).

The Covid-19 speeches focused on the transformational impact of the pandemic that "changed overnight" the "way people live, the jobs people have… [and] the industries that are the bedrock of our economy" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19). However, "new challenges" (Donelan, 2020 - MoS C19) caused by a crisis can also be an opportunity, where the more severe a situation is perceived, 'the bigger is the opportunity space for a critical reconsideration of current policies and the successful advancement of (radical) reform proposals' ('t Hart & Tindall, 2009b, p. 22). However, in most cases, a crisis is described as a flashpoint that has accelerated existing changes and challenges, or exposed and magnified existing unfairness or inequalities. For example, Johnson

(2020 - PM C19) argues that the COVID-19 "crisis has compressed" the technological "revolution" that was already occurring.

The speeches galvanise public support and justify their policy ***Goals*** by creating a sense of fear through '*risk talk*' (Bessant et al., 2003, p. 2) about the severity of the crisis and its potential to worsen if there is no action (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). Risk talk dominated the 2010 election campaign, where 'the Conservatives had made much of the argument that Britain faced imminent bankruptcy and was in a similar position' to other struggling European countries (Clarke et al., 2016, p. 39). Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) echoes these fears when addressing funding redistribution in HE and the consequences of inaction when he says:

> And if you want to know how serious that can be, just look at what's
> been happening to some of our European neighbours… At a time
> when markets are gripped by fears about government finances
> across Europe. It's absolutely vital that we keep Britain out of the
> danger zone by sticking to our plans for getting the public finances
> under control.

Cameron argues that failing to implement austerity measures will result in even worse economic conditions than those experienced by our European neighbours. During the GFC, austerity discourses played on fears of global economic insecurity and the eurozone crisis to justify the 'unaffordability of the welfare state' (Berry, 2016, p. 2). The hostile rhetoric about the eurozone during the GFC also 'tarnished the reputation

of the whole of the EU project' and was probably a contributing 'factor behind Brexit' (Goodhart, 2017, p. 98).

In the GFC speeches, the initial austerity discourses dwelt on fears of economic decline because of fiscal mismanagement; in later speeches, this evolved into worries about low productivity and economic growth. Such failings led to arguments that it is "time for change, and for radical change" (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19). Discourses 'on education and skills… in England' have 'often been associated with a rhetoric of crisis and a fear of economic decline' (Granoulhac, 2018, p. 5), and this continues throughout the speeches. Worries of economic decline feed into fears about the country's ability to compete in globalised markets (Goodhart, 2017). Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) warns that the continued underfunding of UK universities will hinder their ability to compete with "international rivals [like] India and China", who are building new universities and significantly increasing the "number of graduates".

Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit) raises the threat of the "incredible pace" of change in the "global economy" while Britain's "productivity… lags behind many advanced economies"; the country "faces a burning platform – one which long predates Brexit and yet is made all the more real by it". Williamson (2020 - SoS C19) also cautions that as "a nation, we seem to have given up on" technical skills when we need "them most to have a chance of competing against other nations", such as Germany and Canada.

The speeches' *Circumstances* establish discourses of fears about global and labour market competition and feed into unease about the 'dilution of 'Britishness'' from the direction of the EU (Leruth & Taylor-Gooby, 2021, p. 171). Particularly during the

Brexit and COVID-19 crises, risk talk plays on persistent public anxieties and concerns about 'globalisation and the social and economic consequences of unrestrained market forces' (Bessant et al., 2003, p. 15).

Greening's (2017 - SoS Brexit) **Circumstantial** premise describes how "deepening globalisation [is] steadily transforming the nature of work [and is tearing] up old assumptions about what it takes to succeed". May (2018 - PM Brexit) argues that "new technologies which are shaping the economy of the future will transform the world of work and demand new knowledge and skills in the decades ahead". Johnson (2020 - PM C19) also warns that "ten years from now, [a] huge number of [people] are going to have to change jobs – to change skills" because of technological and economic changes that have been "massively accelerated" due to the pandemic.

Fear and risk discourses focus on existential global threats that negatively affect people's lives and communities, providing an *illusion* of change in the state's fiscal management or mitigation of globalisation on communities (Baldwin et al., 2022). The illusion of British exceptionalism or superiority in dealing with a crisis and nationalistic rhetoric of welfare chauvinism, where entitlements, rights and benefits are restricted to one's community (Leruth & Taylor-Gooby, 2021). These discourses shield from 'scrutiny the considerable effort by policymakers to actually *prevent* change in the way that the UK economy operates' (Berry, 2016, p. 2).

For example, the repeated rhetoric about the excessive size of the state deflected away from the lack of economic reforms to the banking sector, thereby maintaining existing structures that caused the GFC. Boris Johnson's levelling-up agenda employs a

similar approach by playing on concerns about globalisation while also offering policy

solutions based on global trade that aim to promote regeneration and job creation in

left-behind cities and regions (Hudson, 2022; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021).

This section has explored how fear and risk discourses are strategically deployed in the

speeches' *Circumstances* to build a consensus and justify the proposed policy changes.

Whether the changes and challenges caused by the crisis are new or existing, the

crucial thing is how the political actors use crises to justify radical reform that would

have been unimaginable before the disaster. The *Circumstances* are "represented or

constituted" to establish the right *Goal* while excluding or restricting other options

(Bacchi, 2009, p. 1).

6.3 The Purpose of Austere Higher Education

Calhoun (2006, p. 10) suggests that universities are understood to have a public

service mission that contributes 'to both the continuity and creativity of culture'. This

mission is in the *Values* and beliefs these politicians express about education.

Universities are positioned as vital for "a socially mobile or culturally rich society"

(Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC) and are "at the heart of our national life" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS

GFC). "The pursuit of knowledge" is called the "hallmark of a civilised society"

(Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit), and education is the "keystone of our society" (Johnson,

2020 - PM C19). However, these *Value* premises must be explored alongside

Circumstantial and *Goal* premises to establish whether politicians are expressing

'normatively appropriate' views rather than their actual *Values* (Fairclough &

Fairclough, 2012, p. 45).

The speeches only pay lip service to this public role, and what is more evident in the text is a subversion of this ideal. The problems articulated (***Circumstances***) and the ***Goals*** move the sector towards an 'input–output system which can be reduced to an economic production function' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 324). Wright (2016, p. 131) also found in their analysis of parliamentary debates and ministerial speeches that there was a 'profound shift from treating education as a social good… to an ideal of education as a personal investment in a positional good'. In austerity solutions, policymakers reject 'that goods such as education are constitutively public, or key for social cooperation between citizens, and therefore a matter of distributive justice for which the state is responsible' (Martin, 2015, p. 204). The following two sections explore how austerity discourses in the speeches framed the purpose of HE, firstly as a national economic benefit and secondly as an individual benefit for those that take advantage of it.

6.3.1 Economic

Cable (2010 - SoS GFC) argues that "universities are central [to] knowledge-based [and] modern economies", and the expansion of HE now means that "universities and their students now dominate… [many] towns or cities and their economies". Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit) suggests education and skills are the "strongest determinant of economic success… globally, nationally, and regionally". Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) believes that the "transition from an elite to a mass system of [HE] brings… an expectation of a strong economic return". Across each crisis, universities are expected to 'enhance economic competitiveness, at both local and national levels, and through

contributions of both skilled labour and intellectual property' in a globalised

knowledge economy (Calhoun, 2006, p. 11). The speeches show how *Goals* to enhance

the British economy can only be realised per *Values* that discursively frame HE as an

economic function.

The politicians' *Goals* and *Values* also align HE's economic role with an 'ideology of

British exceptionalism', which harks back to the country's pre-eminence 'as the first

industrialised capitalist state and for a time the leading world economy' (Leruth &

Taylor-Gooby, 2021, p. 170). May's (2018 - PM Brexit) *Goal* is to create an education

system that makes "Britain a great engine room of this technological revolution in the

twenty-first century" (*Figure 5.6*). At the same time, Brexit and COVID-19 deployed

British exceptionalism to justify changes to how education was delivered and funded.

Prioritising skills and technical education will "finally enable our amazing country to

close the gap with other countries" and give the country the edge (Johnson, 2020 - PM

C19).

As discussed above, times of crisis give rise to fears of economic decline linked to

educational failings. Austerity promised economic growth but resulted in stagnation

for all but the very elite (Berry, 2016; Clarke, 2018; Mendick et al., 2018). The

rhetorical solution in the speeches is to repurpose education away from the

knowledge-based economy to support a technical or vocational skills-based economy.

Cable (2010 - SoS GFC) was the first to imagine the breakdown of the "rigid dividing

line between HE and FE" to address the country's skill deficit. While the other GFC

speeches – distracted by the funding debate – do not mention Further Education (FE), it is central to economic prosperity and levelling up in the other speeches.

May (2018 - PM Brexit) argues that the dominance of HE in the "public debate on tertiary education" means FE has not had the same attention and "this imbalance has an economic cost, with some businesses finding it hard to recruit the skilled workers they need". To break "down false boundaries between further and [HE]", May (2018 - PM Brexit) launched a review that, for the first time, would imagine possible futures for "the whole post-18 education sector". The review, named after its chair Philip Augar, had four priorities: "making tertiary education accessible to all, promoting choice and competition in the sector, delivering the skills our economy needs, and getting value for money for students and taxpayers" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit). The Brexit speeches show how the referendum triggered debates about the 'UK's future position on the global scene', which indirectly drew 'attention to the UK-wide dimension in education policy, from school to university' (Granoulhac, 2018, p. 24).

Policy solutions to an economic crisis and austerity have often emphasised 'vocationalism', paving the 'way for market-based reforms' that make education 'more responsive to the emerging financial needs of the nation' (Naz, 2023, p. 3). FE was also the policy solution for the pandemic recovery – "as we emerge from Covid, FE will be the key that unlocks this country's potential and that helps make post-Brexit Britain the triumph we all want" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19). Therefore, the country's economic *Goal* discursively employs FE as "vital if we want our country to grow economically and our productivity to improve" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19).

FE policy has become a form of 'soft economic nationalism' (Naz, 2023, p. 7). FE and technical skills are integral to the country's 'national, social, and economic priorities' in the Brexit and COVID-19 speeches (Orr, 2020, p. 507). Post-referendum, these politicians copy the broader language in education policy that is 'emphatically nationalistic' and based on British exceptionalism (Finn, 2018, p. 6). These nationalistic discourses emerged because of a shortage of skilled and unskilled labour caused by leaving the EU and anti-globalisation sentiment (Hodgson & Spours, 2019; Orr, 2020).

This section has argued that the speeches have used each crisis strategically to frame the purpose of education as economic. The following section will explore the 'linear continuum between education, work, productivity and earnings' or human capital theory, which has now come to dominate 'policy and public thinking' at all levels of education (Marginson, 2017, p. 3). It will also show how human capital theory has been strategically co-opted into austerity discourse to frame HE as a private individual good.

6.3.2 Cultivation of Individualism

Austerity discourses capitalise on free market logic 'that individuals pay for what they want or… will benefit from' (G. W. Williams, 2016). In all the speeches, *Values* rooted in individual responsibility act to define the *Circumstances* and justify their *Goals* and actions (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). As Cameron's (2010 - PM GFC) speech demonstrates– "a graduate earns on average over £100,000 more than someone who doesn't go to university"; therefore, he concludes that "graduates' contributions to the system should reflect the advantages they have enjoyed". Even where the broader

social benefits of HE are acknowledged, the main thrust of the argument is the individual goods: "The <u>benefits to the individual</u> of university study go beyond the financial. <u>Graduates</u> also enjoy better health, longer life expectancy, and higher levels of civic participation" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit, emphasis added).

An 'individualistic ideology' rhetoric frames all rewards and benefits of a degree as a reason for graduates to contribute to the cost of HE (J. Williams, 2016, p. 620). This discourse redefines HE as a 'private economic enrichment' benefit which evaporates the 'public good' purpose 'along with the public funding' (Marginson, 2011b, p. 414). It also reshapes the public perception of universities as only 'producing private status goods and private knowledge goods', so the public 'come to focus largely on those functions alone' (Marginson, p. 414). The individualisation of private gains casts students as 'investors in their own stocks of human capital' who should seek services that deliver 'value for money and a good return from the investment' (J. Williams, 2016, p. 626). Greening (2017) says, "Human capital is the missing ingredient in lifting the United Kingdom's economic productivity". Human capital theory individualises 'responsibility for all the costs and benefits associated with being an economic actor' (Fleming, 2017, p. 693).

The ***Goal*** of the COVID-19 speeches is for students to make choices that will support levelling up and "allow them to fully contribute to their community and serve as inspiration to their family" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19). Over the last decade, a mixed approach to human capital has developed. On the one hand, it is 'an extreme version of self-interested individualism, one that is largely unrealistic and unsustainable in

practice' (Fleming, 2017, p. 693). On the other, an extreme version of austere moralisation of responsible consumption in which an 'austere person is self-controlling, disciplined, and responsible' and one who can put 'higher things first, unlike lesser, impulsive people' (Mitrea, 2018, p. 57).

An individual is assumed to be self-interested economically, a 'rational optimiser, and the best judge' of their 'interests and needs' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314) while also being 'risk aware, prudential, responsible and enterprising' (Vigurs et al., 2018, p. 82). Prospective students should make choices that give them the most 'advantage in the highly competitive labour market' while considering the country's business, economic, and skills needs (Leach, 2017, p. 231). The success of the national economy now relies on human capitalists who 'are competitive individualists, preoccupied with investing and enhancing… their… economic value' (Fleming, 2017, p. 692).

Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit) says education should help students "translate… skills into real, smart choices and great opportunities". However, individuals do not always act as *good consumers*, which brings risks for an economy based on rational consumer behaviour. Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit) expresses dismay that "even when many young people are achieving good grades at school, too few are making the best choices they can about what routes to pursue after school".

The COVID-19 speeches also imply that students have made poor choices because there are not enough people with the "right skills for the jobs our economy creates", and there are "too many graduates" in jobs they do not want (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19). In responding to customer demand, universities are also blamed for poor choices

as they have taken advantage of students by expanding "popular sounding courses" with no economic benefit (Donelan, 2020 - MoS C19).

The austerity discourses in the speeches have enabled an 'ideological debate around the role and scope of the state', public institutions and individuals (Griffiths, 2020, p. 19). These austere discourses resulted in the state's retrenchment, 'the emergence of a politics of individualism,' and the repurposing of HE as a positional economic good (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017, p. 11). Individual consumers are responsible for making rational choices for themselves and society. As such, 'students in English universities are no longer reading for a degree; they are buying a degree' (Maisuria & Cole, 2017, p. 610). Austere individualism acts to dismantle 'structures to be replaced by individual agency', but at the same time, the 'structural certainties' that enable choice-making are disassembled, which can reinforce inequalities (Holdsworth, 2017, p. 299).

There is an assumption of context-free decision-making; however, choices are constrained or enabled by factors such as class, ethnicity, previous educational experiences, locality, financial resources, social networks, and cultural capital (Baker, 2019; Ball et al., 2002). Providing information to individuals without addressing structural inequalities is questionable as not everyone has the same resources to maximise that knowledge (Pickering, 2021). This approach embeds 'neoliberal norms of competitive individualism within educational contexts by promising to equalise opportunities' (Owens & de St Croix, 2020, p. 405).

Moral austerity discourses and human capital theory are deeply interwoven in the speeches reducing every function of education to its 'quantifiable' economic return,

which justifies increasingly 'leaden and oppressive' intervention by the state in educational institutions to ensure economic growth (Holborow, 2012, p. 24). The following section will explore how austerity discourses justify state intervention in the quasi-choice-driven market.

6.4 Austere Marketisation

Anxieties about the expanding and increasingly expensive welfare state drove the Coalition's 'broader policy agenda' and their austerity programme (Williams, 2019, p. 18). Cable (2010 - SoS GFC) encapsulates these concerns when he says, "Britain is a tangibly poorer country… [so] deep cuts in government spending on universities" are needed and "like the wider public sector, universities are going to [have to] do more for less". Austerity policies promoted neoliberal goals of reducing costs and the state (Griffiths, 2020). However, Farnsworth and Irving (2018, p. 462) argue that the neo-austerity state leads to 'not less, but more reliance on the state to enforce, support and compensate for the social, political and economic' inequalities caused by austerity.

The following two sections explore the development of an austere-regulated HE market. It also shows how the speeches represent or constitute (Bacchi, 2009) problems in the *Circumstantial* premise to justify *Goals* and policy changes. It begins by exploring how austerity discourses justified the reconstruction of HE funding and created a 'policy inheritance' (Weir, 1992) that led to a crisis discourse about value for money and quality. It then discusses how the austere market crisis justified increased state intervention and regulation to make the HE market operate more fairly.

6.4.1 Funding and Value

Labour's introduction of fees in 1997 began the erosion of 'hitherto taken-for-granted policy beliefs and practices' about university funding and the role of public institutions ('t Hart & Tindall, 2009b, p. 22). This legacy facilitated the Coalition's 'tuition fee hike by making it more politically and socially acceptable' (de Gayardon et al., 2019, p. 967). However, increased fees are 'not the whole story'; the real story is that they create the 'essential condition for implementing a new kind of market in undergraduate provision' that was meant to increase competition - in fees charged and students recruited - and improve quality (McGettigan, 2013, p. 25).

The GFC enabled Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) to argue there are "no pots of money… [to] delve into… we're in deep debt… yet the current model of [HE] funding is simply not providing enough money to support this growing number of students… and it's right... successful graduates pay their share". Cameron's *Circumstances* preclude government subsidies as reasonable because the country is in debt. Therefore, he presented his *Goal* of moving HE funding away from the state and towards graduates as the only viable solution to the funding crisis.

Other problems caused by the funding system are identified in the *Circumstantial* premise to justify the *Goal* of a competitive market in HE. Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) argues there is no "genuine competition or choice" in HE because universities "get most of their money from government"; therefore, there is "no real incentive for universities to improve and give students what they want, and that is damaging to the quality [HE]". The increased graduate contributions will give students a "real choice"

(Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC) and the "greatest possible influence over the service they receive" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC).

The new funding model would give universities "financial independence" (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC) and put "real pressure" on providers "to drive up standards" and create a genuinely competitive market (Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC). The increased resources will provide a "high-quality student experience and protect… the financial interests of graduates and taxpayers" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC). Cable (2010 - SoS GFC) argues that it would not just bring "more and better choice for students… [but] better value for money through new and potentially lower cost approaches to teaching". However, one of the 'consequences of the demand-led system has been a decline in more flexible' study modes (Millward, 2021, p. 12).

The GFC speeches believed competition would drive fee levels and the charging of the maximum fee would be "exceptional", especially as new and alternative providers may charge "significantly below £9,000, so universities should not ignore the competitive challenge" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC). The GFC politicians repeatedly tried to influence pricing decisions and encourage differential fees (McGettigan, 2013), most significantly by requirements to broaden "access if they [universities] want to charge a graduate contribution of more than £6,000" (Willetts, 2010).

The 2010 funding model shifted HE from 'essentially a public service to one… largely bought and sold as a private commodity' (G. W. Williams, 2016, p. 131). In an austere market, universities are reimagined as 'private corporations competing with each other' to improve quality (Marginson, 2016a, p. 5). Austerity discourse also introduced

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moral economy norms – 'expectations and ideas of obligation and entitlement' - into the HE funding debate (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 314). The **Values** in the GFC speeches transformed students into hybrid consumer-client, altering their expectations of the state, their obligations to themselves and society, and their entitlements from universities. While not aligned with the Big Society, the funding model and the HE austere market employ the same principles of transforming personal responsibility and public goods.

The funding policies both bound and shaped May's Brexit government's permissible choices and solutions to growing concerns about the cost of the funding model (Weir, 1992). Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) addresses the public unease with "student finance… [that] played a prominent role in the General Election campaign". The public concerns were rooted in the sluggish economic growth that undermined the assumption that the graduate premium would be maintained and the economy would continue to create knowledge-based graduate jobs (Granoulhac, 2018; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021; Ortiz & Cummins, 2021). This situation is 'in danger of creating a heady cocktail of discontent: students and their parents may find that a degree fails to deliver the standard of living they have been led to expect' (Brown & Lauder, 2006, p. 50).

However, Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) argues that the fee levels are "right and fair", and instead, the question is "whether universities are providing students with a fair deal". The argument about how to fairly fund HE transforms into discourses about "poor value for money [which] was disguised when fees were absorbed in general

taxation" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit). Therefore, "universities must be honest with themselves about what they are offering" and be "willing to make the reforms necessary" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit).

Despite the defence of the fee system, public discord and resistance continued to grow. May (2018 - PM Brexit) points out that "universities in England are now better funded than they have been for a generation, [but the] competitive market between universities which the system of variable tuition fees envisaged has simply not emerged". Instead, England has one of the world's "most expensive systems of university tuition", and there are "serious concerns" that the "level of fees charged do not relate to the cost or quality of the course" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit). Willetts (2017, p. 83) reflects that differential fees did not emerge because it was 'based on a false analysis' that students would be swayed by fee level, whereas what mattered to them 'was the repayment formula'.

Austere marketisation was also unsuccessful because it failed to recognise engrained hierarchies in the sector and the positional good of HE in determining future opportunities. Therefore, 'setting low prices may send the wrong signal to potential applicants, who are using it to judge the prestige, status or the quality of the education on offer' (McGettigan, 2013, p. 35). High-status universities do not recruit but choose the student-consumer; they do not need to become cheaper, more efficient, or more responsive to gain support, and 'to expand would be to reduce their positional value' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 327). However, where they did choose to expand, it was often at the expense of lower-status providers.

HE's diminishing returns are increasingly used to argue that it no longer fulfils its economic purpose and to justify a move towards FE. These discourses are particularly striking in the *Circumstantial* premises of the COVID-19 speeches. Johnson (2020 - PM C19) argues that students "leave university and work in a non-graduate job", leaving them "wondering whether they did the right thing, [racking] up that debt on that degree?". There is also a shift in the language politicians use, from fees being an 'investment' to a 'debt'.

Donelan (2020 - MoS C19) blames expansion and universities for "recruiting too many young people onto courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals". While Williamson (2020 - SoS C19) claims that "a work-based, technical apprenticeship… gives greater returns than the typical… bachelor's degree". However, this claim has caveats; most apprenticeships only offer 'marginal better lifetime earning than secondary school qualifications ', and the high-earning apprenticeships are 'disproportionately populated by those from wealthier backgrounds' (Kirby, 2015, p. 2).

The austere discourse reframed education as an economic function and created a *'value for money'* crisis in HE. The 'paradox of the knowledge economy' where ''human capital' is increasingly subject to the laws of diminishing returns as more people gain access' to HE (Brown & Lauder, 2006, p. 45). There is no acknowledgement from the politicians that austerity economic policies may be why there is a growth in the number of graduates in non-graduate roles - blame and responsibility for weak growth was transferred to universities and students (Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022). The

graduates in non-graduate jobs are somehow subpar because they have failed to optimise university opportunities, demonstrating their lack of suitability for higher learning in the first place. The following section explores how market failures and poor value for money justify neo-austerity intervention.

6.4.2 Austere State Intervention

The 'failure of a differential fees policy meant other markers of distinction were needed to differentiate institutions' (Rainford, 2019, p. 26) and 'alter university structures and behaviour' (Finn, 2018, p. 29). Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) acknowledges that "universities rightly enjoy autonomy". However, he argues that the "Government has a legitimate interest in questions around institutional efficiency, both in our role as stewards of the [HE] system and as its most significant single funder". These responsibilities justify the increasing role of the states in monitoring, measuring, and controlling the quality of HE (Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2018).

Government governance is epitomised in the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA), which "sets an entirely new regulatory framework for the HE sector and marks the start of a new era" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit). The Office for Students (OFS) gained new powers to hold providers to account for all 'outcomes across the student lifecycle', leading to increased regulatory intervention (Millward, 2022, p. 9). HERA also introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), an "essential means of holding universities to account for the teaching and outcomes they deliver for students" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit).

TEF's *Goal* was to create provider differentials according to the quality of teaching and would support student choice. TEF 'represents an intensification of forms of new public management in HE whereby efficiency, standards and effectiveness are… increased through new and extensive processes of metricisation' (Lucas, 2019, p. 174). The TEF was also meant to support students' choice-making by providing accurate information on teaching quality. However, 'most applicants were not aware of the TEF'; if they were aware, they did not consider it crucial for decision-making (Ashwin, 2022, p. 36).

A new crisis or period of austerity provides an 'opportune moment to roll out further rounds of regulatory restructuring' (Mercille & Murphy, 2017, p. 372). The policy solution is to reform the welfare state and shift 'the emphasis from spending to regulation' (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). Neo-austerity introduces 'numerical metrics that are used as a proxy for quality and high standards', creating the conditions for quality assurance 'protocols to be axiomatic, rendering them almost unquestionable' (Maisuria & Cole, 2017, p. 605). Regulation opens up providers for criticism as the metrics lay bare their inadequacies. As demonstrated by Donelan (2020 - MoS C19), who challenges universities on poor participation records, "there has been too much focus on getting students through the door, and not enough focus on how many drop out, or how many go on to graduate jobs".

Post-Brexit, there has been an evolving policy discourse that "for too long as a country, we've settled for second best for students who have been going to FE colleges" and have not "paid enough attention to what they are studying, or making sure it is

genuinely high quality" (Greening, 2017 - SoS Brexit). However, as Chapter Five

argued, there is intentional policy amnesia about how successive governments have

cut funding to FE (Stark & Head, 2019, p. 1525). England has maintained 'a dual sector

approach with separate policy drivers for each sector', with further education taking

'second place to [HE] both in funding and in status' (Shattock & Hunt, 2021, p. 6).

The Augar Review aimed to deconstruct the silos of tertiary education (Shattock &

Hunt, 2021), and recommended wholly or partially reversing the Coalition's pro-

market policies (Morgan, 2019). It also provided a rationale for further state

intervention in tertiary education, arguing that while competition creates choice for

students, the 'full spectrum of social, economic, and cultural benefits' and outcomes

will be haphazard 'with no steer from government' (Augar, 2019, p. 8).

Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) and Donelan (2020 - MoS C19) identified issues of over-

recruitment, "grade inflation", "low entry requirements", "unconditional offers", "low-

value courses", and inconsistent quality as having a negative impact on the sector.

However, the mix of 'poor student choices', intensive competition and a 'generous and

undirected funding' system has caused these issues, as well as the 'over-supply of

some courses at great cost to the taxpayer and a corresponding undersupply of

graduates in strategically important sectors' (Augar, 2019, p. 10). The

acknowledgement by Augar that post-16 education cannot be left entirely to market

forces represents a philosophical shift away from competition and choice to a neo-

austerity state that aggressively steers education policy to achieve social, economic,

and cultural outcomes. The rejection of the market-oriented principles lays bare the

tension between 'politics and markets' and the failures of neoliberal principles of competition and choice in previous HE policies (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021, p. 11).

A change in PM and a global pandemic resulted in a lacklustre government response to Augar's recommendations (Pickford, 2021). However, Johnson (2020 - PM C19) still quotes Augar's finding that the "funding system… propels young people into universities and away from technical education". The policy *Goal* was to offer a "real choice" between FE and HE by extending the funding system so it is "as easy to get a loan for a higher technical course as for a university degree" (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19).

Access to the student funding system would also allow colleges to be "better able to compete with universities". However, students would have their choices restricted as "not… every FE course", only a "specific list of valuable and mainly technical courses", will be able to access the funding system (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19). This policy was a marked departure from the funding model implemented by the Coalition, which said they would not dictate "who studies what" but would provide information, "send signals about the wider national interest", and equip "students to judge" the best routes (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC)

Another review will aim "to simplify" the FE system and courses, giving people a "quality set of choices" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19). Since 1980, FE has experienced constant and rapid change and has been subject to 28 pieces of legislation and numerous funding changes (Baldwin et al., 2022). Despite the 'near-permanent state of revolution', FE has remained 'chronically underfunded and vulnerable to the caprice of policy' and status hierarchies that make fair competition unlikely (Orr, 2020, p. 508).

When students have a choice between an access course in a college or at a university, they are more likely to opt for the better-funded resources and facilities of universities (Pickering, 2023; Staton et al., 2021).

Johnson (2020 - PM C19) also positions FE and access to technical and vocational training as central to the government's "levelling up agenda", expressed in the *Values* and *Goals*. To aid levelling up, Colleges should "work with small, local businesses [to] deliver courses that are of the highest quality and which are tailored to the needs of employers and their local economies" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19). The Johnson government elevated employers to the role of 'expert', giving them 'unprecedented influence over education and training provision that increasingly subsumes learning under labour-power production' (Cogavin, 2023, p. 10). The realignment of funding will allow the government to blame others for 'failing to play their part' while opening the door for neo-austerity regulation and scrutiny (Marginson, 2011a, p. 32).

This section has argued that neo-austerity discourses have increased regulation and government intervention in the HE quasi-choice-driven market to assure value for money and quality. While neoliberalism intends to reduce the state, the opposite has happened under neo-austerity policies. Cameron's Big Society is 'thwarted by a Big State that has gradually inserted itself into every aspect of our lives, controlling everything from the centre' (Biressi & Nunn, 2014, p. 4). A crisis may provide an opportunity to reduce the state. However, the GFC crisis marked 'a moment of discontinuity in the neoliberal era, one in which the severity of the crisis has forced the

leading Western economies into much greater reliance on the state' (Callinicos, 2012, pp. 66-67).

State intervention was seen again during Brexit and COVID-19, where the 'state has triumphantly returned to the scene' and the 'post-modern myth about withering nation states is being seriously challenged' (Vankovska, 2020, pp. 73-74). The aspiration of neoliberalism remains, but the reality is that a state has to intervene to ensure outcomes, especially in the face of a crisis. Individual choices are being eroded by economic needs, which is at odds with neoliberal freedoms. Responsibility for outcomes has been devolved to other parties, but the state's role has increased in monitoring and regulating those parties. The circumstances and problems created by neoliberalism meant the politicians' response was a mutated version of neoliberalism - neo-austerity.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to answer the second research question - What discursive political strategies do these speeches employ during three major crises to construct and justify higher education policy changes? It has found that the legacy of the Coalition austerity programme was so significant that it impeded the country's ability to respond to Brexit and COVID-19, and its influence was still identifiable in policy a decade later (Glover & Maani, 2021; James & Thériault, 2020; Navarro, 2020). The result was a neo-austerity turn in English HE policy. This turn differs from a neoliberal one based on a small state; it promotes market-based policies, liberating individuals and private enterprises (Harvey, 2007), enforced through heavy state intervention and financing.

The chapter established the discursive strategies of neo-austerity (*Figure 6.3*) that use a crisis to build consent for change through blaming and assigning responsibility to others. Fears about social and global change caused by the crisis and the risk of not acting according to *Goals* are strategically employed to develop a consensus. The discursive strategies of neo-austerity realigns the purpose of HE to an economic function that benefits private, enterprising individuals. Finally, the process created an austere market where funding and value for money concerns justify increased state intervention in education, resulting in HE and FE being 'subject not just to 'state steering' but to state micro-management on a scale comparable to other European systems' (Shattock & Horvath, 2020, p. 182).

Austere Consensus Building	The Purpose of Austere HE	Austere Marketisation
Blame & Responsibility Other groups, institutions, or political parties are blamed or held responsible for a crisis.	**Economic Contribution** In a crisis, the purpose of HE is defined as economic, thereby tying it to the country's fiscal success and productivity.	**Funding & Value** A crisis in funding or perceived poor value for money justifies radical changes to the HE sector.
Fear & Risk Fears about a crisis or social and global change are engaged to highlight the risks of not acting according to the stated goals.	**Cultivation of Individualism** HE is a private benefit for individuals to increase their economic and consumerist powers.	**State Intervention** The state obfuscates responsibility for HE to markets while increasing surveillance and monitoring of the sector.

Figure 6.3 Detailed Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity

The next chapter will continue to examine the discursive strategies of neo-austerity to understand how educational fairness is framed in times of uncertainty.

Chapter 7: Levelling Up Social Mobility in a Neo-Austerity State

The more a ruling class is able to assimilate the foremost minds of a

ruled class, the more stable and dangerous becomes its rule (Marx,

2001, p. 808).

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will answer the third research question: How do these speeches

discursively frame educational fairness during three major national crises? Defining

fairness is challenging because it is a slippery discourse that slides between ideas of

social mobility, levelling up, opportunity, meritocracy, freedom, society, educational

attainment, equality, funding, and fees. These 'slippages' make the concept of fairness

problematic as it is utilised interchangeably with any of the words above, and its uses

and meaning appear to slip and change over each crisis and even from speech to

speech (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022). However, this chapter attempts to clarify the

discursive framing of fairness in the speeches under study.

The Practical Argumentation Framework (PAF) categories, ***Goals*** and ***Values*** will be the

primary means of examining the conceptualisation of fairness in the nine speeches

(*Figure 7.1*). ***Goals*** are 'future, possible state of affairs that the agent envisages' which

normally align with an agent's concerns 'expressed in the value premise' (Fairclough &

Fairclough, 2012, p. 42). ***Values*** loosely bind existing moral, social, and institutional

orders, but they also often aim to transform the existing structures by promoting

certain ideological beliefs, concepts, and assumptions (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012;

Gale, 1999; Olssen et al., 2004).
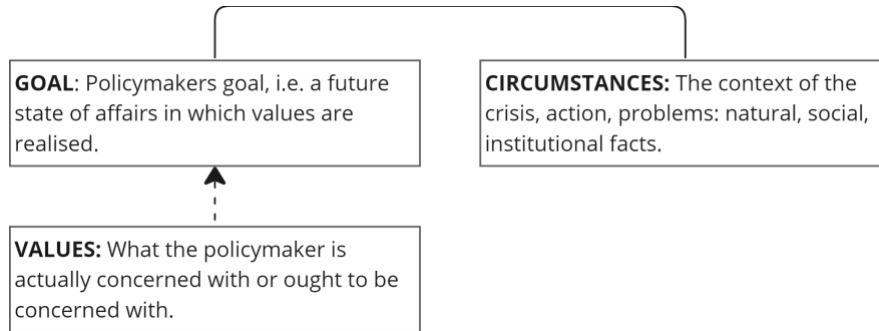
Figure 7.1 PDA Circumstances, Goal and Values Premises

This chapter applies the discursive strategies of neo-austerity (*Figure 7.2*) identified in the last chapter and the findings of Stage 3B of the data analysis (*Appendix 1*). The first section, Austere Consensus Building: Fairness, explores how fairness is discursively framed in the nine speeches in response to a crisis to justify policy choices. It then examines how these politicians engage with discourses of polarisation, which undermine liberal collectivism and disrupt the possibility of collective resistance to policy changes.

Figure 7.2 Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity: Fairness

The second section, the Purpose of Austere HE: Societal Change, investigates if speeches discursively frame the purpose of HE as egalitarian. The analysis identified that meritocratic discourses linked fairness with individual hard work, talent, and

achievement. It then explores how the discourse of social mobility evolves across the

speeches and how politicians' underlying ideological beliefs influenced the meanings

and purpose of social mobility. The section concluded that meritocracy and social

mobility discourses in the speeches reinforce the economic and individualistic

purposes of HE.

The third section, Austere Marketisation: A Failing Sector, returns to funding and

explores the discursive framing of fairness to justify fee increases and raise concerns

about high fees and value for money. It then discusses how discourses of HE expansion

and fair access in the speeches justified significant neo-austerity intervention. The

chapter concludes by summarising the findings in response to the research question.

7.2 Austere Consensus Building: Fairness

The following two sections explore how these politicians have used discourses of

fairness or unfairness to build a consensus for 'fundamentally divisive policies' that

enhanced individual responsibility, reinforcing or increasing social inequalities

(Hoggett et al., 2013). It shows how discourses of blame, responsibility, fear, and risk

are strategically deployed with fairness discourses to build a consensus for change.

7.2.1 Fairness and Crisis

Cameron's (2010 - PM GFC) *Values* and *Goals* interweave when he says he is "in

favour of social mobility, in favour of a fairer society" where "young people should

have the chance to go to university, whatever their background or family income". He

plays on people's fears of exclusion while promoting an austerity discourse that wraps

a government cuts programme in a 'liberal and reasonable cloak of fairness' (Hoggett et al., 2013, p. 568). Fairness discursively legitimised the broader austerity programme even when it increased inequalities (Nunn, 2012). In HE, austerity and fairness were the 'twin logics of… reform' that transformed the sector into a competitive market and private good (Clarke, 2018, p. 31).

The economic crisis allowed Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) to outline the risks of a "university system" that is "unsustainable, uncompetitive and unfair"; therefore, the "system need[s] to change". Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) voices people's fears that students are not getting "a fair deal" from universities. The speeches discursively frame HE fairness as 'concerns for quality and funding' (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 228). In the pursuit of fairness, politicians argue for urgent action to address the inequalities caused by the crisis (Peters et al., 2005). They highlight societal unfairness as a means of allocating blame and responsibility for the crisis to gain consent for their *Goals*.

Cable (2010 - SoS GFC) says he is "looking for ways of turning this funding crisis into an opportunity for universities". Johnson (2020 - PM C19) claims the "once a century pandemic" is an opportunity "to fix a problem that has plagued this country for decades". These politicians do not see crisis discourses as 'exclusively nor inherently… negative' because of the imagined 'bright future' (*Goals*) that will come after difficult times (Brambilla, 2019, p. 271). A crisis allows for the realignment of morals and *Values* along particular ideological beliefs because of the 'virtuous necessity' of the *Goals* (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 303). Leaders can present themselves as 'saviours'

that citizens can look to for the right solutions to tragic, risky or unfair situations they have identified (Sandaran & De Rycker, 2013, p. 200), appropriating the political opportunities a crisis provides for their own *Goals* (Altheide, 2004).

May (2018 - PM Brexit) builds her argument on the virtuous necessity of reconnecting "everyone in our society to a sense of fairness and opportunity" and by voting for Brexit "millions of people across this country... were sending a clear message about how our society and our economy works – or rather doesn't work – in too many communities". May's *Values and Goals* appropriate a fairness discourse that austerity has led to inequality to address the Brexit crisis because it captures the 'general mood, value or belief' of the time (De Rycker & Zuraidah Mohd, 2013, p. 38). Brexit was a protest vote caused by inequalities; therefore, "bold social and economic reform" is needed (May, 2018 - PM Brexit).

May uses the Brexit crisis to raise fears about the fundamental moral (*Values*), and political questions of society. A crisis can realign altruism, solidarity, global and national responsibility, and societal tolerance for inequalities and unfairness (Cappelen et al., 2021; Hoggett et al., 2013). However, crisis types affect the realignment of values and morals. Public health emergencies and natural disasters foster solidarity and altruism (Cappelen et al., 2021). In economic downturns, efficiency trumps equality, personal responsibility, and selfishness increases (Fisman et al., 2015). Moral persuasion and ideological consent are powerful argumentative tools because they control the 'attitudes and values' that 'permeate people's lives' (Scott, 2011, p. 136) as

long as they are continually repeated to harden public opinion into consent (Tyler, 2021, p. 10).

This section has shown how policymakers build a consensus by identifying blame and risks. The *Goals* align or co-opt *Values* of fairness to gain consent. However, the argumentative construction of the problem or crisis can be an 'alternative reality' they created to justify policy (Peters et al., 2005, p. 1284). The alternative reality or facts often result in fairness becoming a discourse about who is deserving (Hoggett et al., 2013), which the following section examines.

7.2.2 Fairness and Polarisation

Bowl (2018, p. 3) suggests it 'would be difficult to envisage a government policy position which (on paper at least) did not advocate that [HE] should be available to all'. However, the speeches' construction of fairness discourses creates caveats as to what is meant by 'all' in 'perhaps intentionally' to foment 'rivalries and inequalities rather than building solidarities' amongst different groups (Hoggett et al., 2013, p. 582). This section shows how *Values* of fairness influence the *Circumstantial* premise that blames some groups for taking advantage, emphasising unfairness, thereby leading to the *Goal* of a fairer education system.

In the GFC speeches, the Coalition argues that "those on low incomes" should not pay taxes "to prop up an unaffordable university funding system that they… do not benefit from directly" (Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC) and "pay for an already privileged group to avoid earning a living for three years" (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC). The GFC analysis identified two groups: the deserving, hard-working poor and the undeserving,

workshy, privileged middle class. The division of the ''us' and 'them' of graduate and non-graduate, educated and (supposedly) uneducated' was the fundamental justification for raising tuition fees (Finn, 2018, p. 117).

Polarisation is a well-worn neoliberal tactic of making and unmaking groups to blame, stigmatise, subjugate, and abject into a state of exclusion or *Otherness* (Hoggett et al., 2013). Austerity rearticulated the egalitarian form of fairness into one that legitimised 'attacks on the poor and welfare users' (Clarke, 2018, p. 30), reproducing and entrenching 'inequalities and injustices' (Tyler, 2021, p. 8) 'along class, racial and gender lines' (Nunn, 2016, p. 482). The result is dichotomous groups along modes of class representation: working-class 'shirkers' and middle-class "strivers" (Clarke, 2018, p. 30). However, the polarisation discourses in the speeches are less stable and more malleable; the groups blamed and cast as deserving or undeserving appear to change according to the articulated policy problem.

The Brexit speeches identify a new group: the "significant numbers of graduates in non-graduate jobs"; therefore, there needs to be a "big reduction in student numbers" to maintain the graduate premium (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit, *Figure 5.5 Counter-Claim*). These politicians used this group to fuel debates about value for money and blame universities for over-recruiting students and failing to deliver good outcomes. The declining graduate premium and Brexit also reignite battle lines between "education… based in learning practical and vocational skills [and] education based on academic excellence" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit). The HE/FE divide is exploited even further in the COVID-19 speeches.

Johnson's (2020 - PM C19) *Goal* is also to "end this bogus distinction between FE and HE" to support the economic recovery post-pandemic. Williamson (2020 - SoS C19) commits to "stand for the forgotten 50%... [that] choose another path" in FE and, therefore, are assumed to have "somehow come up short". However, the COVID-19 speeches suffer from mass policy amnesia as there was no acknowledgement of austerity or policies since 2010 that defunded and devalued FE and those who access it (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018; Rietdijk, 2021; Stark & Head, 2019). Johnson's government constructed a counternarrative that there has been too much "focus on what we're familiar [HE] with, not what the nation needs [FE]", which has caused unfairness in post-compulsory education (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19).

Cogavin (2023, p. 3) suggests HE and FE polarisation reinforce traditional 'cultural capital and social class' representations. It is also a form of class protectionism that wants to stem the flow of working-class graduates and retain the positional value of HE for the middle class (Brown, 2013; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022). As HE confers cultural and social capital above and beyond its supposed economic benefits, the distinction between HE and FE has 'inevitably fostered a sense of injustice and inequality' (Finn, 2018, p. 118). Therefore, dismantling the bogus distinction is also challenging because FE 'still struggles for recognition and esteem' because middle-class parents do not send their children there (Orr, 2020, p. 508). The vocation and academic binary also 'plays down institutional differentiation… within and between' FE and HE (Avis & Orr, 2016, p. 52).

The HE/FE divide was exploited in the 2019 general election campaign to create a political realignment of the working class to the Conservative Party (Tomaney & Pike, 2020). Williamson (2020 - SoS C19) argues for "a major shift in how we treat [FE]" because of its "importance in levelling up" and for delivering for "all those communities who we, as Conservatives, are representing for the first time". Levelling up was meant to 'unite, or re-unite, the nation, and indeed four nations, around a common goal: to bring left-behind, underfunded and economically depressed regions up (Espiet-Kilty, 2022, p. 22). However, it deviously pits geographical locations against each other 'in a way that speaks to some voters' feelings of having been neglected over many decades and having lost status to other groups in society' (Jennings et al., 2021, p. 306).

Austerity 'engineered greater divisions between social groups' than ever before as different groups are blamed and made responsible for social problems (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021, p. 21). This social polarisation undermines liberal collectivism and intergroup solidarity, breaking down the possibility of resistance to subjugation, growing inequalities, and the failing welfare state (Cunningham & Samson, 2021; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012; Leruth & Taylor-Gooby, 2021). This fractured society contributed to the outcome of the EU referendum but is also beneficial for politicians as they can exploit divisions to build a consensus around policies (Goodhart, 2017). Hoggett et al. (2013) state that the underlying sentiment of polarisation is 'reactionary forms of populism' and nationalism, which is most apparent in Johnson's (2020 - PM C19) speech when he highlights the "sizeable proportion" of British jobs being filled by "technicians… from overseas".

Clarke and Newman (2012, p. 316) argue that 'one of the most telling indicators of the dislocation of moral economy is the proliferation of competing political discourses of 'fairness' – attempting to both revive and renegotiate the promises of equity and solidarity'. In the speeches, the quest for fairness aligns with the austere moral economy, which requires the undeserving to 'sacrifice' because of the 'mutual obligation [and responsibilities] governing social and economic relations' (Clarke, 2018: 31). However, in the neo-austerity groups are polarised according to discursive needs of politicians rather than actual inequality. The following section explores how fairness discourses mask the individual and economic purpose of HE.

7.3 The Purpose of Austere Higher Education: Social Transformation

The following sections explore how the speeches discursively frame the purpose of HE and fairness. It finds that the proclaimed egalitarian role of education masks austere meritocratic (Mendick et al., 2018) economic and individual functions (Cunningham & Samson, 2021) that perpetuate inequality and class-based outcomes. The section, Meritocratic Fairness, explores the meritocratic framing of fairness in the speeches. Next, Mobility and Fairness examines the changing meaning of social mobility through each crisis and its increasing economic function for maximising individual and localities outputs.

7.3.1 Meritocratic Fairness

UK Austerity has resulted in increased inequality, but this situation is broadly accepted because people are 'confident… they live in a meritocratic society' where one's circumstances represent an individual's 'hard work and commitment' (Leruth & Taylor-

Gooby, 2021, pp. 173-174). The **Belief** that education-based meritocracy (ability +

effort + qualifications) should determine an individual's outcomes rather than

background has become the axiom of modern policymaking and society (Millward,

2021; Themelis, 2021; Tholen, 2022).

Willetts (2010 - MoS GFC) felt there was "no incompatibility between the aims of

social justice, in the sense of equality of opportunity, and the effective competition for

talent". Therefore, "young people from disadvantaged backgrounds" need to be

enlightened about "the opportunities available to them and the means of seizing

them" (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC). A scholarship fund would be available for "anyone from

a <u>poor</u> background who is <u>bright</u>, ambitious and wants" to attend HE (Cameron, 2010 -

PM GFC, *emphasis added*). Universities should have "access to the very best pools of

talent" but avoid educating "people who do not have the potential to benefit from a

particular course at a particular institution" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC). Providers

should also mitigate the unfairness of "poor quality schooling" by assessing "academic

merit - both prior attainment and future potential" in a manner that is "fair,

transparent, and evidence-based" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC).

The Coalition's meritocratic fairness **Goals** prioritised making market opportunities

accessible to all individuals regardless of their social background as long as they have

the talent and ability (Espiet-Kilty, 2022; Spohrer, 2015). Targeting support to only the

most 'deserving' became synonymous with the 'bright but poor' (McCaig, 2016), a

conspicuously elitist attempt to influence these 'applicants to choose high-status

universities' (Harrison, 2018). Interestingly, none of the speeches qualifies middle-

class access to HE with caveats such as attainment or talent; for example, there is no suggestion that the dim but privileged should pursue other educational routes.

However, 'fairness should not be understood as a neutral concept' as its conflation with 'transparency of admission procedures… hides the social and cultural processes impacting both on applicants' abilities to prove 'merit' as well as what institutions consider as such' (Spohrer, 2015, p. 105). The Coalition framed fairness as 'equal chances' – to access opportunities rather than 'equal treatment… [or] equal shares' (Clegg, 2010, para. 23). Therefore, social justice is 'equal opportunities in competition for social status and incomes' rather than 'equality of living conditions' (Spohrer, 2015, pp. 110-111). Meritocratic fairness also has an 'IQ fetish' (Slobodian, 2023); intelligence is innate and not shaped by external factors – so as long as opportunities are available, the intelligent will rise to the top through hard work.

Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit) aspires for bright but disadvantaged students not to attend just any university but to attend "the very best… world-leading" institutions. May's (2018 - PM Brexit) *Goal* is for "a country where your background does not define your future... Britain as the Great Meritocracy, a country that respects hard work, rewards effort and industry, where a happy and fulfilled life is within everyone's grasp". The Great Mayritocracy (Littler, 2017) wanted a 'socially just hierarchy based on merit rather than privilege' (Page, 2018, p. 116).

May's *Goal* assumes the education system is unfair because it does not work for everyone. She tells a 'schemata' (Charteris-Black, 2018) of "a working-class boy" who aspires to be a lawyer but has no "social network to draw on" and a "privately

educated" girl who dreams of being a "software developer... and... go[ing] straight into the industry" but is pressured to attend a "Russell Group university" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit). However, May fails to appreciate that the "girl" will have the opportunity to access both university and industry, while the "boy" will most likely only get one chance. The risk of failure has much higher consequences for the working class.

Meritocracy simultaneously illuminates and obscures structural disadvantages as it 'insists young people can transcend adverse social conditions by working hard to take up the opportunities offered by an equitable, high-quality education system' (Owens & de St Croix, 2020, p. 407). It creates an 'opportunity trap' for individuals that forces them 'to spend more time, effort and money trying to access the education, certificates and jobs they want, with few guarantees that their aspirations will be realised' (Brown & Lauder, 2006, p. 47).

The Brexit speeches acknowledge structural barriers - the "postcode lottery" (Greening, 2017 - SoS Brexit) of education funding and the roles "location of birth and economic background determine young people's outcomes". However, it is the COVID-19 speeches that engage more fully with the impact of place on education through their levelling up agenda. Localised opportunities and high economic unfairness caused by austerity were weaponised by promising higher state spending and intervention (McCann, 2023; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021).

A *Value* of levelling up is that "HE should be open to... those... qualified by ability and attainment" (Donelan, 2020 - MoS C19, *emphasis added*). However, meritocratic levelling up reframes poor but bright students' aspirations and expectations of the

future. It also has a *Value:* "Talent and genius are expressed as much by the hand and by the eye as they are in a spreadsheet or an essay" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19). Therefore, FE provides the opportunities to "unlock an individual's potential so they can get the job and career that they crave" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19).

The speeches mythologise meritocracy (Owens & de St Croix, 2020) and elevate education to the great arbiter of social and economic justice (Marginson, 2017). The meritocracy discourses promoted in the speeches appear to align with Mendick et al. (2018, p. 11) 'austere meritocracy', which refers to this intensification of individualism and economic risk. Their theory suggests that 'particular behaviours and orientations' are established 'as the legitimate and desirable means through which young people are to pursue and attain their aspirations' (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 11). Success, failure, and risk shifts from the state and 'structural frameworks' to 'intimate personal and individualised ones' - young people who successfully navigate austere meritocracy and maximise their choices are strivers, and those who fail are scroungers (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 54). The following section will continue to examine these themes by exploring the discourses on social mobility in the speeches.

7.3.2 Mobility and Fairness

This section explores how the speeches discursively frame social mobility and fairness as *Goals* and *Values* during each crisis. Social mobility in the GFC speeches focuses on helping a few bright students climb the social ladder. The Brexit speeches reframe social mobility as economic mobility for all. Finally, the COVID-19 speeches use social

mobility discourses interchangeably and undistinguishably from levelling up discourses.

7.3.2.1 Social Mobility for a Bright Few

Willetts (2010 - MoS GFC) *Values* put "social mobility… at the heart of the Government's agenda... [and] universities must be part of this". The Coalition framed social mobility as an "engine" that had "stalled" (Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC). The stalled engine meant the "previous Government [Labour] had to concede…, social mobility is no greater or less since 1970's" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC). Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) wanted universities to reverse this trend by being "a key part of an education system that is an engine for social mobility".

Since the golden age of social mobility between the 1940s and 1980s, policymakers have tried to use education to recreate that social transformation (Mandler, 2020). However, the Coalition engine ran into a headwind of 'escalating inequalities unleashed by neoliberalism and accelerated by post-crash austerity' (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 162). Austerity cuts broke the 'seamless web' (Archer, 2007) of support that aided post-compulsory education progression. The contracting austerity welfare state also meant less 'room at the top', and the private sector failed to step into the breach (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). However, during austerity, the broader policy discourse maintained that if only young people are sufficiently aspirational, 'ambitious, motivated and talented,' they can succeed and become socially mobile (Dorey, 2023, p. 223). Individualising social mobility in this way is 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011), as

it attaches optimistic ideals to hard work in a climate where 'hard work alone had less and less chance of reaping the prizes' (Littler, 2017).

Willetts (2010 - MoS GFC) describes social mobility as a "virtuous circle", which improves early-year education if children "encounter parents or nursery teachers who themselves benefited from a university education". The virtuous circle implies a move away from hyper-individualism of hard work, ambition and talent to a form of social collectivism where support from the community and 'parents is also underlined' (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022, p. 581). The circle embodied the Big Society agenda, positioning communities and families as 'best placed to understand their needs and reclaim their social responsibility' (Gillies, 2013, p. 91). Individualism combines with the 'capacity of parents to pass on endowments to their children' (Marginson, 2017, p. 3) resulting in middle-class opportunity hoarding and the reproduction of existing social strata (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). Failing to secure upward mobility is attributed to 'suboptimal parenting practices' rather than structural or policy consequences (Gillies, 2013, p. 90).

Cameron's (2010 - PM GFC) *Goal* of "making it [HE] fairer" and universities "opening their doors to everyone… regardless of where they're from" would enable people to "escape - truly escape - the circumstances of your birth". This echoes an old social mobility trope that people need to escape from a place due to its lack of opportunities (Mendick et al., 2018). The heroic individual success of escape is celebrated, as if bright people are held hostage in their working-class communities (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022), and their upward mobility is because of their character, effort and their ability

to exercise their agency in choosing the advantageous opportunities (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022).

The Coalition's discursive framing of social mobility aligns with the Waller et al. (2015, p. 619) view that, since 2010, austerity has transformed 'discourse and policy… around educational fairness …, from seeking a wide-ranging good of 'social justice' to a narrower target of 'social mobility' for a far smaller number' of the brightest students. Coalition policy assumed that allowing students to compete fairly in an arena of equal opportunities would compensate for social inequalities (Smith, 2016). Austere social mobility, like 'neoliberal justice,' recognises the social injustice caused by market competition yet pronounces the extension of it as the solution (Littler, 2017, p. 69).

7.3.2.2 Economic mobility for all

May's framing of Brexit as a protest vote about societal inequalities resulted in a significant shift in the social mobility discourse. The ***Belief*** that "society and… economy… doesn't work – in too many communities" led to a ***Goal*** for a "Great British Meritocracy" that "works for everyone" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit). Similarly, Greening's (2017 - SoS Brexit) ***Goal*** is to "transform… social mobility and opportunities" to create a "fairer, more cohesive country… [because] in Brexit Britain social mobility is now no longer a 'nice to have', a 'good thing to do'. It is a cold, hard, economic imperative for our country".

Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit) says, "economic mobility… [is] more profound in nature… [than just] helping the most disadvantaged to do better"; it is about "stripping away the barriers that <u>anyone</u> faces, so that <u>everybody</u> all over the country, and of <u>many</u>

backgrounds, can go as far as their talents mean they're able to" (*emphasis added*).
There is a linguistic slide in the Brexit speeches where 'social mobility' comes to mean
'*economic* mobility' (Maslen, 2022, pp. 107, emphasis in original). The Economic
Mobility Ladder's imperative is no longer about enabling a few to climb the ladder of
opportunity, 'leaving the rest behind' (Maslen, 2022, p. 107). It is about maximising
everyone's mobility to contribute effectively to the economy and be productive. There
is no longer a single destination of 'encoded middle-class behaviours' (Littler, 2017, p.
90) but multiple destinations according to ability and desire.

May (2018 - PM Brexit) argues that "opening up opportunity for everyone… [is] the
key that unlocks the door to a better future… [and a] good job and… fulfilled life"
(*emphasis added*). Social mobility would no longer have a 'narrower concept of social
justice which primarily focused on the most vulnerable' but on 'social mobility for all'
regardless of background (Williams, 2017, p. 12). Mobility for all believes that "talent
is… evenly spread around the country – it doesn't reside in one bit and not another";
therefore, there is a need to tackle "geographic disadvantage… [and] level up those
parts of the country where that talent isn't being tapped into" otherwise it is wasted
damaging the economy and productivity (Greening, 2017 - SoS Brexit).

Mobility for all is starting to embrace the notion of place due to Brexit and May's
ideological belief in the 'Shared Society' whereby 'individual rights and freedoms
would co-exist with the bonds of family, community, citizenship and strong
institutions' (Dorey, 2023, p. 12). However, while proclaiming the value of places, the
Shared Society is still more interested in 'people and enabling their mobility' than

geographical locations (Tomaney & Pike, 2020). Escaping working class roots is still essential, as Greening (2017 - SoS Brexit) demonstrates through her heroic escape from Rotherham, where "it was a really hard, long slog". However, she was willing to work because she "knew there was something better out there, and… knew there was opportunity" (Greening, 2017 - SoS Brexit).

Economic mobility for all aimed to create a fairer, more cohesive society (Jamet, 2022) by optimising everyone's competitive economic and productivity contribution through fair and inclusive rhetoric that connects to 'post-recession inequality' (Littler, 2017, p. 101). It also appeases Brexiteers as it is 'wrapped in the flag through the constant reiteration of 'Britain'…, as part of the reconstructed nationalism and 'a protective state'' (Littler, p. 101).

7.3.2.3 Levelling up mobility

Boris Johnson's "Government was elected on a mandate to level up Britain, to deliver greater opportunities to every person and every community in the UK" (Donelan, 2020 - MoS C19). People previously viewed social mobility as a 'moralising discourse' that devalued locally based HE or FE (Leaney & Mwale, 2021). However, levelling up in the speeches fully embraces local education and wants to shift "how we treat [FE]" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19). "Local colleges are [the] hearts" of communities and are "how left-behind towns and regions" are transformed. Levelling up will not be achieved by investing in HE but in FE, which is "central to… transforming lives… fundamental to social mobility… to businesses... to the economy" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19).

Levelling up FE "ensure that the same quality applies everywhere… [and] gives people the "skills that they need to get the jobs that they want" where they are and will make the country more "productive… richer and fair" (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19). The **Goal** was to 'improve the life chances and opportunities of people who wish to stay in their local towns and areas rather than creating individual pathways of improvement which require people to move away' (Wood et al., 2023, p. 5). This discourse spoke to those people where 'locality of birth and upbringing heavily' affects 'on many dimensions' the opportunities available (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021, p. 549)

The social mobility discourse of escape that tells people they 'have crap lives' in crap places was dropped (Maslen, 2022, p. 106). Giving "people meaningful careers… [would] allow them to fully contribute to their community and serve as inspiration to their family" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19, *emphasis added*). This discourse does not negate individual responsibility as it is 'not about helping people, it is about helping them help themselves by providing them with a better education' so they can invest in their communities (Espiet-Kilty, 2022, p. 18; McCann, 2023).

Donelan (2020 - MoS C19) believes universities are "recruiting too many young people" to popular courses that do nothing to improve their life chances. She says, "[T]rue social mobility" is no longer about "getting more into university… [it] is about getting people to choose the path that will lead to their desired destination and enabling them to complete that path… [it] is when we put students… first, be that in HE, FE or apprenticeships". Ingram and Gamsu (2022, p. 192) characterise Donelan's 'true social mobility' as getting the working class to 'choose educational pathways

other than university', which is ideologically underpinned 'by social reproduction, where working-class kids are encouraged to aspire to working-class jobs'.

The last three sections have identified three distinct phases of social mobility in response to each crisis: social mobility for a bright few, economic mobility for all, and levelling up mobility. The evolving social mobility discourse in the speeches could be symptomatic of the Coalition's austerity programme that reduced the options for 'any upward social mobility to occur', especially in certain localities (Boliver & Byrne, 2013, p. 51). This interpretation of social mobility also aligns with Brown's (2013, p. 679) view that neoliberalism has created an ''opportunity bargain'… that can no longer bear the weight of social and political expectations'.

However, whichever phase of social mobility discourse, they all reinforce the 'individualistic, market-based rationalisations' of equality that have transformed the 'language of policy into notions of fair choices and chances to compete economically' (Bowl, 2018, p. 13). The language of fairness – meritocracy and social mobility – is strategically 'employed by those who formulate policy' to promote an egalitarian purpose of HE while ostensibly masking the economic and individualistic purpose of education (Bowl et al., 2018: 3).

7.4 Austere Marketisation: A Failing Sector

The following two sections examine the consequences of austere marketisation on university funding, expansion, and access. Firstly, it investigates how funding and value for money have become mechanisms in the quasi-choice-driven market to ensure

quality and competition. Secondly, it explores how the expansion and fair access in HE has created an environment for increased state intervention and regulation of providers. It finds no desire for any future expansion of HE, but attention has shifted to FE as an avenue to fairness.

7.4.1 Fair Funding

The Coalition's funding changes were sold as putting "fairness back at the heart of our university system" because universities would "get the funding they need and [offer] much-needed savings for the taxpayer" (Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC). The "rich [would] pay more, and the poor [would] pay less", and no one would "leave university… [with] an unfair burden of debt" (Cameron, 2010 - PM GFC). Students and taxpayers would "see the system as fair - or fairer" than existing agreements (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC). However, there are indications that fairer funding did not emerge for anyone.

Evaluating the Coalition's funding model is challenging because the constant 'tinkering by successive governments… amount to a policy change practically every year' (IFS, 2022), making the loan debt costlier for taxpayers (Ahlburg, 2019). Many universities are also in precarious financial situations because fees have not kept pace with inflation as initially planned, eroding their real terms value to £6,585 in 2012 prices (The British Academy, 2023). Only 37% of students feel their course offers value for money (Neves & Stephenson, 2023). Replacing maintenance grants with loans meant disadvantaged students borrowed more, incurred more interest, and paid back more (Hubble & Bolton, 2017; McCaig, 2016). After graduation, the 'student loan debt can…

constrain' employment and career choices 'for many years according to background' (de Gayardon et al., 2019, p. 966).

The GFC **_Goal_** for fairer student contributions becomes a **_Value_** in the Brexit and COVID-19 speeches - "Sharing the cost of university between taxpayers and the graduates who directly benefit from university study is… a fair principle" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit). However, May's (2018 - PM Brexit) **_Goal_** is still rooted in addressing unfairness by making "tertiary education accessible to all, promoting choice and competition in the sector, delivering the skills our economy needs, and getting value for money for students and taxpayers". The Brexit speeches utilise value for money discourse to highlight the unfairness of a "funding system, which leaves students from the lowest-income households bearing the highest levels of debt" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit). This acknowledgement of unfairness taps into the discourse that the Brexit crisis is rooted in social inequality, which then rationalises educational reform (Granoulhac, 2018).

At the launch of the Augar Review, PM May (2019) said the Government would "put right the errors of the past" by restoring maintenance grants so students from the poorest background would not leave university with the highest levels of debt and would "cut tuition fees so students pay a fairer price for their education". Augar represented a marked reversal of the Coalition's market-oriented austerity policies for a smaller state and increased individual responsibility (Morgan, 2019). It rejected neoliberal tenets (Page, 2018) in favour of a moral interventionist state (Cowley, 2017).

The Boris Johnson government did not implement many Augar Review recommendations (Pickford, 2021). However, they did absorb the Review's core theme of addressing the disparities in 'fairness and equity' between the 50% in HE and the 50% in FE (Augar, 2019, p. 5). The solution was to give FE colleges "access to the main student finance system" for specific courses, "so that they are better able to compete with universities" (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19). Access to the university funding mechanism would end the "bogus distinction between FE and HE" and bring them "closer together… level up between them" (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19). It would also open up a "new vista of choice" (Johnson, 2020 - PM C19) for students and provide "fundamental reform: a wholesale rebalancing [away from HE] rebalancing towards further and technical education" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19).

PM Johnson also used post-truth and policy amnesia to dissociate the adverse effect of Conservative austerity policies on FE (Espiet-Kilty, 2022; Jennings et al., 2021). He neglects to connect the "haemorrhage" of a "million fewer" adult education participants to Tory austerity cuts that reduced FE funding by 47% between 2010 and 2019 (Britton et al., 2019; Foster, 2019). The levelling up agenda was committed to big state spending, and intervention for left-behind places secured the populist vote. The 2019 Conservative election campaign used a populist polarising 'critique of the middle-class graduate world and its perceived condescension towards blue-collar Britain' to secure the traditional non-Tories (Maslen, 2022, p. 108).

This section showed that the Coalition failed to establish a fair and sustainable funding mechanism and how future governments responded to that policy inheritance. The

Brexit and COVID-19 speeches offered increased state intervention or regulation of the education market. They also discursively frame improving FE funding as necessary to improve economic output and productivity. However, Theresa May and Boris Johnson push for policies that increase control over funding allocation. The following section explores the intrinsic nature of funding, expansion, and access.

7.4.2 Expansion and Fair Access

The 'language of expansion, massification and access have dominated' HE discourses (Burke, 2012, p. 13). According to Atherton and John (2020), the 50% HE participation target drove expansion and access. It also established a twenty-year orthodoxy that they believe only ended with Donelan and William's speeches. Donelan (2020 - MoS C19) says, "[T]hat the 2004 access regime has let down too many young people… there has been too much focus on getting students through the door". While Williamson (2020 - SoS C19) declares, "[W]hen Tony Blair uttered that 50% target for university attendance, he cast aside the other 50%; it was a target for the sake of a target". The *Goal* of the Covid-19 speeches is to propel people into FE.

This section argues that there has not necessarily been adherence to this assumed orthodoxy or coherent argument for expansion since 2010. Only Cameron (2010 - PM GFC) argues that "more people… [should] have the chance to go to university; not less" and says the new funding model "will… make future expansion affordable". However, Cable (2010 - SoS GFC) questions whether the 50% target is "sensible as well as affordable" and suggests "fewer students [will be] coming straight from school to do 3-year degrees" because of the GFC (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC).

Johnson (2017 - MoS Brexit) states the Government has "no target for the proportion of young people it wants to see entering [HE]" as the "size of the sector [should be] determined by the needs of learners and the demands of employers" and as FE improves, the number of those "choosing to go to university" will fall. However, as the COVID-19 speeches point out, the market failed to deliver the skills the economy needed. Therefore, to fix the skills shortages and economic problems caused by COVID-19, Williamson (2020 - SoS C19) promised to stand for the "forgotten education" and the 50% "cast aside" because of the 50% participation target "was a target for the sake of a target" (Williamson, 2020 - SoS C19).

The Coalition's HE policies amounted to an 'undeclared intention to limit access while espousing equity' (Leach, 2013, p. 279). Successive administrations have also sought to 'dampen down the attraction of, and demand for, university education and to highlight other routes to economic advancement', particularly for those from 'less favoured origins' (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022, p. 583). There is an assertive attempt in the speeches to discursively reframe the 'socially approved pathways' that young people should take according to their background (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 79). Despite the thinly veiled anti-expansion discourse, the sector has grown, and there was an unwanted HE boom during the COVID-19 crisis (Bolton, 2023; The Economist, 2021).

However, the growth had more to do with the surprising removal of student number controls in 2015 than funding, as all providers could expand without fear of penalties for over-recruitment (McCaig & Taylor, 2017; Watson, 2015). According to May (2018 -

PM Brexit), this lifted the "a cap on aspiration – so universities can expand and so broaden access", which Johnson (2020 - PM C19) celebrated as "one of this country's great achievements". Free HE would necessitate "regulating the number of places" preventing expansion "which has driven wider access in recent years" (May, 2018 - PM Brexit), and this "would see the poorest and most disadvantaged would miss out" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit).

The expansion has predominately benefited 'elite' providers, often at the 'expense of lower status institutions' (Harrison, 2018, p. 58) because they selectively increase their intake of students on the border of their tariff from lower status providers (Bekhradnia & Beech, 2018; Bolton, 2023). Growth has also maintained and intensified the hierarchical status of providers (McCaig & Taylor, 2017), and the primary beneficiaries have been the middle class (Brown, 2013; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). They have dominated access to high-status opportunities, reproducing social structures and positional goods (Savage et al., 2015). While more students from all social strata accessed HE, this only occurred because demand from other groups - the middle classes has plateaued (Harrison, 2018, p. 58). However, demand from the middle class remains high, especially for high-status opportunities (Marginson, 2011a).

Reducing HE places is politically challenging while demand remains and promoting a veneer of fairness as expansion has been the only route to providing equal opportunities for social mobility and widening access since the 2010s (Maslen, 2022). The Coalition did not want to "dictate… admissions for particular individuals", and providers would be free to "make… judgements on admissions, based on individual

merit" and select their "own measures of performance" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC). However, they still aimed to influence admissions by requiring universities to state how they would "broaden access if they want to charge a graduate contribution of more than £6,000" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC). The 2012 funding model further devolved responsibility for fair access to individual providers and market forces - the state was no longer wholly responsible for the 'financing equality of opportunity' (Spohrer, 2015, p. 110) and could blame others for the lack of fairness in access (Marginson, 2011a).

However, the Coalition thought they did have the responsibility to provide 'equal access to information' to support choice-making (Donnelly & Evans, 2019, p. 103). The provision of "intelligible data on the performance of the different university departments" that is "easily accessible" was viewed as "one of the biggest policy challenges" facing the Coalition (Cable, 2010 - SoS GFC). Despite this, the Coalition closed the national careers service, devolving responsibility for information and guidance to schools (Maragkou, 2021). This austerity cut resulted in significant 'inequalities in provision particularly for students without strong family and community traditions of entering HE' (Whitty et al., 2015, p. 39).

The full impact of this cut manifested a decade later despite access to information being a dominant HE policy since that time. Donelan (2020 - MoS C19) says it is essential that "the most disadvantaged backgrounds have the confidence to apply and the information they need to make informed choices". However, she highlights how the pandemic presented challenges for "prospective students… particularly… those in

disadvantaged groups who… [could] not… rely on their schools, colleges or teachers for information, advice and guidance [about HE]". This lack of reliable information and guidance contributed to fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing university during COVID-19 (Millward, 2022).

The Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) significantly increased the regulatory powers to hold providers "to account for [performance], outcomes and value for money" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit). Providers now have to show improvements not only on fairer access but on outcomes across the student lifecycle, with a much 'stronger focus on evaluation and understanding 'what works' (Millward, 2022, p. 9). HERA put the "onus… on universities to go further too, not just admitting disadvantaged students with good grades, but focusing even more on helping them to achieve and complete courses" (Donelan, 2020 - MoS C19).

The 2012 funding model also means the state has to 'take on a greater burden of ensuring consumer protection for the student-customer paying high fees' (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2016, p. 52). During the Coalition, they encouraged providers to have "Student Charters" (Willetts, 2010 - MoS GFC). Then, HERA empowered the sector regulator to press providers to "comply with consumer law consistently across the sector" through student contracts (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit). This accountability envisioned a system that is "clear, quantifiable and fair" (Johnson, 2017 - MoS Brexit).

This section demonstrated how the state has increasingly had to specify and incentivise fair access and monitor performance, thereby creating an 'austerity market' based on the idea that markets alone cannot 'generate efficiency gains'

(Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2018, p. 860). There has been no orthodoxy of expansion and access since 2010. Instead, changes have predominately benefited the middle class, and recent policy has rearticulated socially approved pathways for the geographically disenfranchised working class.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored how educational fairness was discursively framed in political speeches on HE during three major national crises. It applied the discursive process of change established in the last chapter to the speeches' *Goals* and *Values* premise to clarify the conceptualisation of the slippery term – fairness – in nine speeches about HE. The analysis found (*Figure 7.3*) that discourses of fairness are used strategically to justify the transformation of the HE sector into an austere market.

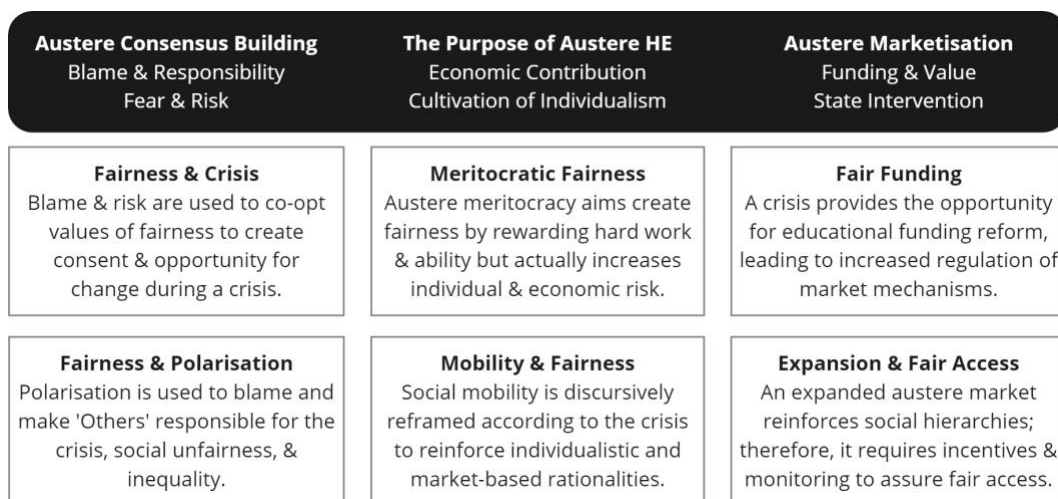| Austere Consensus Building Blame & Responsibility Fear & Risk	The Purpose of Austere HE Economic Contribution Cultivation of Individualism	Austere Marketisation Funding & Value State Intervention
Fairness & Crisis Blame & risk are used to co-opt values of fairness to create consent & opportunity for change during a crisis.	**Meritocratic Fairness** Austere meritocracy aims create fairness by rewarding hard work & ability but actually increases individual & economic risk.	**Fair Funding** A crisis provides the opportunity for educational funding reform, leading to increased regulation of market mechanisms.
Fairness & Polarisation Polarisation is used to blame and make 'Others' responsible for the crisis, social unfairness, & inequality.	**Mobility & Fairness** Social mobility is discursively reframed according to the crisis to reinforce individualistic and market-based rationalities.	**Expansion & Fair Access** An expanded austere market reinforces social hierarchies; therefore, it requires incentives & monitoring to assure fair access.

Figure 7.3 Detailed Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity: Fairness

Austere consensus building applies discourses of fairness to support the politicians' representation of the crisis (Bacchi, 2009). Blame and risk highlight social inequalities

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and portray the opportunity for change as motivated by **Values** of fairness. Discourses of fairness and unfairness create polarised groups of deserving and undeserving - the undeserving become the scapegoats for the causes of the unfairness.

Meritocracy, social mobility, and levelling up are synonyms for fairness. Austere meritocracy (Mendick et al., 2018) promotes fairness by rewarding hardworking people who apply their talents and abilities while reinforcing existing social and institutional hierarchies - increasing individual economic risks. Each crisis had its own discursive strategies of social mobility to achieve the **Goal** of fairness within their context. However, whatever its iteration, it reinforces individualistic and economic-based rationalities.

A crisis provides a reason to change educational funding - to make it fairer. However, to achieve this fairness, the state increases regulation of market mechanisms, leading to an austere marketisation. Despite the abdication of responsibility of the HE sector to market forces, the state has increasingly had to intervene to ensure fair access and discourage expansion.

This chapter has reinforced that fairness is a slippery discourse that slides between ideas depending on the **Circumstantial** premises and the politician's **Goals** and **Values** (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022). The discursive strategies of fairness discussed in this chapter do not attempt to address the hierarchical and status-driven market. Instead, neo-austerity discourses of fairness facilitate access into an oppressive and unequal 'sphere of production', which hardens and entrenches inequality and reduces opportunities for change (Adorno, 2005, p. 160). The next chapter summarises the

thesis and findings, identifying the contribution to knowledge and suggestions for

further study.

Chapter 8: Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity

The last decade has been indistinguishable from a rollercoaster…

composed entirely of nauseating descents. (Jones, 2022, p. 508)

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has investigated how three crises—the Global Financial Crash (GFC), Brexit, and COVID-19—have provided nine politicians with a rationale for reforming higher education (HE) in England. This conclusion chapter will summarise the thesis and its findings, contributions to knowledge and their implications; it will also suggest the limitations of the findings and make recommendations for further research.

8.2 Thesis Summary

The introductory chapter positions the study in the existing research fields and identifies the intended contributions to knowledge this research will make to those areas. It goes on to outline the rationale for this study and the research questions. The research sites were explored in detail, providing an overview of Cameron, May, and Johnson's premierships and the three crises over which they presided. Chapter One also explored the concept of crisis and its different forms and concluded by outlining the study. Chapters Two and Three provided an in-depth overview of the literature and discourses relevant to the research. The former conceptualised policy, its connection to ideology, and the operationalisation of policy in HE. The latter delved into discourses that have shaped HE policy, such as neoliberalism, austerity, HE

expansion and fairness. Chapter Four outlined the research methodology - PDA, and its application in this study.

Chapter Five presented a detailed analysis of the nine speeches revealing their arguments for change in HE and the discursive framing of crisis. Chapter Six set out the discursive strategies used in the speeches to justify policy changes; these were identified as Austere Consensus Building, the Purpose of Austere HE and Austere Marketisation. Chapter Seven sought to understand the discursive framing of fairness in HE policy through the strategies identified in the previous chapter. The following section will provide a more detailed summary of the findings from these three chapters.

8.3 Findings Summary

The rationale of this thesis was that crisis events, regardless of their cause or type, provide governments with an opportunity to diagnose a crisis in HE and the need for radical reform (Granoulhac, 2018; Jones, 2016). Therefore, understanding the arguments employed to justify change is essential for identifying discourses dominating HE policy. The methodological approach PDA was systematically applied to nine political speeches to understand 'what agents do in response to the crisis', Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, p. 4). The thesis set out to answer three research questions:

1. How is crisis discursively framed in nine political speeches about higher education?

2. What discursive political strategies do these speeches employ during three

    major crises to construct and justify higher education policy changes?

3. How do these speeches discursively frame educational fairness during three

    major national crises?

The following three sections will answer these questions by summarising the findings

discussed in the previous chapters.

8.3.1 Ramshackle Policy

This section explores the findings of the first research question - How is crisis

discursively framed in nine political speeches about HE? The analysis of the nine

speeches showed that each one had unique arguments and discourses that changed

over time according to the context. A context was 'represented or constituted'

(Bacchi, 2009, p. 1) according to the political agenda or ideologies of the orator.

However, the synthesis of the arguments did show some common discursive strategies

but also demonstrated that policymaking is a ramshackle process influenced by the

winds of a crisis (Ball, 1998).

As in the literature, the speeches showed that whatever the crisis was, regardless of

where it began, it was co-opted to propose radical reform to HE (Klein, 2007). The GFC

became a moral crisis about who should contribute to the underfunded HE sector

(Clarke & Newman, 2012; Finn, 2018). Brexit became a crisis about a failing education

system, contributing to the reproduction of an unfair society and Britain's ability to

compete on the global scene (Granoulhac, 2018; Sensier & Devine, 2017). The

government's ability to respond to COVID-19 was hampered because HE and FE did

not produce people with the skills the country and economy needed, making the crisis worse (Cogavin, 2023; Struthers, 2021).

The discursive framing of a crisis contributes to constructing the problem in the *Circumstances*. In articulating the problem, politicians exert their version of the truth, thereby dissolving and reconstituting the problem to align with their *Goals.* Politicians have 'power over' the truth (Foucault, 1980), or deontic power (Searle, 2010) that comes from their office, giving them power to set the policy agenda and prioritise the issues that merit attention and action (Birkland, 2017, p. 65). However, this power is 'not value-neutral, but reflects the structural balance of power in society' and ideological beliefs of dominant groups (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 18). For Ball (1994), understanding the power struggle over meaning and truth represents policy as discourse.

Less powerful groups can compel politicians to defend and shift policy, even if that change is sometimes slow and difficult to achieve (Birkland, 2017, p. 68). Some of the speeches in this study demonstrated how politicians dealt with and dismissed alternative truths through deliberation. However, like Harmon (2017), this thesis found that deliberation was not always present, for example, in the COVID-19 speeches. The absence of deliberation was insightful, indicating a populist approach to government and policymaking (Jennings et al., 2021; Naim, 2022).

Deliberation showed how politicians dealt with policy inheritance, which played a significant role in the discursive framing of the crisis in the speeches as it bound and determined future policy choices and solutions (Peters et al., 2005; Weir, 1992; Zaki &

George, 2022). However, the lack of deliberation during COVID-19 highlighted how these politicians ignored or intentionally forgot inconvenient truths that did not fit their current discourse. The truth is not necessarily falsified or contested but is of secondary importance to politicians when discursively framing a crisis (Marshall & Drieschova, 2018; Nally, 2022; Newman, 2023). Effective policy responses are increasingly challenging as 'contemporary crises are typically complex, multidimensional, and socially embedded' (Zaki & George, 2022, p. 130). However, this has been made worse by politicians manipulating events for their own purposes and the continual shifting discourses resulting in incoherent and ramshackle policy during GFC, Brexit and COVID-19.

8.3.2 Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity

This section answers the second research question - what discursive political strategies do these speeches employ during three major crises to construct and justify HE policy changes? The policy responses during the GFC, Brexit, and COVID-19 may have been incoherent and ramshackle. However, that does not mean there was no consistent approach to the discursive strategies employed or a desired destination for HE policy. The speeches' practical arguments analysis identified three discursive political strategies: Austere Consensus Building, the Austere Purpose of HE and Austere Marketisation (*Figure 8.1*).
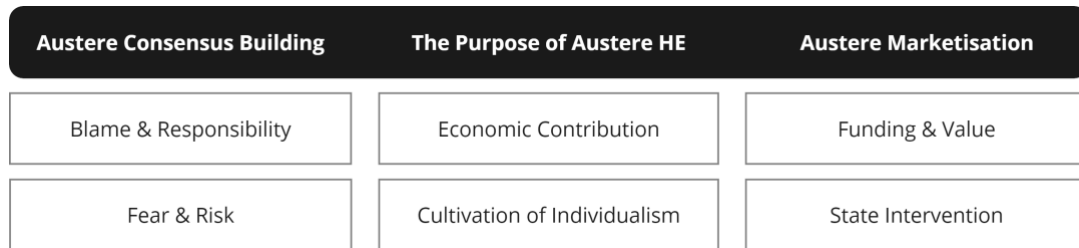
Austere Consensus Building	The Purpose of Austere HE	Austere Marketisation
Blame & Responsibility	Economic Contribution	Funding & Value
Fear & Risk	Cultivation of Individualism	State Intervention

Figure 8.1 Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity

Firstly, neo-austerity discursive strategies build a consensus for austerity policies that aim to reduce the size and cost of the state. Policymakers pursue austerity policies openly by framing them as the only responsible option (Bramall, 2013; Williams, 2019) and justify interventions as 'minimising the burdens of the crisis on the entire society' while supposedly protecting the vulnerable (Antonucci, 2016, p. 3). Policymakers build an austere consensus by directing blame and responsibility for the crisis and resulting actions onto others ('t Hart, 1993; 't Hart & Tindall, 2009a). For example, universities were blamed for acting selfishly and for not delivering what the country or young people needed at times of crisis (Fetzer, 2019b; Finn, 2018), and opposition political parties were held responsible for failing to deliver the right policies at the right time (Brambilla, 2019; Nunn, 2012, 2016).

Consent is also sought by amplifying fears about the risk of a crisis worsening or the negative impact of a new event if the government *Goals* are not implemented (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). Fears about the country's economic decline and the risks associated with globalisation and economic and technological changes build consent among unlikely coalitions through policies like

levelling up (Hudson, 2022; McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021). Consensus-building can discursively frame the crisis in a way that reforms social values and institutions.

The discursive strategy - the Purpose of Austere HE - reduces the public mission of universities to a predominantly economic production function (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Austerity promised economic growth but led to stagnation (Calhoun, 2006), which became the reason to reform and align education to the state's needs. Educational discourses in the speeches focused on enhancing economic competitiveness and productivity locally, nationally, and globally by delivering the right skills and knowledge (Berry, 2016; Clarke, 2018; Mendick et al., 2018).

Neoliberal and neo-austerity discourses define education as a private positional good; therefore, those who benefit the most from it should contribute to its funding (Marginson, 2011b). Individual consumers invest in their stocks of human capital and seek value for money and a good return on their investment (J. Williams, 2016). Neoliberalism and neo-austerity cultivate an extreme version of self-interested individualism (Fleming, 2017).

However, neo-austerity also promotes the moral austere person, a rational optimiser who understands their own and others' needs and acts accordingly (Leach, 2017; Mitrea, 2018). Austerity cuts also dismantle 'structural certainties' (Holdsworth, 2017, p. 299), replacing them with individual agency, making choice-making more challenging, reinforcing inequalities and reducing the ability to respond to future crises. Therefore, this thesis proposes that the arguments made in the speeches were a discursive political strategy to define the austere purpose of HE.

Austere Marketisation was the final discursive political strategy identified in the speeches' arguments and deliberation. Politicians created **Circumstances** that justified transferring responsibility for funding to the individuals who would benefit most from HE – students (Marginson, 2016a, p. 5). The Coalition speeches believed the **Goal** of an austere market choice would stimulate provider competition, drive up quality, drive down costs and empower students (McGettigan, 2013, p. 35; Willetts, 2017). However, these assumptions proved false, and concerns over funding were transformed into concerns about value for money - in terms of economic returns - and the quality of university provision (Martin, 2015; Teixeira & Koryakina, 2016). The Austere marketisation discursive strategies identified in the speeches were opportunistic as they used funding and value discourse to their benefit by constantly shifting the cost for HE to others.

The failure of the competitive sector to emerge meant policymakers had to implement other levers to alter the behaviour of the HE sector. In an austere market, the primary influence comes from increased monitoring, measuring, and controlling of the quality and outcomes of HE by the state (Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2018). The state has become increasingly involved in all domains of the HE sector, regulating and overseeing everything from the centre (Biressi & Nunn, 2014, p. 4). Austerity cuts led to chronic underfunding of many services, which ultimately undermined the neoliberal dream of a small state as the severity of Brexit and COVID-19 has forced the government to intervene (Callinicos, 2012; Vankovska, 2020). Neo-austerity leads to 'more reliance on the state to enforce, support and compensate for the social, political and economic' inequalities caused by austerity (Farnsworth & Irving, 2018, p. 462).

8.3.3 Neo-austerity and Fairness

This section answers the third research question - How do these speeches discursively frame educational fairness during three major national crises? The argumentative categories, *Goals,* and **Values** were examined in relation to the discursive strategies of neo-austerity to gain a deeper understanding of the conceptualisation of fairness in the speeches. The analysis found (*Figure 8.2*) that discourses of fairness are used strategically to justify the transformation of the HE sector into an austere market.

Austere Consensus Building Blame & Responsibility Fear & Risk	The Purpose of Austere HE Economic Contribution Cultivation of Individualism	Austere Marketisation Funding & Value State Intervention
Fairness & Crisis	Meritocratic Fairness	Fair Funding
Fairness & Polarisation	Mobility & Fairness	Expansion & Fair Access

Figure 8.2 Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity: Fairness

Austere consensus-building co-opts or aligns with the *Value* of fairness to gain agreement that the stated *Goal* is the best possible action (De Rycker & Zuraidah Mohd, 2013). The speeches deploy a crisis to highlight societal inequalities while blaming others for their cause, rationalising the need for change (Brambilla, 2019). The crisis becomes an opportunity for politicians to appropriate discourses of fairness for their *Goals,* promising to take on the responsibility for creating a fairer society (Altheide, 2004; Sandaran & De Rycker, 2013).

The polarisation of groups was a discursive strategy that evoked the principle of fairness to build a consensus for policy changes and foments intergroup rivals and

inequalities (Hoggett et al., 2013). In the speeches, the undeserving were blamed for behaving unfairly and assigned a moral responsibility to change (Clarke, 2018). The groups blamed and cast as deserving or undeserving were malleable and changed during each crisis according to the articulated ***Circumstances*** and ***Goals***.

The speeches wrapped the austere purpose of HE in an apparent cloak of egalitarian fairness that is achieved through meritocracy and social mobility. However, the analysis identified that meritocracy and social mobility were discursive strategies that perpetuated the economic and individual functions of HE (Owens & de St Croix, 2020). Meritocratic fairness focuses on opening opportunities to all but fails to address the structural inequalities that stop some groups from accessing those opportunities (Mendick et al., 2018). The 'onus is now on the self-rising Individual who succeeds [by their] efforts and abilities' with little support from the state (Themelis, 2021, p. 62)

The analysis also identified that the speeches recognised that the purpose of HE was to aid social mobility. In response to each crisis, there were three distinct phases of social mobility: social mobility for a bright few in the GFC, economic mobility for all in Brexit, and levelling up mobility in COVID-19.

- Social mobility for a bright few prioritises enabling the bright but poor to escape their circumstances of birth by having access to high-status choices and opportunities (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022; Bukodi et al., 2015; Harrison, 2018; McCaig, 2016).
- Economic mobility for all has no single opportunity destination but aims to support people from all backgrounds to climb their own

opportunity ladders so they can be as economically productive as possible and live fulfilled lives (Jamet, 2022; Littler, 2017; Maslen, 2022; Williams, 2017).

- Levelling up mobility is not about improving access to HE but about providing the same quality of FE opportunities everywhere so people can stay in their local communities and help improve those places (Ingram & Gamsu, 2022; Leaney & Mwale, 2021; Wood et al., 2023).

However, all three versions of social mobility reinforce the 'individualistic, market-based rationalisations' of equality that have transformed the 'language of policy into notions of fair choices and chances to compete economically' (Bowl, 2018, p. 13).

The discursive strategy, Austere Marketisation, engages with fairness to justify changes in HE funding. The GFC speeches argued that it was only fair that those who benefit most from HE should pay the most, but the new progressive graduate contributions would be fairer than the existing model. However, the fair funding model failed to emerge, so the Brexit and COVID-19 speeches took a different approach to funding and fairness. Brexit utilises the value-for-money discourse to highlight the unfairness of funding, tapping into the discourse of social inequality to rationalise educational reform (Granoulhac, 2018). In comparison, the COVID-19 speeches shift the funding debate to the unfairness of funding between HE and FE and geographical inequalities (Maslen, 2022).

The 2012 funding model further devolved fair access to individual providers and market forces (Spohrer, 2015). However, there was too 'much at stake for the public

and government, including social equity, to let universities go' entirely to market forces (Marginson, 2016a, p. 8). The expansion of HE participation has led to an increase in all social groups accessing HE, but the primary beneficiaries have been middle-class students who have the resources and support to access high-status opportunities (Harrison, 2018, p. 58; Savage et al., 2015; Savage et al., 2013). In order to address this, the state has introduced legislation and a sector regulator with increased powers to scrutinise, regulate, and monitor providers on student outcomes. All but one of the speeches wanted to limit access to HE and promoted alternative 'socially approved pathways' that young people should take according to their background (Mendick et al., 2018, p. 79). Austere marketisation is strategically used to regulate and monitor the size of the HE sector as well as promote the pathways the state feels are appropriate.

8.4 Contribution to Knowledge and Limitations

This thesis wanted to contribute new knowledge to two areas of research: HE policy and political discourse about HE. Firstly, it sought to address the lack of contemporary studies that examine policy as a process rather than a product. Secondly, it wanted to establish if political speeches could be used inductively as research data to explore the policy process. Finally, it wanted to challenge the dominance of neoliberalism and explore austerity's role in English HE policymaking. This section examines each of these in turn whilst addressing the study's limitations.

The decade the thesis spanned was one of the most turbulent in British politics the country has endured since the World Wars (Jones, 2022). Since work on this study

began, there have been six prime ministers and four general elections, resulting in a poorer and more divided country that has lurched from one crisis to another with dwindling hopes that things will get better (Newman, 2023; Page, 2018; Whale, 2023).

The continual shifting of the political landscape has brought challenges for this contemporary study as it tried to manage the 'unruly and heterogeneous' events of a decade in Tory (Ang, 1996, p. 514). The constant leadership changes mean that identifying the political beliefs and ideologies of the three governments in this research has been challenging. This study has tried to piece together elements of Conservative doctrine to answer the research questions (Page, 2018, p. 113). However, as a researcher, I had 'to come to terms with perspectives that may not be easily integrated into a smooth, finished and coherent political theory' (Ang, 1996).

This will limit the findings, and someone with a more historical perspective of the last decade may come to different conclusions. As the thesis progressed from each crisis, government and policy shift, the depth of existing evidence became shallower. For example, there was a much greater volume of works critiquing the GFC, Cameron's government and its HE policy than there was about COVID-19, Johnson's government and its approach to FE, HE and skills policy. Again, someone undertaking a similar study in a decade's time with more available literature and evidence might come to different conclusions. However, this is not to undermine the value of a contemporary study where the researcher is both living and analysing the study's research sites, as it allowed me to make connections and provide insights a more historical study would be unable to.

Secondly, this thesis sets out to increase the available research that uses political speeches as a sample for investigation. I found them to be an insightful source for understanding how policy as discourse is framed and used by politicians to achieve their *Goals* during a crisis. However, as the analysis in Chapters Five, Six and Seven showed, the policy announcements in the speeches sometimes had little resemblance to the final policy product. This is not necessarily a limitation because it shows the complexity of the policy process. Still, researchers need to be aware of this when formulating conclusions on what they have found. Perhaps of more serious concern is the focus on speeches by politicians in senior government roles, which privileges a particular type of 'politics' and amplifies elite voices that already possess significant power (Randour et al., 2020). However, this thesis's critique and analysis potentially subverts some of that power.

PDA and the use of practical argumentation provide a robust and flexible framework for analysing speeches. Analysing the nine speeches was an in-depth process, and my application of PDA would not lend itself to a larger sample. The nine speeches only provide a snapshot of particular times and points in the policymaking process. A different nine speeches may come to different conclusions. However, the focus on the construction of a crisis, discursive political strategies used to justify change, and the framing of fairness have all focused on how politicians engage with policy as discourse rather than a pure focus on the content of the discourse. PDA allows the researcher to analyse the gestation and trajectory of system-level policy and, in turn, reveal the extent of the influences of competing ideologies (McCaig, 2018, p. 22). Therefore, it is

hoped my approach in this thesis will provide more universal insights into the policy process that could be applied more widely.

Finally, this thesis wanted to challenge the dominance of neoliberalism in HE policy and political discourse about HE. It intended to do this by examining the long-term effect of austerity on HE policy since the GFC. This study found room on the 'political stage' for other occupants apart from neoliberalism (Peck, 2013, p. 139) and suggests a more robust understanding of austerity and neo-austerity can contribute much to the research fields of HE policy and political discourse about HE.

Neo-austerity does not replace neoliberalism but augments it, providing additional critical insight and understanding of the discourses and the reshaping of **Values** in HE. Neo-austerity differs from neoliberalism because it is a moralising and cultural politics that draws on World War nostalgia, a sense of self-sacrifice (Bramall, 2013, p. 3), and a shared responsibility where everyone needs to 'metaphorically tighten their belts' (Williams, 2019, p. 18). Unlike neoliberalism, governments have openly pursued austerity policies (Peck, 2013) that have manifested in people's everyday lives (Hitchen, 2016, p. 102). Neo-austerity has also 'reinvigorated ideological reframing' of the excessive social settlement (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021, p. 21).

The role of the state plays a fundamental role in the neo-austerity discourses. Austerity was aligned with the neoliberal goal of reducing the role and cost of the state (Griffiths, 2020). However, neo-austerity has resulted 'in more reliance on the state to enforce, support and compensate for the social, political and economic' inequalities caused by austerity (Farnsworth & Irving, 2018, p. 462). For many years,

fears about the size of the state oscillated between overspending to underspending –

Thatcher's rolling back of the state brought New Labour spending – New Labour

brought about austerity cuts – austerity cuts contributed to Brexit – Brexit brought

populism – populism brought a disastrous response to COVID-19 (Williams, 2019).

Neo-austerity is not just an economic endeavour but a moral and ideological exercise

that obscures the 'structural conditions of a deep social, political and economic crisis'

(Dowling & Harvie, 2014, p. 872) and 'represents the latest iteration of the ongoing

struggle between politics and markets' (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021, p. 11). Situating

austerity within its historical English context has allowed for some of the nuanced

discursive strategies in HE policy to be identified that could have been missed by only

thinking with the nebulous concept of neoliberalism.

Figure 8.3 shows how discursive strategies of neo-austerity are employed to construct

and justify HE policy changes in uncertain times. The discursive process starts with the

actual or perceived crisis. Politicians then construct the ***Circumstances*** to build a

consensus about blame and causes of the crisis and the resulting inequalities. Policy

problems are then discursively framed to redefine ***Values*** about the purpose of public

institutions as an economic function that benefits individuals. The redefining of the

purpose of institutions creates a reality where only certain policy ***Goals*** are desirable.

The ***Goals*** increase competition through the marketisation of public sectors. However,

markets will fail if left to their own devices, so the state needs to intervene by

introducing ***Means-Goals*** that increase regulation and state oversight. The resulting

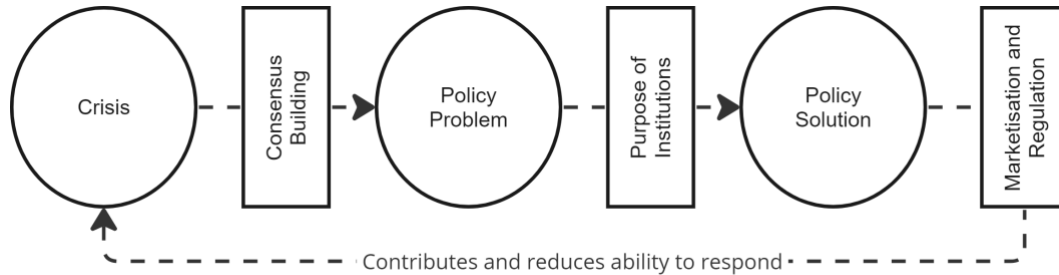policies contribute to the next crisis and how the state can respond.

Figure 8.3 Discursive Strategies of Neo-Austerity

These discursive strategies have only been developed within the research fields of HE policy and political discourse about HE, using a very small and specific sample. Therefore, their applicability beyond this study is limited; however, the next section addresses this limitation.

8.5 Recommendations for Further Work

Researchers and activists working in the politics of HE are recommended to engage with the discursive strategies of neo-austerity and use them to identify points of resistance to policies. For example, understanding how those in power use discourses of blame and responsibility to gain consent means alternative accounts of blame and responsibility can be developed to counter those arguments. Furthermore, research could be undertaken on additional speeches or other policy areas to establish if the discursive strategies of neo-austerity are relevant beyond this thesis.

Another area of further study is the shifting discourse of social mobility. For example, levelling up has been of 'relatively little' interest to those researching the 'political economy of [HE]' because levelling up policy documents excludes the role of HE (McCaig, 2022, p. 163). The lack of engagement with levelling up is symptomatic of

Ingram and Gamsu's (2022) work; while they 'acknowledge… political talk on social mobility is shifting', they do not engage with these changes. It would be erroneous not to include the growing importance of locality, opportunities, FE, and their economic impact in researching social mobility discourses.

8.6 Conclusion

As I write this conclusion, the fifth Tory prime minister since 2010, Rishi Sunak, limps towards another general election with predictions that the Labour Party will wipe out the Conservative Party. However, this thesis has proven that predicting election results can be as reliable as oneiromancy. It seems clear that whichever party can form a government after votes have been counted will have to deal with some very challenging issues in HE: an impending funding crisis caused by the current funding arrangement, inflation and an over-reliance on the unregulated fees of international students (Mills, 2024); a generation of young people whose formative experiences of education were severely disrupted by COVID-19 (UPP Foundation, 2022); and a growing number of young people not in work or education (Murphy, 2023). How the new government chooses to respond, and if they will employ the same discursive strategies of neo-austerity, will be of great interest.

Appendix 1: Coding Approach

The following table sets out the approach to coding the speeches with examples of what went into each category. The examples are not an exhaustive list but an indication of how the data was coded in each stage.

The first attempt to analyse the data was undertaken in Microsoft Excel, utilising a macro that sorted text into different columns according to the colour assigned to the text. However, after the initial coding, this approach did not offer the flexibility, capacity, or ability to interrogate the speeches thoroughly. Therefore, the speeches were re-analysed using the computer-assisted qualitative software programme NVivo 12.

This software allows for the easy management and organising of data that inevitably leads to more 'transparent, rigorous, credible or accurate information' (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, Rhodes (2019, p. 88) suggests NVivo provides 'new ways of seeing the data' and assists in 'ordering the data without losing access to the source data or context from which the data came'. The advantage of using NVivo also meant that stage one coding could be identified in stage three, which meant the dominant Practical Argumentation Framework (PAF) categories could be identified.

Code Stages	Approach	Codes	Indicative Examples
Stage 1	The main PAF categories were used to create a coding matrix. A deductively	Claim for Action: Reasons used to call for or justify changes to the HE sector.	Widening access to HE has failed, or COVID-19 has changed society, so

dominant but flexible approach to coding was taken in stage 1 (Armat et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).			the education system needs to change
		Circumstances: The politicians' interpretations and descriptions of society's current context and problems.	The GFC means the government is in debt and can no longer afford to fund HE. COVID-19 has shown the shortcomings of the education sector. Universities are not training people in the right skills.
		Goals: The political actors imaginaries for possible future states. Some goals are contingent on others being achieved. Therefore, achieving the first set of goals would create the circumstances for achieving overarching goals	Fair and sustainable funding. Levelling up the nation. One speech had overarching goals for a fairer, more equal post-Brexit country. However, for this to be achieved, a more diverse, flexible, competitive, and accessible tertiary education must be created first.
		Values: The professed beliefs of the politicians.	Education is a societal good or a cornerstone of society. Higher education is an individual benefit. Universities should be open to all who are able.
		Means-Goals: Activities, plans, or spending that would be undertaken to make the goals a reality	The government will pass new legislation to change the student funding system. Funding will be available to poorer students.

Stage 2	The expanded PAF was added to the matrix. Introducing these coding categories meant a re-examination of the texts and the shifting 'back and forward between applying codes' to the data (Fryer, 2022, p. 371) while also developing how these categories were defined and used because Fairclough and Fairclough do not offer definitions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).	Negative-Consequences: The supposedly bad outcomes of not acting according to the goals or the results of pursuing an alternative argument.	Not increasing tuition fees will negatively impact universities' ability to compete internationally. Free higher education would decrease funding, restricting access and participation.
		Counter-Claims/arguments, Objections and Alternatives: Addressed challenges to the argument or perceived issues or concerns with the goals	An Objection might be that raising fees to £9000 will discourage the participation of poor students, or a Counter-Claim may be that universities are crucial to the economic success of the country, so they should be publicly funded.
		Positive Consequences: The expected good outcomes of acting according to the *Goal* or *Means-Goal.*	Raising fees would increase funding and resources so universities could compete internationally. Universities competing for students will improve quality. Or HERA has brought accountability to the sector.
		Unreasonable: The moral or social injustices that need addressing or fixing	The high pay of vice-chancellors is morally wrong (unreasonable) because universities are charities. Unfair that educational opportunities depend on where you live.

		Arguments from Authority or Other Countries: The use of 'statistics' or 'facts' that prove the Circumstances or support the Goal. Alternatively, examples from other countries that show the actions are right.	Evidence shows students who do apprenticeships earn more than graduates. Alternatively, no other country has introduced a graduate tax, so neither should England. England should have a technical education provision like Germany.
Stage 3A	The PAF categories are re-analysed. Coding words or sentences into predominately semantic 'conceptual buckets' (Fryer, 2022, p. 371). An iterative process was undertaken, allowing multiple new codes to be discerned. These codes were then consolidated into themes informed by theory.	Justification for policy change. This later became Austere Consensus Building: • Blame and Responsibility • Fear and Risk Talk • Trust in Universities	HE funding needs to change because it is unstable, uncompetitive, and unfair. Labour have failed on social mobility. The country needs to change because the global economy is being transformed by technology. Universities are self-serving and have taken advantage of students from poor backgrounds.
		The purpose of HE. This later became The Purpose of Austere HE: • Economic • Individualism	Mass HE should have a strong economic return. HE contributes to society, but graduates are the prime beneficiaries of HE. HE should make the economy productive. The graduate premium means graduates should contribute to their education. HE provides skills that

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			lead to better paid jobs.
		HE Marketisation. This later became Austere Marketisation: • Funding • Value for Money • Austere State Intervention	Funding is inadequate for a globally competitive sector. HE needs to be more competitive, so quality improves. Making students the major funder of HE will make universities more responsive. HE does not offer value for money for students, taxpayers, or government. Graduates are into much debt. A degree no longer provides a highly paid job. Government has a legitimate interest in HE operations as its main funder. FE is underfunded. Any reference to reviews, legislation, regulation, regulators, quality control.
		Fairness and opportunities. Coding in this section was re-examined following the categories above.	Access, widening participation, opportunities, disadvantaged backgrounds, poor but bright, fairness, social mobility, societal inequalities, hard work and reward, value of certain types of education (academic vs technical). Group inequalities and unfairness. The

			fairness of HE funding. The unfairness of FE funding. Student aspiration. Institutional hierarchies and status.
Stage 3B	Codes related to fairness were re-examined according to the themes identified in 3A.	Austere consensus building: Fairness • Fairness and Crisis • Fairness and Polarisation	Fairness of a course of action because of a crisis (GFC, Brexit and Covid-19). The crisis unfairly impacts on certain groups. Certain groups are taken advantage of by others. Society is unfair for certain groups and places.
		The purpose of austere HE: Social transformation • Meritocratic Fairness • Mobility and Fairness	Hard work, talent, ability, aspiration, and reward. Fair access to opportunities. Information about opportunities. Bright but poor students accessing the best universities. Background should not determine outcomes. Social mobility definitions. Levelling up left behind places and communities.
		Austere Marketisation: A Failing Market • Fair funding • Expansion and Access	HE fees are unfair for students from the poorest backgrounds as they leave university with the most debt. FE funding is unfair and should be better funded. Universities have not

			used their funding correctly. HE should expand so more students can access it. HE should be reduced as it is not providing the skills the country needs. Universities should diversify their student body. Students should be able to access any university. The best universities and poor students.

Appendix 2: Text Section

The official British government website https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches

was used to search for speeches for analysis using the following criteria.

Selection Stage	Search Criteria	Results
Stage 1	Speeches referencing Higher Education between May 2010 to September 2020. Speeches delivered by those in Senior Government Roles • Prime Minister (PM) • Secretary of State (SoS) • A Minister of State Monological speeches (Not a parliamentary debate).	122 speeches met these criteria. • 3 PM • 20 SoS • 99 MoS
Stage 2	Speeches delivered within a year of each of the PM's speeches.	38 speeches met these additional criteria. • 3 PM • 16 SoS • 19 MoS
Stage 3	Each speech was read for references of two or more key discourses identified in chapter three. • Crisis • Austerity • Fairness • Access • The role of HE • Opportunities	17 speeches met these additional criteria. • 3 PM • 4 SoS • 10 MoS

	• Social mobility • Competition • Quality • Benefits of HE • Ability/Talent	
Stage 4	Each of the 17 speeches was read in detail concerning their relevance to the research questions.	9 speeches were chosen according to their perceived relevance. • 3 PM • 3 SoS • 3 MoS

Appendix 3: Ethics Approval

Educational Research | Lancaster University

8 October 2021

Dear Nathaniel (Pickering)

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for **"Equality in uncertain times: An exploration of how discourses of crisis in political speeches have shaped English higher education access and participation policies since 2010."** The information you provided has been reviewed and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As principal investigator your responsibilities include:
- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer (Dr Richard Budd or Dr Natasa Lackovic).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to Dr Richard Budd for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.

Kind regards,

Sheila Walton
Programme Administrator
Doctoral Programme in Education and Social Justice

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Appendix 4: GFC Speech Reconstructions

Vince Cable (15 July 2010)

- *Claim for Action:* the GFC has caused an 'urgent problem', and 'deep cuts in government spending on universities' are needed.

- *Counter-Claim:* Universities make a 'vital contribution' to the economy, so there should be 'caution over cuts'.

- *Circumstances:* The country is 'tangibly poorer… than two years ago,' and 'spending has to adjust accordingly'. University funding is unfair as the taxes of non-graduates support an already 'privileged group' 'who benefit most' from gaining a degree. The higher education sector needs to 'rethink' how it can be delivered more efficiently and effectively for the 'public support they receive'. It should prepare for a 'period of consolidation, perhaps even contraction'. Universities 'benefit graduates' and are central to 'knowledge-based' economies, but the current system is 'creating a… deficit… in intermediate skills'.

- *Counter-Argument:* Universities do not 'need to change; the students will simply pay up and plug the hole'.

- *Goals:* Increased 'competition for students', 'diversification of funding sources and more flexible ways of delivering excellent teaching'. The new funding system should encourage the 'market to operate more freely', provide certainty over resources and be open to alternative providers. It should also be 'fair - or fairer' than the existing model but increased 'private contributions' should not deter 'anyone from university with the ambition to go'. A 'wider

pool of potential students' should be able to access higher education, especially elite institutions.

- *Values:* Universities create 'an economically dynamic, socially mobile', and 'culturally rich society', but a degree is predominantly a private benefit.

- *Means-Goals:* A new funding system creates a flexible market. Barriers restricting which institutions can 'receive public funds' are removed. The Government will equip and empower students with data and information to 'judge better the routes they take, ' increasing sector competition and 'driving up quality'. Admission policies will not be dictated, but institutions need to 'acknowledge the barriers to access' and forge 'closer links with schools in deprived areas… to enlighten young people… of the opportunities available'.

David Cameron (8 December 2010)

- *Claim for Action*: The 'university system' is 'unsustainable, uncompetitive and unfair' and needs to change.

- *Circumstances:* The funding model cannot support the increase in participation. Universities are underfunded and 'continue to fall behind their international rivals'. The country is 'in debt' and cannot adequately fund universities. Graduates who receive a 'wage premium' should contribute more. There is no 'incentive for universities to improve', damaging the 'quality of higher education'. Universities, and particularly the 'best' institutions, have stalled on social mobility.

- *Goals:* A 'more sustainable', 'competitive… responsive', and 'fairer' university system, which is amongst the 'world's best'. Universities should increase

participation, become 'engines' 'for social mobility', and 'raise people's aspirations' regardless of 'background or family income'.

- *Values:* 'Social mobility… a fairer society' and 'a country where you can escape… the circumstances of your birth'.

- *Means-Goals:* New higher but fairer graduate contributions and scholarships. Competition and markets will drive up quality and standards and widen access.

- *Counter-Claim:* Maintain the 'status quo' of funding, reduce the 'number of students', increase everyone's taxes or introduce a 'graduate tax'.

- *Negative Consequences:* An 'unfair tax' burden on non-graduates. Increased public funding is 'unsustainable in the long-term' and 'unaffordable in the short-term'. Furthermore, a graduate tax would be unprogressive as everyone would have to pay more than 'the cost of their course' and would also fail to 'up standards' in universities.

- *Positive Consequences:* Increasing graduate contributions will be progressive as the 'rich will pay more, and the poor will pay less' while offering 'savings for the taxpayer'. It is the 'most sustainable funding option available', providing stable funding for 'future expansion', allowing universities to 'compete with the very best in the world'. Students will be empowered as they decide 'where the money goes,' putting 'real pressure on universities to drive up standards'.

- *Other Country:* No country has introduced a graduate tax; it 'is not the way forward'.

- *Objection*: Increased fees will put 'people, especially the poorest… off' university.

David Willetts (17 February 2011)

- *Claim for Action:* The funding mechanisms for higher education need to be 'sustainable and progressive', and universities should 'improve social mobility'.

- *Circumstances:* Higher education funding is being rebalanced to ' follow the student'. People from 'poorer backgrounds' going to university have increased, but those accessing 'more selective' institutions have not, hindering social mobility, which has stagnated 'since 1970'.

- *Goal:* Improve social mobility in Britain. 'Sustainable and progressive' funding that does not put students 'off from applying to university'. Universities must broaden access in a 'fair, transparent, and evidence-based' way by considering 'both prior attainment and future potential of students' while maintaining excellence.

- *Values:* Fairness and social mobility are 'at the heart of the Government's agenda'. The 'aims of social justice, in the sense of equality of opportunity' are not incompatible with 'effective competition for talent'.

- *Means-Goals:* The government will not set access 'quotas' or 'targets' or dictate the fee level, but it has clear expectations for social mobility and 'about how much' universities should charge. Instead, universities must specify how access will be broadened if they 'charge… more than £6,000' and 'students from disadvantaged backgrounds' will be awarded the National Scholarship Bursary (NSB).

- *Objections to the Claim:* Universities cannot fix poor previous education. The tripling of fees will discourage participation. All universities will charge the maximum fee.

- *Values*: 'Social mobility is… a shared responsibility'. History shows that fees do not discourage access, and market forces and competition mean 'charging £9,000' would 'be exceptional'.

- *Positive Consequences:* Increased funding will strike 'the right balance between… the financial interests of graduates and taxpayers', and the NSB and university activity will support poorer students' access.

Appendix 5: Brexit Speech Reconstructions

Justine Greening (30 March 2017)

- *Claim for Action:* Britain leaving the EU makes social mobility a 'cold, hard, economic imperative' 'for our country'.

- *Evidence from Authority:* Inequalities and background determine outcomes and cause an 'attainment gap'.

- *Circumstances:* The country's inequalities are partially responsible for the leave vote. Britain is on a 'burning platform' which existed before Brexit but has intensified. The 'global economy has been changing… at an incredible pace' and has 'steadily' transformed 'the nature of work'. These changes 'create a massive generational opportunity… especially in an economy driven… by knowledge and skills'. However, Britain lacks the right skills and its productivity 'lags behind many advanced economies'. Furthermore, the education system does not 'enable people to reach their full potential' or equip them with the training or skills to thrive.

- *Goal:* Level up 'parts of the country where… talent is not being tapped into' by provided opportunities to the 'skills they need to thrive in the future economy'. Make social mobility the country's 'biggest competitive advantage' post-Brexit so the economy and people can 'realise their unique potential'. Education policy will have three core priorities: 'firstly, tackling geographic disadvantage, secondly, investing in long-term capacity in our system, and thirdly, making sure our education system as a whole… prepares… people… for career success'.

- *Values:* A 'fairer, more cohesive country' where people can 'go as far as their ability and drive will take them'. Social mobility strips away 'the barriers that anyone faces'.

- *Unreasonable:* Outcomes 'depend on where you live', despite talent being 'evenly spread around the country'.

- The *Means-Goal* is for 'long-term investment' and improvements in further education, apprenticeships and 'careers advice'. Higher education access will focus on enabling 'adults to continue learning and retraining' or ensuring 'that disadvantaged young people… are accessing the… best… universities'. Educational reforms will empower people 'to lift and shape their own lives'. Civil servants will get 'out of Whitehall and into communities', bring together stakeholders for more 'innovative thinking in social mobility', and develop strategic partnerships to unlock 'the talents of our young people' and equip them with the 'skills to drive our country forward'. The country will also 'learn how to invest in and… value human and social capital in a way we… value physical capital'.

Jo Johnson (17 September 2017)

- The *Claim for Action* is 'whether universities are providing students with a fair deal' which 'has become ever more pressing' because of the 2017 election.

- The *Circumstances* surrounding the election meant 'student finance… played a prominent role'. The 'legitimacy' of the sector is at risk if concerns about 'diminishing returns', 'poor value for money', 'patchy teaching', and 'questionable outcomes' are not addressed. Despite 'considerable public

scrutiny', universities have taken little action to ensure 'students feel their time and money was well invested'.

- *Goal:* Improve accountability, 'value for money', and fairness in the higher education sector. In addition, the government's core educational *Goals* are to improve student choice and 'alternatives to university'.

- The *Values* state that the 'pursuit of knowledge is the hallmark of a civilized society', but higher education should not be the only route to improving social mobility. A 'mass system of higher education brings… an expectation of a strong economic return'.

- The *Means-Goals* involve universities tackling 'grade inflation', offering 'the right mode of study for every student', and finding the 'right benchmarks' for vice-chancellor remuneration, which is currently *Unreasonably* high. New regulation and accountability will be introduced through: the Higher Education & Research Act 2017 (HERA), the Office for Students (OfS), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and student contracts. However, universities also have a 'clear responsibility to take ownership' of issues, and inaction will result in *Negative Consequences* of reputational damage and loss of legitimacy

- The 'Statists' *Counter-Argument* is for abolishing tuition fees and introducing '100% of state funding'.

- The Pessimists express three *Counter-Arguments.* First, 'university is inappropriate for many students', and other types of post-18 education should be promoted. Secondly, higher education benefits have been eroded by expansion, and degrees fail to train students for graduate jobs. Finally, higher

education is not 'economically useful' as productivity 'has stagnated' even as the number of graduates has increased.

- The Statists and Pessimists are dismissed because of the *Negative Consequences* of their arguments. Abolishing fees would be 'bad for social mobility… university funding' and 'for taxpayers'. Limiting access to higher education would reduce its benefits to a 'narrow elite' and damage the economy and productivity. The Pessimist argument is dismantled by outlining the *Positive Consequences* of higher education and student fees. Universities contribute to 'individual lives and society' and offer 'real economic benefits' and 'productivity uplifts'. Sharing the cost of higher education between 'students and taxpayers' is responsible for increasing funding, sustainability and transformed access.

Theresa May (19 February 2018)

- *Claim for Action* is that the economy and work are being transformed by 'new technologies', and outside of the EU, Britain needs an education system that meets the changing needs of the country and its people.

- *Circumstances* described societal divisions, inequalities, and injustice that resulted in the leave vote. The education system is failing to teach people crucial skills. Student fees have led to 'better funded' universities that have expanded and broadened access. However, the fee system is 'one of the most expensive… in the world', with the poorest students burdened with the 'highest levels of debt'. Debt levels do not necessarily relate to a course's 'cost or quality' or bring a return on the investment. Nevertheless, university has

become the 'only desirable route'. The alternatives to higher education are undervalued, 'hard to navigate', and have inconsistent quality standards and patchy funding.

- *Unreasonable* that someone's background determines their opportunities and educational route.

- *Goal* is to make 'a country which is fit for the future, delivered through bold social and economic reform' that 'works for everyone'. Outside of the EU, the country will be 'self-confident' and 'outward-looking', making 'the most of all of our talents' to become a 'Great Meritocracy'. A 'more diverse' and 'flexible' tertiary system will be created to 'ensure that everyone gets the education' that 'suits their skills and aspirations'.

- *Values* are to 'reconnect everyone in our society to a sense of fairness and opportunity'. The education system should 'unlock everyone's talents', so they can 'go as far as their hard work will take them', creating a 'genuinely classless society'.

- *Means-Goal* is a 'major and wide-ranging review into post-18 education' looking at further and higher education, so a 'truly joined-up' system can be created. The review aims to make 'tertiary education accessible to all', promote 'choice and competition', deliver 'value for money', and. 'the skills our economy needs'. The funding system will also be examined to make tertiary education fairer and more progressive.

- The *Counter-Claim* suggests that the taxpayer should meet the total cost of higher education.

- However, this would have three *Negative Consequences*. Firstly, it would raise taxes; secondly, universities would be 'competing with schools and hospitals for scarce resources'; finally, it would mean restricting university places subverting progress in widening access.

Appendix 6: COVID-19 Speech Reconstructions

Michelle Donelan (1 July 2020)

- The *Claim for Action* is that the '2004 access regime' has failed, and 'we need to think again' about the meaning of social mobility and higher education.

- The *Circumstances* described the impact of COVID-19 on education and progression to university. Social mobility should not be 'about getting more people into university', and universities have taken 'advantage of' 'too many young people', especially 'those without a family history' of higher education. In addition, universities have overrecruited to 'popular sounding courses' that do nothing to improve students' 'life chances or help with their career goals'. Many Graduates have invested in education and incurred significant debt that is not 'worth its value'. There has not been enough focus on student retention and employment outcomes. Universities have felt 'pressured to dumb down' admission criteria or 'in the standards of their courses', which has manifested in grade inflation.

- Universities play 'a vital role in helping' the government deliver the *Goal* 'to level up Britain, to deliver greater opportunities to every person and every community in the UK'. A 'new era' of access and participation' is needed 'based on raising standards', 'results', and 'impact'. Prospective students should have their 'ambitions and needs' put first. Graduates should be able to get jobs 'that really will transform their lives'. Universities need to go 'the extra mile to raise standards and aspirations in schools' and collaborate 'at the national level' to

ensure 'gaps in achievement and… progression' to university between different groups do not 'widen because of… COVID-19'.

- The *Values* are that 'Higher education should be open to all… qualified by ability and attainment'. There should be a focus on levelling 'the playing field by creating' and opening opportunities so 'every person can rise to the position that their talents and hard work allow'. 'True social mobility' is encouraging 'people to choose the path that will lead to their desired destination and enabling them to complete that path', 'be that in HE, FE, or apprenticeships'.

- The *Means-Goal* involves universities undertaking initiatives such as 'sponsoring schools, supporting a robust curriculum, or running summer camps'. Therefore, 'access budgets' should not 'be spent on marketing but on raising standards' in schools and 'providing the role models, the information, encouraging aspiration and highlighting… high-quality opportunities'. Disadvantaged students are helped by 'driving up standards, not by levelling down' and by ending the 'system of arbitrary targets'.

Gavin Williamson (10 September 2020)

- The *Claim for Action* is that 'the unprecedented challenge posed by the pandemic has made it even more important to invest in long-term change and to think seriously about the post-16 education system we need in this country'.

- The *circumstances* are that COVID-19 has 'thrown many of our assumptions' about education and society 'into sharp relief'. In the pandemic recovery, 'further education will be even more important', but 'too many people… don't value it'. It is the 'forgotten education' with the 'forgotten 50%' 'who choose

another path' to university. There is 'an inbuilt snobbishness about higher being somehow better than further', 'when really, they are both just different paths to fulfilling and skilled employment'. There is too much focus on getting 'more people into higher education', even though it 'is not always what the individual or our nation needs'. Universities have 'been training people for jobs that don't exist', and 'graduates don't have the skills they need', leading to 'low productivity and lost opportunity' .

- It is *Unreasonable* that 'governments of all colours have failed' this 'forgotten 50%' of people.

- The *Goal* is to 'stand for the forgotten 50%', for 'fundamental reform', and a 'wholesale rebalancing' away from higher to 'further and technical education'. The 'heart of our post-16 education system', 'levelling up', and the post-pandemic recovery will be further and technical education. Modelled after the 'German-style further education system', England will have a 'high-quality system' that is 'adequately funded,' with 'industry-grade equipment and modern buildings'. Colleges will 'act as centres for business development and innovation' and deliver the highest quality courses and training, giving 'people meaningful careers'. The

- *Values* say, 'education is a keystone of our society,' and its 'purpose… is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job'. Further education and colleges are fundamental to 'unlocking this country's potential', 'to social mobility' and 'to levelling up every part of our great nation'.

- The *Means-Goal* is a White Paper that proposes comprehensive plans and fundamental changes to 'England's further education landscape'. The paper will 'give colleges the powers and resources' they 'need to truly drive change', work with business and 'transform many of our left-behind towns and regions'. In addition, further education will be reviewed 'to simplify the system' and courses.

Boris Johnson (29 September 2020)

- The claim for action is that COVID has shaken the 'economy' and shown the 'shortcomings of our labour market – and our educational system'. 'It is time… for radical change' as there is an imbalance in skills, meaning 'business isn't happy; the economy is under-productive; and many working adults are stuck in jobs without much future'.

- COVID-19 created *Circumstances* that 'massively accelerated' 'changes… already happening in the UK economy'. 'Old types of employment' are falling away as 'new opportunities are opening up', requiring many to 'change jobs – to change skills'. The 'lack of investment in infrastructure' and science and 'failures in technical education' have 'hamstrung' the country. There are 'fundamental problems in our economy of productivity and growth', a 'shortage of… crucial skills', and too many graduates with the wrong skills. 'The problem is that not every FE college is… superb', and people cannot borrow money to study for further education, which 'propels young people into universities' despite questioning if it is 'sensible to rack up that debt' for a degree that does not pay.

- The *Goal* is to come 'through this crisis… stronger… build back better' and level up the country, making it 'richer' and 'fairer' while tackling the 'fundamental problems in our economy of productivity and growth'. Post-18 education, skills, and apprenticeships need investment and transformation 'so everyone has the chance to train and retrain'. Universities should be open to all with the 'aptitude and the desire to go', but there should be 'real choice' and an alternative 'route to success'. Therefore, the 'bogus distinction between FE and HE' should end. The

- *Values* assume skills 'transform' people's 'lives' and give them a 'chance to find their vocation and… a… well-paid career'.

- The *Means-Goals* will involve 'huge capital investment' to improve 'colleges across the country' and increase apprenticeship availability. The university loan system will be expanded 'so it's as easy to get a loan' for a 'specific list of valuable' further and technical education qualifications. Colleges will be able 'to access funding on the same terms as… universities,' enabling them to 'compete' with higher education institutions. The availability of loans will open up a 'new vista of choice' and 'help people to train and retrain' by borrowing funds flexibly and easily.

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