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# **A Decade of E-learning Policy in Higher Education in the United Kingdom: A Critical Analysis**

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## Abstract

Both as discourse and as practice, e-learning in Higher Education (HE) is shaped by many factors, the most critical of which are the political motivations driving its adoption. In this dissertation I attest that e-learning policies relevant to HE issued by government departments and non-departmental public bodies in the United Kingdom (UK) between 2003 and 2013 were predominantly underpinned by neoliberal ideology. The enquiry is grounded in the Critical research paradigm's intention to expose, critique, and ultimately overcome sources of oppression. Thirteen policy texts were analysed via two critical lenses. First, via thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the corpus I identified recurring themes. These were then clustered around a trilogy of master narratives: *Marketisation*, *Instrumentality*, and *Modernisation*. Through an ideology critique of these master narratives, I uncovered and unpacked the motivations underpinning claims made in relation to e-learning. My second mode of analysis was a detailed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of each document. CDA sees the wider context as essential to making sense of a text (Bloor and Bloor 2007; Van Dijk 2008). My critique, therefore, considered each document within its historical and socio-economic context, and examined the extent to which the three master narratives were evident both over time, and across England, Scotland, and Wales. How policy is communicated and presented is as important as what is said (Barnett 2000). Indeed, ideologies can be both enacted and obscured by language (Jones and Stilwell Peccei 2004; Henriksen 2011). My analysis, therefore, also examined the role of visual presentation, lexical choices, and rhetorical techniques in communicating the policies. Taken together, the two prongs of my analysis demonstrate that – although there are variances in different contexts and at different times – overall, the policies considered were motivated by neoliberal imperatives aimed at placing HE within the realm of the market and enhancing the UK's economic competitiveness. The policies also persistently reflect a deterministic and uncritical perspective towards technology. Furthermore, many of the claims made are exaggerated, unsubstantiated, contradictory, and even duplicitous, or are justified via reference to contested discourses. While neoliberal ideology is privileged and promoted across the corpus, alternative value systems are not. I argue that this problematic framing of e-learning is intensifying the negative impacts of neoliberalism on HE's role as a public good, as well as exacerbating social inequalities. Furthermore, it is channelling e-learning into a restricted form that limits any possible pedagogical or egalitarian opportunities that the judicious application of digital technologies in HE teaching and learning might support. I reflect on the implications of this for HE and for society, and for the professional practice of Learning Technologists. Finally, I present an alternative vision for e-learning in HE.

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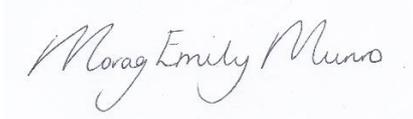
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Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my three wonderful children: Aobh, Isla, and Patrick, all of whom were born during the course of this journey, and who have been patiently waiting for me to finish writing my 'very big book'.

## Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Morag Emily Munro". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M'.

Morag Emily Munro

# CHAPTER 1: Study Origins and Outline

## Prologue

In generational terms, I am one of “Thatcher’s Children” (Pilcher and Wagg 2005). Growing up pre-Internet, I could never have envisaged that I would become a Learning Technologist<sup>1</sup>; but with the benefit of hindsight perhaps my career, although unintended and unanticipated, is unsurprising. From my earliest exposure to ‘e-learning’, jostling with my classmates for my turn at playing ‘Granny’s Garden’<sup>2</sup> on our much revered classroom computer, I was mesmerised by technology. On completing my undergraduate studies in Chemical Engineering at the University of Strathclyde, I was torn between pursuing a Master’s degree in Energy Systems and the Environment, and undertaking postgraduate studies in secondary teaching, eventually choosing the former. I graduated at the tail end of the 1990s recession, and was saddled with student loans; nevertheless, I fully bought into New Labour’s anthemic pledge to Generation X that ‘Things can only get better’<sup>3</sup>. During my Master’s programme and after graduating I worked in various part-time and temporary roles at my alma mater, and in 1998, while seeking a ‘real job’, I accepted what I assumed would be another stopgap post as a Learning Technologist at Strathclyde, full of enthusiasm about the possibilities that I envisaged that the Internet might generate for democratising HE and for enabling new pedagogical possibilities. A decade later, I was still working as a Learning Technologist, by now a burgeoning profession; yet my aspirations for e-learning had failed to come to fruition. Where did it all go wrong?

My entry into the nascent field of educational technology coincided with the dawn of the golden age of e-learning in UK HE. The Conservative government had recently invested £75 million into the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP), while the 1997

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<sup>1</sup> Most Higher Education Institutions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland employ at least one person whose remit encompasses responsibility for supporting and promoting e-learning (McNutt 2013; Walker et al. 2014). Job titles for these professionals vary both across, and within institutions (Browne and Beetham 2010; Fox and Sumner 2014; Hopkins 2015). In this dissertation I use the term adopted by the Association for Learning Technology: Learning Technologist.

<sup>2</sup> Granny's Garden is an educational game for primary school children launched in the 1980s. An updated version is still in use in some UK schools (4Mation 2015).

<sup>3</sup> "Things Can Only Get Better" by 1990s pop group *D:Ream* was the Labour Party’s anthem during their 1997 election campaign.

report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education<sup>4</sup> (NCIHE 1997) – commissioned by the Conservatives but endorsed by the incoming Labour government (Scott 1997) – emphasised the perceived importance of technology to the future of UK HE. New Labour’s e-learning flagship, The National Grid for Learning (NGfL) was launched the same year, and was followed by a flurry of e-learning policy and related initiatives. I was part of a TLTP-funded team charged with the development of supplementary e-learning resources for mathematics and chemistry. Caught up in the e-learning buzz of the late 1990s, I was optimistic about the possibilities that I believed technology might offer in support of, and even in revolutionising, teaching and learning in HE; yet I had absolutely no rational basis for my sanguine attitude. In retrospect, I realise that I had unquestioningly succumbed to the prevailing belief that technology was set to revolutionise education. In my defence, I had grown up surrounded by the “popular perception of the computer as inherently educational” promulgated by government, media, and the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) industry during the 80s and 90s (Selwyn 2002b: 25). At nine years old, I vividly remember my parents stressing that the Commodore 64 computer that they had toiled to purchase for the family was ‘not just for playing games on – it’s for your education’. This early emphasis on the educational importance of ICT was reinforced by teachers and academic staff during my secondary and university education. Aside from the few occasions when computers had let me down – usually in the hours before an assignment was due – I had no reason to doubt technology, and every reason to embrace it. Selwyn’s (2014:11-12) vexation that most Learning Technologists are “driven by an underlying belief that digital technologies are – in some way – capable of improving education”, thus encapsulates my uncritical, and often technologically deterministic, perspective towards e-learning in my role at Strathclyde. I was surrounded by technology enthusiasts and academic staff who were considered to be ‘early adopters’, and was ignorant of the writings of those who were more apprehensive about the motivations for, and possible detrimental impacts of, e-learning. These early – and as it turns out prophetic – critiques included Postman’s (1995: 378) fears about “what kinds of learning will be neglected, perhaps made impossible” by technology; Bromley and Apple’s (1998) edited collection; Noble’s series of articles (1998a; 1998b; 1998c) prophesying the “Digital Diploma Mills”, and his contention that technology is “but a vehicle and a disarming disguise” for the commercialisation of HE (1998a: 10); and Winner’s (2000) tongue in cheek, but nevertheless rather foreboding, depiction of the

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth the Dearing Report.

“Automatic Professor Machine”. Even had I been exposed the aforesaid literature, I am unsure if I would have been persuaded to change my mind about e-learning. I was buoyed by the positive feedback that we were receiving from students and staff, and, as Selwyn (2002b: 7) observes, at that time any periphery challenges to e-learning tended to be dismissed as “anti-progress” or “Luddite”.

Notwithstanding the above, I remain proud of the work that we carried out at Strathclyde. One of my aspirations for e-learning at the time was, and indeed still is, that technology might support students to engage in learning opportunities that cannot otherwise be easily realised. While some of the resources that we created could be described as ‘lecture notes on the web’, we also developed innovative and high-quality multimedia materials, which offered students insights into chemical reactions, and mathematical operations that could not have been achieved without technology. Unfortunately, much of the e-learning that I have been involved with since then has been rather more mundane.

In 2001, I relocated to the Republic of Ireland (ROI) global hub of the e-learning industry during the ‘Celtic Tiger’<sup>5</sup> years (Crone 2003; Ó’Riain 2014). My first post was in a large e-learning company, where I was responsible for coordinating the work of a team of Instructional Designers. In 2002, I moved to a smaller organisation, where I was involved in all phases of the e-learning ‘product development’ process. Like most commercial e-learning organisations at that time, the pedagogical approach employed in both companies was grounded in instructional design, and drew on the behaviourist learning theories of Gagné (1965) and Skinner (1968). Straightforward and logical, the instructional design process was easy to sell to clients, and was simple to cost, develop, and manage on a large scale in the e-learning ‘factories’. I soon questioned the appropriateness and effectiveness of this approach however, finding it to be simplistic and prescriptive, focused on transmitting content from the screen to the learner, and ultimately the antithesis of my aspirations for e-learning.

In 2003, I returned to the HE sector, taking up a post as Learning Technologist at Dublin City University (DCU). Here, as was the case in most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK and ROI at that time, e-learning was mainly the realm of the early adopters (Oliver 2005). My return to HE coincided with the dawn of the ‘next big thing’ predicted to transform the sector, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (Frutos 2002; Totkov 2003).

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<sup>5</sup> The period of rapid economic growth in the ROI during the 90s and until the world-wide economic downturn in 2001.

In my new role, I was responsible for the selection, roll out, championing, and support of a VLE for the University. The next three years flashed by in a whirlwind of consultations, meetings, and workshops, as I collaborated with the early adopters, and attempted to persuade the less enthusiastic of the possibilities that I believed e-learning might offer. By the end of the 2005/6 academic year around 70% of academic staff, as well as most students, were using the VLE; yet I was dismayed and deflated. My aspirations for technology were that it would transform HE learning and teaching; yet I saw little evidence of such impact. I could barely keep up with the demand for workshops, but when they attended, many participants' priority was to find out how to upload lecture presentation slides to the VLE. Worse still, some colleagues told me that they no longer wanted to use the VLE because they felt that students were becoming over-reliant on it, or because they perceived that provision of resources via the system was contributing to non-attendance at lectures. My concerns were substantiated by research which revealed that, while the use of the VLE was widespread across the university:

[L]ittle disruption of teaching practices – defined as serious transformation or alteration of the structure of teaching and learning activities – has occurred. [...] [T]he VLE is mainly used for administrative purposes, to disseminate resources or information and to complement or replicate existing practices. (Blin and Munro 2008: 488)

Much of the literature relating to e-learning up until that point had been dominated by enthusiastic rhetoric and claimed success stories (see, for example, Boyle et al. 2003; Twigg 2003; Garrison and Kanuka 2004). I was therefore relieved to find that a growing number of accounts mirroring my own lived experience of the disparities between the “rhetoric of how digital technologies could be used in education and the realities of how digital technologies are actually used” (Selwyn 2014: vii) were beginning to enter the mainstream (see, for example, Conole 2004; Kirkup and Kirkwood 2005; Price et al. 2005; Donnelly and O'Rourke 2007). But something else was deeply troubling me. I was beginning to have fundamental concerns about the motives underpinning the introduction of e-learning. I saw little evidence that technology was widening access, enabling flexible participation, improving student learning, or even that it was making teaching and learning more efficient; yet these were the same claims which I was using to ‘sell’ e-learning to colleagues. And although such aspirations had initially seemed noble to me, I began to question their ideological underpinnings. My impetus for engaging with this research topic is thus that I find myself to be what Whitehead (1989) has described as a ‘living contradiction’: there is an uncomfortable disparity between my own values and aspirations for technology in HE, and current implementations of e-learning. In order to live my values in practice it is essential

that I uncover and critique the motivations underpinning the drive to embed e-learning into HE, and that I consider the implications for my professional practice.

## **Dissertation overview**

The last two decades have seen a growing trend towards the use of technology in HE learning and teaching, referred to in this dissertation as ‘e-learning’. By 2003, the outset of the analysis timeframe, e-learning was a key feature of HE policy in many developed countries, with several having published a dedicated e-learning strategy or policy (Kearns 2002; Charpentier et al. 2006). Despite its growing prominence, e-learning “only occasionally receives sustained critical attention and thought” (Selwyn 2011b: viii). In this dissertation I argue for a more nuanced and judicious consideration of e-learning. In particular, I take a critical stance against the neoliberal discourses that, as I will demonstrate, framed the UK’s e-learning policies between 2003 and 2013. The enquiry is a conceptual analysis, and is grounded in the critical social research paradigm’s intention to expose, critique, and ultimately overcome sources of oppression. My analysis makes particular reference to the wider socio-political context and to relevant literature on HE and e-learning. I also draw on my own professional experiences as a Learning Technologist.

The following research questions framed my enquiry:

1. What ideologies and claims underpin e-learning policies issued by government departments and non-departmental public bodies in England, Scotland, and Wales between 2003 and 2013?
2. Are the claims made valid? Are other ideologies and perspectives omitted?
3. What are the implications for constructions of e-learning in HE?
4. What are the implications for HE?
5. What are the implications for the professional practice of Learning Technologists?
6. What might e-learning look like if it was framed by an alternative vision for HE?

The methodology employed is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an approach that examines how “social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk 2001: 352). Thirteen policy texts were critically examined through two analytic lenses. First, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the corpus identified numerous recurring themes. These were then clustered (Miles et al. 2014) around three overarching ‘Master narratives’ (Jessop 2004; Fairclough 2006): *Marketisation*, *Instrumentality*, and *Modernisation*. The themes and narratives were then subjected to an ‘Ideology critique’ (Held 1980) in order to expose

evidence of myths, contradictions, biases, hegemonies, and omissions. CDA sees the wider context as essential to making sense of a text (Bloor and Bloor 2007; Van Dijk 2008). In my second mode of analysis I therefore examined each text within its historical and socio-economic context, and considered the extent to which the three neoliberal master narratives were evident over time, and across England, Scotland, and Wales. In addition, the way that a policy is communicated and presented is often as important as what is said (Barnett 2000). Thus, my analysis also explored the role of presentation, language, and rhetorical techniques in communicating the policies.

My critical analysis of the documents demonstrated that – while there are variations in different contexts, as well as shifts in emphasis over time – overall, the policies considered were predominantly motivated by neoliberal imperatives aimed at placing HE within the realm of the market and enhancing the UK’s economic competitiveness. Furthermore, the policies persistently reflect a deterministic and uncritical perspective towards technology, while many of the claims made about the supposed characteristics and capabilities of e-learning are exaggerated, unsubstantiated, duplicitous, or justified via reference to contested discourses. I contend that this problematic framing of e-learning is exacerbating the negative impacts of neoliberalism on HE’s social, cultural, and intellectual role as a public good, and is intensifying social inequalities. It is also channelling e-learning into a restricted form that limits any possible pedagogical or egalitarian opportunities that the judicious application of digital technologies in HE teaching and learning might support. I explore the implications of this for HE and society, as well as for my own, and for other Learning Technologists’ professional practice. I then present an alternative vision for the use of e-learning in HE that, rather than driving forward the neoliberal agenda, instead foregrounds HE as a means for fostering democratic and global citizenship.

## **Conclusion and dissertation structure**

The current chapter has introduced the research topic and has outlined the rationale for my engaging with it. In chapter 2, I outline my conceptual framework, contextualise the study, and detail my methodology. In chapter 3, I chart the rise, and overall demise, of UK e-learning policy against the backdrop of the growth of neoliberalism. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present my ideology critique of the three master narratives underpinning the policies: *Marketisation*, *Instrumentality*, and *Modernisation* respectively. In chapters 7, 8, and 9, I critically analyse each text within its historical and socio-economic context. I also examine how visual presentation, language choices, and rhetorical techniques are leveraged in communicating the policies. In chapter 10, I summarise my findings, and consider their

implications for HE and society, and for my own, as well as for other Learning Technologists' professional practice. I also reflect on the extent to which the study has transformed my professional perspectives, practices, and commitments. Finally, I present an alternative vision for e-learning in HE.

# CHAPTER 2: Conceptual Framework, Context, and Methodology

## Introduction

Neoliberalism is a worldview that puts faith in the supremacy of the market at the heart of all human activities (Friedman 1962). My central thesis is that neoliberal suppositions about the role that technology should play in HE – which as I will demonstrate are widespread across the policies analysed – have contributed to the shaping of e-learning in HE into an undesirable format that compounds the damaging impacts of neoliberalism on HE's operation, and its societal function as a public good, as well as exacerbating social inequalities. In order to situate my argument, in this chapter, I first summarise what I consider to be the most problematic facets of neoliberalism, particularly in relation to its impacts on HE. Next, I contextualise the study. After introducing the policy analysis field, I outline the organisational arrangements for policy-making in UK HE. I then define e-learning, set out the scope of the study, and note its limitations. I next introduce the approach to discourse analysis underpinning the research, CDA, and explain how it is aligned with the aims of the study. Following that, I outline the two critical lenses through which the texts were interrogated. The chapter concludes with a short discussion on relevant ethical considerations.

## Neoliberalism

Olssen and Peters (2005) summarise four suppositions which are at the heart of neoliberal ideology: *The self-interested individual*: Individuals are economically self-interested, and the individual is the best judge of his or her own interests and requirements; *Free market economics*: The market is the most efficient mechanism for allocating resources and opportunities; *Laissez-faire*: Markets are self-regulating, hence state power and intervention should be minimised; the state's role is simply to create the conditions for markets to operate efficiently; and *Free trade*: Global free trade and open economies are prerequisites for economic growth.

Over the course of 60 years, neoliberal orthodoxy has grown exponentially from its roots as a peripheral economic theory and has proliferated into a global political and economic hegemony (Bourdieu 1998; Harvey 2005; Peters 2011). Neoliberalism is now the prevailing philosophy guiding policy-making worldwide, and the idea that the market is the best way to organise all aspects of society has entered the realm of popular thinking (Bourdieu 1998; Harvey 2005). Despite its all-encompassing reach, neoliberalism is “less like a singular set

of ideas derived from one source and more like a plural set of concepts stemming from numerous sources” (Saunders 2010: 45), while its manifestations have varied across locales, and in different epochs (Saad Filho and Johnston 2005; Steger and Roy 2010; Hall 2011). Steger and Roy (2010: xi) therefore suggest that we think in terms of “*neoliberalisms* rather than a single monolithic manifestation” [emphasis in original].

Despite its prominence worldwide, the many critics of the neoliberal thesis point out that neoliberalism rests on at best, questionable, and at worst, entirely flawed, prepositions. The untrammelled market was heralded by its forefathers as a failsafe method for achieving capital growth and accumulation (Friedman 1962); yet growth rates have declined in neoliberal regimens (Harvey 2005; Klein 2007). Despite its core principles being discredited by the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, neoliberalism is thriving and proliferating (Crouch 2011; Duménil and Lévy 2011; Mirowski 2013). Advocates allege that the application of neoliberal principles will achieve a better standard of life for all citizens; yet neoliberal policies have mainly benefited the already privileged, and the gap between the poorest and the richest has grown (Duménil and Lévy 2005; Harvey 2005). Moreover, the elevation of economic success over all other priorities is contributing to the destruction of the physical environment and squandering scarce physical resources (Foster et al. 2011) as well as hindering attempts at sustainable development (Reed 2002; Kumi et al. 2014). Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, there are often significant discrepancies between neoliberalism as theory, and neoliberalism as it is implemented and experienced (Harvey 2005; Munck 2005; Holborow 2012a).

I will argue throughout this dissertation that neoliberal ideology has had, and is continuing to have, a radical and adverse impact on the purpose, structure, and operation of HE in the UK. The assumptions underpinning neoliberalism are not an appropriate framework for determining the purpose of HE, nor for organising its operation. Although HE certainly has a role to play in contributing to the national economy and in supporting individual employability, these goals should not be the sole focus of HE. HE has an equally important role as a ‘public good’ through its contribution to maintaining and developing democratic society, citizenship, and culture (Nussbaum 2010; Collini 2012; Giroux 2014). In addition, careful consideration as to how HE can help prepare future generations for sustainable and responsible living in an ever more interconnected and unstable global political landscape and increasingly fragile physical environment, is of utmost importance (Gough and Scott 2008; Shephard 2015). Yet a narrow instrumental focus on the role of HE neglects these important issues. A further troubling result of neoliberalism is its impact on equality. The opportunity

to participate in HE should be open to all those for whom a university education will be beneficial: yet framing goals for ‘inclusion’ and ‘widening participation’ in narrow instrumental terms will not result in an equitable system (McMahon 2009; Brown 2011).

### **Policy analysis**

Policy is frequently the means through which neoliberalism is articulated and operationalised. For the purpose of this study I take Parsons’ (1995: 14) broad definition of policy as “an attempt to define and structure a rational basis for action or inaction” as my starting point. It follows that a text or act of communication need not be explicitly named as a policy in order to constitute policy. Indeed, most of the documents considered in this study are referred to as ‘strategies’, as opposed to ‘policies’. In addition one, *An e-learning Strategy for Wales (ELWa 2003b)* is described therein both as policy and strategy. Another, the *Joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group: Final Report (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003)* does not refer to itself as either policy or strategy, but is subsequently referred to as such in related documentation<sup>6</sup>. Following Parson’s definition above, I therefore consider the strategy documentation reviewed in this study to constitute policy.

The methodological approach employed is CDA. A key motivator for my electing to engage with the study of policy via this approach is that policy is inherently value laden, hence if the policy-making process is not open, it can generate inequalities of power and privilege (Wodak 2002; Heck 2004; Taylor 2004). The language used to communicate policy is also important, since language choices can reify and reinforce certain values and ideologies (Edelman 1985; Jones and Stilwell Peccei 2004). Furthermore, as Biesta (2005: 54) notes: “the language or languages we have available to speak about education determine to a large extent what can be said and done, and thus what cannot be said and done”. Moreover, as Holborow (2012b: 14) observes, neoliberalism and discourse are in a sense interdependent: “neoliberalism, as a social system and an ideology is said to have invaded discourse; at the same time discourse is deemed to reproduce neoliberalism”.

Although there is a wide body of academic critique relating to UK HE policy, critical commentary relating specifically to e-learning policy is limited. Notable exceptions include Selwyn and Gorard’s challenges to policy constructions of technology in relation to lifelong learning and widening participation (Selwyn et al. 2001; Gorard et al. 2003; Selwyn and Gorard 2003; Selwyn et al. 2006); Clegg et al.’s (2003: 51) exposé of the flawed “meta-

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Harvey and Beards (2004); SFC (2006a); SFC (2007).

narrative linking of ICTs, globalization and supply side economics” in HE policy; and Plenderleith and Adamson’s (2009) analysis of New Labour’s ‘transformation agenda’ as a policy driver for e-learning. In addition, the aforesaid work has been predominately carried out by academic researchers and practitioners; the current study thus brings a new, and much needed professional perspective to the debate: the ‘voice’ of the Learning Technologist.

Analyses of UK social policy tend to neglect regional variations, resulting in an over representation of ‘Anglo-centric’ perspectives (Donnelly and Osborne 2005; Moon 2014). This is reflected in the majority of discussions of UK e-learning policy, which almost exclusively focus on England (Plenderleith and Adamson’s (2009) work is a solitary exception). Furthermore, policy studies in general often conflate England and the UK (Phillips 2003). Indeed, England’s cross-sectoral e-learning strategy (DfES 2003d; DfES 2005; Becta 2008) has been frequently, but erroneously, referred to by policy analysts and other commentators on e-learning as pertaining to the UK overall (see, for example, Andretta 2005; Uhomoibhi 2006; Dyer 2007; Cowan 2008). The present study aims to address this gap in the literature by highlighting policy divergences and convergences across England, Scotland, and Wales.

## **Policy making in UK HE**

While it is both a sovereign state and country in its own right, the UK<sup>7</sup> comprises four constituent countries: England, Northern Ireland (NI), Scotland, and Wales. The UK Government and Westminster Parliament act as government and parliament for the whole of the UK, and also as government and parliament for England. Since 1999 some aspects of governance and policy making, including responsibility for HE, have been devolved. Thus while the UK Parliament is directly responsible for policy and strategy relating to English HE, in Scotland and Wales responsibility for HE is devolved to the Scottish Government<sup>8</sup> and Parliament; and the Welsh Government<sup>9</sup> and National Assembly for Wales respectively. During the analysis timeframe relevant e-learning policy and strategy was issued by

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<sup>7</sup> The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) the correct term for the sovereign state that comprises, England, Scotland, Wales, and NI, and is the term that I will primarily use throughout this dissertation. However some authors erroneously refer to ‘Britain’ or to ‘Great Britain’ (which constitutes only England, Scotland, and Wales), thus I occasionally use these terms when citing the work of such authors.

<sup>8</sup> Named the Scottish Executive until 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Named the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) until 2006.

government departments (such as the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)) and by non-departmental public bodies (such as Becta<sup>10</sup> and HE Funding Councils (FCs)).

The devolved administrations are financed via block grants from the UK government, calculated via the – controversial – Barnett formula which allocates monies to the other countries based on spending in England. Monies allocated to HE in England, Wales, and Scotland are administered via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Scottish Funding Council for FE and HE (SFC)<sup>11</sup> respectively. Although their main role is to distribute funding to HEIs, the FCs' remits extend to policy development; indeed they have played a key role in the development of e-learning policy. The FCs are 'arms-length bodies', and as such they are meant to act as buffers between HE and government, in order to protect HEIs from interference motivated by short-term political decisions (Bekhradnia 2004). The extent of this arm's-length relationship should not be overstated however. The UK's governments periodically stipulate their priorities for HE to the FCs, and they have become increasingly directive in the work of the FCs (Bekhradnia 2004; Baker 2011; Bruce 2012). Although the three FCs function on a broadly similar basis, there are some variations in their ethos, remits, and operation (Bruce 2012).

Various factors constrain the ability of the devolved nations to develop unique HE policy approaches. The legislative powers available to the devolved administrations have varied over time. England has no parliament of its own, and is governed centrally by the UK parliament, thus the UK and English political institutions "have effectively become fused" (MacKinnon 2013: 50). Scotland acquired primary legislative powers at the outset of devolution. Wales by contrast was not granted primary legislative powers until 2011, being initially only granted secondary legislative powers. This allowed the Welsh Government to amend primary legislation issued by Westminster, but not to create their own. More recently the differences between the powers available to each of the governments have narrowed, but have not been entirely eliminated. Key aspects of HE, such as research and quality assurance, are administered on a UK-wide basis, while wider policy areas impacting on HE, such as education, science, equality, and immigration, are UK-wide. The four countries also operate

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<sup>10</sup> The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA), latterly known simply as 'Becta', was a UK non-departmental public body responsible for the promotion and integration of ICT in education between 1998 and 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Formerly the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC), until 2005.

within a common market and are impacted by common policy communities. Perhaps most significantly, since funding is allocated to the devolved administrations according to spending in England, policy changes there inevitably impact on decision making in the devolved nations (Trench 2008; Gallacher and Raffe 2012). As I will demonstrate in chapters 7, 8, and 9, the aforementioned constraints are reflected in the general propensity towards convergence across the e-learning policies, which corresponds with the overall tendency post-devolution towards convergence in UK HE policy (Trench 2008; Gallacher and Raffe 2012).

### **Defining e-learning**

Various terms have been employed to describe the use of technology in relation to HE learning and teaching. As the most commonly utilised across the policies analysed, the term ‘e-learning’ is that which is primarily employed in this dissertation. However, it is acknowledged that while this term remains in use globally, it has fallen from fashion in the UK, with ‘Technology-Enhanced Learning’ (TEL) currently the term *du jour* (Bayne 2015).

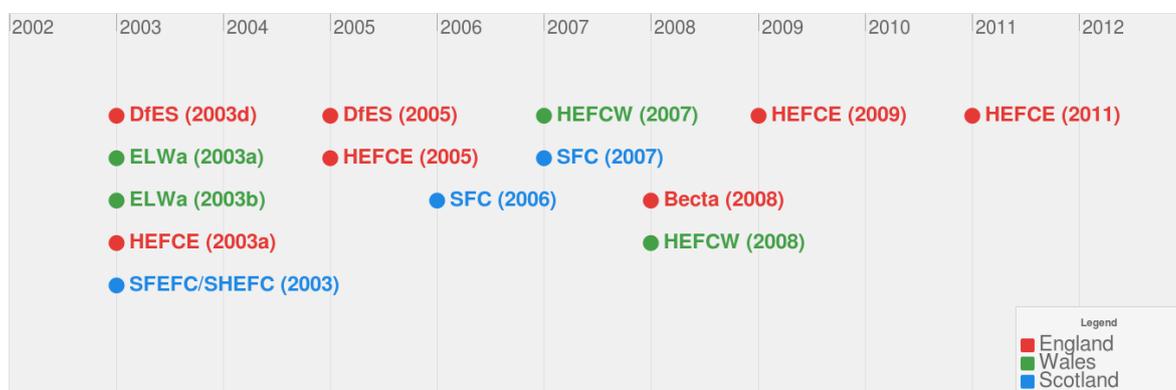
Reflective of wider inconsistencies and discrepancies (Pachler and Daly 2011) e-learning is variously defined across the texts; indeed, in some of the policies e-learning is not defined at all. Furthermore, rather than being “a neat single entity” e-learning is “riddled with complications, contradictions and conflicts” (Selwyn 2014: 6). Notwithstanding the importance of these complexities, for the purpose of this dissertation e-learning is broadly understood as the application of ICT in relation to learning, teaching, and assessment, both in distance education contexts (where the majority of learning activities take place online) and in contexts where e-learning is combined with face-to-face learning and teaching approaches (sometimes referred to as blended learning).

### **Scope**

The corpus analysed comprised thirteen policy texts issued by government departments and non-departmental public bodies in England, Wales, and Scotland that were either wholly, or partly, concerned with e-learning in HE, spanning the timeframe 2003-2013, and amounting to approximately 138 900 words in total (See Figure 1 and Appendix A). It is acknowledged that this is rather a large corpus, however, it was important to include all available policy discourse, since, as Holborow (2012a: 24) asserts, “seeing ideology through the prism of a single text can both, paradoxically, overstate its presence and trivialise its impact”.

No relevant policy was issued in NI during the analysis timeframe. Indeed, the NI Assembly was suspended from 2002-2007 with NI placed under direct rule by Westminster; NI is

therefore excluded from my analysis. While the scope of this inquiry is limited to policies relating to provision of full- and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate studies in HE, there is necessarily some overlap in my discussion with other education and training sectors. Some of the policies analysed encompass sectors other than HE, including schools, Further Education (FE), and workforce training. In such cases, while my focus is primarily on the elements of the discourse that directly refer to HE, there are instances where e-learning is referred to a general sense in these texts, without specifying the educational sector; these aspects of the policies are therefore included in my analysis. In addition, although HE has historically been provided by Universities and HEIs, more recently the boundaries between HE delivered in these contexts, and HE delivered elsewhere have become blurred (Brown and Carasso 2013). Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, e-learning is frequently presented as a means to support government priorities in relation to lifelong learning and widening participation, agendas that often refer to the post compulsory education and training system as a whole (Hodgson et al. 2011).



**Figure 1: E-learning policies in the UK, 2003-2013**

## Limitations

Policy directives other than those considered in this dissertation are likely to have impacted on the shaping of e-learning in UK HE, for example those issued via the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission (EC); however, analysis of these texts was beyond the scope of the current study. Moreover, although communications relating to funding incentives and competitive programmes aimed at supporting the implementation of e-learning in UK HE (for example, those issued by via Jisc<sup>12</sup> and the HE FCs) were an important mechanism through which policy was indirectly

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<sup>12</sup> Jisc (historically the Joint Information Systems Committee, JISC), is a non-departmental public body which supports post-16 and HE in the use of ICT in learning, teaching, research, and administration.

promulgated during the analysis timeframe, a full analysis of this extensive corpus was not deemed feasible in the context of the current study.

## **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis, the analysis of discourse, is carried out across a range of disciplines, via a diverse range of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Schiffrin et al. 2001; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Wodak and Meyer 2009). This study employs a particular approach to discourse analysis, CDA. CDA is an emerging methodological approach to education research generally (Rogers 2011), and more specifically in relation to HE policy analysis (Hyatt 2013; Martínez-Alemán 2015). CDA has its roots in the Critical research paradigm (Critical theory). Critical theory is an umbrella term that encompasses a broad range of approaches to social sciences research that aim to expose, critique, and ultimately overcome sources of oppression. Thus, the purpose of critical inquiry is not only to understand or explain social situations and phenomena, but also to transform them. This transformative aspiration is a key distinguishing feature between Critical theory and paradigms such as Positivism and Postpositivism (which – in general – aim to explain, predict, and control phenomena) and Constructivism (which – in general – aims to understand and reconstruct existing constructions) (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Sherman 2003). In line with this, CDA aims to address “social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them.” (Fairclough 2010: 11). Moreover, a central tenet of CDA is an understanding that discourse can reinforce and perpetuate hegemonic structures of power (Foucault 1980). Furthermore, as Taylor (2004: 426) points out, CDA is particularly suited to policy analysis since it “provides a framework for a *systematic* analysis – researchers can go beyond speculation and demonstrate how policy texts work” [emphasis in original].

CDA is by no means a homogeneous school with a united approach to its research. Bloor and Bloor (2007: 4) point out that it is “difficult to define the boundaries of CDA as a discipline”, while according to Van Dijk (2001: 353), “CDA is not a specific direction of research”. Indeed, CDA encompasses a diverse range of approaches which differ in their theoretical frameworks and methods (Wodak and Meyer 2009; Tenorio 2011). The *Discourse Historical approach* is grounded in the Bernsteinian tradition, and in the work of Jürgen Habermas, and attempts to expose where language and other semiotic practices are employed in order to maintain domination or power (Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Tenorio 2011; Wodak 2011). *Dispositive Analysis* considers texts from a Foucauldian perspective (Jager and Maier 2009). *Sociocognitive approaches* examine discourse at the sociocognitive interface, that is, “the relations between mind, discursive interaction and society” (Van Dijk

2009: 65). The approach taken in this dissertation is most closely allied to Fairclough's *Dialectical-Relational* approach, which is focused on the relationship between language, ideology, and power (Fairclough 2009; Fairclough 2010). This approach is well-aligned with the purpose of this dissertation, which is to interrogate and critique the ideologies and assumptions underpinning e-learning policy in order to expose contradictions, inconsistencies, omissions, and hegemonies, and ultimately to identify areas for action in my professional practice.

## **Method**

I analysed the thirteen policy texts via two critical lenses. First, I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) *Phases of Thematic Analysis* (Appendix B) in order to identify, categorise, and refine themes recurring across the corpus. The qualitative data analysis software Nvivo was used to code and organise instances of each theme. Whilst critically reading and analysing the texts, I assigned instances of each theme to either a pre-existing, or new category. The initially large number of themes was then reviewed, refined, and consolidated. The distilled themes were then clustered (Miles et al. 2014) around three overarching 'Master narratives' (Jessop 2004; Fairclough 2006): *Marketisation*, *Instrumentality*, and *Modernisation*. A full list of the themes falling under each master narrative is provided in Appendix C. It is important to note that the three master narratives are intended as an organisational framework in order to present and critique the themes in a coherent way. There are many overlaps and unidirectional relationships between the narratives and themes; indeed, alternative organisational frameworks and nomenclature for describing them are possible. For instance, particularly when referring to New Labour, some commentators, such as Whitfield (2006), consider the marketisation of public services to be part of New Labour's modernisation project. Others, for example Shattock (2008) see marketisation and modernisation as elements of New Public Management (NPM). In my analysis I consider marketisation and modernisation as separate, but interrelated, narratives. In particular, my conceptualisation of modernisation places much, although not all, of its emphasis on the drive to reform HE via technology.

E-learning policy may be considered to be a means through which particular ideologies are presented, reified, and reproduced. Following my thematic analysis I undertook an 'Ideology critique' of each of the three master narratives and the themes falling under them. Ideology critique is the predominant form of critique associated with both Critical theory (Held 1980) and CDA (Fairclough 1995a; Fairclough 2010). Originally a Marxist concept, ideology critique was revised and further developed by the first generation Frankfurt School (Marcuse

1964; Horkheimer 1972; Adorno 1973), and subsequently by Habermas (1985a; 1985b). In this context, ideologies may be understood as sets of doctrines, beliefs, ideas, or values that are presented as implicit, natural, or self-evident, despite their being shaped by particular social, cultural, and political interests. Ideological beliefs and ideas may be employed in order to implicitly or explicitly justify ideas or actions, by presenting them as being inherently neutral, certain, natural, or commonsensical, and exempt from criticism; by implication other viewpoints or interpretations may be marginalised (Held 1980; Buchanan 2010). Ideology critique thus “assesses an object in terms of its own standards and ideals” (Held 1980: 106). In doing so, it aims to highlight contradictions and inconsistencies, as well as to uncover the social, cultural, and political motivations underpinning ideological claims (Held 1980; Friesen 2009). There is no set method for carrying out ideology critique (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). In conducting my analysis, I utilised Friesen’s (2009: 178) approach as a guiding framework:

1. Identify ideas or claims that are presented as obvious, inevitable, or matter-of-fact in dominant bodies or sources of knowledge;
2. Scrutinize these ideas or claims in the context provided in other, often marginal knowledge forms or sources;
3. Reveal through this scrutiny that behind dominant claims and ideas lay one or more politically charged and often contradictory ways of understanding the issue or phenomenon in question; and
4. Use this underlying conflict as the basis for developing alternative forms of understanding and point to concrete possibilities for action.

As well as considering what was included in the texts, I also examined what was omitted. In particular, I looked for indications of conceptions of education framed by alternative ideologies by searching for evidence of discussion relating to education’s role with respect to citizenship, community, democracy, interculturality, environmental sustainability, and culture.

In my second mode of analysis I examined the policies as individual texts, and as sets of texts relating to the development of e-learning policies in particular contexts. CDA sees the wider context as essential to understanding a text (Bloor and Bloor 2007; Van Dijk 2008). My critique, therefore, considered each text within its historical and socio-economic context. I also examined the extent to which the aforementioned neoliberal narratives were evident over time, and across the three jurisdictions considered.

The way that policy is communicated and presented is often as important as what is being articulated (Barnett 2000). Indeed, ideologies can be both enacted and obscured via language choices (Jones and Stilwell Peccei 2004; Bloor and Bloor 2007; Henriksen 2011). In particular, policy discourse is frequently ‘rhetorical’, that is to say, it is intended to persuade and influence (Fahnestock 2011; Henriksen 2011; Atkins et al. 2014). My analysis, therefore, paid particular attention to the impact of the use of rhetorical techniques, lexical choices, as well as presentational, structural, and narrative devices. Although textual discourse is the main focus of this study, visual semiosis is also an important aspect of discourse (Fairclough 2010; Bloor and Bloor 2007; Wang 2014) and was therefore considered where relevant.

### **Ethical considerations**

All of the documents analysed are freely available in the public domain, thus ethical approval was not deemed to be necessary. In situating my work within the critical research paradigm, I acknowledge that my own values, perspectives, and biases regarding the research questions cannot be separated from, and have thus impacted on both my approach to the enquiry, and on the study’s outcomes. As Bloor and Bloor (2007: 4) put it:

Critical discourse analysts do not attempt the type of objectivity that is sometimes claimed by scientists or linguists, but recognize that such objectivity is likely to be impossible because of the nature of their experience. Instead they are critical of and open about their own position.

Indeed, since discourses are contextual, they can be variously interpreted (Fairclough 1995b; McGregor 2004). My use of ‘I’ in this dissertation is a conscious decision that is aimed at ensuring that I take ownership of my discourse, rather than trying to make it appear to be ‘popularly owned’, which as I will argue, seems to be the case in some of the policies analysed.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented my conceptual framework, set out the context for the study, and outlined my methodology. I attested that, despite it being the dominant ideology driving policy-making worldwide, neoliberalism is a problematic ideology that is adversely impacting on HE. I also highlighted the dearth of critical commentary on e-learning policy and the impacts of the same. I presented my definition of e-learning, defined the scope of the study, and noted its limitations. Following on from that, I justified my rationale for electing to utilise CDA as my method, discussed the two critical lenses through which I critically interrogated the policies, and highlighted relevant ethical considerations.

In order to contextualise my argument further, in the next chapter, I juxtapose the emergence, and overall demise, of e-learning policy in the UK against the growth of neoliberal policy across England, Wales, and Scotland.

# **CHAPTER 3: The Rise and Demise of e-Learning Policy in UK Higher Education**

## **Introduction**

Most commentaries on education and technology tend to focus on the future (Losh 2014). Yet it is essential to frame discussions about e-learning within a historical perspective (Selwyn 2014), not least because “the future of ed-tech” is shaped by the “history of ed-tech” (Watters 2014: 3). Furthermore, as Tapper (2007: 4) asserts, HE policy should be analysed “with reference to the wider debates that have surrounded the delivery of British public policy”. Indeed, while my analysis pertains to the decade spanning 2003 to 2013, this period in the history of e-learning policy did not emerge in isolation, and cannot be separated from the wider historical and socio-political context. In this chapter, I situate the rise, and ultimate demise, of e-learning policy against the backdrop of the emergence of neoliberalism in the UK, under the guises of ‘Thatcherism’, ‘The Third Way’, and ‘Cameronism’. As noted in the last chapter, discussions of UK e-learning policy tend to be Anglo-centric. My discussion, therefore, also considers relevant contextual variations across England, Wales, and Scotland.

## **The Conservative party’s ‘Neoconservatism’**

The election in 1979 of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Government was a key turning point in UK politics. Thatcher’s neoliberalism (popularly referred to as ‘Thatcherism’) incorporated elements of traditional conservative agendas, and has thus been alternatively referred to as ‘neoconservatism’ (Harvey 2005; Steger and Roy 2010). A defining tenet of Thatcherism was its “neoliberal privatization drive” (Steger and Roy 2010: 41). From the 1980s onwards, various theretofore publicly owned sectors of the economy were sold or privatised (Harvey 2005; Steger and Roy 2010). The Conservatives also sought to apply the economic principles of neoliberalism to the public sector, emphasising “cost reduction, privatisation and deregulation” and promoting “new forms of public management” (Jones 2003: 107). Somewhat paradoxically, given neoliberal ideology’s emphasis on the supremacy of the free market – but not atypical of neoliberal regimes in practice – the conservatives retained tight control over the public sector, resulting in “a form of governance in which market principles were advanced at the same time as central authority was strengthened” (Jones 2003: 107).

### ***The Conservatives and HE***

The Conservatives outlined their vision for HE in the Green Paper *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s* noting that “it is vital for our higher education to contribute more effectively to the improvement of the performance of our economy” and asserting that universities should be “concerned with attitudes to the world outside higher education, and in particular to industry and commerce” (DES 1985: 4). Despite implementing various reforms aimed at pushing HE into the realm of the market, overall, the Thatcher and Major governments were not as successful as they might have wished in applying neoliberal principles to HE, perhaps in part due to the “entrenched and sometimes traditional upper-middle-class attitudes of [their] core supporters” (Harvey 2005: 61).

### ***The Conservatives and e-learning***

The Conservatives were the first UK government to “give the computer sustained attention” (Selwyn 2002c: 25). They considered technology key to economic growth, and wanted to ensure that the UK did not continue to lag behind Japan and the USA in the burgeoning ICT industries (Kline 2006). The Conservatives also identified a role for technology in enabling their plans for educational reform. Although their initial policy focus was mainly on schools, by the mid-1980s the idea that ICT could improve learning was embedded into government discourse (Selwyn 2002b). In 1989, the Conservatives made the first notable investments into e-learning in UK HE, via the Computers in Teaching Initiative (CTI) (1989-1999), and the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP) (1992-1998). An additional significant milestone during the Conservative’s term was the establishment in 1993 of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), latterly rebranded simply as ‘Jisc’, a non-departmental public body responsible for supporting FE and HE in the use of ICT, which would become a key gatekeeper for the funding for e-learning initiatives in UK HE.

### **New Labour’s ‘Third Way’**

In 1997 a landslide victory by the Labour Party, rebranded as ‘New Labour’ and led by Tony Blair, brought the Conservative’s 18 year reign to an end. A significant development early on in Blair’s government was the devolution of powers to the UK’s constituent jurisdictions. The discussion that follows relates predominantly to the English context; parallel developments in Wales and Scotland are discussed later.

Although Blair was the face and voice of the rebranded party, the emergence of New Labour was the result of gradual and incremental changes that had begun under his predecessors in the 1980s and 1990s. While Labour had theretofore ostensibly been a left of centre, socialist party, New Labour “had to deal with the world as it found it, not with the world in a form it

would have preferred” (Chadwick and Heffernan 2003: 8). Also shaping New Labour’s approach was the Conservatives’ legacy (Lunt 2008) as well as wider global trends towards neoliberal governance (Chadwick and Heffernan 2003; Finlayson 2003).

Blair’s politics were highly influenced by the ‘Third Way’ policies proposed by economist Anthony Giddens (1998). New Labour claimed that The Third Way was a new politics that transcended the democratic socialism traditionally associated with the left (‘the First Way’) and the neo-conservatism of the right (‘the Second Way’). Despite being heralded as a new political direction, the Third Way has been described as essentially being a continuation of the Conservative Party’s neoliberalism, albeit one that attempted to retain elements of the democratic socialism traditionally associated with ‘Old Labour’ (Hay 1999; Fairclough 2000; Prabhakar 2011). As such, the Third Way is fraught with contradictions. Particularly problematic are its attempts to reconcile what are often ostensibly antagonistic values and goals (Fairclough 2000; Harvey 2005). As will be demonstrated in chapters 4-7, these ideological contradictions extend to the discourse of New Labour, and are frequently evident across the policies analysed.

As Fairclough (2000) observes, the Third Way was in a constant state of flux, continually being constituted and reconstituted. Notwithstanding this, New Labour’s core values remained relatively consistent throughout their time in government (Atkins 2011). Key policy themes relevant to this dissertation are: ‘globalisation’; the establishment of a ‘strong civil society’; the ‘modernisation’ of government and the public sector; and the endorsement of free-market capitalism and the marketisation of the public sector, while retaining active government.

The discourse of globalisation has become a hegemonic ‘grand narrative’ (Bourdieu 1998; Scholte 2005; Munck 2006). Yet, despite its ubiquity in contemporary discourse, globalisation incites controversy (Munck 2006; Robertson and White 2007; Dicken 2011), to the extent that “the only consensus about globalization is that it is contested” (Scholte 2005: 46). The Third Way was framed by a specific and narrow conception of globalisation as a “non-negotiable external economic constraint” that circumscribed “both political possibility and political choice” (Watson and Hay 2003: 290). New Labour appropriated concerns about the need for national competitiveness as a way of “providing its globalisation discourse with a popular political resonance” (Watson and Hay 2003: 308). Thus, across the discourse of New Labour, globalisation is framed as an irrefutable ‘fact’ that presents both a threat and an opportunity to the UK (Watson and Hay 2003; Fairclough 2006; Green 2010; Atkins 2011).

A key priority for New Labour was the development of a “Strong civil society embracing rights and responsibilities where the government is a partner to strong communities” (Blair 1998: 7). Fundamental to this aspect of New Labour’s ethos was ‘equality of opportunity’, which set the context for a core discourse of the Third Way: reciprocal ‘rights and responsibilities’ (Buckler 2007; Atkins 2011). Following on from this, ‘poverty’ was reframed as ‘social exclusion’ (Fairclough 2000). Whereas ‘Old Labour’ had placed their emphasis on the eradication of poverty via the redistribution of wealth and resources, for the new regimen social exclusion was deemed to be a direct result of a lack of opportunity, and could be ‘solved’ by engaging people in education and training, thus both encouraging them to become more self-reliant, as well as facilitating ‘social mobility’. In this context an individual who failed to “keep their side of the contract, either by refusing to act responsibly or by rejecting the opportunities offered to them, was deemed to have relinquished their stake in the community, and thus was described as socially excluded” (Atkins 2011: 88).

The rhetoric of ‘modernisation’ was fundamental to the Third Way (Finlayson 2003), and is implicit in the party’s reincarnation as New Labour. Modernisation can be seen in part as an attempt to distance the rebranded party from the regimes of previous and opposition parties, which are juxtaposed as old and outdated (Fairclough 2000; Finlayson 2003; Atkins 2011). Despite its ubiquity, like much of New Labour’s rhetoric, the meaning of modernisation is by no means stable. In general terms, however, modernisation can be seen to encompass the reform and transformation of public services (including education) placing emphasis on: efficiency; ‘joined-up’ government; choice and consumer-driven service delivery; public-private partnerships; accountability; quality; and decentralisation. See, for example, *Modernising Government* (Cabinet Office 1999), and *Transformational Government - Enabled by Technology* (Cabinet Office 2005).

Perhaps the most significant distinction between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Labour was the latter’s endorsement of free-market capitalism and the marketisation of the public sector. Whereas Old Labour had “defined its role as managing the economy by using the state to regulate a market deemed incapable of self regulation”, New Labour embraced the neoliberal viewpoint that the free market is the most efficient mechanism for allocating resources (Chadwick and Heffernan 2003: 8). Indeed, New Labour’s neoliberal reforms of public services and the welfare state went much further than the reforms implemented by the Thatcher and Major governments in the 1980s and 1990s (Whitfield 2006).

### *New Labour and HE*

The publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) was a significant turning point for UK HE, and set the agenda for the neoliberal reforms of the system implemented by New Labour and their successors. Although commissioned under Major's government, the NCIHE had bipartisan support (NCIHE 1997), and its membership included several New Labour supporters (Scott 1997). While the Dearing report retained an emphasis on HE's role as a public good, it also made it clear that going forward, HE would have a major remit in achieving economic prosperity in a competitive global context, and stressed that this would require expansion of the system while reducing costs. A key recommendation was that while the state should continue to subsidise HE, graduates should also contribute to the cost of their education (NCIHE 1997). New Labour's response to the report (DfEE 1998) was generally supportive of the NCIHE's recommendations, and in 1998 the government introduced tuition fees and replaced maintenance grants with loans across the whole of the UK. The introduction of fees led to a concern that the costs now incurred would further discourage those from lower income families from participating in HE, and led to a policy emphasis on widening participation (Gallacher and Raffe 2012).

New Labour's first White Paper on HE *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003c) stressed that the system must "maintain and improve high standards, expand and widen access, strengthen links with business, and compete globally" (DfES 2003c: 5). Three years later, the Leitch review of skills, *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy - World Class Skills*<sup>13</sup> was commissioned by the government in order to identify the UK's "optimal skills mix in order to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice" (Leitch 2006: 2). In his Foreword, Lord Leitch unapologetically proclaimed that "'Economically valuable skills' is our mantra" (Leitch 2006: 2). In 2009, a second White Paper *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* cemented New Labour's prioritisation of HE's instrumental role. The strategy sets out the government's intention to ensure that the HE system delivered "the higher skills that the economy needs" (BIS 2009: 40). The paper also stressed that universities needed to become "more efficient and effective" (BIS 2009: 4). Students are framed as "the most important clients of higher education", and as such it is asserted that their "choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping the

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<sup>13</sup> Henceforth the Leitch Review.

courses universities provide and in encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service” (BIS 2009: 70).

### ***New Labour and e-learning***

During their early years in government at least, New Labour “made an unprecedented and sustained political commitment to technology in education” (Selwyn 2008: 704). Blair’s government spearheaded numerous initiatives partly or wholly aimed at embedding e-learning across the UK’s education and skills sectors, including the National Grid for learning (NGfL) (1997); the establishment of Becta (1998); and the formation of UK eUniversities Worldwide Limited (UKeU) (2000). E-learning was highlighted as a priority in both of New Labour’s White Papers on HE: *The Future of Higher Education* stressed that it is “important that opportunities for part-time and flexible study, including e-learning, continue to increase” (DfES 2003c: 63), while *Higher Ambitions* emphasised the need to “empower our universities to be world leaders in the growing market in transnational education based on e-learning” (BIS 2009: 20). It is perhaps no coincidence then that the period from 2003-2009 was the most intensive time for the publication of e-learning policy in the UK.

### **The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition’s ‘Cameronism’**

The 2010 general election resulted in a hung parliament. Negotiations amongst the three main parties eventually led to the establishment of a coalition government led by the Conservative’s David Cameron, with the Liberal Democrat’s leader Nick Clegg as his deputy. What has popularly come to be known as ‘Cameronism’ has been described as a continuation of neoliberalism (Hall 2011; Kerr et al. 2011). Indeed, the legacy the Third Way is evident in much of the Coalition’s rhetoric and policies (Prabhakar 2011; Hayton and McEnhill 2014). The economic context was one of global recession, with the UK facing a crisis in its public finances. Immediately following their formation the Coalition made it clear that their key priority was “deficit reduction, and continuing to ensure economic recovery” (HM Government 2010: 15). In short, the Coalition’s strategy for fiscal austerity was to reduce the deficit by radically decreasing public spending. While much of their emphasis was on austerity, the Coalition also continued the trajectory of modernisation and reform initiated by New Labour (Byrne et al. 2012; Hayton and McEnhill 2014), along with promoting the – rather nebulous – concept of the ‘Big Society’, which promoted the third sector and community involvement in societal issues in preference to government intervention (MacLeavy 2011; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Burton 2013).

### ***The Coalition and HE***

In 2009 Labour commissioned a review of the future funding of English HE, chaired by Lord Browne of Madingley, former chief executive of BP. The controversial proposals detailed in *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education an Independent Review of Higher Education Funding & Student Finance*<sup>14</sup>, were unashamedly “designed to create genuine competition for students between HEIs” (Browne 2010: 8). The report advised that student fees be increased; recommended that private providers should be permitted to enter the HE ‘market’; foregrounded the need for student choice; and proposed mechanisms to make institutions more accountable. Browne’s recommendations were broadly accepted by the Coalition and were incorporated into the White Paper, *Higher Education - Students at the Heart of the system* (BIS 2011). The resulting program of neoliberal reforms have been described as radical and far-reaching in terms of their potential to detrimentally impact on English, and ultimately UK, HE (Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013; Scott and Callender 2013; Giroux 2014).

### ***The Coalition and e-learning***

While e-learning was a central theme in New Labour’s policies for education and skills, by contrast, e-learning was clearly not a priority from the Coalition. Writing about the schools sector, Selwyn (2011d: 396-402) notes that the Coalition’s “sustained withdrawal of state support for digital technology” has been “as dramatic as New Labour’s embracing of the area in their first year of office”. Indeed, after just a fortnight in power Cameron’s government announced the closure of Becta, a move that was estimated to save £80 million in the short term, but at the cost of 240 jobs and at possible financial cost over the longer term (Becta claimed a track record of generating cost savings) (Arthur 2010). Although the most recent iteration of the Government’s cross-sectoral e-learning strategy (Becta 2008) was intended to last until 2014, the change of government sent the strategy “into abeyance” (Bacsich and Pepler 2014: 9). Similarly, while HEFCE’s e-learning strategy was intended to remain active until 2015, the strategy was to “fade into irrelevance” (Bacsich and Pepler 2014: 9). In 2011, *Collaborate to compete*, the report of the Online Learning Taskforce (OLTF) established by HEFCE under New Labour was published (HEFCE 2011). However, it soon became apparent that the Coalition did not intend to fund the OLTF’s recommendations (Bacsich and Pepler 2014). The Coalition’s draw back from educational technology was not necessarily due to them being opposed to e-learning. As well as wishing

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<sup>14</sup> Henceforth the Browne Review.

to be seen as implementing austerity measures, the Cameron government may have wanted to distance themselves from New Labour's flagship e-learning initiatives. As Selwyn (2011d: 402) puts it "the Coalition were perhaps best advised to quietly move on from educational technology as a politically "spent" area of activity". More recently, there has been some renewed interest in e-learning via HEFCE's *Changing the Landscape programme* (2015); however, documentation relating to this initiative was beyond the scope of the current study.

The discussion heretofore has considered the UK and English contexts. In the following sections I outline socio-political contexts for HE policy-making in Wales and Scotland, and chart the emergence of e-learning policy in the two countries.

## **Wales**

Wales has a historical tradition of electing left wing and social democratic MPs. Welsh Labour in particular has a long history of support, and has been the largest party in the Welsh Assembly since devolution, where it has variously held power both as a single party government, and as the dominant party in coalition. This social democratic tradition extends to the other two main parties, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, and is evident in "the largely smooth running" of the coalition governments (Rees 2011: 61). The Conservatives' privatisation of state-owned industries and public services had a particularly detrimental impact on Wales' economy during the 1980s and 1990s, which had been based around the steel and coal industries, as well as the public sector and resulted in widespread unemployment and lowered earnings (McConnell 2000). Wales has traditionally, and continues to, aspire to collaborative, participatory and transparent approaches to policy-making (Rees 2011). Post devolution, Welsh Labour was keen to emphasise the 'clear red water' between the Labour governments in Cardiff and in London (Drakeford 2005; Reynolds 2008; Davies and Williams 2009), particularly in relation to their rejection of New Labour's "market approach to public services" (Morgan 2002: para. 29). Notwithstanding this, as Wynne-Jones (2010) notes, neoliberal directives are increasingly evident in the discourses of Welsh government.

### ***Welsh HE***

Prior to devolution Wales' education system was almost identical to, and was in many respects integrated with, England's (Hodgson et al. 2011; Bruce 2012; Evans 2015). Post devolution there have been divergences in the pre-school, schools, and 14-19 sectors aimed at developing a distinctive education system rooted in the Welsh social democratic tradition (Reynolds 2008; Andrews 2014). Despite this, much of the organisation, funding, and

operation of Welsh HE has continued to mirror the English model (Rees and Taylor 2006; Keep et al. 2010). There have been some areas of difference, including an emphasis on the promotion of institutional collaboration, and the encouragement of the use of the Welsh language as a teaching medium (Reynolds 2008; Trench 2008; Bruce 2012). The most notable divergence however has been Wales' commitment to the financial support of students (Trench 2008; Rees 2011), with the Welsh Government's perspective on tuition fees setting the tone for "a combative relationship with Westminster" (Evans 2015: 43). Despite the government's claimed preference for provision of state-funded HE, Wales has now transitioned to a partly-student funded model.

The need for HE to contribute to economic expansion and social cohesion was stressed across various policy documents just prior to and during the analysis timeframe, including the economic strategies *A Winning Wales* (WAG 2002b); and *Wales: A Vibrant Economy* (WAG 2005), as well as the Skills strategies *The Skills Employment Action Plan* (WAG 2004b); *Skills That Work for Wales* (WAG 2008b); and *The Learning Country* (WAG 2008a). These priorities are also foregrounded in the HE strategies, *Reaching Higher* (WAG 2002a); and *For Our Future: The 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales* (WAG 2009).

### ***E-learning in Wales***

From the 2000s onwards the Welsh government identified e-learning as having a pivotal role to play in achieving their priorities for growing the economy and addressing social exclusion across various government papers and policies relating to economic strategy, lifelong learning, and skills. *The Learning Country* identifies e-learning as a mechanism "to remove physical, geographic and linguistic barriers, and to combat social exclusion" (National Assembly for Wales 2001: 41) and emphasises the need for Welsh HE to be wary of "increasing competition from institutions in England, and from e-learning developments" (National Assembly for Wales 2001: 57). E-learning is also foregrounded as a priority in the Government's *Information Age Strategic Framework* (WAG 2001); *A Winning Wales* (WAG 2002b); The National Council of Education and Training for Wales (National Council-ELWa)'s *Corporate plan 2002-2005* (ELWa 2002); and the HE strategy, *Reaching Higher* (WAG 2002a).

In 2003, the Welsh government issued a cross-sectoral e-learning strategy consultation paper *An E-learning Strategy for Wales* (ELWa 2003b). A summary analysis of feedback provided by respondents to the consultation was reported in 2004 (WAG 2004a); however it does not seem that a final version of the strategy was ever published. In 2007, HEFCW issued their

own e-learning consultation (HEFCW 2007) and published their strategy, *Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through Technology: a Strategy for Higher Education in Wales* (HEFCW 2008), the following year. An update to the strategy was published in 2014 (HEFCW 2014); analysis of this document was outside the scope of the current study.

## **Scotland**

Of the UK's devolved nations, Scotland has historically had the greatest degree of independence from Westminster. This is coupled with a strong sense of social, cultural, and linguistic identity (McConnell 2000). Like Wales, the Scottish electorate has historically tended to elect centre-left, social democratic parties. Prior to devolution the market-driven policies of the Conservative party were met with resistance, in part due to Scotland's much stronger reliance on public spending (McConnell 2000). Following devolution, a Scottish Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition was elected into government and remained in power until the 2007 election of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Policy making in Scotland has traditionally taken a less market orientated and politically driven approach than in England (Keating 2005; Trench 2008; Hodgson et al. 2011; Bruce 2012). More recently, although Scotland has, ideologically at least, retained a commitment to social democratic governance (Scott and Mooney 2009) there has been an overall shift towards neoliberal modes of governance (Davidson et al. 2010).

### ***Scottish HE***

Scottish HE has some distinct features that predate devolution: the four-year degree; blurred boundaries between the FE and HE sectors; higher participation rates than the rest of the UK; and a tradition of cohesiveness and cooperation, facilitated by the country's small number of HEIs (Soden 2003; Humes and Bryce 2013). Post-compulsory education has also traditionally been regarded as an important aspect of national identity, and while education's economic role has certainly been to the fore, there has historically been a strong emphasis on education as a means of personal fulfilment and as an expression of the Scottish 'democratic intellect' (Humes and Bryce 2013). As with Wales, the most significant divergence from England post devolution was in relation to funding. Whereas there has been a steady move towards student-funded education in England, Scotland has – to date at least – retained a primarily government-funded system. Notwithstanding this, in line with the rest of the UK, there has been an overall shift toward instrumentally-focused and market-orientated provision of HE in Scotland, albeit with a retained, but diluted, focus on education's social and cultural functions (Trench 2008; Lowe and Gayle 2011; Humes 2013; Bruce 2015). During the first two terms of the Scottish Parliament (1999-2007), the Scottish

Executive stressed the role of HE as a mechanism to promote upskilling and in enabling Scotland to participate in the global knowledge economy, but retained an emphasis on HE's role in relation to social justice and citizenship. In 2007, the SNP was elected into government. Although the Leitch Review (Leitch 2006) discussed earlier in this chapter was intended to cover the whole of the UK, the incoming SNP administration rejected the paper and instead published their own strategy *Skills for Scotland* (Scottish Government 2007). Whereas the Leitch Review had mainly focused on growing skills supply, the Scottish strategy by contrast places its emphasis on stimulating skills demand, and on promoting skills utilisation (Lowe and Gayle 2011; Gallacher and Raffe 2012). Latterly the White Paper *Putting Learners at the Centre* sets out the government's vision for a post-16 education system which "plays a central role in improving people's life chances, delivering the best outcomes for learners; [...] and which maximises its contribution to sustainable economic growth" (Scottish Government 2011: 5).

### ***E-learning in Scotland***

From the 2000s onwards, e-learning began to emerge as a priority for the Scottish Government. The *Final Report on Lifelong Learning* noted that "e-learning can help remove barriers to accessing learning" (Scottish Parliament 2002: para. 54). The report also recommended that the Scottish Executive establish a Centre of Excellence in e-learning, and that the Enterprise Networks evaluate potential markets for e-learning. *Life Through Learning: Learning Through Life* further emphasised the importance of e-learning in supporting the government's aims to "improve the skills base, employability and enterprise of the people of Scotland" (Scottish Government 2003b: 2). The Government's interest in e-learning generated several developments across the education and training sectors, including continued investment into the NGfL Scotland (Established in 1998). Additionally, Scottish Enterprise<sup>15</sup> identified potential for Scotland to become a "global centre for the design, development and application of eLearning" (Scottish Enterprise 2004: 4), and made significant investments into e-learning, including a £2.3 million investment into the Interactive University, "an independent organisation set up to assist universities and colleges in Scotland to exploit the potential of e-learning" (Scottish Enterprise 2004: 6). Specifically in relation to HE, *A Framework for Higher Education in Scotland* stressed that "HEIs need to exploit further the potential of e-learning" and directed SHEFC to "support and encourage the sustainable development of e-learning" (Scottish Executive 2003:31). In 2003 the *Joint*

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<sup>15</sup> Scotland's main economic development agency, funded by the Scottish Government.

*SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group: Final Report* (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003) was issued by the SFC's predecessors the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), followed by two updates to the strategy, SFC (2006a) and SFC (2007). Following the publication of the strategy and its updates, as a government policy priority, e-learning appeared to vanish from Scotland. Indeed, the isolated reference in *Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy* suggested that e-learning had been ticked off the government's 'to do list': "thanks to wider use of technology and e-learning, barriers of geography and rurality have been reduced" (Scottish Government 2007: 8). Neither of the *Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities'* (JFTTU) reports (JFTTU 2008a; JFTTU 2008b) refer to e-learning. Neither does *Building a Smarter Future Towards a Sustainable Scottish Solution for the Future of Higher Education* (Scottish Government 2010a); nor the *Skills Strategy - Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth* (Scottish Government 2010b). An exception is *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education* (Scottish Government 2011) which identified a role for e-learning in widening access, accommodating growing student numbers, and enhancing student choice. However there is no reference to e-learning in the *SFC's Corporate Plan 2009-12* (SFC 2009) or *Strategic Plan 2012-15* (SFC 2012) and there is no recent information regarding e-learning on the SFC's website.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has set the scene for my ideology critique and CDA of the policies, by charting the rise, and latterly the demise, of e-learning policy in UK HE against the backdrop of the growth of neoliberal economic and social policy across England, Wales, and Scotland. Since the 1980s, UK HE policy has been increasingly linked to government priorities for economic expansion and addressing social exclusion, and from the 2000s onwards e-learning has been charged with supporting the fulfilment of these goals. Between 2003 and 2009, an avalanche of e-learning policies was issued by the UK's governments and by non-departmental public bodies; subsequently the publication of dedicated e-learning policies tailed off.

The next three chapters present my 'Ideology critique' (Held 1980) of the three master narratives underpinning the text:

- Chapter 4 unpicks the narrative of *Marketisation*, the assumption that the free market is the most appropriate mechanism for funding and organising HE.

- Chapter 5 discusses the narrative of *Instrumentality*, which frames HE as having a primarily utilitarian purpose, concerned with growing the economy, and as the key to individual employability, wealth, and success.
- Chapter 6 critiques the narrative of *Modernisation*, the incessant pursuit of HE reform, often manifest via the application of technology.

## CHAPTER 4: Marketisation

### Introduction

This chapter presents my ideology critique of the first of the three neoliberal narratives underpinning the policies analysed: *Marketisation*. Neoliberalism is predicated on three fundamental assumptions about the role and functioning of markets. First, it is purported that the free market is the most appropriate mechanism for organising all aspects of human life. Second, markets are claimed to be self-regulating. Under this assumption, state intervention in the operation of markets should be minimised; instead, the government's role is to foster conditions that allow markets to operate at their optimum level. Third, individuals are assumed to be self-interested and rational economic actors. Overall, neoliberal ideology promises that open economies and global free trade simultaneously increase efficiency, improve quality, and widen consumer choice (Friedman 1962).

Until the 1980s, a tacit 'contract' existed between HE and society. Universities were predominantly publically funded and enjoyed a high level of autonomy, and in return produced public goods in the form of new knowledge and educated citizens (Brown 2011; Williams 2013). Under successive neoliberal regimes the UK's HE system has been increasingly placed within the realm of the market. Public funding for HE has been slashed and HEIs are now increasingly financed via student fees and private revenue streams (Brown 2011; Molesworth et al. 2011; Williams 2013). Whereas classical neoliberal doctrine considers government intervention to be at variance with the proper operation of the market, the marketisation of UK HE has – somewhat paradoxically – been coupled with a growth in government regulation and intervention in HE (Brown 2011; Molesworth et al. 2011; Williams 2013).

A central tenet of my argument is that the application of market economics to HE is eroding its essential function as a public good and may be exacerbating inequalities in relation to participation. Furthermore, the current framing of e-learning as a mechanism for advancing the marketisation of HE, as articulated in the policies, is likely to be contributing to these detrimental impacts. In this chapter, I review the context for the marketisation of UK HE, explain how marketisation is manifest in practice, and discuss the negative impacts of marketisation on UK HE. I then demonstrate how e-learning is positioned across the policies as a key enabler of marketisation. As I will demonstrate, despite being heavily implicated in the marketisation of HE, much of the hype in relation to e-learning's role in this regard is overstated. I conclude by unpicking the specific, and often flawed, assertions made in the

policies in relation to e-learning's alleged capabilities for generating efficiencies and economies of scale, improving quality of education provision, and broadening choice.

### **The marketisation of UK HE: context and implementation**

A market is the exchange of goods and services between sellers and purchasers. In a 'free market', prices are set based on the interplay between supply and demand, without state intervention. Consumers choose between the various alternatives offered by sellers on the basis of price, availability, and quality, and sellers adjust their product based on purchasers' preferences (Dasgupta 2007; Belk 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013). The marketisation of HE is the application of market economic theory to HE (Brown 2011). This is not an entirely new phenomenon: there has been competition between the UK's universities since their inception (Dill et al. 2004; Teixeira et al. 2004b; Collini 2012) and HEIs have always engaged in commercial activities (Zemsky and Massy 2005; Brown 2011). What is new, however, is the increasing scale of marketisation, and the detrimental impact that it is having on the purpose, scope, and day-to-day operation of HE (Locke 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013; Giroux 2014).

Although critical commentaries on the marketisation of HE are plentiful and detailed, critical writings in support of the application of market mechanisms are by contrast more scarce, and tend to be less specific (Brown 2011). Nevertheless, claims about the purported benefits of a marketised HE system are widespread across government and policy discourse. It is asserted that market-based competition drives HEIs to become more efficient, innovative, and entrepreneurial; leads to a higher quality of research activity and education provision; generates better diversity of provision (and hence more student choice); and results in a better alignment between HE's 'outputs' (research and graduates) and the needs of the economy and society (Massy 2004; Teixeira et al. 2004b; Brown 2011; McGettigan 2013).

Due to various edicts on its operation (Brown and Carasso 2013), as well as the complex nature of the HE 'product' (McGettigan 2013; Williams 2013) the UK's HE system does not meet the conditions required to be considered to be true 'free market'. It is thus more accurately referred to as a 'quasi-market' (Brown 2011; Hemsley-Brown 2011; Williams 2013). This quasi-market is manifest in a number of ways. The first has been the introduction of approaches and practices traditionally associated with the organisation and management of business and industry (Teixeira et al. 2004b). This shift has been derived in part from the top-down influence of neoliberal policies, and also from the bottom-up, as universities attempt to adapt to pressures to simultaneously accommodate increasing student numbers and cope with reductions in government funding (Brown 2011; Molesworth et al. 2011).

Competition, both within and between institutions, is increasingly fundamental to academia, and HEIs are increasingly managed according to corporate models (Olssen and Peters 2005). As I will demonstrate, recurring leitmotifs across the corpus that are of particular relevance to this aspect of marketisation are the framing of students as ‘consumers’ of the HE ‘product’; the promotion of e-learning as a means to facilitate competitive provision of HE within an increasingly global market; the assumed potential for e-learning to create cost savings; the purported role of e-learning in increasing quality of provision; and the claim that e-learning generates greater customer choice. However, as I will demonstrate, these assertions are highly questionable.

A further manifestation of marketisation has been the growing privatisation of HE, evident in the emergence of private providers; the outsourcing of activities to the private sector; and the entry of private capital into the sector (Teixeira et al. 2004b; Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013). Across the corpus, e-learning is highly implicated in this problematic aspect of marketisation: first, due to the perceived ease with which new for profit providers can successfully enter and prosper in the global HE marketplace, and second, via the mounting emphasis on establishing e-learning-related partnerships between HE and commercial organisations.

### **The customer is always right? Meeting the demands of the student consumer**

A key manifestation of the marketisation of HE is the increasing framing of students as ‘consumers’ of the HE ‘product’ (Molesworth et al. 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013; Williams 2013; Giroux 2014). In line with this, across the corpus, students are presented as consumers with their needs and expectations repeatedly referenced:

[I]t is very important to place learning and learners (or, in other terms, markets and customers) at the heart of our thinking. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 11)

[T]he education and training system [needs] to become more demand-led, client focused and personalised. (Becta 2008: 28)

Technology needs to enhance student choice and meet or exceed learners’ expectations. (HEFCE 2011: 12)

The portrayal of the student as consumer accelerated during the analysis timeframe: while the Guardian newspaper made two references to students as consumers in 1998, this rose to 442 references in 2011 (Williams 2013). Although the increasing perception of the student as consumer can be partly attributed to rising tuition fees, as Williams (2013) reasons, the construction of the student-consumer is perhaps a more complex and multifaceted outcome

of wider social, cultural, and political changes. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in chapters 7, 8, and 9, the student as consumer is an enduring theme across the jurisdictions, despite the regional variances in policies on fees. The emergence of the student-consumer tends to be presented in the media, and in government policy, as a positive and inevitable development that casts students as empowered to influence their university experience (Williams 2011). Yet the framing of students as consumers is contributing to the erosion of HE as a public good (Molesworth et al. 2011; Williams 2013). Instead of presenting participation in HE as having both personal and public benefits (McMahon 2009), in line with the instrumental perspective on education that will be discussed in the next chapter, the emphasis is on the individual, with HE framed as a financial investment in oneself with a view to reaping financial rewards and facilitating social mobility, and for which students are entitled to value for money (Holmwood et al. 2011; Williams 2013). Moreover, although students may *think* they know what they want from their participation in HE, their perceived needs may not actually be in their own best interests, or the wider interests of society (Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013; Williams 2013). Additionally, a higher education differs from normal consumer goods since it hinges on the complex interaction between the student and his or her engagement with educational processes; it is thus highly problematic to frame education as a tangible commodity that can be bought and sold (Brown 2011; Collini 2012; Barnett 2013; Williams 2013). The drive to produce satisfied consumers may also be a contributing factor in reducing quality, by encouraging teaching staff to lower their intellectual demands on their students, and to instead focus on ‘entertainment education’ (Morley 2003; Williams 2011).

### **Competitive provision of HE to a global market: rhetoric versus reality**

The marketisation of HE has intensified pressure on HE providers to compete, not only locally, but also on a global scale. The neoliberal conception of HE as key “traded service” (Cable 2012: para. 13) is reflected across the policies, with e-learning presented as playing an essential role in opening up provision of UK HE to new markets:

The UK’s wider role in global education will mature as we realise that e-learning acknowledges no national boundaries. (DfES 2003d: 12)

The policies emphasise that the HE market will not be confined to traditional education providers. Transnational competition is also presented as a threat to UK HEIs, and is framed as an impetus for them to step up their game and become more competitive:

Global players (which may be universities, colleges, or commercial enterprises) will be an increasing fact of life. (ELWa 2003a: 6)

E-learning increases the potential for competition from on-line providers, nationally and internationally. (HEFCW 2007: 8)

Providers around the world [...] may well attract students away from UK institutions. (HEFCE 2011: 6)

The free market thesis purports that competition can simultaneously increase efficiency and drive up quality. Yet when imposed on HEIs it may have the opposite effect. Competition may generate new inefficiencies or create possible reductions in academic quality, as institutions divert resources away from academic endeavours towards activities such as administration, marketing, recruitment, and customer service (Brown 2011; McGettigan 2013; Williams 2013). Competition has also extended to the internal functioning and culture of universities, and is further contributing to the erosion of HE as a public good, as workloads increase, collegiality is damaged, and ‘economically valuable’ subjects and activities are prioritised (Stabile 2007; Brown and Carasso 2013; Williams 2013; Giroux 2014).

Notwithstanding e-learning’s role in contributing to the detrimental impacts of marketisation on HE, there are – somewhat paradoxically – many practical, cultural, and pedagogical issues that may make entry into, and participation in the global e-learning market less straightforward, and likely less successful, than is claimed in the policies. Although the Bologna process<sup>16</sup> has gone some way towards ensuring comparability of awards across Europe, there may be issues relating to recognition, accreditation, and transferability of UK qualifications further afield, limiting the actual potential for successful global provision. Indeed, the e-learning consortium Scottish Knowledge ran into problems in this regard when it attempted to market its course offerings in the USA, Asia, and the Middle East (Paulsen 2009). Moreover, many global e-learning ventures have failed due to overestimation of demand (Garrett 2004; Jokivirta 2006; Keegan et al. 2007; Bacsich 2010). Furthermore, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter, there is little evidence that e-learning can “achieve economies of scale and increase value for money” (DfES 2003d: 19); thus the same efficiencies that fail locally are also likely to fail at the global level (Fisher 2006).

As will be referred to repeatedly in this, and subsequent chapters, practical preconditions for participation in HE via e-learning include access to the appropriate technology as well as a reliable power source and internet connectivity. Yet these prerequisites may not be met in many parts of the world (World Bank 2013; ITU 2015), further limiting the actual potential

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<sup>16</sup> A series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries intended to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of HE qualifications.

for global course delivery. For example, although not exclusively intended as a for-profit initiative, a blended MSc programme in offered by DCU to students in Malawi ran into problems due to the lack of available hardware and internet infrastructure (Donaldson et al. 2014). (See Andersson 2008; Tedre et al. 2010; Bhuasiri et al. 2012 for further examples).

Cultural differences may have significant implications both for delivery on online learning to a global audience, and as will be shown in the next chapter, they are also of relevance in the context of the widening participation agenda within the UK. As will be elaborated on in chapter 6, technologies are not neutral, and instead embody particular values and ideologies (Heidegger 1977; Feenberg 1991). E-learning pedagogies and resources – like all teaching approaches and instructional materials – are therefore embedded with cultural biases that may disadvantage learners from outside the predominant culture (Ibarra 2000; Gunawardena et al. 2003; Venter 2003; Goodfellow and Hewling 2005; Smith and Ayers 2006; Al-Harthi 2005; Downey et al. 2005; Thompson and Ku 2005; Aljabre 2012). Furthermore, variations in cultural communication patterns can result in miscommunications or misunderstandings (Reeder et al. 2004) and can contribute to feelings of isolation or marginalisation (Mavor and Traynor 2003; Shattuck 2005). Language barriers for non-native speakers may be exacerbated when communicating online, and have been demonstrated to inhibit equal participation (Gunawardena et al. 2001; Kim and Bonk 2002; Chase et al. 2002; Ku and Lohr 2003; Shih and Cifuentes 2003; Reeder et al. 2004; Wong and Trinidad 2004; Thompson and Ku 2005; Zhao and McDougall 2008; Liu et al. 2010b). Moreover, differences in time zones may adversely affect the quality and continuity of dialogue (Wong and Trinidad 2004; Liu et al. 2010b; Ke and Kwak 2013).

Overall then, while it is alleged that e-learning can provide “learning products and services which are global in their scale and reach but relevant and appropriate to the needs and preferences of the individual learner” (ELWa 2003a: 1-2), there are significant practical and cultural issues that mean that such claims are incredibly hard to stand over.

### **Efficiency and cost savings**

The neoliberal thesis purports that free markets simultaneously increase efficiency and reduce costs. E-learning is linked to this claim in two ways. First, as has been discussed, e-learning is directly implicated in the increasing marketisation of HE, due to its claimed potential for opening up market-based provision of UK HE. Second, it is repeatedly pronounced that e-learning can “achieve economies of scale and increase value for money” (DfES 2003d: 19). These assertions need to be scrutinised. Leaving e-learning aside for a moment, it is difficult to empirically prove or disprove whether marketisation can improve

efficiency in HE. Massy (2004: 13) defines efficiency as “producing the right bundle of outputs given the needs and wants of stakeholders, and then minimising production cost for the given bundle”. But it is not possible to quantify the return on investment from HE, since it is impossible to establish a direct correlation between the outcomes of students’ learning and the investment made (Brown 2011; Collini 2012; McGettigan 2013). Furthermore, the aforementioned “right bundle of outputs” includes “goods that are valued by society but not captured by individuals’ demand functions” (Massy 2004: 13). Thus, although it could certainly be argued that marketisation has made UK HE more efficient and entrepreneurial, and has facilitated massive expansion in student numbers despite reductions in government funding, any apparent efficiency gains must be offset with the reductions in quality, equity, and diversity of the UK HE system (McMahon 2009; Brown 2011) as well as the detrimental impacts on HE’s societal role (Nussbaum 2010; Giroux 2014).

Further to the aforementioned general difficulties in relation to defining and measuring efficiency in the context of HE, bold pronouncements such as the following merit particular attention:

e-Learning also offers scope to achieve more efficient business processes. (SFC 2006a:7)

[W]here economies of scale can be achieved [Blended and online provision can] deliver capacity to meet greater demand. (Becta 2008: 16)

Online learning [...] if offered at scale, can deliver quality and cost-effectiveness. (HEFCE 2011: 2)

Fisher’s (2006) analytic line of reasoning provides a useful starting point for examining whether e-learning actually reduces costs. He outlines five ways in which e-learning is generally claimed to generate efficiencies: *Development* - whereby once built, e-learning tools and materials can serve as building blocks for further development; *Delivery* - whereby enrolments can be increased at little or no cost; *Labor savings* - whereby it is alleged that teaching costs can be reduced, or eliminated, by reducing contact time, ‘downsizing’ to adjunct instructors, and by automating grading and other administrative tasks; *Renewable use* - whereby content can be reused in different contexts, and thus reduce development costs; and *Low operating costs* - whereby once up and running, e-learning resources are cheap to maintain compared to physical resources. These five claims are evident across the policies. For example:

Once created, materials can be made available at all times, in many places, with very small marginal costs for each additional user. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 13)

E-learning programmes and materials are expensive to develop, but once they are available they can be accessed by large numbers of students with no additional cost [...]. Much online material is available free of charge [...] thus improving the quality of the learning experience at no additional development cost [...]. Communication is easily achieved electronically, with a saving of time and cost on traditional methods. (HEFCW 2007: 8)

Effective use of e-assessment technologies can provide efficiency and effectiveness improvements. (HEFCE 2009: 9)

[F]or-profit models of online provision have benefited from using a different staff structure to that of UK HE institutions, with freelance tutors focusing on facilitation, teaching and assessment. (HEFCE 2011: 19)

The argument for achieving economies of scale thus assumes that, once the preliminary fixed costs are out of the way, e-learning becomes cheaper to deliver over time. There are many problems with this idealised story however. The assertion that development costs will be eliminated over time does not tend to be borne out in practice: development technologies, aesthetic designs, and pedagogical approaches tend to have a relatively short ‘shelf life’, therefore there are costs incurred in sustaining and renewing them (Liber 2005; Jones et al. 2009; Nicholson and Nicholson 2010). The notion of renewable use is particularly promoted across the policies; yet as I will demonstrate later on in this chapter, there is scant evidence that significant efficiency gains can be achieved via reuse. In relation to efficiency in delivery, while it may be theoretically possible to significantly increase student numbers for a given course when it is delivered online (Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) being a case in point) these efficiency ‘gains’ may be offset by compromises in relation to quality (Fisher 2006; Brown and Carasso 2013). Indeed, MOOCs have been criticised for “high drop out rates and learner confusion and frustration” (Conole 2013: 2) (see also Hayes 2015). It is also unlikely that e-learning can achieve significant savings in relation to human resources, as Fisher (2006: 129-130) puts it:

When one adds up the number of persons needed to design, develop, deliver, support and sustain instructional technologies—not to mention the costs of licencing software, obtaining rights to intellectual property, and training faculty and staff—the comparable cost of the all-in-one faculty member found in traditional teaching environments begins to look far more attractive.

Overall then, according to Fisher’s (2006) line of argument there can be no guarantee that e-learning either becomes inexpensive over time, or is more cost effective than traditional modes of delivery.

Generating an accurate picture of the actual costs involved in developing, delivering, and maintaining e-learning is difficult. Further to the more general issues in relation to measuring

costs and efficiencies in HE already highlighted, there are some additional complications particular to e-learning. As has been noted already, due to obsolescence, e-learning tends to necessitate ongoing investment. Costing studies do not tend to take these long-term investment requirements into account however. Accurate costing is further complicated since e-learning in the UK is often employed in blended, rather than fully online contexts (Browne et al. 2008; Browne et al. 2010; Jenkins et al. 2014). Thus, it is often difficult to precisely determine the extent to which e-learning is employed across a particular course or programme (Garrett and MacLean 2004). Furthermore, costing studies on e-learning tend to employ different methods, making it difficult to compare the outcomes of studies or to make generalisations (Laurillard 2007b; Bacsich 2008). Notwithstanding the aforesaid issues, mirroring Fisher's (2006) theoretical argument, the limited number of studies which have attempted to cost e-learning initiatives tend to indicate that high quality e-learning may cost as much as, or even more than conventional face-to-face learning (Bates 2001; Boeke 2001; Carr 2001; Ryan 2002; Garrett and MacLean 2004; Spector 2005; Laurillard 2007b; Rumble 2008; Parry 2011; CFHE 2013; Delgaty 2013; Stotzer et al. 2013). The findings of a review of e-learning courses developed under the Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign (Twigg 2003) are a notable – and frequently cited – exception to this trend. However, it is significant that the study emphasises that cost reductions are particular to large-enrolment, introductory courses, while the ongoing costs incurred in maintaining e-learning do not appear to have been taken into account.

I have argued thus far that, overall, it is problematic to make generalised claims about e-learning's ability to reduce costs or generate efficiencies. Further to this, in what follows I critically analyse two recurring themes across the policies that are repeatedly presented in relation to cost saving: collaboration and partnerships, and reuse of digital teaching and learning resources.

### ***Collaboration and partnerships***

A key theme relating to marketisation running through the policies is an emphasis on the need to establish collaborations and partnerships, both among HE providers, and between HEIs and commercial organisations, since “through collaboration, institutions can achieve significant economies of scale” (HEFCE 2011: 5). Collaboration is also framed in *Collaborate to Compete* as a way for the UK's HEIs to present a united front in the global HE market:

Institutions in the UK may well be competing with each other for students, but they all share a responsibility for promoting UK HE as high quality, responsive and globally competitive. (HEFCE 2011: 6)

E-learning consortia often have commercial input, an approach that is encouraged across the policies:

e-learning technologies could lead to changes in the organisation of the delivery of learning, including an enhanced role for third party providers such as consortia of institutions or spin-off providers of specialist services or commercial organisations. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 4)

Collaboration should embrace and harness the strengths of diverse institutions and organisations, across public-private and sector divides. (HEFCE 2011: 16)

As will be discussed later in this chapter, the entry of private interests into HE should not go unquestioned, since it is another factor that is contributing to the increasingly instrumental framing of HE, as well as the erosion of HE's societal and cultural function.

An emphasis on collaboration is not unique to e-learning. Cross-institutional collaboration is increasingly integral to academic research (Jones et al. 2008; Jeong et al. 2014). Collaboration in degree provision is also becoming increasingly common (Obst and Kuder 2012). Moreover, collaboration is frequently a prerequisite for obtaining funding for educational innovations, for example via Jisc, the HE FCs, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and the EC. Collaboration does not necessarily happen easily or automatically, however, and is not always easy to sustain (Guri-Rosenblit 2001; Hansen and Nohria 2004; Morris 2008). Consortia-based e-learning models also raise complex and divisive new issues, for example in relation to ownership of intellectual property (Guri-Rosenblit 2001). Furthermore, by definition, there are fundamental tensions between collaboration and competition that may detrimentally affect the success of collaborative e-learning ventures (Guri-Rosenblit 2001; Morris 2008). As Paulsen (2009: 463) puts it: "It is easy to find good reasons for collaboration [...] but in real life, individuals and institutions are usually much more committed to themselves than to the consortium". Such tensions may have been factors in the failure of some of the UK's e-learning collaborations. According to Bristow (2004: 5) the closure of Scottish Knowledge can be attributed in part to "rivalry from the very Scottish Universities with which it had partnered", while Slater (2005: para. 15) reasons that "a simple explanation for the failure of the eUniversity is that no-one had a primary overriding interest in its success". From a market-based standpoint, overestimation of demand, insufficient market research, underestimation of budgets and development timescales, and ultimately failure to generate profits within rapid enough timeframes are common factors

cited in relation to the demise of e-learning consortia (Garrett 2004; House of Commons 2005; Jokivirta 2006; Keegan et al. 2007; Paulsen 2009; Bacsich 2010). From an alternative perspective, Conole et al. (2006: 136) report that some of those who were involved in UKeU have since suggested that the consortium's failure might be partly attributed to a disconnect between the perspectives of those with "business-orientated vision for UKeU" and "those more interested in the academic aspects".

### ***Reuse of digital learning resources***

Achieving economies of scale via the reuse of digital learning and teaching resources is an omnipresent theme across the corpus. The core idea is that digital resources can be designed for use in multiple contexts, including across subject boundaries and education sectors, thus reducing duplication of efforts. Charles Clarke, the UK's Education Secretary at the outset of the analysis timeframe, rather romantically envisions the apparent potential for reuse as follows:

[T]he same piece of information can be easily adapted to a number of uses. For example, a 3-D online model of a trench could be used by a PhD student studying war poetry, by an A-Level psychology student studying the effects of shell shock and by a primary school teacher preparing for a trip to the Imperial War Museum. (Clarke 2003: para. 16)

Accordingly, the importance of reusability is foregrounded across the policies:

[I]t may be useful to commission content once, which can then be deployed across a very wide range of academic programmes or institutions. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 23)

There is no point duplicating effort to create content that is already available. (HEFCE 2011: 7)

There is also an emphasis on the need for cross-sectoral recycling of digital resources:

We now have a range of digital resources for education, but their usage is typically confined to the one curriculum area or age group for which they were designed. (DfES 2005: 27)

[W]e will promote national arrangements for the collaborative development of content and services, to enhance front-line value for money and reduce duplicated efforts. (Becta 2008: 32)

Two factors are fundamental to achieving economies of scale in relation to reuse of digital resources. First, resources need to be findable by educators, and second, reuse needs to be practicable. There may be technical, cultural, and pedagogical obstacles to the successful design, retrieval, and reuse of digital learning resources however. Initiatives such as Jorum

have encountered numerous technical difficulties in relation to resource storage and retrieval. Further challenges have been derived from copyright and digital rights management concerns, as well as a lack of interest in, and an absence of motivation for sharing materials (Parrish 2004; Harris and Thom 2006; Littlejohn and Margaryan 2006; Nurmi and Jaakkola 2006; Halliday 2008). Such issues were mirrored in my own experiences participating in National Digital Learning Resources (NDLR) service in the ROI (O'Keeffe et al. 2009; McAvinia and Maguire 2011). The NDLR is no longer a supported service, while Jisc retired Jorum in 2016 (Jorum 2016).

Good practice in pedagogical design emphasises the need to design learning activities and resources in relation to the target audience or context (Nurmi and Jaakkola 2006). Thus, pedagogical effectiveness and potential for reuse may be in conflict. Furthermore, the 'design for reusability' philosophy may promote decontextualised and content-focused conceptions of learning (Friesen 2004; Parrish 2004; Nurmi and Jaakkola 2006; Kirkwood 2011).

The actual potential for reuse across disciplines may be complicated by differences in disciplinary preferences in relation to preferred types and formats of resources (Littlejohn and Margaryan 2006) and variances in pedagogic approaches (Russell 2005; HEA and Jisc 2009). Aspirations for sharing across sectors may also be unrealistic, due to differences in cultural preferences for, and traditions of, sharing and collaboration (Littlejohn et al. 2003). But even where curriculum and content are similar, reuse may be difficult. I was involved in the development of a suite of e-learning resources designed to support first year computer programming students across three Irish HEIs. Although the curriculum was ostensibly the same in the three institutions, variations in institutional practices, cultures, and teaching approaches meant that compromises frequently needed to be made in the design of the resources, while the development process was labour intensive and time consuming (Costelloe et al. 2006). Overall then, despite the significant investment into the development of reusable digital learning resources, as well as mechanisms to promote and support their reuse, it is unclear whether the anticipated cost savings have been, or can be, achieved.

## **Quality**

Continuing the narrative of marketisation, a key argument predicating the free market thesis is the claim that market-based provision of HE can drive up quality. Yet it is difficult to specify what quality means in HE (Gibbs 2010). The quality of a given HE experience depends on the outcome of the complex interactions between the student, his or her teachers and peers, and his or her learning experiences, and will thus differ for each individual (Brown

2011; Barnett 2013; Williams 2013). A university education is therefore a ‘post experience good’ (Brown 2011; Collini 2012) since “the benefits of the product often do not become clear during ‘consumption’ but only later” (McGettigan 2013: 59). While it is impossible to directly and objectively measure quality in HE, since it is a public service, some measure of quality, however imperfect, is necessary. Previously it was the academic community who adjudicated over quality in UK HEIs (Scott 1999; Brown and Carasso 2013). Quality judgements were made in relation to the extent to which students, programmes, and awards fulfilled specified requirements, and quality “was ultimately seen in terms of an academic view of what is meant to be an educated person, usually in a particular discipline” (Scott 1999: 198). In the ever more marketised HE system, however, institutions have increasingly been required to provide “indirect or symbolic indicators of quality” (Brown and Carasso 2013: 124). Yet the resulting proliferation of quality indicators and league tables have been criticised for providing scant information on “what actually happens to students between matriculation and graduation” (Massy 2004: 29). The nature of what is meant by quality is also changing, with quality increasingly determined by the perceived requirements and expectations of employers and students (Molesworth et al. 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013; Williams 2013). But, as I will argue in the next chapter, the priorities of employers and individuals may not correlate with the wider interests of society. Furthermore, “students by definition having not yet completed their education are not in a strong position to determine what this education should be” (Williams 2013: 53). The concept of quality is thus becoming less about “academic quality” and more about the “general student experience” (McGettigan 2013: 4). In this context, although marketisation may improve the perceived “quality of service” (Brown and Carasso 2013: 125), there are many indicators that marketisation, coupled with increasing emphasis on privatisation and reductions in public funding is actually detrimentally affecting the quality of UK HE. The pressure on institutions to aggressively compete is diverting resources away from learning and teaching into marketing activities, along with the development non-academic amenities that might attract students, such as residences, landscaping, and social and sports facilities (Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013). There is also increasing reliance on temporary and part-time teaching staff (Brown and Carasso 2013; Bryson 2013; Lopes and Dewan 2014). Indeed, online courses often rely on this adjunct teaching demographic (Macfarlane 2011). The time spent by both academic staff and their students on teaching and learning related activities is decreasing, due to reductions in contact hours, heavier staff workloads, and higher student-staff ratios. Students are increasingly engaged in part-or full-time work – which is often essential to funding their studies – but this has been demonstrated to negatively impact on

academic performance (Metcalf 2003; Brennan et al. 2005; Callender 2008). Marketisation is also claimed to have contributed to reductions in academic standards, manifest via grade inflation (Yorke 2009; Bachan 2015); increases in plagiarism (Brown and Carasso 2013; Pulfrey and Butera 2013); pressure on academic staff to lower academic demands (Morley 2003; Furedi 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013; Soin et al. 2014); and students' increasingly instrumental approaches to learning (Shephard 2008).

As I have already argued, e-learning is framed in the policies as a way to push HE further into the realm of the market, and is thus implicated in contributing to the negative impacts of marketisation on the quality of HE. It is rather ironic, then, that across the policies, e-learning is presented as a way to increase quality:

Essentially, e-learning is about improving the quality of learning. (DfES 2003d: 7)

Innovation in learning approaches may increase quality and standards. (HEFCE 2003a: 4)

[T]he main driver for e-learning should be to enhance the quality of learning and teaching. (SFC 2006a: 7)

Notwithstanding the aforementioned difficulties in describing what is meant by quality in HE, there is little substantive evidence to support assertions such as the above. Indeed, as Guri-Rosenblit (2009: 42) points out, "the current state of art indicates that studies on the impacts [of e-learning] on students' achievements do not yield conclusive evidence that online learning is an improvement over traditional education". Furthermore, there are instances where e-learning has been shown to have a detrimental impact on the quality of the learning experience. Particular concerns have been raised around quality and standards in relation to for-profit online provision of HE. Several high profile online providers have been subject to controversy, including claims of unethical and fraudulent practices; reliance on transient, part-time, and adjunct – and in some cases underqualified and/or underpaid – teaching staff; poor academic standards; low rates of retention and dismal graduation rates; and ultimately for putting profit before educational concerns (Dillon 2007; Mangu-Ward 2008; Hillman 2011; Keegan 2011; Mufson and Yang 2011). Online courses also tend to utilise part-time and adjunct staff (MacKeogh and Fox 2009; Macfarlane 2011; Walsh et al. 2012). Although little detail on the impact of full- versus part-time staff on quality of student learning in online contexts is available, a notable exception is Mueller et al.'s (2013) empirical study, which found that the use of part-time staff in an online course negatively impacted on quality. Further problematic issues in relation to quality will be covered in the

next chapter, where I will demonstrate how technology-based mechanisms alleged to increase ‘flexibility’ may negatively impact on the quality of the HE experience for some learners.

## **Privatisation**

Privatisation is “the penetration of private capital, ownership and/or influence into what were previously publically funded and owned entities” (Brown and Carasso 2013: 24). In HE privatisation is manifest via the entrance of private institutions into the HE market; the outsourcing of activities to the private sector; and the entry of private capital into HE via donations, commissioned projects, or Public–Private Partnership (PPPs) (Teixeira et al. 2004b; Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013). E-learning is highly implicated in all three of the aforesaid aspects of privatisation. First, due to the perceived ease with which for-profit providers can apparently successfully enter and prosper in the global market, and second, via the increasing emphasis on partnerships between HE and commercial organisations.

As has been noted already in this chapter, there are currently restrictions on the ability of new providers to enter the UK HE market. Notwithstanding this, successive neoliberal regimes have facilitated a recent and rapid expansion in the number of private and for-profit providers (Brown and Carasso 2013). A recent BIS report identified 674 privately funded providers of HE across the UK, and determined that the median length of time that they had been in operation was just twelve years (BIS 2013b). Interestingly, e-learning has not been a priority for these institutions: BIS report that only one-third use online lectures or seminars, while only around half use a VLE (BIS 2013b). Nevertheless, private provision of e-learning is a recurring theme across many of the policies, where competition from non-traditional HE providers, and providers outside the UK, are frequently presented as a threat:

Organisations, which may be colleges, universities, commercial enterprises or multinational corporations, are investing in the design and delivery of learning which can be accessed from beyond the borders of a single country. (ELWa 2003a: 1)

Providers around the world [...] may well attract students away from UK institutions. (HEFCE 2011: 6)

In addition, as was discussed earlier, across the corpus, the need for collaboration “across public-private and sector divides” (HEFCE 2011: 16) is encouraged. Privatisation carries many threats to the role and scope of HE. The three pillars of the academy have traditionally been teaching, research, and service (McAllister 1976; Bourner 2008). Private providers do

not tend to be engaged in research; indeed, ‘freedom’ from the apparent burden of research is identified as a positive in one of the documents:

Some successful for-profit models of online provision have benefited from using a different staff structure to that of UK HE institutions, with freelance tutors focusing on facilitation, teaching and assessment, with no expectation of engaging in research activity. (HEFCE 2011: 19)

There are a small, but significant number of teaching-only universities in the UK as well as a growing number of research-only and teaching-only posts (Locke, 2014). Yet this severing of the link between teaching and research neglects the pivotal symbiotic relationship between the two activities, and fundamentally changes the nature of both the academic profession, and HE (Boyer 1990; Healey 2005; Jenkins et al. 2007).

Private providers are also unlikely to be interested in engaging in the ‘unprofitable’ civic and social activities traditionally associated with HE’s service mission (McGettigan 2013). New providers may even be prepared to initially operate at a loss in order to seize markets from established HEIs; this is likely to be to the detriment of local communities who will no longer avail of the benefits associated with a local institution (University of Cambridge 2011). The drive to privatise may also be a contributing factor in the overall narrowing of subject provision in HE. UK HEIs have historically tended to offer a broad range of disciplinary and subject provision. Privately funded providers on the other hand tend towards more vocational and specialised provision (McMahon 2009; BIS 2013b), a trend that, as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, may be exacerbated by e-learning.

A further manifestation of privatisation is the increasing emphasis on partnerships between HE and commercial organisations. Across the policies, commercial organisations are repeatedly framed as having a role to play in the establishment of markets for e-learning development tools and e-learning resources:

[W]e need to improve education-industry partnerships to achieve innovative, effective and sustainable e-learning resources. (DfES 2003d: 13)

There are also significant opportunities for partnership with private organisations to produce content. (HEFCE 2011: 7)

Indeed, the development of e-learning technologies is frequently “predicated upon the involvement of commercial IT firms” (Selwyn 2007a: 86). While not attended to in any of the policies, the possible impact of such commercial interests needs to be considered: the software industry is driven by commercial imperatives for profit and efficiency, thus e-learning tools and resources are not neutral, value free artefacts. Instead a precarious balance

of “public, private and political interests are embedded in every stage of the development of digital learning resources, from the designer’s drawing board to the learner’s desktop” (Selwyn 2007b: 225). Furthermore, left unfettered, commercial developers may be inclined to prioritise the most ‘profitable’ subject areas and forms of knowledge (Clegg et al. 2003).

### **Broadening choice**

Fundamental to neoliberalism is the claim that markets generate greater diversity of offerings, and hence widen consumer choice. In the e-learning policies, readers are told, for example, that:

Through e-learning a wider range of course options can be generated. (DfES 2003d: 23)

[A strategic priority for HEFCE is] Enhancing flexibility and choice for learners. (HEFCE 2009: 12)

It is ironic then that the marketisation of HE is instead actually narrowing the scope of provision, by causing ‘market-orientated’ types of knowledge to be prioritised (Nussbaum 2010; Belfiore and Upchurch 2013; Brown and Carasso 2013; Small 2013). Partly as a consequence of the increasingly instrumental framing of HE that will be discussed in the next chapter, students are increasingly favouring more vocational and ‘lucrative’ courses such as Business, Engineering, and IT, over the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (Reay et al. 2005; Nussbaum 2010; UCU 2012; McGettigan 2013). In addition, the value of academic departments has become determined by their ability to generate income, privileging some disciplines but marginalising or even eliminating others (Bivens 2014). As Giroux (2014: 139) puts it: “In this new Gilded Age of money and profit, academic subjects gain stature almost exclusively through their exchange value on the market”. E-learning may be compounding this problem. Selwyn (2011b: 100-101) contends that while e-learning may support “a greater volume of learning opportunities [...] these are often homogeneous and interchangeable” while provision tends to be dominated by “popular and profitable areas of study”. Guri-Rosenblit (2009: 96) points out that most applications of e-learning to date “have taken place in postgraduate courses of business administration, informatics and computer science, engineering, introductory mathematics, statistics, language instruction”. Indeed, as Carr-Chellman (2005: 5) observes “[I]t is rare to see any courses on Shakespeare, Kant or impressionist painters offered online”.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the current framing of e-learning in the UK, as evident across the policies, is contributing to the detrimental impacts of marketisation on HE. E-learning is presented as a way to push UK HE into the global marketplace, and as a way to accede to the needs and expectations of student-consumers. Rather ironically though, many of the specific assertions made in relation to e-learning and markets are highly problematic. E-learning is purported to enable UK HEIs to compete on a global scale; yet there are significant practical and cultural barriers to enabling this aspiration. As has been demonstrated, assertions regarding e-learning's ability to reduce costs and increase quality do not stand up to scrutiny. Furthermore, rather than broadening choice, e-learning may be contributing to increased homogeneity in provision.

The next chapter examines the second neoliberal master narrative underpinning the policies: *Instrumentality*.

## CHAPTER 5: Instrumentality

### Introduction

This chapter presents my ideology critique of the second of the three master narratives underpinning the policies analysed: *Instrumentality*. Debate regarding the most appropriate balance between HE's social, cultural, and intellectual role as a 'public good', versus its economic and individually-focused purpose has raged since the inception of the Academy (Collini 2012; Williams 2013). Under successive neoliberal regimes, however, there has been a marked shift from a combination of social, cultural, and economic goals for HE in the UK towards an almost entirely utilitarian purpose. HE now tends to be presented by politicians, in policy, and across much contemporary discourse as being primarily concerned with enhancing economic growth and global competitiveness, and as the key to individual employability, wealth, and success. In this chapter, I demonstrate that themes derived from this primarily instrumental framing of HE pervade the policies. The need to compete in the 'global knowledge economy' is foregrounded as one of the main drivers for implementing e-learning. E-learning is also frequently framed as a way to facilitate widening participation and enable participation in lifelong learning, and although the social benefits of the aforesaid are sometimes referred to, these are eclipsed by a focus on their claimed economic purpose. The narrative of instrumentality also extends to neoliberalism's emphasis on the individual. As I will demonstrate, across the policies e-learning is promoted as a mechanism for advancing the needs of the individual over the collective. Many aspects of this story need to be problematised, however. The discourse of the global knowledge economy, as well as many of the assertions made in relation to its impacts are contested. The privileging of only those skills that are obviously economically valuable means that other skills and ways of knowing may be neglected. Although widening access to HE and encouraging lifelong participation ostensibly have both societal and economic benefits, the increasingly instrumental framing of these discourses, as reflected in the policies, may be exacerbating rather than reducing inequalities. Further to this, many of the assertions made pertaining to e-learning's role in supporting agendas for widening and growing participation in HE also need to be challenged. The most persistently asserted advantage of e-learning in relation to growing participation is the 'flexibility' that e-learning is claimed to offer. The narrative of flexibility as it appears in the policies thus merits particular attention, and is therefore critically interrogated.

## **Deconstructing the discourse of the global knowledge economy**

Across the policies, the discourse of the knowledge economy in particular is repeatedly invoked so as to portray e-learning as a mechanism for preparing citizens as self-reliant individuals, for employment in the knowledge economy and thus contributing to economic growth:

[E]ffective application of technology in learning can help underpin the knowledge based economy in Wales, and drive its growth. (ELWa 2003b: 12)

[e-learning is] ideal for helping learners develop the skills they need for the knowledge-based economy. (DfES 2005: 27)

[H]igher education has to provide high-level skills for the information economy, and to equip learners as workers and citizens in an information society. (HEFCE 2009: 7)

Fairclough (1995a: 5) points out that a text's "implicit content", that is information that is implied or presupposed, is of crucial importance. Although globalisation is not directly referred to in any of the policies, across the corpus a narrow conception of globalisation as economic globalisation is implicit in the many references to the global economy:

In the changing world of the knowledge economy, ICT skills will help to boost productivity and competitiveness. (DfES 2003d: 1)

We face an increasingly tough global economic climate, and a prospect of greater competition from abroad [...] to take forward all the Government's agendas, and perform to our maximum potential as an economy and society in the future, we must embrace and exploit ICT in all aspects of our lives. (ELWa 2003b: 2)

We recognise the role technology-enhanced learning may play in ensuring that HEIs in Wales maintain competitiveness in the global marketplace and contribute to the knowledge economy (HEFCW 2008: 2)

Although commonplace across contemporary political and media discourse, the narrative of the knowledge economy is deeply contested, and thus it cannot be considered to be an inevitable fact or a coherent theory (Peters 2003; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Olssen and Peters 2005). The concept of 'Human capital' (Becker 1964) is fundamental to the discourse of the knowledge economy, and is linked to another key element of the neoliberal thesis, individualism, and the "idea that each individual had the freedom to invest in himself" (Williams 2013: 37). From this perspective, education is thus portrayed as "an investment activity undertaken for the purpose of acquiring capabilities that enhance future earnings of the person as a productive agent" (Schulz 1973: 8), and a key enabler of 'social mobility'. Neoliberalism presumes that since individuals are the primary beneficiaries of HE, the costs incurred in studying for a degree should be borne out, to some extent at least, by students

(Teixeira et al. 2004a). Indeed, the cost of HE has been increasingly been passed to students (Brown and Carasso 2013), who are increasingly framed as – and indeed increasingly perceive themselves as – ‘consumers’ of HE (Williams 2013) (see chapter 4). Critics, however, have pointed to the “emotional abhorrence” of “considering people as crude economic investment” (Williams 2013: 37) (see also Coffield 1999). The portrayal of HE as an incubator for human capital is thus contributing to the overall shift from HE being perceived as a public good, whereby it is society that benefits from the skills and attributes of graduates, to a private good, by which HE is primarily linked to personal employment and prosperity (Williams 2013).

Leaving aside its neoliberal foundations, it is also necessary to challenge some of the specific claims made across the policies in relation to the knowledge economy. First, we need to question whether the workforce requires new skills and attributes in the context of the knowledge economy, and if so, whether e-learning in its typical manifestations in HE can engender them. Second, the overall demand or otherwise for citizens with these skills needs to be scrutinised. Third, the assertion that increasing the number of potential ‘knowledge workers’ actually generates significant economic returns also needs to be critically examined. Finally, the impact of privileging ‘economically valuable’ skills over other forms of knowledge needs to be taken in to account.

### *New economy? New skills?*

The increasing prevalence of ICT in relation to many occupations, as well as the tendency towards ‘just in time’ utilisation of knowledge does appear to necessitate certain types of broad abilities in preference to highly specialised skills or knowledge. These generic attributes include digital literacy; interpersonal and communication skills; critical thinking skills; analytical abilities; information processing skills; capacity for self-management; propensity towards learning to learn; and the ability to be ‘flexible’, and to anticipate and adapt to change (OECD 2001; Rohrbach 2007; Ananiadou and Claro 2009; Brinkley et al. 2009; Allen and van der Velden 2011). Digital literacy excepted, however, rather than being ‘new’ such skills have historically been fundamental to the world of work (David and Foray 2003; Silva 2009); indeed, they have long been considered to be desirable graduate attributes (Crebert et al. 2004).

Whether new or not, it is questionable whether e-learning, in its prevailing manifestations at least, can engender the aforementioned sophisticated skills and attributes. While readers are told, for example, that e-learning can “build higher order skills” (Becta 2008: 17) and “equip people with skills and attributes which underpin a knowledge based and entrepreneurial

culture” (ELWa 2003b: 12), such claims fly in the face of the banal realities of e-learning in HE. As will be elaborated on in the next chapter, much of the deployment of e-learning in the UK appears to be primarily concerned with dissemination of content and the administration of assessment (Browne et al. 2010; Conole 2010; Kirkwood and Price 2014; Jenkins et al. 2014). Furthermore, the limited number of studies that have examined e-learning’s potential for engendering complex high-order skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking have noted that while this may be possible, it requires significant effort (see, for example, McLoughlin and Mynard 2009; Thomas and Morin 2010; Saadé et al. 2012).

### ***Jobs for the knowledge workers?***

In many of the policies e-learning is framed as a way to address the apparent explosion in demand for knowledge workers. For example:

Exemplar e-learning methods can themselves help familiarise and equip people with skills and attributes which underpin a knowledge based and entrepreneurial culture. (ELWa 2003b: 12)

[H]igher education has to provide high-level skills for the information economy, and to equip learners as workers and citizens in an information society. (HEFCE 2009: 7)

Yet at the outset of the analysis timeframe there was little evidence to suggest that there was likely to be a significant shift in employment patterns in the UK towards a high-skills, knowledge-based labour market (Thompson et al. 2001; Wolf 2002; Brown and Hesketh 2004). Indeed, this has been borne out by more recent research. A study by Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), indicated a significant mismatch between skills supply and demand in the UK (Felstead et al. 2007), while a survey of UK workers conducted by the Work Foundation found that, “even after 40 years’ uninterrupted growth in knowledge based industries and occupations, [knowledge-based jobs] account for only one in ten of those in work today” (Brinkley et al. 2009: 4). More recently, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) acknowledged that:

[T]he UK has recently experienced a relatively slow rate of high skilled job creation, and certainly one which is well below the overall growth of high skilled people [...] there is increasing evidence of over-qualification and under employment [...] in the future, it is expected that significant employment will remain in areas that have traditionally demanded low skills. (UKCES 2010: 38-39)

Thus, there is a fundamental disconnect between the exaggerated rhetoric of the policies, and the realities of the UK labour market. The mismatch between skills supply and demand

has resulted in “increasing congestion in the market for knowledge workers” (Brown and Hesketh 2004: 7) as well as ‘over-qualification’ of many citizens, which is by implication coupled with underuse of skills (McGuinness and Bennett 2007; Chevalier and Lindley 2009; Green and Zhu 2010). Another impact of the imbalance between skills supply and demand is ‘credential inflation’, whereby the minimum level of qualification necessary for entering many jobs has become inflated. Credential inflation has financial and personal implications for a growing proportion of graduates. First, it has been associated with diminishing financial returns on graduate jobs (McGuinness and Bennett 2007; Brynin and Longhi 2009; Green and Zhu 2010). Furthermore, as was discussed in the last chapter, students and their families are increasingly responsible for financing their degrees. Credential inflation thus also has implications for equality: the already wealthy are more likely than the less well-off to be in a position to afford the costs associated with obtaining the qualifications required to enter the higher paying professions (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Green and Zhu 2010). Furthermore, the mismatch between skills supply and demand means that some graduates struggle to repay the student loans incurred in obtaining their education, representing not only burden to those individuals and their families, but also generating a fiscal cost to tax-payers (Chevalier and Lindley 2009). Over-qualification also tends to impact negatively on workers’ job satisfaction and productivity (Maynard et al. 2006; Green and McIntosh 2007; Fine and Nevo 2008) and may contribute to cognitive decline (De Grip et al. 2008).

### ***More education = economic growth?***

The claim that investment in education leads to economic growth is the basis for much of the UK’s economic and education policy (Johnes 2006; Keep and Mayhew 2010; Barro 2013). This assumption is mirrored across the policies. For example, it is asserted that:

[E-learning] can help underpin the knowledge based economy in Wales, and drive its growth. (ELWa 2003b: 12)

Achieving a modern world-class education and skills system [...] is essential to ensuring the UK’s global competitiveness. (Becta 2008: 5)

The relationship between education and economic expansion is complex however. Education is just one of many potential determinants of economic growth, thus it is difficult to establish a direct relationship between the two. Although some studies have proposed links (Stevens and Weale 2004; Johnes 2006) others maintain that there no evidence of a correlation (Wolf 2002; Keep and Mayhew 2010), while others still are inconclusive (Carpentier 2006; Barro

2013). It is therefore highly problematic to directly link education, or indeed e-learning, to economic expansion.

### ***Higher Education = employers' priorities?***

Across the corpus, employers' needs are repeatedly foregrounded:

E-learning makes it easier to establish partnerships with local industry and SMEs. (DfES 2003d: 19)

Education and industry working together, through shared e-learning resources and support, will contribute to the aims of our Skills Strategy. (DfES 2005: 5)

While it is certainly important that HE remains in touch with the skills needs of employers, it is also important to consider, and thus to compensate for, the fact that employers are unlikely to be concerned with types of knowledge that they consider to be 'unprofitable', and will thus tend to place more emphasis towards vocational programmes that meet the needs of occupations. As I established in the last chapter, the privileging of 'economically valuable' skills and knowledge means that types of knowledge that are deemed to be less economically valuable are being neglected, and is eroding HE's important purpose as a social, cultural, and public good.

Overall then, the discourses of globalisation and the knowledge economy are far from straightforward. Yet these unstable discourses form the rather shaky foundations for two of the main policy objectives that e-learning purports to support: lifelong learning and widening participation.

### **Lifelong learning and widening participation**

Lifelong learning and widening participation are persistent themes across the policies, where they are frequently collocated and discussed as if a single entity, for example:

We have already invested in exemplars of e-based provision for widening access and promoting lifelong learning. (HEFCE 2003: 9)

e-Learning offers particular opportunities for maximising flexibility and responsiveness in delivery within a mass post school education system with an increasingly diverse cohort of learners, against a backdrop of lifelong learning and changing lifestyles. (SFC 2006a: 7)

The policy motivations underpinning drives to encourage lifelong learning and widen participation do overlap; indeed, as will be discussed, so do the assertions made across the policies in relation to e-learning's role in supporting these agendas. Lifelong learning and

widening participation are conceptually different however, and thus will be considered separately in the first instance.

### ***Lifelong learning***

The discourse of lifelong learning first emerged in the 1970s (Tuijnman and Boström 2002; Dehmel 2006). Early policy conceptions portrayed lifelong learning as adult participation in formal, as well as informal education settings, and promoted both learning for learning's sake, and vocational learning. Since the 1990s however, there has been a distinct shift away from the humanistic ideals underpinning early notions of lifelong learning, towards an emphasis on more vocational and economic objectives, set within the discourse of the global knowledge economy (Coffield 1999; Olssen 2006; Keep et al. 2010). This utilitarian slant on lifelong learning as education for employment is evident in several of the policies. For example, lifelong learning is presented in the context of individual responsibility:

[Through e-learning] people of all ages could take responsibility for what and how they learn, achieving their personal goals as self-directed lifelong learners. (DfES 2003d: 25)

Lifelong learning is also repeatedly linked directly to skills and employability:

New technologies can attract new kinds of learners into lifelong learning. Wider access to these more compelling learning experiences will contribute to the ambitions of our Skills Strategy. (DfES 2005: 3)

Another driver for e-learning is to develop and support lifelong learning, and enhance graduate employability. (HEFCW 2007: 6)

### ***Widening participation***

Widening participation in HE by groups who have not had a history of participating, also referred to as 'massification' of the system, has been a persistent policy theme in the UK, and indeed globally, since the 1960s (Archer 2007; David 2012; Hinton-Smith 2012). This continuing emphasis on widening participation is reflected across the corpus, where e-learning is frequently portrayed as a way to "open up" (DfES 2003d: 56) access to HE by underrepresented groups:

Universities are making use of online provision [...] to help more people progress to higher education. (DfES 2005: 6)

We will continue to support and encourage institutions to use all available resources, including technology, to widen access and opportunity. (HEFCE 2009: 1)

The policy motivations underpinning aspirations to widen participation in HE are twofold. The first ostensibly has its roots in egalitarian aspirations and emerged from concerns that HE was an elite system, and that women, those from lower income families, some ethnic groups, and those with disabilities were under-represented (Greenbank 2006). Second, beginning with the election of the Conservative government in 1979, and accelerating under the neoliberal regimes that followed, widening participation's role in relation to social justice has been increasingly eclipsed by a more instrumental intent, whereby massification of HE is framed as a way to grow the UK's supply of human capital and thus to ensure the UK's competitive success within the global knowledge economy (Basit and Tomlinson 2012; David 2012; Hinton-Smith 2012). Problematic issues deriving from this increasingly skewed emphasis on HE's economic, individualistic, and utilitarian role have already been discussed in detail. Furthermore, although supposedly about equality, widening participation is increasingly rooted in an individualistic, neoliberal narrative that draws on the discourses of 'social exclusion' and 'social mobility' (David 2012) and that may be serving to exacerbate, rather than to address, inequalities.

The shift from the previously dominant concept of 'poverty' to the discourse of 'social exclusion' is a significant conceptual swing from the historical idea of marginalisation as "not commanding sufficient resources to survive in the market" towards the neoliberal conception of marginalisation as "detachment from the moral order of society" (Fairclough 2000: 51-52). Addressing issues of social exclusion has thus become about emphasising individual, rather than collective responsibility, expressed in the discourse of "coupling social rights with social responsibilities" (Blair 2006: para. 43).

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or families between social strata. Neoliberalism purports that market, rather than meritocratic competition is the best route to a fair, efficient, and competitive economy (Brown 2013). Following on from this, neoliberalism thus sees social mobility as allowing those from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to compete in the free market with those from more privileged backgrounds (Peters 2011). The assumption is that increasing the skills level and qualifications of the low-skilled will allow them to move off welfare into employment, and allow them to progress in the labour market (Payne and Keep 2011). For New Labour in particular, economic and social concerns were seen as two sides of the same coin whereby "both economic performance AND social justice and mobility can best be served through improvements in the skill levels of individual workers" (Keep 2009: 5) [emphasis in original]. These agendas may be fundamentally, and irreconcilably, incompatible however (Fairclough 2000; Harvey

2005), and the marketisation of the HE system, coupled with the increasingly instrumental framing of its purpose serve to extend, rather than decrease inequalities. Sources of tension arise for example from the fundamental clash between policy goals for widening participation and the increasing financial burden incurred by students and their families in enabling them to participate in HE (Archer 2007; Molesworth et al. 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013; Williams 2013).

That the instrumental purpose for widening participation takes precedence over any genuine concerns regarding social justice is unashamedly obvious across the policies. Wider participation enabled by e-learning is directly linked to the skills agenda:

[E-learning] can contribute to all the Government's objectives for education – to raising standards; improving quality; removing barriers to learning and participation in learning; preparing for employment; upskilling in the workplace. (DfES 2003d: 4)

[E-learning can] address equality and diversity issues [...]. This will support the lifelong learning agenda and the principles cited in the Leitch Review. (HEFCW 2008: 10)

Rather than being a societal issue, social exclusion is presented as an individual problem, with non-participants disparagingly portrayed as “unwilling”, “disaffected”, and “disengaged”:

New technology can transform the experience of learning for all learners, but has particular impact for those who might otherwise be excluded or even unwilling to access learning [...]. Young people who are disaffected, or disengaged, can re-engage with education when they experience an approach to learning through technology. (DfES 2005: 27)

In line with neoliberalism's emphasis on social exclusion and social mobility, social justice is reframed as equality of opportunity to compete in the labour market:

[T]he social inclusion agenda is important for all communities in Wales, where increased ICT user skills can help to give people access to new social networks and employment opportunities. (ELWa 2003b: 17)

Thus, rather than widening participation, across the corpus the focus seems to be on the use of e-learning to widen potential markets for HE. Under-represented groups are even presented in one of the documents as another market segment to be exploited:

[e-learning] innovations could help to widen participation in higher education at home, and overseas, while stimulating demand from learners. (DfES 2005: 53)

Besides their neoliberal foundations, particular problems and contradictions derive from two specific claims made in relation to e-learning's ability to support agendas of lifelong learning and widening participation: first, the claim that access to technology can 'open up' access to learning where it was not a possibility before; and second, the assertion that technology can make education 'more flexible'. In following sections I unpick these claims in detail.

### **Opening up access?**

Learning via technology carries some obvious – but important – practical prerequisites. First, students require a basic level of digital literacy. Second, they must have access to the requisite hardware and software, along with a reliable power supply and internet connectivity at the time when they are available to study. Yet for many of those that e-learning will supposedly benefit, these prerequisites are not met. Levels of digital literacy and access to technology tend to be delineated according to existing inequalities of socio-economic status, gender, ethnic background, and disability (Van Dijk and Jan 2005; Selwyn et al. 2006; White and Selwyn 2013). Indeed, for many people, their main “way in to” the use of ICT is via engagement with technology at work (Selwyn et al. 2006: 137). Thus, “those groups most likely to be ‘digitally excluded’” are “remarkably similar to those who can already be characterised as being socially excluded” (Selwyn 2002a: 5). Indeed, successive National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) surveys have demonstrated that this digital divide serves to reinforce the learning divide (NIACE 2013; NIACE 2014; NIACE 2015). While the existence of a digital divide is acknowledged in three of the policy documents (ELWa 2003b; DfES 2005; Becta 2008), excepting a brief discussion in Wales' National Strategy (ELWa 2003b), scant attention is paid to its implications in the context of the e-learning policies, or to how it might be tackled.

Even assuming that issues of ICT literacy and access to technology could be addressed, e-learning cannot be assumed to open up a guaranteed gateway to participation. Indeed, participation in adult education is less dependent on access to technology than on a complex assortment of economic, social, psychological, and pragmatic factors (Selwyn et al. 2006; White 2012). Furthermore, these factors mirror indicators for participation in relation to post compulsory education in general, which show that propensity towards participation is a complex, long standing, and deeply entrenched pattern that is determined by social class, employment status, occupation, age, prior learning, interest, and motivation, that tends to be replicated from generation to generation (Selwyn et al. 2006; Selwyn 2011b; Woodley 2011; NIACE 2013; NIACE 2014; NIACE 2015). Thus, while readers are told that:

Many people who have had negative experiences of formal education have become disenchanted with the concept of learning as a whole. E-learning provides a supportive and private return to education. (DfES 2003d: 55)

Young people who are disaffected, or disengaged, can re-engage with education when they experience an approach to learning through technology. (DfES 2005: 27)

The available evidence suggests that if people have not engaged with learning due to the aforesaid factors, then it is unlikely that e-learning will somehow generate a guaranteed route to participation.

A particularly questionable claim repeatedly made across the policies is that e-learning can enable students with disabilities and special educational needs to participate:

E-learning makes a vital contribution to widening access to education and preventing discrimination against disabled learners. (DfES 2003d: 22 - 23)

E-learning can increase accessibility for all learners, including disabled and disadvantaged students. (HEFCW 2007: 6)

Technology is often highly effective in supporting [learners with special educational needs]. (Becta 2008: 11)

In line with the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility and individualism, in one of the policies students with special educational needs are contemptuously framed as ‘disengaged’:

For learners with special needs, these aids can take them from total disengagement to eager participation. (DfES 2005: 8)

Yet it is erroneous to present e-learning as a panacea that will automatically guarantee equal participation. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, while e-learning may have potential to improve the accessibility of HE for students with disabilities in some cases, many e-learning implementations actually create new barriers if they are used inappropriately, or where an equivalent alternative to media formats that cannot be accessed by some individuals is not provided. Moreover, the development of accessible resources is not necessarily straightforward, and can be resource intensive (Munro and McMullin 2009).

Women were one of the earliest groups targeted under the UK’s widening participation agenda (Greenbank 2006). For school leavers the goal to address the gender balance has been achieved (BIS 2013a; UCAS 2014). However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, particularly for women returning to education and combining study with other commitments, e-learning may generate barriers to participation. In particular, the ‘flexibility’ apparently

offered by e-learning may not always align with the needs of female learners. Overall, technology cannot compensate for the more fundamental barriers that can prevent women from participating in HE, such as lack of access to childcare and inflexible working opportunities (Clegg 2001, Clegg and Steel 2002, French 2005).

Minority ethnic groups are a further category targeted under widening participation policy (Greenbank 2006). Although not specifically referred to in any of the policies, that e-learning might benefit this demographic is implicit in the various references that are made to e-learning's capability to support "an increasingly diverse cohort of learners" (SFC 2006a: 7). E-learning may present various problems that may not be conducive to enabling equitable participation by minority groups however. Inequalities may be derived, for example, from the dominant cultural values and preferences embedded in teaching materials and pedagogies. Furthermore, as has already been highlighted, cultural differences may present particular challenges in relation to online communication and may lead to misunderstandings or marginalisation (see chapter 4).

A further faulty assertion made in relation to e-learning is that it is inherently suitable for learners of all ages:

[T]he issues discussed in this document are so fundamental to delivering effective learning – whatever the age or circumstance. (ELWa 2003b: 1)

[Via e-learning] adult learners of all ages find learning more fun, more challenging and more productive. (DfES 2005: 3)

[N]ew technologies are capable of creating real energy and excitement for all age groups. (DfES 2005: 9)

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the technological proficiency of the so-called 'net generation' (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005; Tapscott 2008) in social and leisure contexts does not automatically translate to the ability to learn via technology (Bennett et al. 2008; Kennedy et al. 2008; Selwyn 2009; Helsper and Eynon 2010; Rogers et al. 2011; Smith 2012). Furthermore, of particular relevance to widening participation, in line with the general trends discussed earlier, the frequency and nature of young peoples' use of technology is impacted by their socio-economic status, gender, and ethnic background (Livingstone and Helsper 2007; Kennedy et al. 2008; Hargittai 2010). At the other end of the spectrum, technology may not automatically offer a guaranteed gateway to participation for mature learners. Many adults "have experienced a lifelong pattern of non-participation in formal education or training, and in many cases have 'learnt' to despise learning other than by doing" (Gorard and Selwyn 2008: 29). Furthermore, like younger learners, adult learners'

engagement with learning depends on many factors including generation, socio-economic status, gender, geography, and ethnicity (Selwyn et al. 2006; Iannelli 2011; NIACE 2013; Chowdry et al. 2013; NIACE 2014; NIACE 2015) thus provision of learning via technology is not a guaranteed route to meaningful participation.

### **The flexibility myth**

Contemporary political, academic, and promotional discourse pertaining to HE is littered with references to ‘flexibility’ (Burge 2011; Selwyn 2011c), so far as flexibility is charged with meeting “many if not all of the alleged shortcomings in and challenges facing higher education” (Barnett 2014: 32). Although the narrative of flexible learning predates e-learning – having previously been employed in relation to traditional correspondence-based distance learning and other forms of part-time provision (Kirkpatrick 2011; Barnett 2014) – since the 2000s, e-learning has increasingly been presented as a silver bullet for enabling flexibility in HE (Clegg and Steel 2002; Servage 2007; Selwyn 2011c). This fixation with flexibility is reflected across the policies, where the flexibility supposedly afforded by technology – and that by implication is apparently absent from conventional learning opportunities – is portrayed as a key driver for increasing provision of e-learning. The narrative of flexibility as it appears in the policies, therefore, merits particular attention, and in the sections that follow it is thus critically interrogated, both in terms of the neoliberal ideology underpinning the discourse of flexibility, and with respect to the assertions made in relation to the flexibility that e-learning supposedly guarantees.

#### ***Flexibility’s neoliberal underpinnings***

Since the 1980s, flexibility has been increasingly depicted as essential to the competitiveness and agility of organisations and nations in the post-Fordist global knowledge economy (Crowther 2004; Nicol 2011). Allied to this is the archetype of the ‘flexible worker’: a multi-skilled and adaptable individual who can multi-task; is constantly updating his or her skills; can transition between jobs and employers with ease; and who takes responsibility for his or her own professional development and economic advancement (Bourdieu 1998; Olssen 2006; Burge et al. 2011). Political rhetoric tends to promote flexibility as a positive aspiration that frees people from the constraints of outmoded working practices (Crowther 2004). In reality, flexibility in working practices has been implemented via increasing deregulation, downsizing, and casualisation of employment, with organisations tending to pursue flexibility through “numerical flexibility, functional flexibility, distancing strategies, and pay flexibility” (Nicol 2011: 321), practices that are impacting negatively on employees, their families, and on organisations, as well as exacerbating socio-economic stratifications

(Crowther 2004; Henly et al. 2006; Lambert 2008). For Bourdieu (1998: 85) this “flexploitation” has become a “mode of dominance” that is “based on the creation of a generalised and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation.” These neoliberal conceptions of flexibility have migrated to the discourses of HE, and are evident in various guises across the policies. For example, the flexibility apparently offered by e-learning is framed with reference to requirements for flexibility in business and working practices, and in relation to flexibility as an essential graduate attribute:

The trend towards a more flexible workforce will continue [...]. The individual will therefore need to be responsible for his or her personal development. (DfES 2003d: 34)

We will have succeeded when e-learning [is] making our educational system innovative and flexible, capable of generating a community and workforce for the 21st century. (DfES 2003d: 43)

Flexibility is also portrayed as a means to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of education systems:

An open approach to e-learning architecture will help to promote good pedagogy in e-learning by enabling greater flexibility of use and re-use. (DfES 2003d: 40)

ICT will facilitate new ways of working with teachers and support staff operating more flexibly. (DfES 2003d: 48)

Institutions need to initiate more agile processes of curriculum design and delivery [...] technology can provide the efficiencies and flexibility they need. (HEFCE 2009: 7)

In particular, flexibility is promoted as a mechanism for enhancing employability and workforce upskilling, as well as for facilitating wider and lifelong participation in education, aspirations which, as have already been confirmed, are underpinned by a predominantly instrumental agenda:

e-Learning offers particular opportunities for maximising flexibility and responsiveness in delivery within a mass post school education system with an increasingly diverse cohort of learners, against a backdrop of lifelong learning and changing lifestyles. (SFC 2006a: 7)

e-learning can also advance the flexibility and personalisation of learning, to support progression and lifelong learning. (HEFCE 2005: 4)

Technology can help to enhance the learner experience for work-based learners, including through increasing flexibility. (HEFCW 2008: 1)

It is repeatedly asserted that the need for flexible learning is driven by the claimed ‘demands’ and ‘expectations’ of learners:

[S]tudents in the future are going to need and demand greater flexibility. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 3)

There is increasing demand from learners, who want more flexible forms of study. (DfES 2003d: 11)

[S]tudents expect high-quality, flexible online learning experiences. (HEFCE 2011: 2)

While there is some evidence to indicate that students may desire flexibility in the provision of HE (Yukselturk and Yildirim 2008; Selwyn 2011c; Barnett 2014; Kahu et al. 2014) this ‘demand’ needs to be seen to be derived in part, if not entirely, from the wider neoliberal context. As Clegg and Steel (2002: para. 16) contend, students have been “engineered to become more ‘flexible’ as a result of policies, which have put more financial pressures on them to work in particular ways”, to the extent that “the only way for many adults to access higher education is via ‘flexible’ modes of delivery”. Thus “students are *forced* to become ‘flexible’ and the flexibility to which they are supposed to conform is a particular pre-determined set of learning practices or processes” [emphasis in original]. Therefore, while the discourse of flexibility was historically associated with part-time and distance learning, it is increasingly framed in relation to the growing diversity of students participating in HE, who are portrayed as requiring a flexible education that will allow them to combine study with paid employment (which may be essential to their ability to participate), home and family life, as well as other commitments. While this flexibility may well facilitate students to slot education into their busy lives, as Williams (2013: 90) concludes, the portrayal of part-time and flexible study as the norm “reinforces the notion that it is the degree product that is to be obtained rather than an immersion in the learning experience”.

### ***Flexibility, but for whom? Contradictions and tensions between conceptions of flexibility***

Leaving aside its neoliberal underpinnings, there are further significant problems and contradictions relating to the discourse of flexibility as articulated across the policies. The first of these is derived from the tendency for the term to evoke positive connotations:

The word “flexible” literally means to be easily adapted, molded, or managed. As a term, it conjures up visions of the suppleness of youth, or the malleability of clay. Added as a prefix to educational practices and products, to define learning as flexible connotes the freedom for learners from potential participatory barriers in education. (Willems 2005: 429)

This optimistic conception of flexibility is reflected across the wider discourse concerning HE (Burge et al. 2011; Evans and Smith 2011). ‘Old’ modes of learning are by implication juxtaposed as inflexible, and thus inferior. As Barnett (2014: 32) asks “who would want to be thought of as inflexible?” But flexibility is far from being a uniform and inherently favourable entity. Indeed, across the wider HE policy discourse terms such as ‘flexibility’ and ‘flexible learning’ tend themselves to be employed rather flexibly (Harris 2011; Barnett 2014), rendering flexibility an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau 2004). Furthermore, upon deeper inspection it becomes clear that the discourse of flexibility as presented across the policies is fraught with ambiguity and paradoxes. Although flexibility is never defined, it is variously and repeatedly referred to. As will be elaborated on in chapters 7, 8, and 9, from a linguistic perspective, within and across the texts the repeated references to flexibility constitute a form of ‘parallelism’ (Bonsiepe 1965; Henriksen 2011; Woods 2014) that serves to portray diverse notions of flexibility as a coherent whole. Flexibility is far from being a uniform concept however. Multiple actors have an interest in flexibility in HE, each of whom is likely to have their own viewpoints on what comprises flexibility. From a learner’s perspective, flexibility tends to be portrayed as flexibility in choice of programme of study; entry requirements; choice of topics within a programme or module; modes and methods of learning; time and place of learning; methods and mode of assessment; and learning pathways and completion times (De Boer and Collis 2003; Willems 2011; Bergamin et al. 2012; Barnett 2014). From an institutional perspective, e-learning is promoted as a way to enable flexibility, efficiency, and effectiveness in institutional and educational practices (Barnett 2014), while from an economic perspective, flexibility has come to be seen as a desirable attribute of the ‘knowledge worker’ (Hager and Holland 2007; Allen and van der Velden 2011; Barnett 2014). These variations in conceptions of flexibility may be at odds with one another however. For example, the introduction of systems aimed at generating institutional flexibility and reducing costs may be counter to what constitutes flexibility from a learner’s perspective (Barnett 2014). Furthermore, it is entirely possible to develop e-learning activities and programmes that, while pedagogically sound, offer little in the way of flexibility, or that introduce new constraints on flexibility (see later discussion). Moreover, aspirations to develop the qualities and capabilities required of so-called flexible graduates may be in direct conflict with learning that is flexible from a learner’s perspective, particularly in relation to conceptions of flexibility as a mechanism to provide personalisation and choice. For example, desirable attributes of the flexible graduate are likely to include the ability to work under pressure, to adhere to deadlines, and to collaborate and communicate effectively (Allen and van der Velden 2011). In the online context, these

sorts of skills might be developed via participation in time-dependent e-learning activities such as online group work. However, as will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, for some students the requirement to participate in such activities could constitute the antithesis of 'flexible learning'. Furthermore, as I highlighted earlier in this chapter, despite the lofty assertions in the policies, it is unlikely that the rather unsophisticated forms of e-learning typically deployed in HE can engender the diverse range of high order skills and qualities required of the 'flexible knowledge worker'.

### *Flexibility as choice*

E-learning is frequently presented as a mechanism for enabling flexibility in relation to choice and personalisation as to what is studied, and in relation to the learning methods and approaches employed. Yet this slant on flexibility again carries both contradictions and problems. At the level of the course or programme, for example, it is asserted that:

Through e-learning a wider range of course options can be generated. (DfES 2003d: 23)

[e-learning can broaden choice] by making available new subject options and new learning methods to meet individual needs. (DfES 2003d: 7)

e-learning can [allow] choice of routes, learning styles, timing, repetition and self-pacing. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 13)

In contrast to such claims, as I demonstrated in the last chapter, marketisation is tending to reduce, rather than extend the scope of subject offerings available to students, a trend that may be exacerbated by e-learning.

E-learning is also framed as a way to enable flexible learning pathways:

[S]tudents are able to construct their own learning pathways through flexible combination of modules [...] learning is customised 'just for me'. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 3)

[The strategy will] explore the use of credit systems in e-learning delivery in order to enhance flexibility of provision. (HEFCE 2003a: 10)

As well as flexibility in relation to content of the curriculum, and as to how learning takes place:

[S]tudents in the future are going to need and demand greater flexibility – in the mode of delivery, in the choices which are available to students, and in the ways in which students interact with each other and with their teachers. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 3)

With more flexible e-learning resources available online, teachers can adapt the curriculum to their learners' needs and interests. (DfES 2005: 2-3)

By implication, such flexibility in choice necessitates a loosening of academic control over a programme of study, and thus a shift in power from teacher to his or her students. While this may be educationally valuable in some instances, there is also a risk of students focusing on their perceived needs at the expense of their broader development (Barnett 2014). Paradoxically this may even reduce choice, since if students' choices are concentrated in particular areas of the curriculum, this may actually reduce scope of offerings available across an institution (Barnett 2014).

As highlighted above, flexibility is also framed in terms of choice as to how students learn. As with the content of learning, pandering to individuals' perceived needs and preferences may actually narrow educational outcomes, and thus may not be conducive to the development of 'flexible graduates'. In any case, there are likely to be limits to the degree of personalisation achievable in practice, and it is neither practical nor desirable to cater to every single student's precise needs and learning preferences (Sadler-Smith and Smith 2004; Harris 2011). In fact, claims regarding choice and personalisation tend to be overstated and are rarely evident in practice (Conole 2004; Jenkins et al. 2014). Indeed, in one of the policies flexibility is presented as the 'choice' between attending a lecture, and accessing lecture notes online; two alternatives that certainly cannot be considered equivalent:

[VLEs] are often used to increase the flexibility of provision, e.g. by enabling students to access lecture notes if they have been unable to attend a lecture. (HEFCW 2007:10)

Flexibility in provision of content and learning approaches has been linked to the emphasis on reusability that was considered in detail in the previous chapter. As well as purporting to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale, in relation to flexibility, the reuse of e-learning resources is promoted as a mechanism to "offer greater choice" (HEFCE 2011: 21) by allowing students to pick and choose from a range of learning resources that will ostensibly assist them to achieve a given learning outcome or outcomes in a way that is aligned with their individual preferences (Mestre 2010). However, unless due care is exercised, application of e-learning in this manner may simply deliver content to learners in a decontextualised way, resulting in a fragmented learning experience (Friesen 2004; Parrish 2004; Kirkwood 2011; Williams 2013).

Overall, the fully flexible offerings that it is proposed e-learning might support, whereby students can construct their own programme of studies in terms of its topics, timing, order,

learning approaches, and mode of assessment, are in danger of resulting in a fragmented learning experience that is evident both “synchronously, as students are bombarded with an array of simultaneous experiences” and “asynchronously, as students try to engage with discrete learning units over time (perhaps over several years)” (Barnett 2014: 42). Furthermore, as was established in the last chapter, students are not always best placed to determine their own educational needs; thus flexible learning experiences that focus on what students think is best for them may, instead of producing flexible graduates, generate individuals with a limited set of skills, knowledge, and attributes (Barnett 2014).

### ***Learning anytime anywhere: flexibility of time and place***

A frequently cited source of flexibility is e-learning’s purported capability to remove the apparent constraints and barriers to participation of time and place:

[e-learning] allows improved flexibility over the time, place and mode of study.  
(DfES 2003d: 51)

Online distance learning (ODL) provides students with the flexibility to study at their own pace, in their own time and at a location convenient to them. (HEFCE 2011: 10)

Indeed, students enrolling on distance learning programmes delivered via e-learning tend to have high expectations about the degree of flexibility that will be afforded to them, with this anticipated flexibility of time and place often a key motivator for enrolling on such programmes (Yukselturk and Yildirim 2008; Selwyn 2011c; Kahu et al. 2014). These aspirations are not always borne out in practice however; in fact, for some students, the gulf between their expectations of flexibility and their lived experience is such that it negatively impacts on the quality and success of their learning experiences (Willems 2005; Servage 2007; Selwyn 2011c; Kahu et al. 2014). Variances in perspectives on what constitutes flexibility are a key source of disconnect between the rhetoric of flexibility, and flexibility in practice. As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this section, while some of the claimed flexibilities generated by e-learning in relation to time and place could comprise flexibility for some learners, for others the same context might paradoxically constrain flexibility, or could create new sources of inflexibility. For others these barriers are not removed, instead their nature simply changes.

That e-learning supposedly enables learning that is independent of time and place implies that study can be carried out wherever students might find themselves, and whenever they wish to do so:

Technology can be mobile. That means e-learning can come to the learner.  
(DfES 2005: 3)

Students studying via e-learning may either be ‘on the move’, for example travelling on public transport, or temporarily located in public places such as a café, or in more static contexts such as a community centre, university campus, their workplace, or their home. Wherever they are located, while they may be ‘learning online’ students still need to establish appropriate temporal and physical contexts in which to study (Selwyn 2011c). By implication, students learning online need access to the internet. Reliable and fast internet access is becoming prevalent across the UK, and provision certainly improved during the analysis timeframe. Notwithstanding this, as will be demonstrated in the sections that follow, technical and logistical issues relating to access continue to present significant problems to many students.

For learners on the move, e-learning may impose technical, practical, and pedagogical barriers to flexibility. As I noted earlier, access to the appropriate technology, a power source, and internet connectivity are fundamental to learning via technology. Thus, without such access any potential for flexibility is immediately closed down. Students intending to learn on the move via e-learning therefore need a laptop, tablet, or smartphone that is installed with appropriate software; periodic access to a power supply (which may not always be available while on the move); and a reliable an internet connection. Learners on the move can either access the internet via Wi-Fi or via cellular networks. Although free or paid Wi-Fi hotspots are available in some retail spaces and public areas, most Wi-Fi networks are private, and are located in homes or workplaces (Ofcom 2013a). Thus, many of those students intending to learn on the move are reliant on cellular networks. ‘Third generation’ mobile telecommunications technology (3G) and above, is generally considered a prerequisite for satisfactory internet browsing and multimedia access via cellular networks. However, recent Office of Communications (Ofcom) data highlights significant gaps in 3G coverage across the UK (Ofcom 2013b). There are particular problems for those students intending to access e-learning via public transport, for example on a daily bus or train commute. Ofcom (2013a: 7) note that there are “significant gaps in coverage on A and B roads, particularly for data services” and predict that it “is likely that some roads will remain unserved”. They also highlight the limitations and intermittency of provision of 3G across the UK’s rail network (Ofcom 2013a). In addition to these technical issues, learning on the move tends to take place in sub-optimal physical environments, and is likely to be subject to fragmentation and interruption that may affect the quality of learning possible (Kukulska-Hulme 2007).

Several of the policies make specific reference to the flexible learning opportunities apparently offered by ‘mobile learning’: learning via hand-held devices such as mobile phones and smartphones. Yet, it is problematic to assume that learning via mobile devices is inherently flexible. Further to the issues relating to learning on the move just discussed, various technical, practical, and pedagogical barriers to flexibility may apply to students wishing to learn via such devices. While many improvements to the functional capabilities of mobile technologies have been implemented recently, insufficient battery life continues to be a significant issue, particularly when accessing multimedia content and data services (Gittlen 2015). The small screen and keyboard size also imposes restrictions on the activities and interactions possible (Wang et al. 2009; Kim and Kim 2012; Harpur 2013). As has already been noted, learning on the move is subject to fragmentation and interruption. This may be exacerbated when attempting to learn via mobile devices: information is necessarily presented as small chunks, and the relationship between these nuggets of information, as well as their relationships to the broader context, may be difficult to assimilate (Traxler 2010). Where mobile learning is promoted as a possibility for students, and if the potential benefits of flexibility are to be realised, learning environments and activities may need to be specifically designed for, or adapted for, use via mobile devices; however this is not the norm (Harpur 2013). Mobile learning is often framed as being particularly relevant to young people whom readers are assured are “increasingly mobile” (DfES 2005: 13). While it may be the case that the so called ‘Digital natives’ make heavy use of mobile technologies to communicate and for entertainment purposes (Haddon 2008; Thinkhouse 2014; Ofcom 2014), this does not automatically translate to an ability to use mobile devices for the types of higher order learning required in relation to participating in HE, or indeed for the types of learning activities required in order to develop the skills of the ‘flexible graduate’ (Rossing 2012). Furthermore, young people and low-income groups are more likely to use more expensive ‘pay as you go’ data plans (Ofcom 2007; Waldram 2009; Thinkhouse 2014) which may influence their ability to make use of mobile devices for learning.

Students accessing e-learning in more fixed locations may also encounter barriers to flexibility. Although access to e-learning may be theoretically possible in “community centres, libraries, drop-in or mobile centres, and other non-institutional and informal learning environments” (DfES 2003d: 50) the impact of disparities in the context and quality of access are omitted from the policies: learning in a library or drop-in centre cannot be considered equivalent to access in the home (Selwyn et al. 2006). Students accessing their course from their place of work may be able to avoid issues relating to power supply and connectivity, but will still need to be allocated, or to establish, temporal and physical spaces to learn, and

may be subject to practical restrictions on the types of e-learning activities possible (participation in a synchronous online classroom may not be feasible in a shared office, or on the move for example). They are also likely to be subject to interruptions and work-related demands that will influence their ability to engage with learning.

For many students studying via technology the main learning environment is their home (Selwyn 2011c; Kahu et al. 2014). According to the UK government's e-learning strategy:

There are significant educational benefits associated with having access to technology at home, as this gives learners greater choice about where, when and how they study. (Becta 2008: 12)

Although studying at home may well offer convenience and flexibility for some learners, for others studying in their home environment can be a constraint to flexibility. In terms of practicalities, as has already been highlighted, students will need to have access to the requisite hardware and software, a power supply, and internet connectivity. Such access comes at a cost, and as has been noted already, disparities in access tend to follow existing trajectories of inequality. Furthermore, adequate access to the internet is not a given across the whole of the UK, particularly for rurally located students (Ofcom 2013a; Ofcom 2013b), who, according to the policies, are one of the groups who will apparently benefit from e-learning (see, for example, DfES 2003d; SFEFC/SHEFC 2003). In addition, by its very nature, the home is not a dedicated learning environment: for many it is shared with others, and is primarily associated with activities other than learning. Studying at home therefore tends to be carried out alongside other people and activities, which students report as negatively impacting on their learning (Selwyn 2011c; Kahu et al. 2014). Additionally, finding physical and temporal contexts to study within the home may be difficult for some learners. Access to technology is often shared with other family members and may be located in communal areas, placing constraints on when and where study can take place (Selwyn 2011c; Kahu et al. 2014). Moreover, the availability of space, time, and technology within the home may be shaped by gender, with women in particular tending to be disadvantaged (French 2005; Moss 2006). For example Selwyn (2011c: 378) found that while male learners tended to establish dedicated office spaces within the home, women were more likely to study in spaces that "fitted around existing domestic arrangements". Furthermore, where dedicated study or office spaces already existed in the home, Selwyn reports that women did not always have equitable access to these spaces.

The narrative of flexibility presents e-learning as enabling time independent study, whereby students are unconstrained by timetabled teaching and learning activities and can participate

in their studies at a time that is convenient for them. There is also a tendency to promote the apparent ability of e-learning to enable students to study at their own pace. Like independence of place, time independence in relation to e-learning will be dependent on students having access to technology, a power source and connectivity, as well as a place to study at the time when they are actually able to. Yet many of the pedagogic and resource dissemination approaches employed in e-learning programmes may mean that the claimed flexibility of time and place is not universally realised. For example, e-learning courses tend to make extensive use of electronic texts such as e-journal articles and e-books. These formats may offer many practical and pedagogical advantages over printed materials (Rowlands et al. 2007; Jamali et al. 2009). Notwithstanding the potential benefits, several studies have indicated that some learners prefer print materials to digital reading (Spencer 2006; Precel et al. 2009; Baron 2015) while others indicate that students may even learn more effectively from print (Eshet-Alkalai and Geri 2010; Ackerman and Goldsmith 2011). Furthermore, the flexibility that electronic course materials afford some learners may paradoxically generate inflexibilities for others. Willems (2004) cites the example of 'Diane', a part-time student whose programme of study was initially organised around print-based materials, which she read on business trips. When the course materials were moved online, she found study much more inconvenient, since she had limited access to the requisite technology at the times when she wished to study. Thus for Diane, the print based materials enabled flexibility, whereas the transition to online materials made her learning dependent on place and thus reduced flexibility. My own experiences as an online learner are similar. Although I am a supposedly technologically enthusiastic and literate learning technologist, and while I often make use of the affordances generated for me by electronic texts in my working life, one of my first 'tasks' for each module of the EdD was to print out the course materials. On my standing room only train commute, with intermittent internet connectivity, reading a book or printout was much easier than trying to squint at text on my phone, while at home print materials were less vulnerable to the inquiring and sticky hands of my three children than a laptop or tablet. For those learners who prefer or require hard copy materials, the burden and cost of printing is transferred to the student, a further possible source of inflexibility. Furthermore, some digital resources and interactions, audio-visual media and dialog in online classrooms, for example, cannot be accessed without an electronic device.

A common criticism of correspondence-based distance learning was that students were not exposed to the pedagogically and motivationally beneficial face-to-face interactions that characterise on campus learning (Besser and Donahue 1996; Carr 2000). In order to compensate for this online courses frequently incorporate online communication

mechanisms (Baxter 2012; Loncar et al. 2014). In early implementations of e-learning such communication was predominantly *asynchronous* (where communication happens over an extended period, for example via online discussion forums). More recently, there has been a trend toward the use of *synchronous* communication, whereby interactions happen in ‘real time’, for example via participation in online audio and video conferencing systems. Although asynchronous online communication channels may theoretically offer possibilities for students to partake in a discussion or activity ‘24/7’, as has been noted already, the actual capacity of an individual to participate will be contingent on them having access to the requisite technology and connectivity at the time at which they are able to study, plus the skills to do so. Furthermore, for some, a side effect of round-the-clock availability of communication may be an expectancy of immediacy of response: students can become frustrated by delays in interactions or in receiving feedback, for example if they are online in the evenings and weekends, but their lecturers or tutors are only available during office hours (Vonderwell 2003; Paechter et al. 2010; Willems 2011). Such expectations of urgency may be exacerbated as students increasingly perceive themselves as consumers who have a ‘right’ to an instantaneous response, and may increase pressure on academic staff to be perpetually available to students.

Real-time synchronous interactions are increasingly integrated into online courses and are claimed to compensate for problems deriving from the lack of immediacy associated with asynchronous communication. Yet while they may generate flexibility for some learners, such activities may diminish flexibility for others. Save for eliminating the necessity to travel (unless students need to travel to access to technology) participation in synchronous online activities can be as, if not more, inflexible as a conventional tutorial or lecture. Students must be available at a particular time, and situated in a location where they have access to an appropriate device and network connection, and often must be able to communicate through speech (which is not always feasible in a shared office or on the move for example). Participation in such activities may also place constraints on any possibilities for flexible pace of study, since students typically will need to prepare for the interaction.

Group work is generally accepted as an important aspect of HE, both in terms of enhancing students’ learning experiences and outcomes, and as a desirable graduate attribute (Light et al. 2009; Gregory and Thorley 2013). Many online programmes thus attempt to incorporate elements of technology-enabled group work. Although potentially pedagogically beneficial, requirements to participate in online group work may not constitute flexibility from a student’s perspective. By its very nature, participation in group work is not necessarily

conducive to flexibility of time, particularly in relation to flexibility of pace. Furthermore, online group work is notoriously fraught with issues that may make for frustrating and inflexible learning experiences. Many of the interpersonal, motivational, and pedagogical difficulties associated with face-to-face group work are not only mirrored in online groups, but can also be exacerbated due to communication difficulties stemming from reliance on asynchronous and written communications (particularly when collaborating across time zones); and decreased potential for trust (due to lack of shared social context and limitations on personal interaction and communication) (Roberts and McInnerney 2007; Liu et al. 2010a; Capdeferro and Romero 2012; Tseng and Yeh 2013). Overall students frequently express dissatisfaction and frustration with online group work (Goold et al. 2006; Smith et al. 2011; Liu et al. 2010a). Indeed this, coupled with students' increasing perceptions of themselves as consumers may lead them to express resistance to online group work (Loh and Smyth 2010).

A further dimension of flexibility tending to be cited across the policies is the “flexible pace of learning” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 38) offered by e-learning, with students frequently electing to partake in e-learning in order to manage the sequence and timing of their studies (Yukselturk and Yildirim 2008; Selwyn 2011c; Kahu et al. 2014). However, as has been established, while offering benefits to some students and in some circumstances, many of the commonly employed e-learning activities discussed earlier by their nature close down opportunities for flexibility in pace. For example in a study of the factors impacting on retention in distance education programmes in DCU, Delaney (2007) found that perceived inflexibilities such as deadlines associated with group discussion tasks had a significant detrimental impact on student retention.

Overall, the narrative of flexibility as portrayed in the policies is highly contradictory. Despite being portrayed as such in the policies, e-learning is not in itself a form of flexibility, but instead potentially generates sources of flexibility for some, but not all learners. The available evidence demonstrates that students' engagement with their studies tends to be “shaped, bounded and often compromised by a range of practical (and often self-imposed) inflexibilities” such as employment, household work, childcare and family life and other commitments (Selwyn 2011c: 375). Indeed, for some students, supposedly inflexible traditional learning environments at least allow them to establish temporal and physical spaces where they can suspend other commitments and engage more deeply in learning (Servage 2007). Furthermore, online learning is frequently dictated by campus rhythms and

institutional regulations, and thus in itself is not going to offer flexibility in relation to enrolment, assessment and completion deadlines (Barnett 2014).

### **It's my learning for me: personalisation as the epitome of neoliberal individualism**

Fundamental to neoliberalism is an “ideology of individualism” (Peters 2011: 31). This emphasis on the individual is derived from the assumption that humans are self-interested utility maximising individuals, and that the uncoordinated self-interest of individuals – the so-called ‘invisible hand’ – correlates with the best interests of society (Smith 1776). But the privileging of individual wants and needs is incredibly damaging from a societal perspective. As Giroux (2014) contends, neoliberalism “fosters a mode of public pedagogy that privileges the entrepreneurial subject while encouraging a value system that promotes self-interest, if not unchecked selfishness” (Giroux 2014: 1) and whereby “notions of citizenship are replaced by the overburdened demands of individual responsibility and an utterly privatized ideal of freedom” (Giroux 2014: 55). Thus, although HE has traditionally been considered to be both a ‘public good’ and a ‘private good’, neoliberalism places most emphasis on the latter: rather than a primary benefit of an educated society being society itself, the benefits are increasingly primarily linked to employment prospects and earning potential for the individual (Williams 2013).

Technology is intimately intertwined with neoliberal individualism. As Selwyn (2011b: 21) puts it: “[digital technologies are] introducing a distinctly ‘individualized’ way of doing things in everyday life”, while for Watters (2014: 60) “There's a very powerful strain of American individualism that permeates technology: personal responsibility, self-management, autonomy”. A major manifestation of individualism across the policies is the multiplicity of references to personalisation:

[W]e want courses and services to become more personalised. (DfES 2005: 8)

e-learning can also advance the flexibility and personalisation of learning. (HEFCE 2005: 4)

A shift towards more personalised learning is fundamental to the Government's approach. (Becta 2008: 26)

The discourse of personalisation also has its roots in neoliberalism (Clegg and David 2006). An agenda for the personalisation of public services began to emerge as a feature of political rhetoric and policy discourse from 2003 onwards (see, for example, Blair 2004; DfES 2004; Leadbeater 2004). For Cribb and Owens (2010: 311) personalisation was “the archetypal

New Labour concept”. The coalition government carried on the mantle, albeit with an emphasis on ‘customisation’ in lieu of personalisation (Hartley 2012; Bragg 2014). Despite this prominence, like much neoliberal rhetoric, personalisation is a vague concept that has had different meanings at different times, and there is a lack of clarity as to what the UK’s governments mean when they refer to personalised learning (Johnson 2004; Campbell et al. 2007; Hartley 2012; Maguire et al. 2013). However, what is clear is that “the language of personalization reflects and embodies a shift towards individualization” (Cribb and Owens 2010: 311). Thus, for Hartley (2008: 365) personalisation is the “organising concept” of the marketisation of education, while for Bragg (2014: 310) “personalisation now speaks to the student as consumer of education”. Personalisation fundamentally changes the relationship between students and teachers. In the personalisation model “professionals become advisers and brokers of services, not providing the services themselves so much as helping clients generate pathways through the available range of provision that meet their particular needs” (Campbell et al. 2007: 137). However, rather than being a passive consumer of education who “selects from what is on offer”, in this model the student becomes “an 'active' user who 'shapes' service provision from below” (Hartley 2008: 366). Once again, this is problematic: an individual’s perceived needs may not actually be in their own best interests overall, and may neglect broader societal requirements.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that the instrumental framing of HE as manifest across the policies is fundamentally flawed. The underpinning discourses of globalisation and the knowledge economy are contested. Despite assertions that e-learning can support students to develop ‘21st century graduate attributes’, it is not clear that the UK’s workforce requires new skills in the context of the knowledge economy. Furthermore, it would not appear that e-learning, in its typical manifestations in HE at least, can actually engender these high-level skills. Moreover, the overall demand for citizens with such attributes does not seem to be as great as is claimed, while the assertion that increasing the number of potential ‘knowledge workers’ generates economic gains does not stand up to scrutiny. Additionally, the privileging of ‘economically valuable’ skills over other forms of knowledge, as well as the emphasis on the individual, as promulgated across the policies are negatively impacting on the form, scope, and quality of HE. The discourses of widening participation and lifelong learning as presented in the policies are framed by neoliberal aspirations to achieve economic competitiveness and are grounded in the ideology of individualism. Yet, as I have demonstrated, the contribution that e-learning can make in relation to supporting widening access and lifelong learning is debatable. Rather than opening up access to HE, e-learning

may generate new barriers to access for some students. In particular, the conceptions of flexibility presented across the policies are derived from neoliberal notions of flexibility as a mechanism to enable efficiencies in business and working practices. Furthermore, despite being portrayed as such in the policies, e-learning is not in itself a form of flexibility, but instead potentially generates sources of flexibility for some, but not all learners.

Although popularly considered to be a positive aspiration (Taylor 2000; Bowles 2004; O'Neill and McMahon 2005), the notions of personalisation, choice, and responsiveness often associated with student-centeredness, and that are promoted across the policies, both align with and reinforce the neoliberal conception of the self-interested individual, as well as the problematic construction of the student-consumer discussed in chapter 4.

The next chapter critiques the third overarching master narrative underpinning the policies: the claim that the *Modernisation* of HE via e-learning is desirable and inevitable.

## CHAPTER 6: Modernisation

### Introduction

This chapter presents my ideology critique of the final neoliberal master narrative underpinning the policies: *Modernisation*. The incessant pursuit of change, increasingly enabled via ICT, the “privileged technology of neoliberalism” (Harvey 2005: 159), is integral to the discourse of neoliberalism, with the apparent imperative to modernise employed as a means to justify and endorse various reforms to government and public services (Finlayson 2003; Byrne et al. 2012). I first examine how the discourse of modernisation is employed across the policies as a mechanism for promoting and legitimising e-learning. I then highlight the many problematic ways in which technology is framed across the policies. As will be demonstrated, the policies are infused with one-dimensional, uncritical, and often flawed portrayals of technology. E-learning is depicted as a neutral and inherently educational force that will unquestionably benefit education; yet as I will demonstrate, all technologies instead embody and promote particular ideologies and values (Feenberg 1991; Nissenbaum 2001). E-learning is also promoted as a ‘technological fix’ (Weinberg 1966; Rosner 2013) for complex social and political problems. Particularly troublesome is the technologically deterministic stance underpinning the policies, which frames technology as an inevitable and autonomous agent of change and progress. In relation to pedagogy, e-learning is presented as being inherently superior to traditional approaches, and is asserted to have transformative capabilities; yet such pronouncements fly in the face of much empirical evidence. Finally, the need to modernise HE via e-learning is frequently rationalised with reference to the alleged needs and expectations of young learners in particular, claims that yet again do not stand up to scrutiny.

### Neoliberal modernisation

Modernisation discourses have been part of the rhetoric of UK politics since the 1960s (Byrne et al. 2012). It was under New Labour that the discourse of modernisation came to the fore, where it was at the heart of the ‘Third Way’ (Finlayson 2003; Driver and Martell 2006; Atkins 2011). Modernisation subsequently became a prominent feature of the rhetoric of the Conservative party, both while in opposition, and more recently while in coalition government (Garnett 2010; Griffiths 2011; Byrne et al. 2012). The narrative of modernisation has also entered the discourses of party politics and governance across the devolved nations (Parry 2005; Davies and Williams 2009; McCafferty and Mooney 2010). Beyond the UK, modernisation has entered the lexicon of the EC, exemplified for example in the work of the *High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education* (EC 2014).

Despite this ubiquity, modernisation is a rather nebulous concept. The narrative has been employed in various and diverse contexts, and has been imbued with various meanings (Fairclough 2000; Finlayson 2003; Byrne et al. 2012), to the extent that it has become a further example of an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau 2004). Notwithstanding this diversity and ambiguity in use, some broad commonalities can be extracted. The narrative of modernisation has been employed by parties across the political spectrum as a way to emphasise and legitimise the need for reform of government, public services, and social policy, often by making contrast to what are – by implication – the outdated strategies and policies of the previous administration, or the current opposition (Fairclough 2000; Finlayson 2003; Byrne et al. 2012). The narrative of modernisation also serves a rhetorical function. It implies progression and positivity, and thus serves to motivate and persuade, helping to render political actions promoted in the name of modernisation as incontestable. For example:

[Stakeholders in HE] expect our institutions to increasingly reflect the nature of modern society, including the incorporation of modern communications technology. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 10)

It is crucial that we fully examine the potential for technology to modernise the curriculum and its assessment. (DfES 2005: 29)

[Technology is] a core tool in a modern education and skills system. (Becta 2008: 23)

In addition, across the policies there is repeated emphasis on the need for change for the sake of change:

[There is a need to] modernise the curriculum in the light of changes in technology. (DfES 2005: 30)

[W]e must keep the curriculum moving, to take advantage of new methods in all subject areas, and to keep demanding a better response from the technology. (DfES 2005: 6)

In the same vein, the apparent need for education to keep up pace with the rest of ‘modern life’ is frequently evoked so as to justify the actions proposed:

Increasingly, online services are part of everyday life. It makes sense for education and training to mirror these changes. (DfES 2003d: 8-9)

Digital technology is already changing how we do business and live our lives. (DfES 2005: 4)

[T]echnology has revolutionised the way we communicate, collaborate and do business [...] These trends reinforce the need for a continuing system-wide approach to technology use in education. (Becta 2008: 8)

In this way, change is framed as an actor with agency, and thus it is presented as the responsible party, acting on the UK's education system, while the motives and actions of those who are driving the changes, and who might benefit from the implementation of e-learning (for example the government and technology companies) are backgrounded (Fairclough 2000).

The discourse of modernisation also serves a unifying purpose that collects up various, and often disparate, constitutional reforms and presents them as a coherent approach, while further emphasising the sense of the need for change (Finlayson 2003). Indeed, a central element of New Labour's modernisation project was its emphasis on 'joined-up government' (Clark 2002; Ling 2002), evident across the policies, for example, in the aspirations to "take a co-ordinated approach to joining up all DfES strategies and objectives" (DfES 2003d: 14). From a linguistic perspective, as I will discuss further in chapters 7, 8, and 9 these repeated references to the need for a joined-up approach are a form of parallelism that further serves to reify modernisation as coherent and necessary.

Unsurprisingly, ICTs are deemed to be a major vehicle for neoliberal modernisation, where they tend to be framed in the context of efficiency and progress (Harvey 2005; Moss and O'Loughlin 2005; Byrne et al. 2012). However, as I will demonstrate in the following sections, the ways in which technology and e-learning are portrayed across the policies are highly problematic.

### **Is e-learning ideologically neutral?**

Reflective of the widespread belief that technology has inherent potential to transform and benefit society (Selwyn 2002c), the assumption that technology is a 'good thing' for education become 'common sense knowledge' (Guri-Rosenblit 2009; Kirkwood and Price 2014; Selwyn 2014). This blithe optimism is reflected across the policies, where the apparent benefits of e-learning are repeatedly presented as given, incontestable 'facts':

At the heart of the strategy will be the aim to realise the full potential of digital technology. (DfES 2003d: 15)

This strategy document [is] the start of an ongoing process to learn about, inform and promote the benefits of e-learning. (ELWa 2003b: 13)

[e-learning technologies] offer huge opportunities that we must exploit. (DfES 2005: 2)

Technological artefacts and systems are not value neutral however; instead, they embody particular values and ideologies (Feenberg 1991; Nissenbaum 2001). Thus, rather than being benign and value-free, e-learning tools and artefacts are instead ideologically-laden, and are inextricably entangled with, and are shaped by, the social, cultural, and economic aspects of society (Selwyn 2011b; Selwyn 2014). E-learning is thus a politically and ideologically driven site of contention that serves to perpetuate dominant values and interests (Selwyn 2014). It is, therefore, highly problematic to portray e-learning as an inherently ‘good thing’.

### **E-learning as a ‘technological fix’**

Neoliberal regimens frequently implement ‘technological fixes’ (Weinberg 1966; Rosner 2013) as sticking plaster ‘solutions’ to complex social, economic, and environmental issues (Harvey 2005; Calhoun and Derluigan 2011; Levidow et al. 2012). Technical fixes attempt only to deal with the surface manifestations of an issue or problem, rather than with its origins (Selwyn 2011b; Rosner 2013). For example, across the policies e-learning is repeatedly framed as a ‘solution’ to issues of social exclusion, rather than attempting to deal with its complexities and root causes (see chapter 5). E-learning is also promoted as a way to simultaneously cater for ever larger numbers of students, while lowering the costs of provision, rather than addressing what might alternatively be understood as a growing problem of under-resourcing of HE in the context of massification:

e-Learning offers particular opportunities for maximising flexibility and responsiveness in delivery within a mass post school education system with an increasingly diverse cohort of learners. (SFC 2006a:7)

A further troublesome characteristic of technical fixes is that, as well as failing to address the root causes of a problem or issue, they may have unplanned side effects. Indeed, history is littered with examples of where the application of a technical fix has had unintended consequences, has produced uneven or unequal results, or has replaced one problem with another. For example, while cars have transformed human mobility, they have had detrimental effects on the environment and on the social fabric of communities (see Nye (2006) and Rosner (2013) for further detailed examples). Yet in relation to e-learning, as Bulfin et al. (2015: 7) highlight, when such unintentional outcomes “don’t fit the logic of improvement”, they “tend to be bracketed out”. Indeed, across the policies no consideration is given to what might be the unintended, unfavourable, or unequal outcomes of the implementation of e-learning. For example, it has been proposed that technology may be contributing to the ‘dumbing-down’ of young people’s and intellectual and learning capabilities (Keen 2008; Bauerlein 2009; Carr 2010). In addition, the increasing proliferation

of online information has been accompanied by an increase in plagiarism in HE (McKeever 2006). Furthermore, while e-learning may potentially benefit some learners, for others it may reinforce, or even extend inequalities (see chapter 5).

## **Technological determinism**

Underpinning the policies is a technologically deterministic perspective that aligns with the general tendency to portray e-learning as “an integral and inevitable feature of ‘modern’ forms of education” (Selwyn 2014: 2). Technological determinism is the claim that technological development is a rational, objective, and inevitable process that drives social and cultural change (Bimber 1994; Smith and Marx 1994; Dusek 2006). Belief in technological determinism is “widely accepted in individualistic societies that embrace laissez-faire economics” (Nye 2006: 18). Technological determinism is also reflective of the wider common-sense perspectives on technology that prevail in popular culture and in the media (Wyatt 2007) and that pervade much of the discourse in relation to technology and education (Oliver 2011; Selwyn 2011b). Technological determinism may occupy a place on a spectrum between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ extremes. At the hard end of this spectrum is the belief that technology has intrinsic agency to affect and steer change, whereas at the soft end of the spectrum, while technology is deemed to have strong influence on social change, some scope for human intervention remains (Smith and Marx 1994). As will be demonstrated, the stance taken in the policies falls closer to soft determinism. Deterministic perspectives on technology can also be both optimistic and pessimistic (Wyatt 2007; Fuchs 2011). It is the more positive variant that tends to dominate contemporary discussions in relation to e-learning. For example, the apparently irreversible momentum of technological progress is repeatedly evoked in order to justify the need to integrate e-learning, while technology is framed as shaping education, rather than educational needs or problems driving technological developments:

Technology is leading change. (DfES 2003d: 12)

Digital media are having the greatest impact on the presentation and transmission of knowledge since Caxton invented the printing press. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 2)

It is impossible to imagine all the ways in which technology will impact on learning and teaching over the coming decade. (HEFCW 2008: 2)

A further idea frequently associated with technological determinism is the concept of ‘autonomy’: “the claim that technology is not in human control, that it develops with a logic of its own” (Dusek, 2006: 84). This aspect of technological determinism is evident across

the policies: technology is frequently reified as an autonomous entity that possesses a power and momentum of its own:

This is a long-term strategy that looks ahead to years when the technology will probably have evolved further. (DfES 2003d: 6)

Learners are bringing new expectations of the power of technology into higher education. (HEFCE 2005: 1)

In the ten year period covered by the strategy there will be developments that are as yet unthought-of. (HEFCW 2008: 1)

Despite its ubiquity within the realm of received wisdom, the determinist thesis has been widely discredited by social scientists and philosophers from various standpoints and traditions. For example, the *Social Construction of Technology* perspective purports that technologies emerge from interactions between social groups and actors (Pinch and Bijker 1984; Bijker et al. 2012). *Actor Network Theory* proposes that technology and society are inextricably intertwined and are thus mutually constitutive: without technology, there would be no society, and without society, there would be no technology (Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005). Proponents of the *Critical Theory of Technology* perspective that has influenced my own thinking maintain that technologies are shaped by the social, political, and historical context from which they emerge, and thus embody ideological and political values (Marcuse 1964; Habermas 1971; Feenberg 1991; Misa et al. 2004). From this perspective:

There can be no predetermined outcomes to the development and implementation of educational technologies. Instead any technological artefact is seen as being subjected continually to a series of interactions and 'negotiations' with the social, economic, political and cultural contexts that it emerged into. (Selwyn 2011b: 36)

Framing technology as an inevitable and autonomous force that education must respond to also obscures the ideological and political interests behind such changes (Fairclough 2000), as well as the fact that there may be both winners and losers as a result of the introduction of a technology (De Miranda 2009).

A further idea closely allied with utopian conceptions of modernisation and technological determinism is the idea that technological developments equate to social progress, a perception that has been widely held in Western societies since the Enlightenment (Sarewitz, 2009). This assumption is evident across the policies:

E-learning can take us a further step forward. (DfES 2003d: 1)

In many aspects of life outside education, technology has revolutionised the way we communicate, collaborate and do business [...]. These trends reinforce the need for a continuing system-wide approach to technology use in education. (Becta 2008: 8)

Yet equating technological change with progress is “one of the most misleading and dangerous aspects of technological determinism” (Wyatt 2007: 172). Indeed, simply making changes to education does not necessarily constitute progress or improvement (Fullan 2007). Furthermore, as Sarewitz (2009: 304) reminds us, technologies are not generally developed in order to achieve an improved quality of life; rather their primary purpose is often to expand economic productivity, grow consumer choice, and enhance competitiveness. Thus, economic growth “becomes a proxy for progress” with it becoming impossible to “isolate simple cause–effect relations between any given technology and human betterment”. As Sarewitz (2009: 304) also argues, “progress for some is erosion for others”, for example those whose jobs are displaced by technology.

### **New technologies = new pedagogies?**

Across the policies, technology is frequently portrayed as innately educational:

We want to do more to exploit the educational potential of the new technologies. (DfES 2005: 5)

New technologies clearly provide exciting opportunities for enhancement and innovation in learning. (HEFCE 2005: 5)

Becta’s goal is to develop a system which exploits the benefits of technology for learning. (Becta 2008: 24)

Yet it is nonsense to proclaim that technology is intrinsically educational, in the same way as we cannot describe a pen or blackboard as being so. Instead, it is the act of human interaction with technologies that renders them educational, or not.

E-learning is also purported to guarantee new pedagogical opportunities:

[e-learning enables the development of] new kinds of pedagogy. (DfES 2005: 28)

E-learning can [enable] new methods of teaching, assessment and support. (HEFCW 2007: 7).

It is also repeatedly heralded as offering transformative potential:

[We need to] ensure the potential of technology to transform learning is realised. (ELWa 2003b: 11)

ICT-based assessment has the potential to transform the way in which we examine learners' attainment. (DfES 2003d: 33)

[e-learning] can effect a genuine transformation of provision. (DfES 2005: 11)

Our primary rationale then for producing an e-learning strategy is to help institutions and practitioners explore the possibilities of transforming the future learning experience. (HEFCE 2005: 4)

This uncritical framing of technology as a guaranteed catalyst for pedagogical transformation is a further manifestation of technological determinism, and represents a technology-, rather than pedagogy-driven stance. As will be discussed in chapter 10, it is my contention that the use of technology in relation to HE should be underpinned by real educational problems and proven pedagogical principles. Furthermore, there is little evidence that e-learning is being used for the development of “new kinds of pedagogy” (DfES 2005: 28), or for “transformation of provision” (DfES 2005: 11); instead there is a gaping chasm between the enthusiastic rhetoric of e-learning as portrayed in the policies, and the more mediocre realities of e-learning in HE. Implementations of e-learning in HE have mainly been used to support rather than to transform practice, often replicating face-to-face teaching strategies, concerned with administrative tasks, or replicating behaviourist, content-driven pedagogical models (Conole 2004; Laurillard 2007a; Gonzalez 2009; Guri-Rosenblit 2009; Kirkwood 2011; Selwyn 2011b; Kirkwood and Price 2014). Successive Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) surveys of technology-enhanced learning use have indicated that the most common uses of VLEs and other learning technologies are for the dissemination of static content as a supplement to face-to-face teaching; for assessment submission; for online testing; and for plagiarism detection (Browne and Jenkins 2003; Jenkins et al. 2005; Browne et al. 2008; Browne et al. 2010; Walker et al. 2012; Jenkins et al. 2014). This absence of radical transformation is not unique to HE: although technological developments may be rapid, social and cultural changes tend to occur more slowly (Wessels 2010). Nor is it unique to the current epoch of e-learning. Educational technology has been characterised by a perpetual cycle of “hype, hope and disappointment” (Gouseti 2010: 351) whereby the anticipated impacts of technology on education fail to live up to expectations. Each of these cycles begins with great promises of the transformative potential of the technology. Despite this initial enthusiasm and high expectations, educators then go on to make only limited or inconsistent use of the technology and few substantive changes to education provision occur (Reiser 2001; Conole 2004; Gouseti 2010; Selwyn 2011b).

Across the wider discourse on HE it tends to be taken for granted that e-learning is somehow superior to ‘less modern’ approaches (Guri-Rosenblit 2009; Kirkwood and Price 2014; Selwyn 2014). This is perhaps no more apparent in the recent adoption of the term ‘technology enhanced learning’ which, unlike legacy terms such as ‘educational technology’ and ‘e-learning’, by definition implies that technology generates improvements or benefits (Kirkwood and Price 2014). This assumption that ‘e-learning is better’ pervades the policies:

[W]here ICT is used effectively lessons are better taught and students get better results. (DfES 2005: 4)

[A]ppropriate use of technology is leading to significant improvements in learning, teaching and assessment across the sector. (HEFCE 2009: 5)

Despite the pervasiveness of such claims, substantive evidence that e-learning leads to improvements in learning, or that it is more effective than more traditional teaching and learning approaches is simply not available (Trucano 2005; Guri-Rosenblit 2009). Indeed, it is notoriously difficult to empirically establish a cause and effect relationship that demonstrates that e-learning (or indeed any educational intervention) impacts on learning (Selwyn 2011b; Livingstone 2012; Kirkwood and Price 2014). Difficulties arise in determining what is meant both by impact, and by effectiveness (Oliver and Harvey 2002; Kirkwood and Price 2014) and because of the complex interplay between education, technology, and other social, cultural, economic, and political variables (Friesen 2009; Selwyn 2011b). Those large-scale or meta-studies that have attempted to examine impacts tend to produce mixed results (Trucano 2005; Guri-Rosenblit 2009; Selwyn 2011b). Furthermore, research into e-learning has been derided for numerous shortcomings including: deficiencies in relation to academic rigour and validity (Selwyn 2012; Kirkwood and Price 2013; Kirkwood and Price 2015); an absence of critical enquiry (Bennett and Oliver 2011; Selwyn 2011a); being technology-led rather than motivated by educational concerns (Kirkwood and Price 2013); focussing on matters of design and implementation (Bennett and Oliver 2011); being methodologically and ideologically biased towards reporting of positive outcomes (Lockee et al. 1999; Selwyn 2012); being dominated by micro level perspectives and neglecting meso level or macro level ones (Latchem 2014); homogeneity in theoretical traditions and methodologies (Friesen 2009; Selwyn 2012; Bulfin et al. 2014); and adopting a technologically deterministic stance (Oliver 2011). This absence of a robust evidence base means that it is impossible to trust the blanket assertions about the unquestionable benefits of e-learning articulated in the policies.

## **Educating the ‘net generation’**

Across the policies the need to modernise HE via e-learning is frequently framed with reference to the claimed technical proficiencies, expectations, and preferred learning approaches of what have been popularly and variously referred to as ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001), ‘millennials’ (Howe and Strauss 2007), the ‘net generation’ (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005; Tapscott 2008), and the ‘iGeneration’ (Rosen 2010):

Young people expect to use leading edge technologies. (DfES 2003d: 1)

Learners are bringing new expectations of the power of technology into higher education. (HEFCE 2005: 1)

‘[D]igital natives’ have high expectations about the pervasiveness of IT in their post-school education. (SFC 2007: 5)

Most potential students are already accustomed to using technology extensively in their everyday lives. (HEFCW 2008: 2)

Yet the available evidence suggests that young people’s use of technology is more limited in scope than is suggested by the narrative of the net generation (Bennett et al. 2008; Kennedy et al. 2008; Selwyn 2009; Helsper and Eynon 2010; Jones and Shao 2011; Rogers et al. 2011; Smith 2012). Neither is there evidence to suggest that millennials’ technological proficiency in social and leisure contexts automatically translates to an ability to learn effectively and meaningfully via technology (Bennett et al. 2008; Kennedy et al. 2008; Selwyn 2009; Helsper and Eynon 2010; Jones and Shao 2011; Rogers et al. 2011; Smith 2012). Furthermore, young people’s access to, and usage of digital technologies is strongly delineated along existing lines of inequality (see chapter 5).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the narrative of modernisation as evident across the policies is highly problematic. The apparent need to reform HE via technology is repeatedly invoked so as to emphasise and legitimise the need for e-learning, yet many of the assertions made in relation to the same are flawed. Although the apparent benefits of e-learning are repeatedly presented as given, incontestable ‘facts’, little evidence is available to support them. Furthermore, e-learning tools and artefacts are not value neutral; instead, they embody particular values and ideologies. E-learning is repeatedly framed as a sticking plaster solution for complex social problems, rather than attempting to deal with the complexities and root causes. I have also demonstrated that the policies are underpinned by a technologically deterministic perspective that frames technology and e-learning as inevitable and autonomous forces. This absolves the government and others in power of

responsibility for the changes that are imposed, while any potentially negative or unintended impacts of e-learning are not acknowledged.

This, and the preceding two chapters, have presented my ideology critique of the three overarching neoliberal master narratives underpinning the corpus as a whole. In the next three chapters, I focus in on the policies as individual texts, and present a CDA of each.

## CHAPTER 7: England

### Introduction

In the next three chapters, I present the findings from my second lens of analysis, a CDA of the thirteen policy texts, organised by jurisdiction:

- The current chapter presents my analysis of the seven texts issued in England;
- Chapter 8 presents my analysis of the three texts issued in Wales; and
- Chapter 9 presents my analysis of the three texts issued in Scotland.

Whereas the last three chapters critically analysed the trilogy of neoliberal master narratives emerging from the corpus overall, my focus now shifts, and I examine not only *what* is said in the policies, but also *how* these messages are presented and communicated. I also highlight variations over time, and across the UK's constituent jurisdictions. This aspect of my analysis complements the ideology critique presented in chapters 4, 5, and 6, and serves to further support my contention that the policies under investigation are underpinned by neoliberal ideology.

CDA sees the wider context for a text as essential to understanding it (Bloor and Bloor 2007; Van Dijk 2008). My critique of each text is therefore situated in the wider historical and socio-economic context for its development. I also examine the extent to which the three neoliberal master narratives are evident in each of the documents. The way in which policies are communicated and presented is as important as their content (Barnett 2000). In particular, policy discourse is frequently 'rhetorical', that is to say, it is intended to persuade and influence (Van Dijk 1998; Henriksen 2011; Fahnestock 2011). Rhetoric is also frequently deployed in relation to neoliberal ideology (Fairclough 2000; Fairclough 2010; Atkins et al. 2014). As I will demonstrate, some of the documents analysed are patently rhetorical, while others are less obviously so. Visual semiosis is also an important aspect of discourse and can influence how a text's message is communicated and interpreted (Bloor and Bloor 2007; Fairclough 2010; Wang 2014). I therefore also pay attention to the presentational aspects of the texts. In order to avoid excessive repetition my analysis presents most explanatory detail at the first instance of a particular rhetorical device; subsequent examples are discussed in less detail.

With seven relevant documents published between 2003 and 2013, England has by far the greatest volume of relevant e-learning policy discourse available for analysis (Figure 2). All of the documents considered were developed during New Labour's second and third terms

in government, although one (HEFCE 2011) was published after the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition had entered into power.



**Figure 2: E-learning policies in England, 2003-2013**

## England’s cross-sectoral e-learning strategy

The first set of documents analysed relate to England’s overall e-learning strategy. As cross-sectoral strategies, the documents make reference to the early years, schools, FE, HE, and skills sectors, as well as, in the case of DfES (2005) and Becta (2008), to children’s services. In line with the scope of the current study, my discussion is primarily focused on the aspects of the documents relevant to HE.

### *Towards a Unified e-learning Strategy*

In July 2003, mid-way through their second term in office, the UK’s Labour government – via the DfES – published *Towards a Unified e-learning Strategy*. (DfES 2003d). This was a nascent time for e-learning. New Labour had recently appropriated e-learning as a vehicle for advancing their agendas for ‘modernisation’ of government and the public sector; for ensuring the UK and England’s economic success in the ‘global knowledge economy’; and for realising a ‘strong civic society’ (see, for example DfES 2002; DfES 2003a; DfES 2003b; DfES 2003d). That same year HEFCE was in the process of developing its own e-learning policy, as were the Scottish Funding councils for FE and HE, and the National Council-ELWa in Wales. At the chalk face, e-learning in HE was beginning to shift from a fringe activity towards the mainstream (Oliver 2005).

In his Foreword, Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, sets the neoliberal tone for the proposed strategy, presenting e-learning as an inevitable autonomous entity, and as a key mechanism for achieving New Labour’s goals for upskilling the workforce, widening participation, and improving educational standards, with the ultimate aim being to grow the economy and improve competitiveness:

E-learning has the power to transform the way we learn, and to bring high quality, accessible learning to everyone – so that every learner can achieve his or her full potential [...]. It is also about the skills we increasingly need for

everyday life and work. In the changing world of the knowledge economy, ICT skills will help to boost productivity and competitiveness. (DfES 2003d: 1)

Barnett (2000: 88) suggests that, for New Labour, “the way a policy is projected is an essential part of the policy, much in the way that the design of a consumer durable is today part of the product itself”. In line with this, the document is ‘glossy’ in style: it is in colour and appears to have been professionally designed and typeset. The front cover displays photographs of people of varying ages and ethnic heritage using computers, implying that e-learning is equally available and appropriate for learners of all backgrounds and ages. This marketing style of presentation extends to the text, and exemplifies the tendency for New Labour rhetoric to be “promotional rather than dialogical” (Fairclough 2000: 12). Indeed, although it is purported to be a strategy consultation, the document more closely resembles a finalised strategy that is being marketed to the reader: the government’s vision for e-learning appears to have been decided, and the document decrees the actions that need to be carried out in order to achieve its aims. Similarly, while the document incorporates sixteen consultation questions, only two of these request feedback on the government’s description of, and aspirations for, e-learning; the remainder seek affirmation for the vision and actions presented.

The text is presented as short, numbered paragraphs interspersed with lots of headings, a presentational style that is typical of the policy genre, and that also serves as a rhetorical device that gives a sense of authority and validity (Finlayson 2007; Mete et al. 2010; Hall and Chambers 2012). Political rhetoric is frequently characterised by ambivalence between the inclusive and exclusive use of pronouns (Thomas et al. 2004; Bloor and Bloor 2007; Henriksen 2011). For example, Fairclough (2000) points out that in the neoliberal discourse of New Labour (and also in the discourse of Thatcherism that preceded it) there is frequently slippage between the use of the pronoun ‘we’ exclusively (when referring to government) and inclusively (when referring to Britain or to the British people). Across the current document, although the pronoun ‘we’ (as well as the possessive pronoun ‘our’) predominantly refer to the government, these pronouns are also used to refer to education providers, to education professionals, or to the general public, while at several junctures it is uncertain who is being referred to. Fairclough (2000) reasons that such vagueness is frequently employed by New Labour as a rhetorical strategy aimed at presenting the Party as speaking on behalf of ‘everyone’. In the current document, as well as in subsequent iterations of the strategy, similar opacity is frequently deployed as a mechanism for bolstering a sense of common responsibility for e-learning, and portraying consensus with

how it is framed. This contrasts with what might be expected in what is, after all, claimed to be a consultation document:

We need to combine the best of human and virtual teaching and mentoring capabilities while providing access to resources not available locally. We will make more use of online learning communities and intelligent tutoring systems for individualised learning. To bring the hardest to reach into collaborative learning we should be looking at the multi-layer Internet video games sector. (DfES 2003d: 55)

The lengthy document is tautologically, and unreservedly, positive about e-learning. Authoritative language is used to incessantly bombard readers with the apparently undeniable advantages of, and possibilities offered by e-learning, and to instruct them as to what it irrefutably ‘can’ and ‘will’ do:

E-learning can even reach out and re-engage people. (DfES 2003d: 7)

[E]-learning can help to improve attainment and raise standards. (DfES 2003d: 8)

E-learning will also provide the means to assess the new kinds of e-learning skills needed for life and work. (DfES 2003d: 32)

E-learning will help to unlock innovation in teaching and learning at all levels. (DfES 2003d: 47)

No evidence is provided or referred to in order to substantiate these lofty assertions, however. In a similar way, commanding language is repeatedly used to dictate what ‘must’, ‘needs to’, or ‘should’ be done:

Education leaders [...] must make e-learning affordable and sustainable. (DfES 2003d: 16)

[M]anagers will need to take a strategic approach. (DfES 2003d: 18)

The whole of the education and training workforce must be fully engaged in order to lead change and deliver effective e-learning. (DfES 2003d: 26)

There is liberal use of headings throughout the document. The impact of headings on the cognitive processing of texts, including impact on memory, comprehension, and interpretation is well established (Ritchey et al. 2008; Lemarié et al. 2012). Headings can also serve to emphasise or foreground aspects of a text by giving them prominence (McGregor 2004). Their constructions in the current document contribute to the overall sense that dialogue is not welcome:

Why is e-learning important. (DfES 2003d: 7). *By implication, e-learning must be important.*

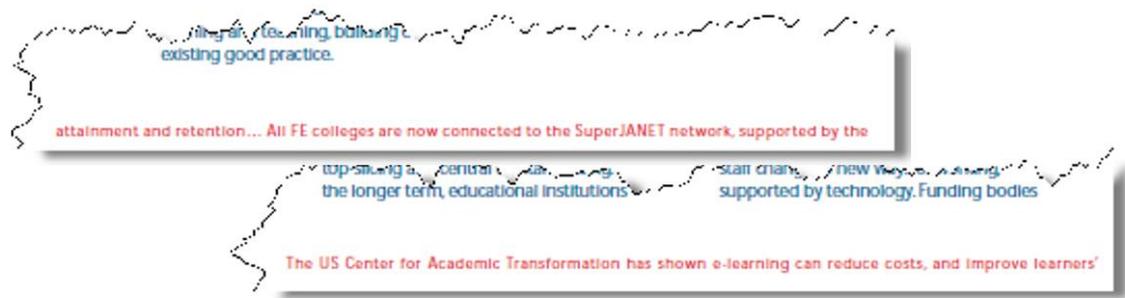
The value of e-learning (DfES 2003d: 8). *E-learning is valuable.*

The vision (DfES 2003d: 18). *Rather than 'The proposed vision' or 'What should the vision be?'*

Exploiting the technology (DfES 2003d: 36). *Reifies Technology as a 'thing' that can, and should, be exploited.*

A thriving market (DfES 2003d: 37). *The ecological metaphor 'thriving' implies that markets are natural.*

Throughout the document, short case studies, differentiated from the rest of the text via placement in coloured boxes, give examples of where e-learning has apparently been successfully employed. Although text boxes may seem like a benign presentational technique, New Labour frequently employ them as a rhetorical device (Fairclough 2000; 2010). First, as a mechanism for guiding or controlling how readers see issues; second as a promotional technique (the helpful, but directive clarity is frequently seen in advertising); and third as a pedagogical device (the presentation is also commonly used in educational texts, and its use in the current document constructs the reader as 'learner' and government as the more knowledgeable 'teacher'). In the same vein, what is described as a "running commentary" (DfES 2003d: 11) at the bottom of each page presents short soundbites, mainly comprised of facts and figures intended to illustrate the success of e-learning to date (Figure 3). This form of presentation acts both as a promotional and directive device. It emulates the scrolling 'News tickers' more commonly utilised in on television broadcasts. While news tickers are ostensibly a mechanism to present brief news updates and information, Fruttaldo (2014: 122) reasons that they are also employed in order to "legitimise the news". In a similar way, the facts and figures presented in the running commentary are deployed in order to reinforce and legitimise the information presented in the main text. Notwithstanding their mode of presentation, the 'evidence' for the benefits of e-learning presented via the two aforementioned mechanisms is mainly anecdotal. This is not untypical of New Labour. As Whitfield (2006: 12) attests "'evidence' and 'research' have been in short supply in New Labour's policy-making process". Furthermore, as Atkins (2011) notes, the use of anecdotes was a strategy frequently deployed in the discourse of New Labour as a powerful method for supporting claims: anecdotes tend to refer to 'real people' with whom readers can identify.



**Figure 3: Running commentary (DfES 2003d)**

As was established in chapter 3, the Third Way was fraught with contradictions. This carries through to the discourse of New Labour, which frequently attempts to reconcile seemingly antagonistic values and goals, which are often presented as pairs of terms. For example: ‘the individual and society’, ‘rights and responsibilities’, ‘economic success as well as social justice’, ‘enterprise with fairness’ (Fairclough 2000, Atkins 2011). Pairing terms in this way is problematic, however. First, although it draws attention to differences and incompatibilities between terms, at the same time it sets up equivalence between them; and second, since it says nothing about the relationship between them (Fairclough 2000). For example, as Harvey (2005: 41) points out, values of individual freedoms and social justice may be in conflict since:

Pursuit of social justice presupposes social solidarities and a willingness to submerge individual wants, needs, and desires in the cause of some more general struggle for, say, social equality or environmental justice.

There are numerous such examples of the juxtaposition of what may be conflicting or contradictory values and goals across the document. Here, for example, “employability and the UK’s international competitiveness”, and “quality of life and citizenship” are paired:

It makes sense for education and training to mirror these changes and to build the skills needed for employability and the UK’s international competitiveness, as well as quality of life and citizenship. (DfES 2003d: 8-9)

The following implies that a professional workforce equals fulfilled citizens:

[E-learning can] Generate a professional workforce and fulfilled citizens. (DfES 2003d: 5).

While in this example, participation in the global market is equated with aspirations for social justice:

If we develop a leading role in global e-learning, we will also be able to contribute to UNESCO's target to bring primary education to every child by 2015. (DfES 2003d: 12)

This is a rather problematic assertion, not least because markets do not tend to take issues of morality or justice into account (Sunstein 1999).

The document frequently bundles the claimed benefits of e-learning in protracted lists. Lists are traditionally grammatically employed in order to group similar or related items. Items in a list are therefore always part of an implicit category (Fairclough 2000; Fahnestock 2011). But in the current document the items placed in lists often have no connection other than they are being presented together. This is typical of New Labour discourse (Fairclough 2000) and is rather specious, as it sets up equivalence between items that might otherwise be differentiated, and also ignores the possibility that some of the elements of the list may be in conflict. The order of items in a list is also significant, with the first item tending to set the context for the rest (Fahnestock 2011). In the following example, items in the list are thus presented as equivalent and part of the same set, despite them being discrete issues, while some may even be deemed incompatible. Furthermore, the first item in the list: "raising standards", is something that most readers of the document are likely to consider to be a positive thing for education and society; thus by implication, the other items are framed as equally desirable:

[E-learning ] can contribute to all the Government's objectives for education – to raising standards; improving quality; removing barriers to learning and participation in learning; preparing for employment; upskilling in the workplace; and ultimately, ensuring that every learner achieves their full potential. (DfES 2003d: 4)

Here, e-learning is framed as an enabler for personalised learning, which is presented as a panacea for learners with diverse, and arguably completely unrelated, needs, who are nevertheless presented as part of an equivalent set:

[E]-learning can provide an individualised learning experience for all learners, including those who are disadvantaged, disabled, exceptionally gifted, have special curriculum or learning needs, or who are remote, or away from their usual organisation. (DfES 2003d: 9)

The document also makes extensive use of bulleted lists. Bulleted lists serve the same grammatical purpose as normal lists; they also draw attention to important information within a text (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). Like boxes, bulleted lists are frequently employed as a promotional and reader-directive rhetorical device (Fairclough 2000). In this case, for

example, it is decreed under no uncertain terms that e-learning can contribute to some of the Government's "most challenging objectives" including:

- Raising standards and improving attainment [...]
- Increasing retention and improving outcomes [...]
- Broadening choice [...]
- Providing support for children at risk [...]
- Increasing access to learning for disadvantaged communities [...]
- Removing barriers to achievement [...]
- Reducing the number of adults without level 2 qualifications [...]
- Ensuring wider participation and fairer access to higher education [...]  
(DfES 2003d: 7-8)

Yet no alternative viewpoints or discussion of the potential relationships or conflicts between the above priorities, which will apparently be simultaneously and equally addressed by e-learning, are provided.

Antithesis is another strategy frequently employed in the discourse of New Labour. Antitheses set up a contrast between words and phrases, which are often characterised by a shift from negative to positive, or vice versa (Fairclough 2000). Here, for example, the apparent constraints of traditional approaches are contrasted with what is thus framed as a more favourable approach:

We must create the conditions that allow the teaching profession to take more responsibility for the way teaching and learning is carried out, rather than being tied by the physical constraints of the classroom, the book and the timetable.  
(DfES 2003d: 22)

Another rhetorical device frequently employed by New Labour is what Clarke and Newman (1997: 48) refer to as "The cascade of change". These are lists of apparently externally imposed and inevitable changes that are invoked in order to persuade readers that e-learning is part of an inevitable process of change that we must all respond to: the world is changing, and thus education must too:

The benefits of e-learning connect with the changing world of work. Increasingly, online services are part of everyday life. It makes sense for education and training to mirror these changes and to build the skills needed for

employability and the UK's international competitiveness, as well as quality of life and citizenship. (DfES 2003d: 8-9)

Across the document, agents are repeatedly missing from sentences, which absolves the agent of responsibility by emphasising the effect, but eliminating the cause. For example, the strategy is presented as a mechanism to “prepare ourselves, through our education system, to cope with an ever-changing world” (DfES 2003d: 6). This obfuscates responsibility for the changes ‘we’ must apparently prepare ourselves for, despite many of them essentially being man-made, often by those in power.

Analogy, metaphor, and simile are common features of political discourse (Van Dijk 1997; Fairclough 2000; Musolff 2004; Carver and Pikalo 2008). Metaphors “link ideology with political discourse by providing models for making sense [of the world]” (Horner 2011: 33). New Labour's fondness for dynamic metaphors (O'Shaughnessy 2004) is evident across the document, where they are used to emphasise the inevitability of e-learning, and to add a sense of urgency to the need to implement it. For example it is claimed that “Technology is leading change at a fast pace” (DfES 2003d: 12), and that “E-learning can take us a step forward” (DfES 2003d: 1), while readers are asked to “Imagine what our education system could do, fuelled by e-learning” (DfES 2003d: 5). As Clegg et al (2003: 46) point out, such references to the “risk of being left behind” and the “need for speed and adaptability” are commonplace across neoliberal discourse, where they serve to “create an anxiety”, at both the level of the institution and the individual. Ecological metaphors are also frequently used across the document, and reflect a deterministic perspective towards technology. Here, for example, the use of the word ‘evolved’ presents technology as natural and inevitable: “This is a long-term strategy that looks ahead to years when the technology will probably have evolved further” (DfES 2003d: 6). The word ‘thriving’ is used several times across the document in relation to the market. For example, “We need a thriving market in educational software” (DfES 2003d: 37). This frames the market as a positive and natural entity: to ‘thrive’ is generally considered to be a positive state, more typically associated with living organisms.

A further strategy frequently employed in rhetorical discourse is ‘parallelism’: the repeated use of the same, or similar, syntactic structure across a text. This technique asks the reader to comprehend entities presented across a text in relation to each other, and is often used to emphasise that ideas are related, or are equally important. Parallelism also adds symmetry and rhythm, which can make a text more memorable and persuasive (Bonsiepe 1965; Henriksen 2011; Woods 2014). For example, across the current document e-learning is

repeatedly presented as intrinsically ‘offering’ a vast range of opportunities that by implication cannot be turned down, for example e-learning: “offers a wide range of online environments” (DfES 2003d: 9); “offers a wide range of design tools” (DfES 2003d: 9); “offers more creative ways of teaching” (DfES 2003d: 15); “offers a wide range of pedagogues” (DfES 2003d: 22); “offers the potential to increase efficiency” (DfES 2003d: 34); “offers individual empowerment” (DfES 2003d: 51); and “offers unprecedented, and managed, access to learning materials” (DfES 2003d: 51).

A well-known form of parallelism is the ‘three part list’, also known as ‘triple structure’ or ‘the rule of three’. Triple structure is frequently used by writers and speakers when making an important point: their pleasing rhythm makes three part lists persuasive and memorable (Thomas et al. 2004; Bloor and Bloor 2007; Henriksen 2011; Mooney and Evans 2015). As Jones and Stilwell Peccei (2004) note, the three part list is so powerful that it is even used by politicians when they have only one point to make, typified in New Labour’s frequently cited mantra ‘Education, education, education’. Examples of triple structure are widespread across the current document. For example it is employed to emphasise e-learning must be “Affordable, scalable and sustainable” (DfES 2003d: 37).

There is extensive use of use of presupposition across the document. Presupposition presents new ideas or assumptions as given ‘facts’. Presuppositions are a common feature of normal communication, and are often consciously or unconsciously used to achieve conciseness in discourse. However while prepositions may be valid and uncontentious, in some cases the assumptions presented as ‘given’ may be flawed or contested (Fairclough 2000; Henriksen 2011). Presuppositions are thus powerful, since they can be used to “efficiently incorporate a ‘truth’ into a text”, which can have “powerful persuasive effect” (Mooney and Evans 2015: 50). Contested prepositions frequently appearing across the corpus have already been introduced in chapters 4, 5, and 6, and include ‘globalisation’, the ‘knowledge economy’, and ‘flexibility’.

As well as demonstrating many examples of rhetorical discourse, examples of themes deriving from all three of the neoliberal master narratives are widespread throughout the document. Chapter 4 discussed neoliberalism’s faith in the doctrine of the free market. One of the proposed strategy’s seven action areas is “Building a better e-learning market” (DfES 2003d: 36). However, in this document the emphasis is primarily on the development of the UK’s commercial digital teaching and learning resources market – as opposed to encouraging market-based competition between English education providers, or encouraging participation in a global e-learning market – and, in line with New Labour’s

aspirations to grow PPPs, the desire to establish partnerships between education institutions and commercial software suppliers in this context. The document does include an ominous warning to the public sector, however:

The role of the market outside education is not yet clear. Will the private sector learn how to use e-learning before the public sector? That depends in part on the ability of the public sector to innovate and be responsive to its learners. (DfES 2003d: 11)

Although the establishment of a competitive education market is not directly referred to, the “needs” (DfES 2003d: 11) and “demands” (DfES 2003d: 15) of students, who apparently want “better value” (DfES 2003d: i) are foregrounded. Throughout the document e-learning is presented as a mechanism for “improving the quality of learning” (DfES 2003d: 7); for example by “Raising standards and improving attainment” (DfES 2003d: 4). Although the document does not present e-learning as a mechanism for directly reducing the costs of education, there is, however, an emphasis on the need to make e-learning “Affordable, scalable and sustainable” (DfES 2003d: 37), with the need to achieve “economies of scale” (DfES 2003d: 5) repeatedly stated.

While ‘classic’ neoliberal ideology espouses a ‘laissez faire’ attitude towards markets, as was discussed in chapters 3 and 4, neoliberal regimes in practice are often characterised by an increase in state control in parallel with the application of market mechanisms to public services. Initially at least, New Labour saw government as having an active role in managing markets for public services, although it deemed its purpose as to guarantee, rather than directly deliver, services (Martell 2004). In line with this approach, the DfES note that government will have a “strong role in implementing the strategy” (DfES 2003d: 43). However, the strategy makes it clear that the onus is on education institutions and educators to make e-learning happen. A priority area is “Developing the education workforce”, who “must be fully engaged in order to lead change and deliver effective e-learning” (DfES 2003d: 26). Educators are also placed within the realm of the competitive market: “We must create the conditions that allow the teaching profession to take more responsibility for the way teaching and learning is carried out” (DfES 2003d: 22) a notion that is further reinforced in plans to “reward” educators who use e-learning (DfES 2003d: 13) and to “link teachers’ and lecturers’ career development to their academic leadership in [e-learning]” (DfES 2003d: 28).

That an instrumental role for education takes precedence is clear. The proposed strategy presents e-learning as a mechanism for boosting provision of the vocational skills that the

government single out as “Shortage subject areas”, such as Science, Engineering, Mathematics, English as a second language, and Modern Foreign Languages (DfES 2003d: 23). An emphasis on individualism and individual responsibility is evident throughout. Readers are told, for example, that individuals “need to be responsible for [their] personal development” (DfES 2003d: 25) and that “e-learning can provide an individualised learning experience” (DfES 2003d: 25). The contested discourse of the knowledge economy is repeatedly invoked. Here, for example, it is alleged that if the education system was to be underpinned by e-learning then “Teaching could be more creative, developing new ways of teaching and learning for the 21st- century global knowledge society” (DfES 2003d: 12-13). Reflective of the wider inconsistencies in use (Rohrbach 2007), the knowledge economy is sometimes referred to as existing in the present, while at other junctures it is presented as part of the future.

‘Flexibility’ is another highly contested discourse that frequently has its roots in an instrumental agenda (see chapter 5). Across the document, parallelism is employed in order to present the repeated, but disparate notions of flexibility as part of a coherent whole. For example, readers are told of e-learning’s apparently inherent potential to “offer flexible learning on demand” (DfES 2003d: 9), to “[enable] greater flexibility of use and re-use” (DfES 2003d: 40); and to “facilitate new ways of working with teachers and support staff operating more flexibly” (DfES 2003d: 48), while a neoliberal agenda is clear in linkages between e-learning and the notion of the flexible and self-reliant worker: “The trend towards a more flexible workforce will continue [...] The individual will therefore need to be responsible for his or her personal development” (DfES 2003d: 34).

At several junctures e-learning is presented as an enabler of the government’s goals for widening participation:

E-learning has been shown to make a significant difference to [disadvantaged learners], sometimes bringing them in from the margins to full participation.

E-learning makes a vital contribution to widening access. (DfES 2003d: 22 - 23)

I argued in chapter 5 that motivations for widening participation increasingly have their roots in a neoliberal agenda rather than in any true pursuit of social justice or equality. Furthermore, although technology may present opportunities for more inclusive access to, and participation in, HE, technology may also present significant barriers to some students; yet this possibility is neither acknowledged nor attended to.

In line with the master narrative of modernisation, technology and e-learning are presented in deterministic terms throughout the document, as autonomous, unstoppable, and inherently positive forces:

E-learning has the power to transform the way we learn. (DfES 2003d: 1)

Technology is leading change at a fast pace. (DfES 2003d: 12-13)

At the heart of the strategy will be the aim to realise the full potential of digital technology. (DfES 2003d: 15)

Although the rhetoric of ‘transformation’ was not yet prominent in mainstream new Labour discourse, it is previewed here in the frequent reference to e-learning’s apparently inherent potential for transformation. In a further example of parallelism, readers are repeatedly instructed that e-learning can: “transform the way we teach and learn” (DfES 2003d: 7); “transform the way in which we examine learners’ attainment” (DfES 2003d: 33); and “transform the higher education landscape” (DfES 2003d: 52).

The importance of a ‘unified approach’, prominently highlighted in the title of the document, is repeatedly stated. Indeed, for Clarke, “There is one word that for me sums it all up. That word is ‘unified’” (DfES 2003d: 1). The emphasis on a unified approach takes a number of forms across the document, and while it has its roots in New Labour’s ‘Modernisation’ and ‘joined-up government’ rhetoric (Clark 2002; Ling 2002), it also connects to the neoliberal narratives of marketisation and instrumentality. First, it relates to an overall aim to “take a co-ordinated approach to joining up all DfES strategies and objectives” (DfES 2003d: 14). Second, unification is presented as a mechanism for achieving “economies of scale in combining approaches across organisations, sectors and communities” (DfES 2003d: 11), expressed for example in the aspiration to “Unify shareable e-learning resources and digital assets, through a national online databank, linking all sectors” (DfES 2003d: 25). Third, “Unifying learner support” is presented as a mechanism for enabling “seamless transition between school, college, work-based learning, community-based learning, university and lifelong learning” (DfES 2003d: 25), via provision of e-portfolios, management information systems and online guidance and diagnostics, the motivation for which is couched in terms of the ideology of individualism and personal responsibility since, “Such systems support learners in the personal management of their learning” (DfES 2003d: 25). While the concept of unification is employed in diverse contexts across the document, its repeated appearance via parallelism serves to present the discourse of unification as a coherent whole.

### ***Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children's Services***

In March 2005, the Government published *Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children's Services* (DfES 2005). New Labour's emphasis on social inclusion, economic success, and modernisation was ongoing, with their modernisation agenda now frequently expressed in terms of 'transformation', as articulated in the white paper *Transformational Government, Enabled by Technology*, which prioritised "customer-centric services, shared services and professionalism" (Cabinet Office 2005: 9). The retitling of the strategy from "Unified e-learning" to "Transforming Learning and Children's Services" is thus indicative of the government's overall agenda for transformation, while the addition of Children's services was a late development that reflected a modification in government structures (Plenderleith and Adamson 2009). The document does include a significant focus on HE however, and includes a section focused specifically on the sector.

The final strategy bears many similarities to the draft document in terms of its visual presentation, rhetorical style, and in its foundations in neoliberal ideology, although, as will be demonstrated, there are some important differences in emphasis. The Foreword, penned by Ruth Kelly, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, encapsulates the neoliberal ideology underpinning the strategy. Kelly presents e-learning as an autonomous entity that must be exploited in order to enhance quality and reduce costs, while she stresses that responsibility for educational development lies with individuals and their families:

Our plans for boosting performance and standards across education are far reaching and radical. We aim to put learners, young people – and their parents – in the driving seat, shaping the opportunities open to all learners to fit around their particular needs and preferences. In achieving these goals the effective use of interactive technologies is absolutely crucial and I am determined that we grasp them. [Technologies] offer huge opportunities that we must exploit. That means working with all the stakeholders [...] to ensure that we deliver quality and cost effective services. (DfES 2005: 2)

Echoing both the preceding consultation document, and the government's overarching agenda for aligning public services, Kelly underscores the importance of "Unifying our approach" (DfES 2005: 2). She then introduces what will be a key theme across the current strategy and beyond: 'personalised learning', and reinforces the government's plans for e-learning as a mechanism for advancing the government's agendas for inclusion, expanding and widening access, with the ultimate goal being economic growth:

Technology is the key to personalised learning [...]. Borrowing ideas from the world of interactive games, we can motivate even reluctant learners [...] New technologies can attract new kinds of learners into lifelong learning. Wider

access to these more compelling learning experiences will contribute to the ambitions of our Skills Strategy. (DfES 2005: 3)

Reflecting New Labour's broader agenda Kelly also places emphasis on establishing PPPs:

We are working together with industry to ensure an equitable solution to the potential digital divide. [...] [A]s demand increases, it becomes more attractive for the digital technology industry to invest in providing access. (DfES 2005: 3)

Finally, she makes it clear that while government is setting the direction, "everyone" has a responsibility to "play their part":

I want to work with all our partners, [...] with everyone playing their part. Government has to set the direction and encourage the approach, but we cannot do it alone. (DfES 2005: 3)

Many of the rhetorical devices demonstrated in the consultation are again evident. The document is written in the first person from the perspective of government; once more, the ambiguity about who 'we' refers to serves to create a sense of consensus and collective responsibility:

We can only harness the new technologies to our ambitions if we are clear about what we want, and how to use ICT to achieve it. A society in which every child, every learner, every citizen, has the opportunity to develop their potential, is feasible if we know how to exploit these technologies. In five years we can build the common ground that brings all our education and children's services to the critical baseline [...]. In ten years, building on the newfound capabilities of our workforces, our newly skilled graduates, and our new appetite for innovation, we could be anywhere – if we have the ambition and the imagination to go there. (DfES 2005: 64)

Like the consultation, the document is again highly promotional, both in its visual presentation and in its content, while also being dogmatic and dictatorial in tone. It is again in colour and appears to have been professionally designed and typeset. The front cover once more features children and adults from various ethnic backgrounds using technology. Numbered paragraphs portray a sense of authority and legitimacy. There is liberal use of authoritative headings that present the government's conception of e-learning as incontestable, such as "Why we need a focus on technology" (DfES 2005: 8), and "What this means for Higher Education" (DfES 2005: 64). Examples of where e-learning has apparently been successfully implemented are again used to reinforce the claims made. These are presented first as direct quotes from educators and students integrated within the main text. This is typical of rhetorical discourse, which often incorporates language that is attributed to other voices and texts (Fahnestock 2011). The examples presented are overwhelmingly positive about e-learning, but omit both contextual information, and the

voices of those who might have had a less positive experience, or who might present an alternative perspective. By using selective voices in this way, the reader is manipulated into believing that these perspectives are “more correct, legitimate, reliable, and significant” (McGregor 2004: 4). Here, for example, technology is presented as a mechanism for unequivocally saving time, despite the abundant evidence to the contrary (see chapter 4):

ICT saves me 15 hours a week, but I now do more than I could ever have done without ICT. (DfES 2005: 9)

While here, e-learning is presented as a definitive way to enable women to combine study with working in the home and raising children, over-simplifying the complex underlying issues, and omitting the alternative perspectives, and experiences relating to gender and e-learning that were discussed in chapter 5:

The benefit of studying with [e-learning] for me was its flexibility. The use of email and the other web-based resources enabled me to fit it in around looking after my children and my home. (DfES 2005: 9)

Further case studies and examples that present a ‘Situation’, ‘Key actions’, and ‘Impact’ are displayed in boxes independent of the main text. Despite being laconic and often anecdotal, these examples are nevertheless used to justify the changes being proposed.

Lists and bulleted lists again bundle together the supposed benefits of e-learning which, as was shown earlier, is reader-directive, and also implies equivalence between items in the list, and thus may omit important distinctions and potential contradictions. Bulleted lists are also employed as a promotional device, presenting ‘headline’ facts and figures in order to market the strategy.

Once again, dynamic metaphors generate a sense of inevitability and urgency:

Our third priority, therefore, is to do all we can to accelerate the move to the next generation of e-learning. (DfES 2005: 5)

[W]e must keep the curriculum moving, to take advantage of new methods. (DfES 2005: 6)

The ‘cascade of change’ is again repeatedly evoked in order to persuade the reader that e-learning is just one of the many inevitable changes in the world that education must therefore simultaneously accept and respond to:

[N]ew technologies are changing the way that people interact and do business. (DfES 2005: 57)

Here, the rather evocative stock phrase “for the sake of today’s children” implies that to fail to utilise technology for learning and teaching would constitute a grave disservice to young people:

For the sake of today’s children and learners, who are increasingly mobile, impatient to learn more and to learn it better, we must fully exploit the facilities already there and accelerate reform. (DfES 2005: 13)

Parallelism is again used across the strategy to reinforce: the phrase “we want” appears 65 times for example, while triple structure is again frequently employed to persuasive effect. For example:

For teachers, lecturers and tutors it means easy and efficient ways of keeping in touch, giving feedback on students’ progress, and managing marking and assessment. (DfES 2005: 2)

Once more, the three neoliberal master narratives are omnipresent. The government’s faith in the market is clear. The need to “support innovation in the market” (DfES 2005: 6) is stressed once more, while students are repeatedly framed as consumers, who, for example, “increasingly expect easy online access to their course resources” (DfES 2005: 10). E-learning is also presented as a mechanism for achieving “efficiency and effectiveness” (DfES 2005: 15). In particular, the need to enable reuse of digital learning resources across sectors is stressed at several junctures; however no mention is made of the complexities associated with this aspiration, (as discussed in chapter 4) or how they might be addressed. E-learning is again repeatedly presented as a definitive mechanism for improving quality: “The evidence is that where ICT is used effectively lessons are better taught and students get better results” (DfES 2005: 4); yet no actual evidence is presented in support of such claims. Educators are again framed as actors in the market, and as passive agents who are acted on:

We must also ensure that teachers, lecturers and practitioners are motivated by their managers to make professional use of ICT. Recognition and rewards for effective e-learning work, appropriate career development opportunities and better accreditation of good practice will provide the right environment for teachers, lecturers and support staff. (DfES 2005: 32)

Reflective of the discrepancies between neoliberalism in theory and neoliberalism in practice, the quasi-market approach initiated in the consultation document continues, with the government stating that “Decisions should continue to be made at local level, but within a national framework of aims, priorities, responsibilities and standards” (DfES 2005: 12).

The government’s instrumental framing of education is manifest to varying degrees across the strategy. For example, in a continuing emphasis on establishing PPPs:

We want [the ICT industry] to have a voice in our future plans at all levels. (DfES 2005: 27)

Partnerships between universities and industry will help develop courses that better equip graduates with the skills appropriate for a wide range of IT careers. (DfES 2005: 54)

As I established earlier, the consultation document made numerous references to e-learning's role in developing human capital. In the current document, readers are again told that technology "is ideal for helping learners develop the skills they need for the knowledge-based economy" (DfES 2005: 4). Overall, however, there is less emphasis on upskilling and employability in the final strategy than in the consultation, perhaps due to the document's broadening in focus to include children's services. An emphasis on the individual continues however, with the need for "Personalisation and choice" (DfES 2005: 15) stressed at several junctures. E-learning is again presented as a mechanism for widening participation and, in a rather nebulous attempt to reconcile social justice and free market capitalism, is now presented in the context of the creation of new markets:

[e-learning] innovations could help to widen participation in higher education at home, and overseas, while stimulating demand from learners who want something other than the traditional campus-only experience. (DfES 2005: 53).

E-learning is again deemed to have a role in achieving inclusion and facilitating social mobility, and is once more linked to the notion of personal responsibility. For example, readers are told that e-learning "has particular impact for those who might be excluded or even unwilling to access learning" (DfES 2005: 27) and that it can ensure that "everybody has the opportunity to develop their potential" (DfES 2005: 10). The contested discourse of flexibility is again omnipresent, with the need for "more flexible learning" repeatedly referred to (DfES 2005: 26).

The narrative of modernisation permeates the document:

[The actions proposed] provide a powerful focus for using ICT to modernise education. (DfES 2005: 16)

It is crucial that we fully examine the potential for technology to modernise the curriculum and its assessment. (DfES 2005: 29)

The need for a 'joined-up' approach is again repeatedly stressed. For the government, "There are too few economies of scale" (DfES 2005: 4), thus the document prioritises mechanisms for cross-sector sharing of resources, in order to "get better value" (DfES 2005: 30). Unification is again also linked to the ideology of individual responsibility, for example, it is asserted that integrated support between the sectors will enable people "to take more

responsibility for their own educational development” (DfES 2005: 23). Modernisation is also couched in terms of reform of public education to become more like the private sector: “Private companies have long used technology to modernise their training methods. The public sector can learn from their experience” (DfES 2005: 10).

A technologically deterministic stance is again evident across the document, with technology presented as autonomous, inevitable, and as having an undeniably positive impact on education. Indeed, the strategy’s metaphorical title suggests that technology is an entity in itself to be harnessed and exploited. Within the document, it is prosaically asserted that “Digital technology is already changing how we do business and live our lives” (DfES 2005: 4), while readers are told that there is a need to “exploit the educational potential of new technologies”. Metaphors are again utilised to persuasive effect, for example in stressing the claimed imperative to “accelerate the move to the next generation of e-learning” (DfES 2005: 5). Echoing the wider agenda, and also implicit in the title of the strategy, e-learning’s potential for transformation is reinforced via parallelism, for example readers are instructed that e-learning can “Transform teaching, learning and help improve outcomes” (DfES 2005: 4) “transform the work of front-line staff” (DfES 2005: 33) and can “transform the experience of learning for all learners” (DfES 2005: 27).

### ***Harnessing Technology: Next Generation Learning***

In 2007, just two years after the publication of *Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children’s Services* (DfES 2005), the recently established Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) commissioned Becta to “review and refresh” the strategy (Becta 2008: 5). *Harnessing Technology: Next Generation Learning* (Becta 2008) was published in July 2008. The political and economic context had changed somewhat. Gordon Brown was now leader of the Labour party, while the devolved nations had, in 2007, elected nationalist or Labour-nationalist coalitions into government, toppling Labour’s UK-wide stronghold. Although Brown had promised the electorate “a new government with new priorities” (Brown 2007: para. 14), notwithstanding some differences in emphasis, his ministry continued on the trajectory initiated by Blair (Atkins 2011). Brown’s short reign as Prime Minister was dominated by the global financial crisis. His government saw HE as key to lifting the UK out of recession, and in a powerful statement of HE’s perceived economic remit, demerged the DfES and placed HE in DIUS (2007-2009), and later in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009-present). In addition, the Leitch Review had

emphasised that HE had an important role to play in enabling the UK to “become a world leader in skills” (Leitch 2006: 2).

In their joint Foreword, Jim Knight, then Minister for Schools and Learners, and Bill Rammell, then Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, echo their predecessors’ neoliberal perspectives on e-learning, presenting it as a mechanism for facilitating economic growth; achieving individual success and prosperity; and contributing to social cohesion:

For our country to compete in the future we need to significantly improve our learning, upgrade our skills and develop our knowledge and understanding. [DCSF and DIUS] see technology as a vital tool to help achieve our ambitions. [...] In some cases this learning is an investment for the future; in others it is more informal; but importantly it can lead to greater productivity and prosperity, personal fulfillment, and a stronger community and a fairer society. (Becta 2008: 3-4)

The strategy is even more promotional in its visual presentation than its earlier iterations. It is again in colour and appears have been professionally designed, and this time incorporates lots of photographic images and white space. Many of the rhetorical strategies already referred to are evident once more. The text is presented in the formal policy style of short, numbered paragraphs interspersed with authoritative headings, and is written in the first person, and yet again, ambiguities about as to who is being referred to by ‘we’ imply common responsibility for the strategy and agreement with its contents.

Boxes are once again used to present supplementary information and anecdotal case studies, while lists yet again present items that might otherwise be considered separately as equivalent:

The challenge now is to engage management to provide leadership in exploiting this infrastructure, to support distance and work-based learning, widen participation, attract overseas students, and provide a more integrated approach to the management of information across the university or college. (Becta 2008: 30)

There is also liberal use of persuasive three part lists, for example “Technology has a central role to play in enabling services to be more innovative, responsive and coherent” (Becta 2008: 3).

The ‘cascade of change’ is again employed at several junctures in order to present e-learning as part of a wider process of inevitable change, with the apparent need to adopt e-learning

justified by making reference to changes in what are arguably unrelated areas of life. For example:

[T]echnology has revolutionised the way we communicate, collaborate and do business. Major advances supported by technology have taken place in public services such as health care. Information and communication technologies are now fast, cheap, easy to use, widely available, increasingly mobile, personal, and above all, powerful. These trends reinforce the need for a continuing system-wide approach to technology use in education. (Becta 2008: 8)

Further to its rhetorical style, there is once more an obvious alignment between the strategy and the wider neoliberal agenda, although there are some notable shifts in focus from the earlier iterations. The spotlight on markets continues, with the need for the “Development of a coherent and growing market for educational ICT products and services” (Becta 2008: 69) stressed. In a significant modification in language that is reflective of the wider policy discourse on public services (Whitfield 2006) and HE (Williams 2013), students are now unashamedly referred to as ‘clients’. The reader is told for example that the education and training system needs to become “more demand-led, client focused and personalised” (Becta 2008: 28). This shift in language use not only reinforces the notion of student as consumer, but also frames students as clients to be looked after and cared for, eroding any sense of dialogue between students and educators or shared responsibility for their learning (Williams 2013).

As in the previous iterations of the strategy, it is asserted that “where economies of scale can be achieved [blended and online provision can] deliver capacity to meet greater demand” (Becta 2008: 16). There is also a continued emphasis on the reuse of digital resources in order to “help drive down costs” (Becta 2008: 39). While on one hand, the strategy presents education as a commodity to be bought and sold in the free market, on the other, the government’s intention to retain overall control is clear, with the “High-level performance management framework” for the strategy (Becta 2008: 48) prescribing the expected roles, activities, and indicative measures of success for Government (via DCSF and DIUS), Government agencies (including the HE funding councils), and education providers.

That education’s instrumental purpose takes precedence is clear. While the 2005 strategy had not placed its emphasis on upskilling and employability, e-learning’s role in “Improving the skills of the population” (Becta 2008: 16) is a strong theme in the revised strategy, where it is presented as a mechanism for investment in one’s own human capital: “Knowledge and skills represent an investment in the future [...] technology enables people to study for new qualifications or upgrade their skills” (Becta 2008: 14). There is for the first time, however,

a (presumably unintentionally ironic) acknowledgement that: “Some people learn for their own interest or self-fulfilment” (Becta 2008: 16).

The document emphasises the need to enable “universal access to technology” (Becta 2008: 29). The rhetoric of universal access is not new, having been an early priority for New Labour that emphasised both the social and economic importance of access to technology:

Universal internet access is vital if we are not only to avoid social divisions over the new economy but to create a knowledge economy of the future which is for everyone. (Blair 2000: para. 51)

However this rather simplistic perspective is highly problematic in the context of the e-learning strategy, since it frames a lack of access to technology as a primary factor in preventing participation; although the ‘digital divide’ may be a barrier for some, overall, the factors preventing participation are far more complex and multifaceted (see chapter 5). The apparently intrinsic flexibility of e-learning is again repeatedly referred to, both in relation to provision of “flexible delivery and pathways” (Becta 2008: 28) as well as a mechanism to respond to the “more flexible and customised forms of learning that employers need” (Becta 2008: 16).

Mirroring the government’s growing concern with the need for ‘Personalisation of services’ (Cabinet Office 2008), the ‘personalised learning’ theme introduced in the preceding documents takes centre stage in the revised strategy, and is referred to throughout. Also introduced in this document is the government’s commitment to ‘Learner entitlement’: a rather vague concept that appears to encompass access to personalised learning, information, support, and choice for all learners.

The narrative of modernisation again underpins the policy:

Achieving a modern world-class education and skills system [...] is essential to ensuring the UK’s global competitiveness. (Becta 2008: 5).

[Technology is] a core tool in a modern education and skills system. (Becta 2008: 23).

In line with this narrative, deterministic attitudes to technology pervade the document. For example, readers are instructed that “Technology has – and will always have – huge potential to change things for the better” (Becta 2008: 6). Technology is even claimed to be “a natural part of most families’ and children’s home environment” (Becta 2008: 34), despite, as established in chapter 5, a lack of access to technology being a major, and well-established, barrier to participation. Indeed, the digital divide is highlighted elsewhere in the document

as an issue that needs to be addressed, although there is no discussion as how this might be achieved. Although retained in the strategy's title, and as will be discussed later, mirroring some of the other recently published policies (for example HEFCE 2005; SFC 2006a; HEFCW 2007; SFC 2007; HEFCW 2008) there is a shift from the emphasis on *transformation* of teaching and learning underpinning the government's previous strategy documents towards an overall focus on *embedding* e-learning, and on provision of blended learning.

As with the earlier documents, there is an emphasis on the need for a "joined-up" approach (Becta 2008: 31). While the previous iterations of the strategy made only passing reference to parallel developments elsewhere in the UK, the current document makes specific reference to the intention to "work with the devolved administrations and relevant supporting agencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to ensure alignment and bring coherence and synergy to UK-wide developments" (Becta 2008: 42). This focus on unity may be attributed in part to New Labour's wider efforts to compensate for the impacts of devolution and retain a uniform political message across the UK (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006; Laffin and Shaw 2007).

Notwithstanding the policy's overall alignment with neoliberal ideology, it is noteworthy that the document does refer to the need to ensure environmental sustainability in relation to the use of technology in education:

Becta will develop approaches to technology infrastructure that encourage architectures which use less power and allow users to make better use of devices and technology which negate the need for energy consumption in other ways, such as remote working. (Becta 2008: 40)

## **HEFCE Strategy for e-learning**

The second set of English policy documents analysed relate first to the development and revision of HEFCE's e-learning strategy, and were developed and issued in parallel with the cross-sectoral e-learning strategy documents considered in the previous section. Although it is not a policy document per se, I also review the Online Learning Task Force (OLTF) report: *Collaborate to Compete. Seizing the Opportunity of Online Learning for UK Higher Education* (HEFCE 2011).

### ***Consultation on HEFCE e-learning Strategy***

In July 2003, HEFCE initiated a *Consultation on HEFCE e-learning strategy* (HEFCE 2003a). As noted earlier, New Labour had identified e-learning as a key vehicle for modernisation, achieving global competitiveness, and dealing with social exclusion.

Specifically in relation to HE, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003c) had directed HEFCE to “embed e-learning in a full and sustainable way within the next ten years” (DfES 2003c: 64). The policy therefore formed part of HEFCE’s overall commitment to e-learning as articulated in their most recent strategic plan (HEFCE 2003b). HEFCE also intended to ensure that their strategy for the HE sector was aligned with England’s overall e-learning strategy, noting that “[the national strategy] provides the context for our proposals” (HEFCE 2003a: 1). Also contextually relevant was the government’s recent £62 million investment into HEFCE’s flagship – but soon to be disbanded – e-learning initiative, UKeU.

The document is overall less visually and rhetorically promotional than the Government strategy documents discussed in the previous section. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, it does bear many similarities in that it is authoritative and dogmatic in tone, and in its clear alignment with neoliberal ideology.

The text is written in the first person from the perspective of HEFCE, although unlike the DfES and Becta documents considered earlier, ‘we’ is nearly always used exclusively, and clearly refers to HEFCE. Numbered paragraphs and a formal style of writing give the document a sense of validity. As with the government consultation, the level of detail and authoritative language give a sense that the strategy is more or less finalised, although the consultation questions are framed such that they open up more scope for dialogue than those included in the cross-sectoral consultation.

Whereas the government’s strategy consultation (DfES 2003d) tautologically promoted the government’s views on the perceived benefits of e-learning, HEFCE’s consultation places less emphasis on repeatedly documenting advantages, and – in comparison with the government consultation at least – takes a more balanced stance. Readers are told, for example, that “We do not yet fully understand all the impacts that new technologies may have on learning and teaching” (HEFCE 2003a: 4). The need to build upon research evidence is stressed; indeed a strand of the proposed strategy is dedicated to research. It is also noted that while “Innovation in learning and teaching may increase quality and standards” it “can also pose challenges” (HEFCE 2003a: 4). Apart from making reference to work underway via the UKeU, the University for Industry, Learndirect, and in the funding of New Labour’s Foundation degree prototypes, no reference is made to e-learning as an enabler for lifelong learning or widening participation. Although e-learning is deemed to have potential in workplace learning, and while the need for flexibility is foregrounded in the inclusion of an objective to “Explore the use of credit systems in e-learning delivery in order to enhance flexibility of provision” (HEFCE 2003a: 10), there is not a strong emphasis on employability

or flexibility. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of a neoliberal ideology underpinning the document. In particular, the drivers for e-learning are presented as being primarily driven by the need to marketise and modernise English HE. The document stresses the potential of technology to “provide global delivery, new HE markets and partnerships with the private sector” (HEFCE 2003a: 2) and places particular emphasis on provision of “wholly e-based learning” (HEFCE 2003a: 2) with UKeU deemed to have a pivotal role as a conduit for the same. The need for e-learning is also rationalised by the apparent imperative for HE to respond to “student and employer demand” (HEFCE 2003a: 2). While it is not claimed that e-learning can directly achieve cost savings, the requirement to reduce costs is, however, implicit in the focus on the “importance of scalability” (HEFCE 2003a: 5), and in plans to enable reuse of digital learning resources. The proposed objectives and associated actions detailed in the draft strategy are comprehensive, and while directed towards HEFCE, Jisc, the HEA and other government agencies, the emphasis is on directing and steering the work of the institutions.

In relation to modernisation, a deterministic stance to technology is evident throughout. Here, for example, a lengthy ‘cascade of change’ that frames technological development as an autonomous force is employed in order to justify the need to adopt e-learning:

[T]he internet and use of new technologies are changing the total operation of HE. Learning and teaching are changing as we explore the possibilities presented by new technologies for example in communications, and the creation and use of databases and digital resources. But these technologies are also bringing about new approaches in research, libraries and resources, and administration. Change therefore may come not just from explicit focus on technologies relating to learning and teaching, but from pervasive impacts and changes in other HE functions. In addition, students’ expectations and experiences are changing because of their rising e-literacy. And finally employers are increasingly exploring e-based training in the workplace and particularly in e-commerce. (HEFCE 2003a: 2)

Echoing the government’s ‘joined up’ services rhetoric, HEFCE emphasise their intention to draw upon the DfES strategy to ensure “connectedness across Government and other education sectors” (HEFCE 2003a: 1).

### ***HEFCE Strategy for e-learning***

In March 2005, HEFCE published the *HEFCE Strategy for e-Learning* (HEFCE 2005) As noted earlier, New Labour were continuing to prioritise economic growth, social inclusion, and transformation of public services. The 10-year strategy up to 2015 was intended to be specific to the needs of English HE while remaining aligned with the cross-sectoral strategy (DfES 2005). The two strategies ended up being less well aligned than was intended,

however, partly as a result of the late restructuring of the DfES strategy to include a focus on children's services (Plenderleith and Adamson 2009). In particular, whereas the DfES strategy echoes the government's overarching transformation of services agenda, the HEFCE strategy places its emphasis on embedding e-learning. An important contextual development since the circulation of the consultation was the high profile disbandment of UKeU. As I noted earlier, HEFCE had invested significant government funding into the development of the UKeU, and the e-learning strategy consultation had identified UKeU as a key platform for provision of e-learning to a global market. Earlier that year, the *House of Commons Education and Skills Committee report on UKeU* (House of Commons 2005) directly attributed UKeU's demise to its failure to adopt an adequately market-orientated approach. The Committee's scathing report stressed that the Government would be keeping a close rein on e-learning in the future, noting the important role of Government "in providing support, information and guidance for e-learning" and stressed that "an overarching national strategy for e-learning is vital to ensure consistency, coherence, and clarity of purpose in developments across the sector" (House of Commons 2005: 4). While the government blamed the failure of UKeU on poor business practices, it is notable that some of those involved in UKeU have since indicated that its failure might be attributed in part to the "mismatch between those with more of a business-orientated vision for UKeU and those more interested in the academic aspects and the potential educational innovation" (Conole et al. 2006: 136). HEFCE's strategy glosses over what had been an embarrassing debacle, simply stating that they are working on the "restructuring" of UKeU and the transfer of its activities to the HEA and to individual HEIs (HEFCE 2005: 3). But as Plenderleith and Adamson (2009: 8), e-learning policy advisors to HEFCE, note, it is likely that the fate of UKeU had significant bearing on the development of the final HEFCE strategy:

HEFCE was aware of a 'cold wind blowing through e-learning' and a certain scepticism, disillusionment and disenchantment in the sector with the notion of e-learning as a delivery strategy. If the final strategy document is perceived as more inward-looking than outward-projecting, more consolidative than visionary, more tentative than bold, it is in this context that those judgments should be viewed.

As with the consultation that preceded it, the policy is formal and business-like in its presentation. Visually it follows the usual 'corporate style' of HEFCE policy documents and circulars. The document is authoritative in tone, and is written in the first person from the perspective of HEFCE, with text presented in short, numbered paragraphs. There are again fewer examples of the New Labour platitudes and rhetorical devices so prevalent in the English cross-sectoral strategies discussed earlier. Overall, however, the final strategy

retains a clear and strong overall alignment with the wider neoliberal agenda initiated in the consultation, although there are some notable shifts in emphasis. In the Foreword, HEFCE's Learning and Teaching Director, Liz Beaty, sets out the policy's key take-home messages: learner expectations are driving change; e-learning needs to become embedded; while HEFCE are setting the agenda it is the responsibility of the HEIs to make it happen; and the importance of a 'joined-up' approach:

Learners are bringing new expectations of the power of technology into higher education. [...] Our goal is to help the sector use new technology as effectively as they can, so that it becomes a 'normal' or embedded part of their activities. That does not mean telling universities and colleges what their aims for e-learning should be, nor how they should go about reaching them. But it is about describing overall aspirations for how e-learning can transform learning and teaching, and about supporting institutions in setting their own visions and plans. [...] We will seek to learn from and get the best out of joined-up approaches to the exploration of e-learning, working with the DfES e-learning strategy. (HEFCE 2005: 1)

A significant shift in focus is the strategy's somewhat diluted emphasis on the market. The perceived potential for English HE to compete in the global HE market was presented in the consultation as a central driver for e-learning; yet just two years on, and perhaps an indication of the more sober climate in the aftermath of UKeU's collapse, there is no explicit mention of markets. A focus on the student as consumer is retained however, articulated for example in the need to "meet the needs of learners" and, reflecting the government's overall emphasis on personalisation of services, to advance "the flexibility and personalisation of learning" (HEFCE 2005: 4). Educators are again portrayed as actors in the market, with skills in e-learning to be "recognised in their roles and responsibilities and in reward structures" (HEFCE 2005: 9).

As with the consultation, e-learning is not presented as a cost saving measure in itself; however the aspiration to cut costs is implicit in continued plans to "Promote the sharing of learning technology and resources across the HE sector and between sectors" (HEFCE 2005: 4). Similarly to the consultation, the document is in some respects inward looking, with the strategy's objectives presented as actions for HEFCE and its agencies. Moreover, on one hand HEFCE claim a 'laissez faire' approach:

[O]ur strategy is not prescriptive about the particular form or use that e-learning is put to in institutions, but supports institutions' own chosen e-learning missions. (HEFCE 2005: 5)

Yet on the other hand, the strategy's "Measures of success" dictate exactly what the institutions are expected to achieve:

Students are able to access information, tutor support, expertise and guidance, and communicate with each other effectively wherever they are. They are able to check and record their achievement in a form designed for multiple uses to enable personal and professional development. (HEFCE 2005: 9)

HEFCE make clear that HE's role is fundamentally instrumental. Whereas the consultation had not identified a role for e-learning in advancing the economy, e-learning is now presented as crucial in order to "support progression and lifelong learning" (HEFCE 2005: 4) and in advancing "workplace learning and hence the relevance of learning to employers and employees" (HEFCE 2005: 4). No references are made to social inclusion or widening participation however.

The narrative of modernisation is evident throughout. Readers are assertively informed, for example, that "New technologies clearly provide exciting opportunities for enhancement and innovation" (HEFCE 2005: 5). HEFCE's commitment to New Labour's 'unification' project is evident in plans for "joining up our strategy with those of other sectors" (HEFCE 2005: 6).

As I demonstrated earlier, the government's transformation agenda was a key theme running through the concurrently published cross-sectoral strategy (DfES 2005). Although a focus on transformation is also evident in HEFCE's strategy, there is overall more emphasis on need to "normalise" (HEFCE 2005: 4) and "embed" (HEFCE 2005: 10) e-learning, which is reinforced via parallelism throughout the document. As will be shown in chapter 9, a preference for embedding over transformation was evident in the Scottish strategy (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003) that was released in parallel with HEFCE's 2003 consultation. Although policy transfer in the UK following devolution has tended to be from England to the devolved nations (Trench 2008; Cairney et al. 2012) this is perhaps an unusual indication of policy transfer from the Scottish to the English context.

### ***Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through the use of Technology. A Revised Approach to HEFCE's Strategy for E-learning***

In March 2009, HEFCE published *Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through the use of Technology. A Revised Approach to HEFCE's Strategy for E-learning* (HEFCE 2009). The document was intended to "build on" the 2005 strategy, and "focuses on enhancing learning, teaching and assessment through the use of technology" (HEFCE 2009: 1).

Much had happened economically, politically, and technologically in the short time since the publication of the first iteration of the strategy, so although planned in advance (HEFCE had stated their intention to evaluate their strategy every three years) the review was timely.

As I noted earlier, the UK was in recession; there had been a change in Government leadership and a restructuring of government departments; and the devolved nations had elected nationalist or Labour-nationalist coalition governments into power. There had also been significant technological developments since the publication of the 2005 strategy. First, in the shift from the ‘read-only’ nature of the first generation of the internet, to the possibilities for user-generated content enabled by Web 2.0 (Alexander 2006; Greenhow et al. 2009). There had also been an explosion in interest in HE in the potential of mobile learning (Kukulka-Hulme and Traxler 2005; Sharples et al. 2005); virtual worlds (Collins et al. 2008; Baker et al. 2009); and social networking (Alexander 2008), with some commentators proclaiming the demise of the VLE (Stiles 2007; Clay et al. 2009).

Whereas HEFCE’s 2003 consultation was mainly concerned with promoting e-learning’s role in the marketisation of English HE, in the aftermath of the UKeU’s collapse the market was not a key focus of the 2005 strategy. Marketisation returns to the centre stage in the revised strategy, however, where readers are told that:

Effective use of technology is vital if we are to maintain the world-class provision of UK higher education [...] attracting overseas students, establishing campuses in other countries. (HEFCE 2009: 7)

Objectives for “Enhancing flexibility and choice”, “Attracting and retaining learners”, “Meeting learners’ expectations”, and “Improving efficiency” (HEFCE 2009: 12-15) also make it clear that e-learning is deemed to have an important role in the transformation of English HE into a fully-marketised system.

Although HEFCE’s 2005 strategy had mainly been concerned with setting objectives for HEFCE and other government agencies in order to encourage and support HEIs to implement e-learning, the strategy’s “measures of success” left no doubt about what institutions were expected to achieve. The revised strategy again on the one hand emphasises institutional autonomy:

[I]t remains institutions’ responsibility to identify the specific directions to follow. (HEFCE 2009: 1)

But once more, HEFCE place the responsibility for implementation of e-learning squarely with the HEIs, and is directive in communicating what is expected:

[T]he importance of using technology to enhance learning and teaching is such that institutions will need to consider this a strategic priority when making investment decisions. Recurrent and capital funding in the block grant to institutions can be used to support these developments, and we would expect

institutions to consider the ability of technology to support the enhancement of learning and teaching when considering how to allocate these funds. (HEFCE 2009: 9)

The document concludes with a “framework to assist institutions in maximising the strategic benefits of technology”. The rather prescriptive “examples of developmental goals” (HEFCE 2009: 12-15) detailed therein also make obvious the actions and outcomes that are expected of the HEIs.

An instrumental perspective on the purpose of HE clearly underpins the strategy. HEFCE explicitly link the policy to the Leitch Review (Leitch 2006), while the “Strategic priorities” to be achieved via e-learning include “Improving employability and skills”, “Engaging employers (or other stakeholders) in curriculum design and delivery”, “Widening participation and improving access to learning”, and “Workforce development” (HEFCE 2009: 12-15). The government’s commitment to “learner entitlement”, as articulated in the government’s e-learning updated strategy (Becta 2008) is highlighted, and it is suggested that HEIs “may wish to consider learner entitlement in the context of their existing commitments to equality of access, inclusion, flexible lifelong learning, international mobility, and other strategic goals” (HEFCE 2009: 7).

The modernisation narrative is evident in a deterministic stance towards technology. For example, it is pronounced that “New and emerging technologies clearly provide exciting opportunities for enhancement and innovation in learning” (HEFCE 2009: 8). There is a move away from a focus on ‘embedding’ e-learning towards an emphasis on ‘enhancement’, expressed, for example, in the “aspiration to enhance learning, teaching and assessment using appropriate technology” (HEFCE 2009: 1). As will be discussed in the next chapter, the previous year the HEFCW’s (2008) strategy had placed its emphasis on enhancement of learning, again, perhaps another case of policy transfer from the periphery to the centre.

### ***Report to HEFCE by the OLTF: Collaborate to Compete***

In mid-2009, shortly after the publication of their updated e-learning strategy, HEFCE established the OLTF and charged them with exploring how UK HE could “maintain and extend its position as a world leader in online learning” (HEFCE 2011: 3). Although published under the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition, the report was commissioned by the previous New Labour administration. The recent White Paper *Higher Ambitions* made several references to e-learning, including an aspiration for “our universities to be world leaders in the growing market in transnational education based on e-learning” (BIS 2009: 20). Shortly thereafter, the landmark Browne Review (Browne 2010) placed

English HE firmly within the realm of the market (Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013; Giroux 2014).

The OLTf was chaired by Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive of the British Library, and its membership, somewhat portentously, included several representatives from the IT industry. Although the OLTf's final report, *Collaborate to Compete: Seizing the Opportunity of Online Learning for UK Higher Education* (HEFCE 2011) is not a policy *per se*, it is an important statement of HEFCE, as a policy making agency's position, and as I will demonstrate has clear roots in the overarching neoliberal agenda.

While commissioned by HEFCE, the recommendations detailed within the report are directed at the UK HE sector as a whole, possibly a further attempt to promote cohesion following the collapse of New Labour's UK-wide stronghold (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006; Laffin and Shaw 2007). However, does not appear that representation from any of the devolved nations had significant input into the development of the report<sup>17</sup>.

The report's neoliberal foundations are acknowledged at the outset:

The pressures of severe constraints on public spending, and a shift towards a more de-regulated, market approach to higher education, combined with the increasing need to put student demand and choice at the centre of higher education provision, require radical thinking. (HEFCE 2011: 2)

The document's visual presentation follows HEFCE's usual format, and is structurally organised under numbered paragraphs interspersed with headings. The document is assertive and authoritative in tone. Whereas the other HEFCE documents had, to varying degrees, presented e-learning as a vehicle for advancing agendas of lifelong learning, widening participation and inclusion, the emphasis is now firmly on modernisation and the market. Aspirations for modernisation are again demonstrated in a technologically deterministic stance, with rather hackneyed dynamic metaphors, as well as cascades of change, employed across the document to emphasise that there is no alternative but to accept the apparent inevitability of technology, which is once again framed as an agent of change, and thus again backgrounds those who are actually driving the desire for change:

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<sup>17</sup> Although Professor Sir Timothy, O'Shea, Principal of Edinburgh University, is listed as a member of the OLTf, it is likely that this was in his capacity as Chair of Jisc. There was no representation from Welsh HEIs on the OLTf; the only contributions from outside England appear to be a University of Glamorgan response to an earlier discussion paper, and while the University of Edinburgh is one of the case studies included in the document, this may be due to the Professor O'Shea's role. No response to the report from the devolved administrations or FCs appears to have been published.

Technological change is rapid. (HEFCE 2011: 2)

Learning technology is pushing people. (HEFCE 2011: 19)

[N]ow is the time to seize the opportunity of online learning. (HEFCE 2011: 24)

As the alliterative title of the document – which is reminiscent of an advertising tagline – suggests, two seemingly incompatible aspirations: collaboration and competition, are to be reconciled. The emphasis is not on competition between UK institutions however; instead, the UK's HEIs are urged to collaborate both as consortia, and with private businesses in the global market:

Institutions in the UK may well be competing with each other for students, but they all share a responsibility for promoting UK HE as high quality, responsive and globally competitive. (HEFCE 2011: 6)

[T]hrough collaboration, institutions can achieve significant economies of scale [...]. Collaboration should embrace and harness the strengths of diverse institutions and organisations, across public-private and sector divides. (HEFCE 2011: 5)

Corporate language pervades the document, more so than any of those analysed thus far. Institutions are told for example to “exploit their joint brands” and that provision of better information will give them “a competitive edge” (HEFCE 2011: 5). HEIs are directed to “Share market intelligence” (HEFCE 2011: 6) and to “be creative and innovative in their approaches to marketing in order to attract students to online learning” (HEFCE 2011: 11). They are also instructed to learn “Business lessons from unsuccessful online ventures”, such as the need to “understand the market and what students want”; and “invest in a robust business plan” (HEFCE 2011: 14). One of the report's recommendations is that “Technology needs to enhance student choice and meet or exceed learners' expectations” (HEFCE 2011: 12). In line with this, students are repeatedly portrayed as consumers who “expect greater flexibility” (HEFCE 2011: 10). It is also asserted that e-learning “offers the prospect of significant economic benefits” (HEFCE 2011: 15). Reuse of digital learning resources continues to be a key priority in order to “offer greater choice” (HEFCE 2011: 21) and to “enhance efficiency and quality” (HEFCE 2011: 22).

In a shift in tone from the earlier HEFCE strategy documents, the OLTF chastise the HE sector for what is deemed to be a lack of progress in e-learning to date: “The HE sector has been talking about the potential of online learning for well over ten years. The moment has come if we wish to remain and grow as a major international player” (HEFCE 2011: 4). They also make it clear that institutions now need to take action:

Institutions and organisations need to invest in learning, and leadership and vision at the highest level is required to bring a step-change. Such changes will not occur rapidly enough without effective organisational structures and processes. [...] Institutions need to ensure staff understand the range of challenges and opportunities provided by online learning, and ensure what they do is cost-effective and high quality. (HEFCE 2011: 6)

Educators are placed into the realm of the market: those who fail to comply and engage with technology are framed as disposable. Reflective of the increasing casualisation and de-professionalisation of the academic profession (Percy and Beaumont 2008; Giroux 2014; Bostock and Baume 2016), and also ignoring the crucial relationship between teaching and research (Boyer 1990) that was discussed in chapter 4, readers are told that teaching staff can be easily replaced by “freelance tutors” (HEFCE 2011: 19) who, free from the apparent constraints of research, can be rapidly responsive to the demands of students:

Not all staff are willing, or able, to engage with technology, which can mean that student expectations are not met. [...]. Some successful for-profit models of online provision have benefited from using a different staff structure to that of UK HE institutions, with freelance tutors focusing on facilitation, teaching and assessment, with no expectation of engaging in research activity. (HEFCE 2011: 19)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a CDA of e-learning policy issued by the DfES, Becta, and HEFCE between 2003 and 2013. There are some differences in emphasis between the cross-sectoral strategies and the HEFCE policies, as well as variances over time. Furthermore, while the cross-sectoral strategies are highly promotional in style, and make much use of rhetorical language and techniques, HEFCE’s documents, are, in general, more formal in style and are less visually and rhetorically promotional. Overall, however, I have demonstrated that the English policies were clearly underpinned by neoliberal imperatives. Counter to the ‘theory’ of neoliberalism, but typical of neoliberal governance in practice, despite the push for English education to operate on the basis of the market, the government and HEFCE are highly directive in the actions that they want education institutions to take in relation to e-learning.

In the next chapter, I examine parallel developments in Wales.

## CHAPTER 8: Wales

This chapter presents a CDA of e-learning policy issued in Wales between 2003 and 2013 (Figure 4). The first set of texts analysed relate to the Welsh government's cross-sectoral strategy: The second set of texts reviewed pertain to HEFCW's e-learning strategy.



Figure 4: E-learning policies in Wales, 2003-2013

### An E-learning Strategy for Wales

In 2003, National Council-ELWa published the consultation paper *An E-learning Strategy for Wales* (ELWa 2003b) accompanied by *The Context to an E-learning Strategy for Wales* (ELWa 2003a). The cross-sectoral strategy aimed to bring “cohesion to e-learning in Wales” (ELWa 2003b: 1) and presents e-learning, defined as “the use of electronic technology to support, enhance or deliver learning”, as central to the future of Welsh education (ELWa 2003b: 1). As discussed in chapter 3, following devolution Welsh Labour were keen to distance themselves from their counterparts in Westminster, particularly with respect to their opposition to New Labour's marketisation of the public sector. Notwithstanding these ideological differences, the Welsh government's overall priorities for enabling economic growth and social inclusion via widening participation and lifelong learning were similar to those in Westminster. An emphasis on maintaining and growing the Welsh language was an additional aspiration. The Welsh government had recently identified e-learning as having a role to play in achieving these priorities across various government papers relating to economic strategy, lifelong learning and skills (National Assembly for Wales 2001; WAG 2001; ELWa 2002; WAG 2002b; WAG 2002a).

The main strategy consultation document details thirteen high-level strategic objectives for Wales under the headings Connectivity, Content, Confidence, and Competence. The memorable and persuasive alliteration employed across these four headings is another feature of rhetorical discourse (Woods 2014), and is reminiscent of an advertising slogan. Other than noting the National Council's intention to work with its partners in implementing e-learning, including the HEFCW, no particular sector is singled out in relation to the plan's objectives. The accompanying document contextualises the strategy, placing its emphasis on the need for “Changing Learning in a changing world” (ELWa 2003a: 1).

Given the Welsh government's resolute intentions to distance itself from Westminster, it is rather ironic that the two documents considered here bear many hallmarks of the authoritative and promotional rhetoric typical of New Labour. Here for example, parallelism and a three part list are used to assertively, but without substantiation, to claim that e-learning can:

[O]pen up a far greater range of opportunities and approaches for learners and teachers, underpin the best learning methods and content, and open up countless means for learners to pursue formal and informal learning experiences. (ELWa 2003a: 4)

Although billed as a consultation, rather than encouraging dialogue, the document instead reads like a final strategy for which the Welsh government are seeking formal endorsement. Indeed it is unashamedly acknowledged that "Our overriding objective from this document is to gain a national consensus over the roles and responsibilities necessary to progress the strategy" (ELWa 2003b: 22), while the five consultation questions are framed such that they make it clear that the strategy's objectives are not up for discussion:

- What contribution are you currently making to any of the objectives?
- What contribution would you like to make to any of the objectives?
- What are you already planning which could contribute to the objectives?
- What would you like to see others doing/doing more of?
- Are there any objectives which should be included but are missing?

(ELWa 2003b: 22)

In the following example, a protracted 'cascade of change' that makes reference to various ways in which "the world is changing" is deployed in order to persuade the reader that learning and teaching must also change. The first set of changes referred to are the increasing online and round the clock availability of activities and services completely unrelated to education, such as domestic utilities, shopping, and banking. Echoing the New Labour mantra of 'rights and responsibilities', a link is also made between "choice and responsibilities" in these contexts:

The world is changing rapidly and, in the last decade the rate of change has been accelerating. [...]. In a very short space of time we have moved, as an economy and a society, where we have an abundance of choice, and responsibilities, in all aspects of our lives, ranging from who provides our domestic utilities, how we spend our leisure time, where we buy food and clothes, how we invest, how we borrow, how we save for a pension. As consumers we already expect to find goods and services available 7 days a week and late into the evening. (ELWa 2003b: 1)

General changes to the “world of work” as well as conceptions of the ‘flexible worker’ are also presented as drivers for change:

In the world of work, it is the norm to change jobs and employers several times in the course of our working lives. The nature of work has shifted dramatically in a few decades from the predictable, day to day, and year to year routine of basic outputs of goods and services, to the highly uncertain world of needing to innovate, shift focus, and stay one step ahead of our competitors at home and abroad. (ELWa 2003b: 1)

Yet no reference is made to the role of government and corporations in creating the conditions for these changes, instead change itself is portrayed as the responsible party. In a further example of rhetorical discourse, anthropomorphism employed in order to humanise and naturalise technology, which readers are told “can help nurture and support progress” (ELWa 2003b: 10), while simile is employed to suggest that the learning system in Wales is “like another one of our great industries” (ELWa 2003a: 10), evoking nostalgic images of the traditional mining industries that are integral to Welsh history and identity (Jones 1992; Bell 2013).

Lists again conceal complexities and tensions. In this example, an assortment of public and private organisations are presented as equivalent competitors in the e-learning market:

Organisations, which may be colleges, universities, commercial enterprises or multinational corporations, are investing in the design and delivery of learning which can be accessed from beyond the borders of a single country, even globally. (ELWa 2003b: 1)

In addition to being rhetorical and promotional in style, across the two documents there are numerous examples of themes linking to the three neoliberal master narratives. The market is a central theme, expressed for example in the need to exploit “the potential for learning delivered from Wales to be accessed by learners based anywhere in Wales and beyond” (ELWa 2003b: 12), while education is framed as a commodity that can be ‘transmitted’ to students: “Technology can help bring a different dimension to the receipt and transmission of knowledge” (ELWa 2003a: 4). Furthermore, the apparently imminent threat of competition from outside Welsh public education is framed as a driver for Wales to enter and participate in the global e-learning market:

Global players (which may be universities, colleges, or commercial enterprises) will be an increasing fact of life, offering learning opportunities far more appealing and attractive than the conventional offer. This is not speculation - it is beginning to happen already: walk into any computer store today and you will see banks of commercially available computer based learning packages, for all ages of customer. (ELWa 2003a: 6)

As with English strategy documents, opportunities for cost saving are implicit in aspirations to enable sharing of e-learning content across sectors. In line with the Government's overall emphasis on promoting the Welsh Language, the importance of e-learning in growing bilingualism is stressed and, reflecting an increasing emphasis on economic and instrumental motives for bilingualism in Wales (Baker 1997; Jones and Martin-Jones 2004), is also presented as a marketable opportunity: "Technology can therefore serve both as a tool for responding to existing demand [for Welsh language learning] as well as transforming much latent demand into reality" (ELWa 2003b: 16).

An instrumental role for education is clear throughout. Here for example, e-learning is explicitly linked to the need for Wales to compete in the knowledge economy:

[E]ffective application of technology in learning can help underpin the knowledge based economy in Wales, and drive its growth. [...] Exemplar e-learning methods can themselves help familiarise and equip people with skills and attributes which underpin a knowledge based and entrepreneurial culture. (ELWa 2003b: 12)

In the following, e-learning is presented as way to for people to develop ICT skills, which are portrayed as a way to enable equality of opportunity, inclusion, and employment:

[T]he social inclusion agenda is important for all communities in Wales, where increased ICT user skills can help to give people access to new social networks and employment opportunities (ELWa 2003b: 17)

The strategy makes it clear that the primary purpose of encouraging lifelong learning is instrumental. The document notes that the strategy has been directly informed by recent economic and lifelong learning policy developments and priorities, and readers are explicitly told that "'lifelong learning' underpins economic performance and social inclusion" (ELWa 2003b: 1). A focus on the individual is evident in the need for "learner focus and learner empowerment" (ELWa 2003a: 6).

The ideology of modernisation is manifest first in a technologically deterministic perspective. For example, readers are told that the strategy "is based on a belief that technology holds untapped potential to benefit access to high quality learning" (ELWa 2003b: 13). While not expressed in terms of the 'joined up' and 'unified' rhetoric so prevalent in the English policy, there is evidence of a similar agenda, nonetheless, for example the first objective of the strategy is to "Create a national integrated e-learning network" (ELWa 2003b: 5).

## **Statement of the Position of E-learning in Higher Education in Wales**

In January 2007, HEFCW circulated *A Statement of the Position of E-learning in Higher Education in Wales* (HEFCW 2007). The consultation details actions taken by HEFCW to date in relation to e-learning; summarises relevant policy developments in Wales, and elsewhere in the UK; presents perceived drivers for, and difficulties posed by e-learning; gives an overview of current practice in e-learning in Welsh HE; and presents proposed measures of success. The document concludes with eight discussion questions; these are framed such that they open up much more scope for discussion than those in the Welsh national consultation.

Welsh Labour's overall priorities for education and skills continued to mirror those in Westminster (see chapter 3). Notwithstanding the Welsh national policy considered in the last section, in comparison with HEFCE and SFC, HEFCW was somewhat late in developing policy for e-learning. That is not to say that Welsh HE had been inactive in promoting and implementing e-learning. The University of Glamorgan was involved in the UKeU; some Welsh HEIs had participated in HEFCE's e-learning benchmarking programme<sup>18</sup>; HEFCW had funded various initiatives relating to e-learning; and in 2002, a joint Higher Education Wales (HEW)<sup>19</sup> and HEFCW working group had made recommendations about possible future e-learning strategies (HEW/HEFCW 2002). In addition, the HEFCW's most recent corporate plan had identified a role for e-learning in Welsh HE (HEFCW 2003). The consultation references the aims of *An e-learning Strategy for Wales* (ELWa 2003b) and notes that they "relate strongly to the e-learning implemented by Higher Education Institutions in Wales" (HEFCW 2007: 4).

The document is written in the third person, and is presented in the numbered paragraphs interspersed with headings typical of policy texts. Overall, the text is directive and dogmatic in tone. The language used is positive and definitive, and reflects a technologically deterministic stance. For example, readers are authoritatively instructed that e-learning can: "[enable] new methods of teaching, assessment and support"; "facilitate and enable the extension of Welsh medium provision"; "bring about change in enhancing widening access";

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<sup>18</sup> HEFCE's benchmarking exercise was intended to help institutions establish their progress in relation to embedding e-learning. See HEFCE (2008).

<sup>19</sup> Renamed 'Universities Wales' in 2014.

“increase accessibility for all learners”; “develop and support lifelong learning”; and “enhance graduate employability” (HEFCW 2007: 6-7).

E-learning is directly implicated in the marketisation of Welsh HE. As with Wales’ national e-learning consultation, the threat of competition from “on-line providers, nationally and internationally” (HEFCW 2007: 8) is highlighted, with a key driver for the strategy being to “protect the sector through maintaining current market share, growing the student base in existing markets, reaching new markets and developing new products” (HEFCW 2007: 7). Students are also unapologetically framed as consumers who demand “value for money” (HEFCW 2007: 9), while e-learning is identified as a means for “saving of time and cost on traditional methods” (HEFCW 2007: 8).

Although the strategy’s “measures of success” are in some respects high level and aspirational, they also make clear how HEFCW expect Welsh HEIs to respond. For example they are directed that: “Students are able to communicate, gain support, and access information regardless of their location” (HEFCW 2007: 12).

That an instrumental purpose for HE takes priority is clear. Lifelong learning, enabled by e-learning, is linked directly to employability: “Another driver for e-learning is to develop and support lifelong learning, and enhance graduate employability” (HEFCW 2007: 6), while a measure of the strategy’s success will be “Perceivable benefits to the economy” (HEFCW 2007: 12). The need for “flexibility of delivery” (HEFCW 2007: 64) is repeatedly referred to. E-learning is also presented as a mechanism for “widening access” (HEFCW 2007: 6), and readers are instructed that e-learning “can increase accessibility for all learners, including disabled and disadvantaged students” (HEFCW 2007: 6). Consistent with neoliberal ideology, the emphasis is on “equality of opportunity” (HEFCW 2007: 10), rather than equality per se. Like the most recent English strategies, and echoing the UK Labour government’s ‘personalisation of services’ agenda, the neoliberal ideology of individualism is expressed in the strategy’s aspiration to provide “more personalised learning” (HEFCW 2007: 6).

### **Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through Technology: a Strategy for Higher Education in Wales**

In April 2008, *Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through Technology: a Strategy for Higher Education in Wales* (HEFCW 2008) was circulated. The ten year strategy to 2018 was intended to “accelerate the mainstreaming of technology-enhanced learning and teaching provision, processes and practice” and to “support Welsh higher education

institutions in embracing new technologies and identifying how their application can enhance learning, teaching and the overall student experience” (HEFCW 2008: 1). Although there had been a change in governance since the publication of the draft strategy, with a Labour – Plaid Cymru coalition now in power, in theory at least, Wales continued to espouse more traditional social democratic values than the Westminster government (Davies and Williams 2009). Whereas HEFCE’s most recent strategy (HEFCE 2005) had placed its emphasis on embedding e-learning, HEFCW prioritise “the enhancement of learning and teaching” via ICT, which they refer to as “technology-enhanced learning” (HEFCW 2008: 3).

The document is overall more rhetorical in style than the consultation. For example, dynamic metaphor is used to emphasise the need to “drive Wales ahead in the enhancement of learning” (HEFCW 2008: 4), and to “accelerate the mainstreaming of technology-enhanced learning” (HEFCW 2008: 1).

Lists again obscure complexities. Here, for example, a three part list is used to persuade the reader that e-learning can address three very different and complex issues:

[T]he use of technology can increase accessibility and flexibility of learning and support resources, address equality and diversity issues, and foster lifelong learning. (HEFCW 2008: 10)

Neoliberal ideology permeates the strategy. The role of e-learning in the market is again stressed:

We recognise the role technology-enhanced learning may play in ensuring that HEIs in Wales maintain competitiveness in the global marketplace [...]. We encourage you to use technology to support and enhance your institution’s mission and remain competitive. (HEFCW 2008: 11)

Students are once more framed as consumers, expressed, for example, in the perceived need to “meet the needs of individual learners” (HEFCW 2008: 3). Collaboration is encouraged since “Increased efficiencies and other benefits are identified through collaborative activity” (HEFCW 2008: 14). While on one hand, HEFCW assert that “ownership of and responsibility for learning and teaching rest with institutions” (HEFCW 2008: 4), on the other, the directive language employed makes it clear that HEFCW do have specific expectations of institutions, for example in decreeing that “We anticipate that institutions will engage with this strategy” (HEFCW 2008: 3) and in instructing that “it is essential that staff are aware of how technology should most effectively be used to enable adoption of new attitudes and ways of working” (HEFCW 2008: 8).

The perception of HE as primarily instrumental is again clear. Readers are informed, for example, that e-learning can “increase the contribution of HE to the knowledge economy” (HEFCW 2008: 14), while institutions are instructed that:

[I]ncreased employer engagement with HE [...] is of increasing importance in the context of the Leitch review. (HEFCW 2008: 1)

Widening participation and lifelong learning are clearly framed in relation to the government’s skills agenda:

[e-learning can] address equality and diversity issues, and foster lifelong learning. We encourage you to use technology to address this agenda [...] This will support the lifelong learning agenda and the principles cited in the Leitch Review. (HEFCW 2008: 10)

The ideology of modernisation is again manifest as technological determinism. For example, readers are instructed that technology will “alter the ‘shape’ of learning and teaching substantially” (HEFCW 2008: 3).

The emphasis on mainstreaming continues across the document, with “mainstreaming” and “normalisation” of e-learning referred to throughout:

Our vision is that enhancing learning and teaching through the use of technology should be considered a normal part of mainstream provision, processes and practices. This means institutions should seek to normalise the use of technology within learning, teaching and assessment, and core processes. (HEFCW 2008: 1-2)

While there is, overall, clear alignment with neoliberal ideology across the policy, the document does make reference to the possible role of e-learning in relation to sustainable development and global citizenship:

You may also wish to consider the role of technology in relation to other issues, including: [...] Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship. (HEFCW 2008: 11)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented my CDA of e-learning policy issued by National Council-ELWa and HEFCW between 2003 and 2013. Despite the Welsh government’s claimed intention to politically distance themselves from Westminster, the Welsh e-learning policies in many ways mirror the English documents in their ideological underpinnings and presentation. Although there are some differences in emphasis between the National Council-ELWa and HEFCW strategies, as well as variations as over time, overall, there is clear alignment with the three neoliberal master narratives across the Welsh policy documents. Despite their

emphasis on promoting market-based provision of education, the policies are highly directive of institutions in relation to what is expected to be achieved, and how.

In the next chapter, I review parallel policy developments in Scotland.

## CHAPTER 9: Scotland

This chapter presents my CDA of e-learning policy issued in Scotland between 2003 and 2013 (Figure 5). Whereas in England and Wales e-learning policy was issued by government departments, and by the FCs, in Scotland relevant policy was published only by the FCs. The main relevant policy document published during analysis timeframe was the *Joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group: Final Report* (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003). Also analysed were two subsequent reviews of the policy: *SFC Review of E-learning Policy* (SFC 2006a) and *Review of Council Strategy on E-learning* (SFC 2007).



**Figure 5: E-learning policies in Scotland, 2003-2013**

### **Joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group: Final Report**

In July 2003, SFEFC and SHEFC published the *Joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group: Final Report* (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003). The document's coverage of both FE and HE is reflective of the close relationship between the FE and HE sectors in Scotland, and was also motivated by the impending merger of the two FCs (Harvey and Beards 2004). The stated purpose of the report is to “advise the sectors and the Councils about their approaches to the development of e-learning” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 7). As discussed in chapter 3, the Scottish government had identified e-learning as having an important role to play in realising their goals in relation to skills and economic growth (Scottish Parliament 2002; Scottish Government 2003b; Scottish Government 2003a). Also in the foreground were the parallel policy developments in England and Wales, while the UKeU had just launched its first tranche of courses.

Scotland's historical emphasis on HE as both a conduit for economic growth and a public good was becoming eclipsed by an increasing emphasis on an instrumental and economic role for HE, although the extent of marketisation was not manifest to the same extent as in England (see chapter 3). Indeed, the Scottish government had made a powerful statement of their opposition to the increasing marketisation of UK HE by replacing the tuition fees imposed under New Labour with the more modest graduate endowment. Notwithstanding all of this, as I will demonstrate, the e-learning strategy considered here is clearly underpinned by neoliberal ideology.

The document is authoritative in style and tone while at the same time stressing the apparent autonomy of institutions. It is written in the first person from the perspective of the e-learning group<sup>20</sup>. Unlike some of the documents considered heretofore, the pronoun ‘we’ clearly refers to the group, or to the Scottish FCs. Although structurally organised in the typical policy style of numbered paragraphs interspersed with headings, the document does not read like a policy or strategy in the traditional sense. Unlike the English and Welsh documents considered earlier, other than presenting a handful of action items for the FCs, universities, colleges, and other relevant agencies, no aims, objectives, targets or measures of success are detailed. Indeed, the report does not explicitly refer to itself as a strategy or policy, although it is latterly referred to as such by members of the SFEFC/SHEFC e-learning group (Harvey and Beards, 2004) and in the policy reviews (SFC 2006a) and (SFC 2007).

The content of the document also diverges from the English and Welsh policy documents in several respects. Overall, it is relatively circumspect regarding the potential, appropriateness, and inevitability of e-learning. Whereas the English and Welsh policy documents published at that time emphasised the need for transformation of education via e-learning (DfES 2003d; ELWa 2003b) and to embed e-learning (HEFCE 2003a), by contrast, the Scottish e-learning group state that they do not consider “transformational change” or the “mainstreaming and embedding of e-learning” to be “imminent or inevitable” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 3). The group note that “e-learning is a complex phenomenon, and careful thought is needed to distinguish between what can be done, and what should be done” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 10). The report is also relatively balanced in terms of pointing out both the potential benefits and limitations of e-learning. For example, although it is alleged that there are “inherent characteristics of e-learning which provide potential educational advantages” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 12) the group also highlight the potential for “doing e-learning badly” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 13). An annex to the document outlines the “Impact of ICT on various learning processes”. Here, potential impacts are often qualified by auxiliary verbs, making the overall effect more cautious and tentative. For example: “can improve”, “scope for”, “may enhance”, “may improve”, “may allow” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 37) [emphasis added]. Elsewhere it is stressed that any benefits of e-learning will only be realised via the development of appropriate approaches informed by sound pedagogy, and it is highlighted that some of the same advantages could be realised via more conventional approaches. The importance of adopting an approach that strikes an appropriate balance between

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<sup>20</sup> Details on membership of the e-learning group are provided in Appendix A.

conventional and e-learning delivery methods is also noted. Whereas e-learning is frequently presented in the Welsh and English policies as having potential to directly or indirectly achieve cost savings, the group are by contrast “sceptical of the claim that e-learning will automatically reduce costs” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 12).

As I demonstrated in the last two chapters e-learning was concurrently presented in the English and Welsh governments’ cross-sectoral strategies as a means for facilitating lifelong learning (DfES 2003d; ELWa 2003b). The Scottish government had also recently identified a role for e-learning in enabling lifelong learning (Scottish Parliament 2002; Scottish Government 2003b). While the policy makes reference to these documents as contextually relevant, lifelong learning is not referred to within the policy. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is mentioned, but it is not considered to be “a major new market” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 19). Notwithstanding this, that “students in the future are going to need and demand greater flexibility” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 3) is deemed to be relevant.

England and Wales had also identified a role for e-learning in their agendas for widening participation and social inclusion. Although the Scottish policy similarly identifies a role for e-learning in relation to widening participation, it also notes that while e-learning may have potential to facilitate access to learning for rural or remote learners, under-represented groups and students with disabilities, e-learning may also act as a barrier to participation for these groups (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003). Furthermore, it is explicitly stated that the Councils already operate various funding mechanisms aimed at facilitating access by the aforementioned groups, and that e-learning is not considered to be an enabler of learning in such contexts; this is perhaps unsurprising given Scotland’s already higher than average participation rates (over 50% at the outset of the timeframe analysis (Scottish Executive 2002)).

While the document is more tentative in tone than some of the documents reviewed thus far, evidence of the influence of a wider neoliberal agenda is clear. The establishment of a Scottish e-learning market, local and global, is a central focus. It is postulated that:

e-learning technologies could lead to changes in the organisation of the delivery of learning, including an enhanced role for third party providers such as consortia of institutions or spin-off providers of specialist services or commercial organisations. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 4)

Five pages of the policy are devoted to a section entitled “Markets for e-learning”, where the group stress that “e-learning should be market-oriented and not technology-led” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 17) and, in an attempt to reconcile markets with aspirations for

equality and social justice, they state that “possible market segments” for e-learning in Scottish FE and HE include “underrepresented students” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 17) and “students with special needs” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 18). The needs of individual students, who are openly referred to as customers, are also presented as a key motivator for e-learning:

[W]e feel it is very important to place learning and learners (or, in other terms, markets and customers) at the heart of our thinking. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 11)

Readers are told that “there is significant scope for e-learning to improve quality and effectiveness” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 12), but, unlike with the English and Welsh strategies, the Scottish FCs are, at this juncture, “sceptical of the claim that e-learning will automatically reduce costs” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 12). They also conclude that collaborative approaches will be necessary to make e-learning economically viable, and decree that institutions should consider how they can “re-engineer” systems and processes in order to achieve economies of scale (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 3).

Throughout the report, the group frequently stress the autonomy of individual institutions in determining their own priorities and agenda in relation to e-learning. For example:

[T]he Councils are not, and should not, be the primary actors in the development of e-learning. [...] [T]his agenda must clearly be owned and directed by institutions. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 33)

However, like HEFCE and HEFCW, and typical of neoliberal governance in practice, the report is in other respects highly directive of the institutions, stipulating what they ‘should’ and ‘must’ do. For example:

Institutions should prioritise the curriculum areas, and/or aspects of the educational process where e-learning approaches would add most value. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 14)

[I]nstitutions will need to continue to respond incrementally to demands from the increasingly sophisticated and demanding student population. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 16)

Indeed, the councils make it patently clear that they do not expect, or indeed want, radical transformation in most institutions:

[W]e do not expect that many Scottish institutions will wish to undertake radical transformation based on a wholesale migration to e-learning delivery modes [although] we also believe that there may be room in Scotland for a small number of more radical delivery models. [...] [I]f this is to be entertained we recommend it is preceded by very careful planning and specification. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 27)

Although the apparent need to modernise is emphasised:

[Stakeholders in HE and FE] will expect our institutions to increasingly reflect the nature of modern society, including the incorporation of modern communications technology. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 10)

While the policy repeatedly stresses that e-learning is primarily “about learning and not about technology” (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 7), overall, a technologically deterministic stance predominates. Here, for example, technology is presented as an autonomous, unpredictable, and inevitable entity that will ‘evolve’ (ecological metaphor) and needs to be ‘harnessed’ (dynamic metaphor):

[F]ew are sure, notwithstanding much experimentation and practice, how the technology will evolve and how it can best be harnessed to support learning. (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003: 2)

### **SFC Review of E-learning Policy**

The SFEFC/SHEFC e-Learning group recommended that the FCs periodically review the e-learning policy (SFEFC/SHEFC 2003); reviews were published in 2006 and in 2007. At a meeting of the SFC<sup>21</sup> on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2006 the *SFC Review of E-learning Policy* (SFC 2006a) was included as an agenda item for noting. E-learning was of continuing strategic importance to SFC, having been presented as a priority area in their most recent strategic plan (SFC 2006b). There are a number of significant changes in direction from the original strategy. As I noted earlier, the 2003 strategy made clear that the councils did not deem the embedding of e-learning or transformation of HE via technology to be imminent. In a significant change in direction, and mirroring the HEFCE strategy published in between their own strategy and the review (HEFCE 2005), SFC now assert that e-learning “needs to be embedded” (SFC 2006a: 7). In addition, whereas the original document had made it clear that e-learning was not intended as a vehicle for lifelong learning or widening participation in Scotland, the Council’s priorities have now changed:

e-Learning offers particular opportunities for maximising flexibility and responsiveness in delivery within a mass post school education system with an increasingly diverse cohort of learners, against a backdrop of lifelong learning and changing lifestyles. For this reason we suggest it merits specific attention as an area of policy. (SFC 2006a:7)

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<sup>21</sup> The SFEFC and the SHEFC merged in 2005 to form the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

The 2003 strategy had explicitly stated that e-learning was not considered to have potential to save money; in another radical change in perspective, it is now asserted that “e-Learning also offers scope to achieve more efficient business processes” (SFC 2006a:7).

Notwithstanding these shifts in emphasis, SFC’s primary focus continues to be on the market:

Institutions will need to be prepared to meet [...] demands from learners, in the context of the developing UK and global markets for learning. (SFC 2006a: 6-7)

The demise of UKeU is attributed to it being “technology-driven, with insufficient attention paid to the markets for UKeU services”, and is contrasted with the Scottish Interactive University (IU)’s – apparently superior – market-orientated “business model” (SFC 2006a:10). The council also notes its intention to “continue to support the aim of the IU in pursuing both domestic and international markets for learning” (SFC 2006a:10).

SFC conclude that their existing current approach to e-learning is appropriate and should continue. The document presents ten recommendations for the Council, which again make it clear that while they are providing the strategic direction, it is up to the institutions to actualise change.

### **Review of Council Strategy on E-learning**

On 25th October 2007, the *Review of Council Strategy on E-learning* (SFC 2007) was tabled at a meeting of the SFC. Several significant developments had taken place in the previous year. In May 2007, the SNP had been elected into power, and had made clear their perspectives on education and skills soon thereafter: first in announcing that the graduate endowment would be scrapped, making HE in Scotland free; and second, in rejecting the Leitch Review and publishing their own strategy *Skills for Scotland* (2007), which was intended to be distinctively Scottish, and to contrast with the Leitch Review (Lowe and Gayle 2011). In April of the same year, Scotland’s IU closed, having recruited fewer than a quarter of the number of students anticipated. It had thus suffered a similar fate to UKeU, and well as many other consortia-based ‘e-university’ initiatives worldwide (See chapter 4).

The 2003 strategy and the 2006 review had placed the majority of their emphasis on the development and placement of Scotland in the global e-learning market. Following the closure of the IU, it is now acknowledged that previous expectations in relation to the potential for “global trade” in e-learning were “wholly unrealistic (SFC 2007: 3). Overall, though, the document continues the trajectory initiated in the 2006 review, and places

emphasis on the need for embedding and mainstreaming e-learning. In a shift in tone, however, SFC repeatedly castigates the Scottish colleges and universities, blaming them for the fact that e-learning is not embedded. The SFC point out that since they have made the necessary investments into the ICT infrastructure, hardware, and software “this is not a bottleneck on the deployment of e-learning”. They also note that while “institutions now have access to a large volume of shared content to support teaching”, “awareness and take-up has been limited” (SFC 2007: 3). Similarly they note that while institutions have ample access to staff development opportunities and technical advice via national agencies, “take-up and deployment is patchy” and there is a lack of “coherent management of ICT training activities to achieve strategic goals” (SFC 2007: 3). Overall, it is concluded that “the key challenge is for institutions to embed e-learning” but that “a major impediment to this process is a lack of a clear strategic vision of how e-learning will contribute to the college’s overall strategy for learning and teaching” (SFC 2007: 3-4).

While the SFC’s ‘hands off’ approach is again evident:

There is a risk that over-enthusiastic promotion of e-learning is seen as a ‘technical fix’ or as an externally-imposed agenda which is not perceived to engage with the real strategic challenges faced by institutions. We should instead promote an inclusive, open-minded approach which encourages strategic managers to consider, as one tool in their portfolio, the potential role of e-learning in taking their institution forward. (SFC 2007: 4)

It is clear that the council intends to intervene in order to ensure that embedding and mainstreaming of e-learning is achieved, although they stress that they “do not propose to earmark any significant funding streams for new initiatives in e-learning” (SFC 2007: 7).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a CDA of e-learning policy issued by the SFEFC/SHEFC and SFC between 2003 and 2013. While the Scottish policy documents are in some ways more tentative than the English and Welsh strategies, overall, there is clear evidence of the influence of the wider neoliberal agenda, and there is alignment with the three neoliberal master narratives across the three policy documents. There are some variations over time however. In particular, while SFEFC/SHEFC (2003) and SFC (2006a) place much of their focus on the role of e-learning in expanding Scotland’s HE and FE market, in SFC (2007) this emphasis has been rolled back. As in England and Wales, while on one hand there is an overall push for market-based provision, and a claimed emphasis on institutional autonomy, the Scottish FCs also assert their authority regarding what is to be achieved.

This concludes my CDA of the texts. The next chapter consolidates my findings and considers their implications.

# CHAPTER 10: E-Learning Policy: A Trojan Horse for Neoliberalism

## Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I consolidate my findings and reflect on their troubling implications. After summarising the outcomes of my ideology critique and CDA of the texts, I explore the ramifications of the market-driven, instrumentally-motivated, and modernisation-centred framing of e-learning in the policies for the function and form of e-learning in HE. Next, I consider the consequences for the future of HE, particularly in relation to its role as a public good, and for equality of participation. I then reflect on the implications of the policies for the professional practice of Learning Technologists. Following that, I discuss how my professional perspectives, practices, and commitments have been impacted as a result of undertaking this study. I conclude by exploring what e-learning might look like if e-learning policies were based on an alternative set of assumptions about the role of HE that, rather than being underpinned by neoliberal ideology, instead consider HE as a means to foster education for democratic and global citizenship.

## Research findings

I conducted an ideology critique and CDA of thirteen UK e-learning policy texts spanning the timeframe 2003-2013, and forming a corpus of 138 900 words. The aim of this aspect of the study was to address my first two research questions:

1. What ideologies and claims underpin e-learning policies issued by government departments and non-departmental public bodies in England, Scotland, and Wales between 2003 and 2013?
2. Are the claims made valid? Are other ideologies and perspectives omitted?

Via thematic analysis of the corpus I established that, overall, the texts were underpinned by a trinity of neoliberal narratives: *Marketisation*, *Instrumentality*, and *Modernisation*. Notwithstanding e-learning's complicity in the damaging impacts of marketisation on HE, there are many contradictions and paradoxes evident across the corpus in relation to the discussion of e-learning and markets. E-learning is portrayed as a way to open up UK HE to a global market; yet there are many practical and cultural issues that make it incredibly difficult to successfully provide e-learning to global cohorts. A central element of the argument for market-based provision of HE is that it can drive up quality; yet there are indications that marketisation is having the opposite effect on HE. In another paradox, while

it is asserted that e-learning can increase quality, I have demonstrated that this is a dubious claim. Notwithstanding the difficulties in defining and measuring quality in HE, there does not appear to be any empirical evidence that supports the assertion that e-learning improves quality; indeed there are indications that poorly implemented e-learning could instead have a detrimental impact on students' learning. Another defining pillar of neoliberalism is the claim that market-based competition makes processes more efficient, and can thus reduce costs. Across the corpus, e-learning is portrayed as a source of efficiency and cost savings; once again, there is little substantive evidence to support these assertions. A related alleged advantage of marketisation is that it will widen consumer choice. But the increasingly market-based provision of HE in the UK is paradoxically narrowing the range of options available to students, and online courses could be contributing to this due to their homogeneity, as well as their tendency to focus on vocational provision. A further persistent inconsistency relating to marketisation evident across the corpus is the glaring contradiction between the claimed intention to advocate local decision making, versus the highly centrally directive nature of the policies.

The neoliberal narrative of instrumentality is derived from the assumption that HE serves a mainly utilitarian purpose that is concerned with growing the economy, and with advancing the wealth and social mobility of individuals. This claim is evident in various guises across the corpus. Implicit in several of the policies is a simplistic and primarily economic conceptualisation of globalisation that both neglects its complexities, and ignores other ways of theorising globalisation and its potential implications for the role and function of HE. The alleged need for HE to enable the UK to compete in the global knowledge economy is a recurring theme; but while the existence of the knowledge economy is portrayed as a given fact, no supporting evidence is provided in the policies to support this claim. Indeed, there is scant evidence for a significant shift towards a high skills workforce in the UK. Furthermore, while it is presented as an irrefutable fact that the workforce require new skills in the context of the knowledge economy, the available evidence paints a much more complex picture. And in a further paradox, the sophisticated skills of the model 'flexible knowledge worker' are unlikely to be cultivated by the prevailing crude implementations of e-learning as a means for course administration and dissemination of resources. Moreover, while a correlation between education and economic growth is proposed, there is no evidence of a clear link. E-learning is also presented as a way to make teaching and learning provision in HE more relevant to employers' needs; while the requirements of employers and the professions do need to be taken into account, employers are not likely to be concerned with what they consider to be 'unprofitable' skills and knowledge.

Across the corpus, e-learning is portrayed as a way to enable lifelong and wider participation in HE. The concept of lifelong learning was originally about holistic intellectual development as well as skills for work. Under neoliberal governance lifelong learning has become primarily about employability and economic expansion, a view that is promulgated across the policies. Similarly, across the corpus widening participation in HE is presented as a solution to economic issues, rather than having any basis in a concern for social justice or equality. Indeed the policies seem less concerned with meaningfully widening participation via e-learning, and more concerned with leveraging e-learning as a means for widening potential markets. The policies also frame lack of participation as an individual, rather than as a societal issue. Furthermore, e-learning is portrayed as a ‘technical fix’ for unequal participation, ignoring the many complex issues that may prevent people from participating in HE. Related to this, one of the most commonly recurring themes across the corpus is the ‘flexibility’ supposedly guaranteed by e-learning. This is yet another flawed assertion. The discourse of flexibility is derived from problematic neoliberal conceptions of flexibility in business and in working practices. Moreover, while e-learning may generate flexibilities for some, it can create sources of inflexibility for others. Finally, several of the policies stress the need for personalisation in HE. While personalisation is portrayed as inherently desirable, the notions of personalisation referred to across the policies both align with, and reinforce, the problematic neoliberal conception of the self-interested individual.

The policies are infused with references to the apparent need for HE to modernise. They depict technology, the economy, and even ‘change’ itself, as actors that have agency, and which are creating imperatives for HEIs to implement e-learning. But this ‘backgrounds’ the processes and agents that are actually driving the demand for change, for example the government and corporations, and thus reinforces the hegemonic structures of power. Furthermore, while technology is framed as an agent of change that will in itself bring about improvements to the way people teach and learn, once again, there does not appear to be any evidence to back up such claims. The policies also portray e-learning as a natural development that will unquestionably benefit HE. But e-learning technologies, like all technological artefacts, are not neutral, and are instead ideologically laden. The application of technology to HE thus may have unintended consequences or could create or exacerbate disparities of power and privilege; yet these issues are neither acknowledged nor attended to in the policies. A further claimed impetus for the use of e-learning is derived from the alleged needs and expectations of the ‘net generation’; while some young people may make extensive use of technologies for social and leisure purposes, the available literature

indicates that this does not automatically translate into the capability to use technology for learning.

My second lens of analysis was a CDA of each text. My critique demonstrated that there are some variances in emphasis across the jurisdictions, and at different points during the analysis timeframe. As discussed, these differences tend to reflect the particular socio-political contexts, as well as, in the case of the English cross-sectoral strategies, the cross sectoral nature of these policies. Taken as a whole however, and in line with the general tendency post-devolution towards convergence in UK HE policy (Trench 2008; Gallacher and Raffe 2012), the overall focus of the policies in the three jurisdictions is similar, and there is clear alignment across the corpus with the three neoliberal master narratives. Also critical to my CDA was a detailed consideration of not only what was said in each policy, but also how the message was communicated and presented. I demonstrated that while some of the texts are patently rhetorical in their presentation, others are less obviously so. Overall, however, this aspect of my analysis established that visual presentation, lexical choices, and rhetorical techniques frequently serve to reinforce the neoliberal narratives underpinning the content of the policies.

Keep (2011: 25) points out that “what is excluded [from policy] is usually every bit as important as what is included”. As well as scrutinising what was included in the policies and how it was communicated, I also considered what was missing. While neoliberal ideology is privileged and promoted across the corpus, alternative value systems are not. In particular, with the exception of two isolated instances, across the 138 900 word corpus there is no mention of the role that HE might play in relation to the crucial issues facing humanity such as conflict, climate change, sustainability, poverty, security, and injustice. Furthermore, while globalisation is implicitly framed as economic globalisation, no reference is made to the other potential impacts of globalisation on the role and function of HE. In addition, the voices of students and educators are mainly absent, and where they are included the viewpoints portrayed are those that serve to legitimise and reinforce the content of the policies.

Taken together, the two prongs of my research demonstrate that e-learning policies issued by government departments and non-departmental public bodies in the UK between 2003 and 2013 were underpinned by neoliberal ideology. Furthermore, many of the claims made about e-learning across the corpus are exaggerated, unsubstantiated, contradictory, and even duplicitous, or are justified via reference to contested discourses. To date, there has been limited critical commentary on the content and form of UK e-learning policy. These findings

thus make a contribution to the emerging work on CDA of education policy (Saarinen 2008; Mulderrig 2011; Sabri 2011; Hyatt 2013; Martínez-Alemán 2015); to the ongoing critique of neoliberalism's impacts on HE's form and function (Olssen and Peters 2005; Hill and Kumar 2012; Giroux 2014); and to critical debates on e-learning and HE (Kritt and Winegar 2007; Friesen 2009; Guri-Rosenblit 2009; Kirkwood and Price 2014; Bayne 2015; Bulfin et al. 2015; Selwyn 2015). In particular, the study raises important questions about the ideological and political motivations underpinning e-learning policies, and the impacts of the same. There are limitations to my research however. Many multifaceted factors shape how e-learning is manifest in HE. A resulting limitation of the study is that it was restricted to the analysis of the thirteen policy texts considered. A further limitation is that my interpretation cannot be untangled from my own values as a researcher: thus alternative interpretations and viewpoints are possible.

There is much more work that could be undertaken in relation to this research. There is a need for a detailed critical exploration of the framing of e-learning in HE funding discourse, since this is a key means by which e-learning initiatives are enabled. Research could also be carried out into the content and composition of institutional e-learning policies as well as their relationship with national policy drivers.

## **Research implications**

Having summarised my findings, I now reflect on their impacts, in order to address my third, fourth, and fifth research questions:

3. What are the implications for constructions of e-learning in HE?
4. What are the implications for HE?
5. What are the implications for the professional practice of Learning Technologists?

### ***Implications for constructions of e-learning in HE***

The relationship between policy and practice is complex, and there is frequently a disjuncture between education policy as it is articulated, and its application and outcomes (Trowler and Knight 2002; Nudzor 2009; Conole 2010). Indeed, it is impossible to definitively determine the extent to which the policies considered have impacted on HE. What is certain, however, is that the policies send out a clear message about the UK governments' and FCs' perceptions of both the purpose and functioning of HE, and the role that e-learning should play in achieving the same. Moreover, the policies analysed framed many of the available funding opportunities for the exploration of the use of technology in HE. For example, the Jisc's e-Learning programme, SFC's e-Learning Transformation Programme, and HEFCW's Gwella

programme were intended to enable the actualisation of the HEFCE, SFC, and HEFCW policies respectively, with such programmes claimed to have had lasting impacts (Jisc and Million+ 2009).

I have argued that e-learning is presented in the policies as a panacea for complex problems, some of which arguably have little to do with HE. I have also shown that – on its own at least – e-learning is unlikely to be capable of accomplishing many of the goals that it is charged with achieving. I also argued that many of the ways in which e-learning is employed in HE have little to do with education or learning. If the application of e-learning as a mechanism for advancing neoliberalism persists, then it is likely that pedestrian, inequitable, and even pedagogically harmful, implementations of e-learning in HE will persist, and that any potential that technology might have if its application was focused on issues that it might actually be able to address are unlikely to be realised.

### *Implications for HE*

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have argued that the way that e-learning is framed in the policies makes it complicit in the neoliberal erosion of HE. It is my contention that the market-based and utilitarian framing of HE as portrayed across the corpus erroneously portrays economic growth as the primary benchmark for national success. This neglects, and will ultimately obliterate, the wider ‘non-economic’ benefits of HE to individuals and to society (McMahon 2009; Shaheen 2011), and is likely to exacerbate societal inequalities (McMahon 2009; Brown 2011). Across the policies, e-learning is framed as a way to abet HE’s assumed primary function in supporting economic growth and thus the nation’s ‘advancement’. Yet framing a country’s advancement solely in economic terms disregards other essential aspects of societal welfare. Economic growth does not necessarily equate to a better quality of life: levels of education, health, and employment are all poorly correlated with growth (Dreze and Sen 2002; Drudy 2009; Nussbaum 2010). While a country may be performing well economically, it does not mean that there is a fair distribution of income (Drudy 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Nussbaum 2010). Focusing on economic performance also neglects the impacts of the unfettered pursuit of growth on resource depletion and environmental degradation (Drudy 2009; Kubiszewski et al. 2013).

The neoliberal framing of HE also neglects, and will likely ultimately diminish, the benefits of HE to individuals, to their families, and to society that “the market does not care about” (Massy 2004: 13). These benefits can be categorised as *Individual non-market benefits*, that is, positive impacts on individuals and their families beyond pure monetary benefits; and

*Social benefits*, that is, those positive impacts that extend beyond the individual to society in general, including future generations (McMahon 2009; Shaheen 2011).

Neoliberalism is also eroding the important societal, cultural, and – somewhat paradoxically – the potential economic benefits of those areas of scholarship that, according to the market-based model, are not considered to have an obvious economic impact, namely the arts and the humanities, as well as some of the social sciences. As I have highlighted, e-learning compounds this tendency with its bias towards the promotion of vocational subjects and skillsets (Carr-Chellman 2005; Guri-Rosenblit 2009; Selwyn 2011b). But this blinkered instrumental focus is neglecting the cultivation of the skills essential to democracy (Nussbaum 2010). The humanities, arts, and social sciences foster the dialogue, reflection, critical thought, imagination, and speculative testing of ideas that are critical to the discussion of social and political issues (Nussbaum 2010; Collini 2012; Small 2013; Giroux 2014). They also play a critical role in individual and collective happiness (Small 2013). Furthermore, the arts and humanities are also important precisely because of their distinction from other ways of understanding the world (Small 2013) and for promoting interdisciplinary thinking (Belfiore and Upchurch 2013). Rather ironically, the skills of critical thinking and creativity fostered via the study of the arts and humanities are precisely those needed for a thriving economy (British Academy 2004; McMahon 2009; Nussbaum 2010; Small 2013).

In direct conflict with claimed aspirations to make the system more inclusive, the market-based framing of HE is likely to increase social inequalities. Rather than resulting in a free market, where choice and value for money are available to everyone, the application of market principles is resulting in an increasingly stratified system whereby it is mainly the already advantaged who can afford to attend the most prestigious institutions and pay for the training necessary to enter most economically lucrative professions; the less advantaged can only afford the lower cost, and lower status institutions and courses, or may not be in a position to participate at all (McMahon 2009; Brown 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013). As I have demonstrated, e-learning in its current forms is exacerbating this problem: while it is alleged to be a means for widening participation, current forms of e-learning are pushing HE further into the realm of the market and may be reinforcing inequalities.

### ***Implications for Learning Technologists***

Learning Technologists are part of the emerging breed of “new professionals” (Hudson 2009; Whitchurch 2012) working in what has been referred to as HE’s “Third Space”

(Whitchurch 2012). The profession has evolved from what was often a primarily technical role into a para-academic role (Macfarlane 2011) which frequently includes a focus on curriculum design and delivery, and in some cases encompasses leadership and strategic responsibilities in relation to learning and teaching (Zellweger Moser and Bachmann 2010; Whitchurch 2012; Hopkins 2015; Walker and MacNeill 2015). There is a plethora of postgraduate programmes in e-learning, and the role is increasingly deemed to be a professional occupation with a defined career path (Walker and MacNeill 2015). The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) support an accreditation framework for the profession, and Learning Technologists are also eligible to become recognised under the HEA's Fellowships.

Watters (2014) employs Frankenstein's Monster as a chilling parable for Educational Technology. If I, and other Learning Technologists, continue to uncritically accept and implement market-orientated, instrumental, and technologically deterministic conceptions of e-learning, then we will be complicit in the creation of a monster. It is my view that, as a profession, Learning Technologists need to be better informed about the implications of the wider socio-political context on their work. The profession also needs to take a critical, evidence-based approach rather than being naively mesmerised by the assumed potential of technology, or attempting to apply e-learning as a technical fix for issues it simply cannot solve. If this does not happen then the profession is at risk of sabotaging the professional status that has only recently been afforded to it. In the next section, I outline some ways in which I have changed, and aim to further change, my professional practice in this regard.

### **My transformed perspectives, practices, and professional commitments**

Conducting this research has been extremely challenging, and has exposed me to new ideas that have disrupted my long-held conceptual frameworks. I have been required to switch academic disciplines from the hard sciences over to the humanities and social sciences, and I have become an autodidact in an eclectic mix of unfamiliar topics. Situating my work within the critical research paradigm has had a transformative professional impact, since it has empowered me to be much more interrogative of the 'facts' promulgated by 'experts' in policy and research, and to consider such discourse from alternative viewpoints. A related, but unexpected learning outcome for me is how politically interested I have become. I am now much more aware of, and engaged with the processes of policy-making and implementation, particularly in relation to issues of power and social justice. A crucial professional action emerging from this is for me to bring critical discussion about the wider context into my work with colleagues. I can promote healthy scepticism about the use of

technology in HE by drawing attention to the flawed and overinflated proclamations made about e-learning, as well highlighting the potential problems and inequalities that can result from its uncritical introduction.

An associated set of areas for action relate to my changed perspectives on, and my relationship with, e-learning research. In chapter 6, I highlighted the growing criticism of research into e-learning. Selwyn (2011a: 713) argues that some of these shortcomings can be attributed to the “noticeable failure of the educational technology community to engage with critical perspectives”. I concede that I have been guilty of taking a rather one-dimensional approach to my research in the past. My undergraduate and postgraduate training in engineering ingrained in me the idea that robust and valid research must, by definition, involve empirically ‘proving’ or ‘disproving’ a predefined hypothesis. Going forward I intend to engage in, and to promote among my colleagues, a critical approach towards e-learning research that considers the basic but challenging, questions that Selwyn (2015: 250) asserts should be asking:

- What is actually new here?
- What are the unintended consequences or second-order effects?
- What are the potential gains? What are the potential losses?
- What underlying values and agendas are implicit?
- In whose interests is this working? Who benefits in what ways?
- What are the social problems that digital technology is being presented as a solution to? Why at this time?
- How responsive to a ‘technical fix’ are these problems likely to be?

One simple step in the right direction would be for me to encourage my colleagues to share experiences of e-learning interventions that were ‘unsuccessful’. Indeed a former Editor of the *British Journal of Educational Technology* recently issued a call for journal contributions that include “Reports on educational technology initiatives which met with problems and/or failed to achieve their aims, and the lessons to be learned” (Latchem 2014: 10). I can also encourage colleagues to engage in research that is motivated by educational concerns rather than being technology-led (Kirkwood and Price 2013), or technologically deterministic (Oliver 2011), and that employ a wider range of theoretical traditions and methodologies (Friesen 2009; Selwyn 2012; Bulfin et al. 2014). In terms of my personal research interests, I intend to continue to situate my work within the critical research paradigm with a view to exposing and interrogating the assumptions underpinning the introduction of technology into HE. With this in mind, a further key action for me is to more actively engage in critical

dialogue with others about my perspectives. Writing this dissertation has been extremely isolating at times. I have shared my viewpoints on technology only with a trusted few, and I am nervous about the professional implications of being more vocal about my concerns. However, I do take some relief from knowing I am not alone in experiencing a disconnect between my values and my professional practice: many working in academic environments experience similar ‘value conflicts’ (Levin 2006; McNiff and Whitehead 2011; Skelton 2012; Winter and O’Donohue 2012). Over the medium term, I intend to contribute to the critical dialogue on education and technology by presenting on, and hopefully publishing my research. I will also to seek out ways in which I might influence national policy-making in relation to e-learning.

There are professional risks for me in divulging, and acting on, my concerns about e-learning. As Selwyn (2015: 252) points out:

From a self-interested point of view, it makes sense for anyone associated with technology and education to perpetuate the idea that digital technology *does* (or at least *might*) make a difference. These are the ‘real-world’ agendas that give the academic study of technology and education its currency and value – not least in terms of keeping researchers and lecturers in employment when so many other areas of academia are facing outright redundancy. [Emphasis in original]

Indeed, my role as a Learning Technologist exists precisely because of the assumption that e-learning is a ‘good thing’! More generally, critics of technology tend to be viewed as anti-progress, or culturally pessimistic (Lovink 2011; Peters 2013). Watters (2014: 74) even describes how she has been subject to rape and death threats for her critical perspectives on e-learning. A further dilemma that I need to carefully navigate is that, while I aspire to engage in and promote critical and unbiased exploration of the use of technology in HE learning and teaching, any funding opportunities for research into e-learning are generally predicated on the assumption that the use of technology in HE teaching and learning is an inherently positive development.

Engaging in this research has also afforded me a much better understanding of my own professional values. While I do not dispute that HE serves an economic and individual function, I also believe that HE has an equally important role to play in informing and supporting the development of a more democratic, just, peaceful, tolerant, and sustainable world. Of particular concern to me is the need for HE to support future generations to contribute as active citizens in an ever more globally connected community, and in an increasingly resource constrained and fragile physical environment. My thinking is aligned with, and has been influenced by, what has been variously referred to as Social Justice

Education (Tyson and Park 2008), Citizenship Education (Arthur et al. 2008), Cosmopolitan Education (Nussbaum 1994), and Global Citizenship Education (GCE) (Peters et al. 2008; Nussbaum 2010; Enslin 2011), which is the term that I will use henceforth. Collini (2012: 98) claims that Martha Nussbaum, one of the major proponents of GCE, “comes perilously close to appearing to suggest that respect for, and tolerance of, other people is only likely to be achieved by those who have taken some kind of ‘great books’ course at college”. While I am not in agreement with Collini’s assessment of Nussbaum’s position, his assertion does prompt me to clarify my own stance. I am certainly not proposing that every student studies for a liberal arts degree, and that we abandon programmes in business studies or the hard sciences. Instead, I consider GCE to be a trans-disciplinary approach that should permeate the curriculum, whether a student is studying Chemical Engineering, Commerce, or Classics. It is also important to stress that GCE is by no means incompatible with education that contributes to the economy and supports employability; on the contrary, a healthy economy thrives on many of the same skills that can support democratic participation in our global society. These competences include the capacity to think critically and ethically about the global issues facing humankind as a ‘citizen of the world’; the ability to critique the dominant structures of power and ideology; and the capacity to communicate with, and empathise with those of different cultures and beliefs (Nussbaum 2010; Giroux 2014; UNESCO 2014). Despite their criticality to the collective well-being of humanity and to the future of the planet that we share, reference to these skills and qualities is conspicuously absent from the policies considered. Following on from this, the most significant outcome of my engaging with this research has been the – highly disconcerting – affirmation of what I suspected at the outset: there is a gaping disconnect between my aspirations for e-learning in HE, and the way that e-learning is portrayed in policy discourse. In the next section, I will outline an alternative vision for the use of technology in HE that is better aligned with my own values. Before I do this, it is important to acknowledge that there are things that are beyond my direct control that may constrain the actions that are possible. As Barnett (2003: 7) reminds us “Precisely because ideology is embedded in our networked life, and therefore, in universities, we cannot do away with it. We have to live with it”. Like the UK, the Irish HE system is becoming increasingly shaped by neoliberal policy-making (Gaynor 2010; Power et al. 2013; Mercille and Murphy 2015). I alone cannot change this wider context. Indeed, as Giroux (2004: para. 1) pessimistically claims, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of neoliberal capitalism”. However, for me, to take such a deterministic standpoint would be disempowering and disabling, since it implies that we are somehow

incapable of challenging neoliberal values. Neoliberalism is not inevitable, and it is contestable.

## **An alternative vision for e-learning in HE**

In this section, I address my final research question:

6. What might e-learning look like if it was framed by an alternative vision for HE?

Laurillard points out that the assumed capabilities of technology are often the basis for actions taken in relation to the use of technology in HE teaching and learning:

Education has problems. Technology has solutions looking for problems. The two should fit, and this conviction fuels the continuing interest in technology-enhanced learning. But the solutions technology brings, in their most immediate form, are solutions to problems education does not have. (Laurillard 2008: 139)

Instead of taking technology as the starting point, I contend that we should instead begin with questions such as the following:

- What are the pressing problems facing humanity?
- What are the skills and qualities that citizens will need to address these issues?
- What role could HE play in developing these skills and qualities in graduates?
- What are the pedagogical strategies best suited to developing these attributes?

It is only when we have clarity on the above that we can critically assess whether technology could help, or indeed hinder our goals. Keeping this in mind, in what follows I explore some possible ways in which the judicious application of technology *might* support education for democratic and global citizenship, particularly in relation to:

- Fostering intercultural understanding, empathy, and tolerance;
- Nurturing the skills necessary for democratic participation in global society;
- Supporting ethical reasoning and actions; and
- Promotion of responsible and creative thinking in relation to environmental care and resource sustainability.

### ***Fostering intercultural understanding, empathy, and tolerance***

Throughout my discussion, I criticised the one dimensional, primarily economic framing of globalisation underpinning the policies. But that is not to say that globalisation is irrelevant to HE. On the contrary, globalisation is impacting on the skills and qualities that graduates will need to become engaged and responsible citizens of the world (Merryfield and Duty

2008). The pressing issues facing humanity are global in their scope and international co-operation will be necessary in order to collectively address them (Nussbaum 2010; UNESCO 2014). Intercultural competence, the ability to effectively communicate and collaborate with those who are culturally different from ourselves, is essential for citizens to live and work harmoniously and effectively in today's multicultural societies. It is also crucial if citizens are to work collectively towards addressing global concerns (Kellner 2006; Deardorff 2009; Schenker 2012). Cultivating understanding and empathy with others is essential to engendering intercultural competence (Guth and Helm 2010; Nussbaum 2010). But it can be difficult for people to identify with those who are socially or culturally different, or who are geographically distant (Bachen et al. 2012). I will now outline how three digitally mediated approaches: telecollaboration, digital storytelling, and role-playing games and simulations might foster the development of intercultural understanding, empathy, and tolerance in students.

Telecollaboration involves enabling geographically dispersed learners to engage in dialogue and intercultural exchange. This is not a new pedagogical concept: technology supported tandem learning, an approach that pairs learners with complementary target and native languages in bilingual/bicultural exchanges, has been employed in language teaching for over two decades (Brammerts 1996; O'Rourke 2005; Sasaki 2015). More recently, there has been some limited exploration of the extension of online intercultural exchange to learners who are not necessarily language learners, via online discussion forum exchanges (Hauck 2010; Chen et al. 2012; Schenker 2012; Yang et al. 2014; Benabdallah 2016; Tcherepashenets 2016); using audio-visual communications tools (Guth and Marini-Maio 2010; Claro 2016; Kirby and Amendolara 2016); via wikis (Cloke 2010; Guth and Marini-Maio 2010); in virtual worlds (Jauregi et al. 2011; Canto et al. 2013); and via online games (Thorne 2008). With global citizenship in mind, integral to such approaches is the creation of an environment that supports exploration of participants' identities, rather than simply putting them in contact with each other and getting them to exchange information (Helm and Guth 2010). Furthermore, as I established in chapter 4, intercultural communication in online environments is far from straightforward: the digital divide and the impacts of language and cultural differences certainly cannot be ignored. However, there is a vast difference between peddling an online course to international students in order to maximise profits, and in fostering a global community of learners to engage in critical and reflective cross-cultural dialogue. In an interesting example from my own context, Fitzgerald and Lemieux (2010) facilitated a collaborative and interdisciplinary online course on terrorism between students in DCU, Dublin, and Purchase College, New York. The students' conceptual frameworks in

relation to terrorism were often shaped by their socio-cultural contexts; in particular their local and personal experiences in relation to the Northern Ireland Conflict and the events of 9/11. Students engaged in critical dialogue via an online discussion forum and worked together to produce a collaborative wiki. The authors reflect that this approach exposed students to differing views on terrorism while engaging them in cross-cultural discussions and collaboration towards a communal goal (Fitzgerald and Lemieux 2010).

Another relatively under-explored digitally mediated mechanism through which intercultural awareness and understanding might be fostered is Digital storytelling, an approach with roots in social justice education (Lambert 2012). Participants create short (3-5 minute) personal narratives via various digital media, such as photographs, video, music, and voice-overs (Gubrium and Scott 2010; Lambert 2012). The multimodal nature of digital stories can support students to share their lived experiences in a richer and more dynamic way than is possible via written communication alone (Brushwood 2009; Truong-White and McLean 2015). Digital storytelling can be a powerful mechanism for engaging young people in learning about, and reflecting on, the local contexts that are both affected by, and contribute to, global issues such as the environment and climate change, as well as for exploring counter narratives to hegemonic views and stereotypes (Kordaki and Agelidou 2010; Truong-White and McLean 2015).

Role-play can be an effective way to help individuals to cultivate empathy with those who differ from them in circumstances or viewpoint (Batson 1991; Nussbaum 2010). Role-play enabled via electronic games, simulations, and virtual worlds may be particularly suited to fostering empathy, since such media can enable participants to become immersed in the roles and perspectives of others within authentic and multimodal environments (Christoph et al. 2009; Whitton 2009; Belman and Flanagan 2010; Raphael et al. 2010). I am not advocating a blanket and uncritical adoption of these technologies in HE however. Games, simulations, and virtual worlds have been subject to the same educational hype as many other technologies (Gee 2007; McGonigal 2012). Indeed, this enthusiastic and uncritical rhetoric is evident in some of the policies:

To bring the hardest to reach into collaborative learning we should be looking at the multi-layer Internet video games sector. (DfES 2003d: 55)

Borrowing ideas from the world of interactive games, we can motivate even reluctant learners. (DfES 2005: 3)

A further important point to take into account is that video games comprise part of the burgeoning neoliberal digital economy (Dyer-Witford and De Peuter 2009). Indeed

educational games themselves are big business (Spring 2012). We therefore need to be cognisant of who is promoting the deployment of these technologies in education, and why. Moreover, some commercial games, for example *Grand Theft Auto*, have been criticised for promoting masculine values, for their pre-occupation with crime and violence, and for their endorsement of problematic stereotypes (Squire and Jenkins 2003; Schut 2007; Schrier and Gibson 2010a). Notwithstanding the significance of the aforesaid issues, we should not fall in to the trap of assuming that all digital games are inherently 'bad'. Learning Technologists could design games that contest negative stereotypes, or that challenge participants' social and political assumptions by enabling them to vicariously experience contexts, events, or issues from different perspectives. A good example is the *Real Lives* game, which allows players to 'inhabit' the lives of people around the world including their experiences of education, employment, relationships, family, disease, natural disasters etc. Bachen et al. (2012) found that students who played the game expressed greater global empathy and demonstrated more interest in learning about other cultures. A further excellent example is *Peacemaker*, a simulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which students play the role of either the Israeli Prime Minister or the Palestinian President. Players experience an immersive environment that utilises authentic photographs and video footage that depict the conflict's impact on the lives of individuals. In order to make progress, players must consider the perspectives of a range of stakeholders. Studies have shown that players experienced better understanding of both sides of the conflict. In addition, when playing a role contradictory to their pre-game attitudes participants expressed empathy with those with different perspectives, regardless of their original standpoints (Nilsen et al. 2011; Alhabash and Wise 2012; Gonzalez et al. 2012; Cuhadar and Kampf 2014).

### ***Nurturing the skills necessary for democratic societal participation***

Promoting democratic societal participation, both local and global, is an essential element of GCE. Games such as the *Civilization* series and *Real Lives* could help to foster the systematic and critical thinking necessary for cultivating democratic civic participation, since they can allow students to access institutional, geographical, and temporal settings that would not otherwise be possible to explore or experience. For example, they can allow students to explore the effects of social, political, economic, diplomatic, and military factors on cities, nations, and civilizations (Bachen et al. 2015). Well-crafted games and simulations could also support critical reflection on issues of history and politics, and could be designed to support the development of the leadership skills and collective action required to address real-world social and political problems (Raphael et al. 2010). Digital games can also challenge participants to consider multiple perspectives on contested events or ideas, either

during the game, or in post-game class discussions (Raphael et al. 2010; Squire 2011; Bachen et al. 2015). Furthermore, well-crafted simulation games have shown potential to enhance students' political interest (Neys and Jansz 2010; Bachen et al. 2015). A strong sense of local identity is essential to becoming a "citizen of the world" (Freire 1998: 39). *World without oil*, is an excellent example of the type of game that could help students to ground learning about global issues within their own local contexts, and in demonstrating that individual and local actions towards change are attainable and can have global impact. The online multi-player game simulated the first 32 weeks of a global oil crisis, and was played by over 1900 people worldwide over a 3-week period. Participants collaborated to work out strategies to survive in a world without oil (Rusnak et al. 2008).

### ***Supporting ethical discourse and reasoning***

Ethical discourse and reasoning are essential to democratic citizenship (Schrier 2010). As I noted earlier, some digital games have been the subject of controversy in relation to ethics. However, well-designed games and simulations could instead support the development of critical ethical reasoning, due to the immersive opportunities that they might generate for students to experience and reflect on ethical dilemmas and to explore the consequences of their choices (Simkins and Steinkuehler 2008; Raphael et al. 2010; Schrier and Gibson 2010b; Zagal 2010). For example, in order to 'succeed' in the *Macdonald's Game* players must maximise profits by clearing rainforests, mistreating animals, violating workers' rights, engaging in poor food safety practices, and partaking in questionable political lobbying. In *10 Downing Street* participants take on the role of the UK's Prime Minister and as they guide the country through a national recession, exploring the economic and ethical consequences of their actions (Constantine 2013). In the *Island Simulation*, through role playing and perspective taking, participants explore ethical dilemmas in international business, which frequently involve trade-offs between profitability and social responsibility (Shami et al. 2004).

### ***Promotion of responsible and creative thinking in relation to environmental care and resource sustainability***

HE has an essential role to play in promoting sustainable development and in equipping citizens to deal with future environmental and resourcing challenges (Gough and Scott 2008; Shephard 2015). But it can be difficult for individuals to see themselves as part of the bigger picture, or for them to see how their actions can influence these global issues (Blake 1999). Games and simulations have shown some potential to support students both to learn about, and to generate local and global actions in relation to these crucial issues. For example,

Nilsson and Jakobsson (2011) used *SimCity* to support students to explore models of future sustainable cities. Similarly, Hansmann et al. (2005) developed *Simulme*, a simulation game which aims to improve environmental knowledge and attitudes. Another interesting example is *Shortfall Online*. Teams of players learn to manage simulated companies within the automobile supply chain, and make decisions based on trade-offs between economic, environmental, and social impacts (Gennett 2010).

As I have outlined here, if e-learning policies were to be motivated by an alternative set of assumptions about the role of HE, then manifestations of e-learning might look quite different to the prevailing implementations. Indeed, many other alternative possibilities for the use of technology in HE might potentially be developed.

### **The Trojan horse**

After many years have slipped by, the leaders of the Greeks, opposed by the Fates, and damaged by the war, build a horse of mountainous size, through Pallas's divine art, and weave planks of fir over its ribs: they pretend it's a votive offering: this rumour spreads. They secretly hide a picked body of men, chosen by lot, there, in the dark body, filling the belly and the huge cavernous insides with armed warriors. [...] Trojans, don't trust this horse. Whatever it is, I'm afraid of Greeks even those bearing gifts. Virgil, *Aeneid*, II. 13-49.

The city of Troy was finally overcome by the Greeks concealed within Odysseus' wooden horse. Perhaps if the Trojan people had looked more closely at the horse and what was contained therein, then they might have been better able to defend their city. Will e-learning continue on its destructive trajectory as a Trojan house for neoliberalism? I have argued that alternative conceptions and implementations of e-learning are possible: whether these can be realised remains to be seen.

## Appendix A: Policy Texts Analysed

ENGLAND				
Issuing body	Date	Title	Authors	Word count
DfES	2003	Towards A Unified E-Learning Strategy.	The DfES E-learning Strategy Unit, led by Professor Diana Laurillard.	20 000
DfES	2005	Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children's Services.	As above.	23 000
Becta	2008	Harnessing Technology: Next Generation Learning.	No information available.	18 500
HEFCE	2003	Consultation on HEFCE E-Learning Strategy.	No information available.	4600
HEFCE	2005	HEFCE Strategy for E-Learning.	No information available.	6100
HEFCE	2009	Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through the use of Technology. A Revised Approach To HEFCE's Strategy for E-Learning.	No information available.	4900
HEFCE	2011	Report To HEFCE By The Online Learning Task Force (OLTF). Collaborate to Compete. Seizing the Opportunity of Online Learning for UK Higher Education.	The OLTF. Membership included: Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive of the British Library (Chair), Current/former University Senior Managers, HEFCE representatives, the BIS Director of HE, the President of the National Union of Students, and IT industry representatives.	18 900

## WALES

<b>Issuing body</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Word count</b>
ELWa	2003	An E-Learning Strategy for Wales.	No information available.	7000
ELWa	2003	Context to an E-Learning Strategy for Wales.	No information available.	3600
HEFCW	2007	Statement of The Position of E-Learning in Higher Education in Wales.	The e-learning subgroup of HEFCW's Learning and Teaching Committee. Membership included representatives from Higher Education Wales, the UK's HEA, HEFCW, Jisc, the Open University, the National Leadership and Innovations Agency for Healthcare, Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum, and the Welsh Assembly Government.	6000
HEFCW	2008	Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through Technology: A Strategy for Higher Education in Wales.	As above.	7500

## SCOTLAND

<b>Issuing body</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Word count</b>
SFEFC/ SHEFC	2003	Joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group: Final Report.	The SFEFC/SHEFC e-learning group. Membership included representation from the funding councils, University and College senior management; Scottish Enterprise, Universities Scotland, the Association for Scottish Colleges, and Glenbrae Management Services Ltd.	13 000
SFC	2006	SFC Review of E-Learning Policy.	As above.	3000
SFC	2007	Review of Council Strategy on E-Learning.	As above.	2800

## Appendix B: Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

## Appendix C: Master Narratives and Sub-themes



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