# *Selling an Education.* Universities as commercial entities: a corpus-based study of university websites as self-promotion

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### Abstract

The current socio-political landscape, coloured by cuts to public funding and an increase in tuition fees, has meant that universities can no longer rely on an education to sell themselves. The result is an increased focus on language with text producers manipulating its evaluative resources as a means to a promotional end. The main concern here is whether this drive towards distinctiveness is in fact a reality, or whether it remains a distant utopian vision of the institutions that are struggling to free themselves from the shackles of standardisation. In order to investigate the likelihood of a common promotional discourse among UK universities, a collocational profile is built around the higher education keyword RESEARCH to see how this, the basic service that universities offer, is promotionally packaged by the company it keeps.

Starting from a corpus comprising data mined from the institutional websites of thirty-nine mission group members, this study explores the data using a methodologically fused Critical Discourse Analytic–Corpus Linguistic approach. It is hoped that, in identifying the collocational behaviour of individual lexical items, and locating these keywords as a point of contact in the dialectical relationship between language and the marketised society, these findings will go some way towards making transparent the semantically opaque.

## 1   Introduction

This paper can be considered a localised linguistic investigation into the UK higher education keyword RESEARCH. It attempts to reveal how micro patterns around this high frequency noun are reflective of macro-level social phenomena, where business-like lexis is firmly assimilated in the 'institutional discourse of self-promotion' on university websites (Mautner 2005a: 111). This study engages in the dialectical relationship between language

and society, taking its motivation from recent political developments in higher education in the UK. This is mostly to do with reforms introduced as part of the 'Coalition Government's White Paper' (DBIS 2011), which acted as the catalyst for a more competitive system. As a result, universities have come to operate in an increasingly competitive marketplace where they offer the same basic service: RESEARCH and TEACHING (Anyangwe, 2012; Brown and Carasso 2013). It is imperative, then, that these institutions tackle the 'challenge' of promotionally packaging 'intangible products' to prospective students (Morrish and Saunston 2013: 61) in order to differentiate from competitors and create a 'unique selling point'. This difference is more important than ever considering an education can no longer sell itself; language is, by implication, the driving force behind institutional differentiation. Indeed, in the marketised context, universities are required to manipulate promotional language as a means to an end. This quest for differentiation is met, ironically, via regulatory bodies, such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) 'Distinct in Higher Education' Project whose resulting 'The Distinct Framework' prioritises universities' communication of distinctiveness online (*distinct.ac.uk* 2013). The very existence of such bodies is perhaps telling of a prevailing move to standard discourses not only on university websites, as is the concern for this paper, but also university discourse in general.

Crucially, though, these recent developments are part of the wider ideological machinery within which the promotional cog has been whirring for quite some time. Indeed, Wernick (1991) first pointed to the 'promotional university', at work within a business-like and entrepreneurial agenda, shortly before Fairclough's (1993) Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) of the trend. Since then, marketisation has gained overly pejorative connotations, a notion exemplified in the creation of the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU 2013). Here the nominalised 'defence' constructs marketisation as an enemy that, having infiltrated higher education lines, needs combatting. Importantly, this is contrasted with the expected positive evaluation of products; a tactic employed on university websites to counteract charges of student as consumer. These tactics have become so entrenched that they are 'naturalised' and 'no longer perceived as marked' (Mautner 2010: 2). What this study aims to contribute to the promotional language debate within higher education discursive practice is the value of the discursive profile as a window to ideology. More specifically

how a seemingly non-evaluative keyword, RESEARCH, is packaged as a product by the collocational company it keeps and the ideological baggage that collocates offload onto this node. In line with this, the research questions that motivate this study are:

- How do evaluative adjectives behave in phrases where RESEARCH is the head?

- Do they offer a product description with a 'unique selling point' (USP) via evaluative adjectives? Or:

- Is there evidence to suggest that mission groups are truly homogeneous, building a common promotional discourse?

The study begins by laying the groundwork for an integrated Critical Discourse Analytic–Corpus Linguistic methodology. It is shown that this two pronged approach is both complementary and necessary in order to bridge the gap between the socio-cultural and the computational. After commenting on the makeup of my corpus and the concordance-based analysis, I then set out the case for a discursive profiling of high frequency keywords as a way into the data. It is argued that a focus on the keyword RESEARCH for its high frequency, as opposed to cultural currency, is more telling of the ideological baggage that collocates offload onto the seemingly 'neutral' node. What follows is a comparative collocational analysis of the keyword's two most frequent modifying promotional adjectives *quality* and *world* across the mission groups. In light of my results, the concepts of semantic opacity and malleability are discussed before I conclude with some implications of the study for the discourse of self-promotion and distinctiveness as universities go forth in their quest to be the best.

## 2   Critical Discourse Analysis and the marketisation of UK universities: then and now

The application of Critical Discourse Analysis to uncovering the implications that marketisation has had on British universities' discursive practices was first proposed by Fairclough (1993; 1995). Motivated by questions of interdiscursivity, Fairclough investigated the notion that the boundaries between 'orders of discourse' and 'discourse practices' (1993:141) are becoming blurred in higher education contexts, whose fuzzy-edged discourses are

increasingly permeated by a promotional agenda not dissimilar to that of advertising. Indeed, commenters have gone on to charge promotion with the 'colonization' (Bhatia 2004: 83) of discourses with particular reference to academia, though Fairclough prefers hybridity in his account of the university prospectus as a 'new hybrid partly promotional genre' (1993: 141). The merits of this research are evidenced in the proliferation of follow-up linguistic inquiries into higher education printed materials of different countries (Askehave 2007; Hartley and Morphew 2008; Osman 2008; Symes 1996; Teo 2007; Xiong 2012). Indeed, the approach adopted here shares a critical discourse analytic concern for making clear often opaque ideologies, in particular how market practices permeate university discourses to further institutions' self-promotion as part of the dialectical relationship between language and its social context. Yet if we are to accurately assess the extent to which marketisation manifests at the micro level of lexical choice, it makes sense to study those online outlets that universities have now turned to in order to sell an education: institutional websites.

Critical discourse analysts' reluctance to defy convention and move away from non-electronic data is, perhaps, down to the 'paucity' of data they prioritise (Piper 2000: 76). Indeed, whilst Benwell and Stokoe (2006) recognise the value of web-based data to the study of universities' marketisation, they choose to ignore how the potentiality of the web promotes corpus-based studies by limiting their analysis to one homepage from one university website. For these studies CDA's largely qualitative orientation suffices since neither deal with an extensive dataset, nor do they set out with the intention of doing so. However, as an isolated approach, CDA does not readily facilitate corpus-based analysis (Baker et al. 2008; Baker 2012; Mautner 2005a, 2007, 2009). To overcome this mismatch between a critical discourse analytic approach and a sizeable corpus, this study combines CDA with corpus linguistics (henceforth CL) as a way into the textual and social analysis of the data.

## 2.1 Towards a methodological fusion: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Corpus Linguistics (CL)

This study straddles both CDA and CL in its approach to the promotion of an education. Importantly, this is proposed to 'supplement', rather than 'displace', conventional CDA methods (Koller and Mautner 2004: 217). While CL tends not to focus on the social aspect of text construction, it facilitates

CDA's commitment to the social by revealing instances of repeated usage that, in turn, expose 'hidden meanings' (Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 123). Thus, CL allows CDA to go beyond intuition and so is taken to be a doubly powerful approach, due to its synthesis of quantitative and qualitative, which provides a sharper focus on discourse. Discourse is used in Gee's (2011) sense of the word as discourse with a big 'D' that embodies much more than language alone but is, nevertheless, shored up by traces at the micro linguistic level, in this case how recurrent ideologies seep into high frequency keywords. CL promotes the profiling of keywords as 'nodes around which ideological battles are fought' (Stubbs 2001: 188). Thus, keywords are an obvious point of entry for a collocational study that, in highlighting RESEARCH as the node around which one aspect of the macro-level discourse of self-promotion manifests itself, hopes to provide insights into how it is the collocates, more so than the node itself, that offload ideology.

## 3   Constructing the corpus: university websites

### 3.1   The selection criteria: which universities?

The university system in the UK comprises a number of different 'tiers'. However, this study aims to move away from the stigma attached to the stereotypical 'university' versus 'ex-polytechnic' binary divide whose temporality privileges heritage as an institutional marketing tool (Bulotaite 2003). Of course, tiered distinctions can only be diminished to a point since the notion of "*selling* an education" in itself implies competition, thus maintaining hierarchy (Hyland and Tse 2009: 17). Esteem lineage has firmly taken root in the UK university system so much so that its inherency is unavoidable. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this investigation, the division of universities into *groups* is considered to be a more neutral distinction given that member institutions of the groups under analysis are self-affiliated rather than self-imposed by external commenters. Crucially, though, it is important not to overlook institutions' reputational idiosyncrasies; universities' personal identities have perhaps become a prerequisite for survival in the market economy (the Distinct Project 2012).

   This study explores the discursive practices of those groups so-called the university 'mission groups'. According to the *Universities UK* (*UUK*) website, these comprise universities who 'are diverse in their missions and location'

and 'have formed groups with common interests' (2013). The notion that these groups act as central vehicles for the promotion of 'common interests' is hugely important to this study since it allows for the investigation of linguistic commonalities and linguistic variation across groups (inter-group) and within groups (intra-group). Indeed, it allows us to identify whether mission groups are truly homogeneous or whether it is just in a name. Do they build a common promotional discourse that makes one group distinct from another, or are commenters' predictions that 'mission groups are bearing the brunt of institutions' growing need for a strong individual identity' (Beer and Purcell 2012) reflected in individual institutions' self-promotion as opposed to collective representation?

The UK has 115 universities (*UUK* 2013), the majority of which (85) are affiliated to a mission group. This study analyses a corpus of data derived from the institutional websites (Section 3.2) belonging to a cross-section of member institutions from the four mission groups (Table 1). Universities included in the corpus have been selected via stratified sampling, taking each distinct group and sampling at random within that group using the online sampling tool *random.org*, but proportionally to the group population so as to increase the representativeness of the findings. In total, the corpus represents 39 universities (see Appendix); 35% of the total number of UK universities (115) and 47% of the total number of UK 'mission group' members (85).

| Mission Group | Total number of member universities | Total number of universities sampled |
|---|---|---|
| 1994 Group | 15 | 7 |
| Million + | 22 | 10 |
| Russell Group | 24 | 11 |
| University Alliance | 24 | 11 |
| **Total:** | **85** | **39** |

Table 1: Total number of mission group member universities sampled relative to the total number of mission group member institutions in the UK

## 3.2   Data: University Websites

University websites are an obvious data choice for two reasons. First, institutional websites, fuelled by ideology, have become the central vehicle

for universities' self-promotion. This is not surprising given the Internet's unique potential to communicate a significant amount of content to a vast audience at the touch of a button. Universities are, then, able to monopolise websites as a means to an end since they facilitate the mediated representation of self, personal to the institution not the individual. It is hoped that this specialised corpus will uncover whether the discursively constructed self has become so entrenched that these sites constitute '*fully* promotional texts in their own right' (Askehave 2007: 725). This may, in turn, suggest that marketisation has moved on from, and perhaps displaced the need for, the kinds of printed materials initially analysed by Fairclough (1993; 1995). Second, the Internet's ephemerality lends itself to the investigation of developments that have gained currency in the socio-political context and whose discursive territory CDA attempts to chart. In this way, the marketisation of higher education, as a topical issue, is likely to manifest on university websites, creating the need for their existence. This study aims to fill the gap between CDA and web-based corpora and can be seen, in some respects, as a response to Mautner's (2005b: 809) call 'to get wired'.

However, the ephemeral nature of the web poses a methodological problem. The issue herein is that, on the completion of this study, the corpus of university websites is likely to exist as a snapshot of texts that have since been revised. For this reason, attempts have been made to impose some fixity on the state of flux the web finds itself in: text has been downloaded (see Table 2) to show data as it was when accessed in September 2012. More specifically, the textual data has been mined from the homepage and "About us" page, as topical areas of university websites that have been shown to be a defining feature of the genre (Caiazzo 2010; Morrish and Saunston 2010; 2013). This is to create comparability between different university websites areas, determining what is frequent common ground in their website structure so as to compare like with like:

- University homepage
- "About us" page
- School of English homepage
- School of English "About us" page

A caveat is required here regarding the hyperlinked interconnectivity of websites. As the name suggests, this 'web' of pages makes their navigation highly subjective so that it would be almost impossible to knowingly

replicate the paths taken by prospective students. To this end, the corpus construction can be considered partly, yet unavoidably, introspective.

| Mission Group | Homepage | "About us" | SofE Homepage | SofE "About us" |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Webpages included in the corpus | | | |
| 1994 Group | 508 | 13,845 | 1,062 | 2,938 |
| Russell Group | 1,793 | 24,108 | 1,641 | 6,780 |
| Million + | 1,160 | 17,415 | 1,288 | 3,284 |
| University Alliance | 961 | 13,065 | 1,569 | 4,337 |
| **Total:** | **4,422** | **68,433** | **5,560** | **17,339** |

Table 2: The size in words of corpus data derived from university websites' topical areas according to the four mission group sub-corpora relative to the total number of mission group member institutions in the UK

### 3.3   Corpus breakdown

The four university mission groups represent the four different sub-corpora that make up this corpus-based study. Table 2 outlines the size of each of these sub-corpora in words. Although it may not be considered sizeable by corpus linguistic standards, for a study that is partly CDA-oriented, a corpus of this size is relatively exceptional. Indeed, CDA studies have often been criticised for cherry-picking atypical texts from which to base claims that are, accordingly, over-generalised and introspective (Koller and Mautner 2004; Mautner 2005a, 2007, 2009; Orpin, 2005; Piper 2000; Stubbs 1996). As a result, this corpus is not readily compatible with conventional CDA methods alone.

   The computational analysis software, *Wordsmith Tools 6.0* (Scott 2011), provided an entry point into the evaluative environment of the node RE-SEARCH (and also TEACHING, see section 4) with a particular focus on evaluative adjectives that occur to the left of the node (L collocates). In order to identify salient linguistic patterns around the node, concordances were generated with a span of 5 words L–R (on the left and on the right), to find recurrent evaluative L collocates. The system adopted for representing collocates is in italics and using superscript to highlight position (*collocate*[L1]) whereas the node is in small caps (NODE[N]).

## 4   A higher education keyword: the case of RESEARCH

The decision to map the discursive territory of RESEARCH is based mostly on frequency; it is the second most commonly occurring noun in the entire corpus (see Table 3). Whilst RESEARCH is the keyword driving the profiling, its semantic network shall not be overlooked. Initially, the profiling of EDUCATION was also proposed. However, it is argued that RESEARCH is such a hub in the promotion of an education that it is also a marker of teaching with the two concepts being, to a certain extent, mutually reinforcing. Indeed, this was a facet of the White Paper (DBIS, 2011):

> We want there to be a renewed focus on high-quality teaching in universities so that it has the same prestige as research.
> — Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2011: 2)

This is echoed by Elton (2011: 68) who points to 'an overall unity of teaching and research' and, crucially, on university websites themselves with one 1994 Group member promoting 'a belief that teaching and research are synergistic' (*University of Leicester 2013*).

By taking frequency as evidence of a word's typicality, this study conflicts with those in the Firthian (1957) tradition that approach texts with a set of intuitively gleaned keywords to be profiled in light of their socio-cultural significance (Caldas-Coulthard 1995; Fairclough 2000; Krishnamurthy 1996; Mautner 2005a). It is not a coincidence that RESEARCH fails to be glossed here as a 'cultural' keyword (Stubbs 1996) or 'buzzword' (Mautner 2005a). Unlike those buzzwords, such as *enterprising* and *entrepreneurial*, assimilated into academe from business contexts (Mautner 2005a), RESEARCH is not considered ideological in itself. It should be noted, though, that RESEARCH has emerged as 'a major signifier of institutional value (Brown and Carasso 2013: 7) and so is not entirely polarised from culturally salient keywords. Nevertheless, it is argued that, on the face of it, RESEARCH is tacitly ideological; it is only by entering its collocational environment that we become aware of its ideological load. Crucially, this does not mean that that this load is diluted. Indeed, this study explores how the collocational environment of RESEARCH acts as a product description manipulated by text producers to further their self-promotional agenda. Exploring overly marketised higher education buzzwords, such as *entrepreneurial* and *customer*, would be ultimately contradictory to a focus on self-promotion; universities do not want to be seen as

actively market-oriented and so it is likely that they these words, for their connotations, will be absent in a corpus of university websites. The point is whether such descriptions constitute a 'unique selling point' (USP) in line with the individualisation prioritised by marketisation. This is essential considering the 'challenge' of promoting RESEARCH as an 'intangible product' (Morrish and Saunston 2013: 61) that students buy into as part of the commodification of knowledge (Becher and Trowler 2001).

|      | 1994 Group | Alliance   | Russell Group | Million + |
|------|------------|------------|---------------|-----------|
| 1.   | university | university | university    | university |
| 2.   | research   | students   | research      | students  |
| 3.   | students   | research   | students      | research  |
| 4.   | English    | school     | world         | education |
| 5.   | world      | staff      | school        | campus    |
| 6.   | campus     | education  | student       | courses   |
| 7.   | school     | courses    | English       | school    |
| 8.   | teaching   | student    | teaching      | English   |
| 9.   | year       | world      | UK            | London    |
| 10.  | staff      | business   | city          | teaching  |

Table 3: Noun wordlists of the top 10 most frequent nouns in the sub-corpora

RESEARCH can be considered a product due to its privileged position in the noun wordlists (Table 3). Most importantly, though, is how RESEARCH undergoes a process comparable to nominalisation. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) suggests its etymology does not strictly satisfy Biber et al.'s (2002: 88) criteria that suffixation is the typical instance with nominalisation: the 're' prefix creates a new noun (research c.1577) from the previously introduced noun 'search' (c.1400) (*OED*). What is important about how RESEARCH is used in the data, however, is the lack of human agency. RESEARCH as a process is back grounded, making questionable institutions' priorities: do institutions want to be seen as doing RESEARCH, or is it more about doing something that is quality assured (Section 5) or worldly (Section 6)? As the two most frequent evaluative L collocates of RESEARCH, *quality* and *world* shall be explored to unpack their promotional function as product descriptors to suggest that an education cannot sell itself. Rather, in the marketised context, institutions are required to manipulate promotional language as a means to an end. The fact that institutions see the need to

evaluatively modify RESEARCH (only 6% of constructions with RESEARCH as head of the noun phrase are non-evaluatively modified in the entire corpus) is telling of a general consensus among mission groups that RESEARCH alone is not enough to fulfil their self-promotional needs.

## 5   A Quality Assured education? The collocational behaviour of *quality* on university websites

The idea that RESEARCH is a product that students can buy into is entrenched by its recurrent packaging alongside the evaluative attributive adjective *quality*[L1] (see Table 5). This gives the impression of—to quote the title of the Government's White Paper—'students at the heart of the system' (DBIS 2011) since it centralises the importance of customer satisfaction in the drive towards value for money. To this end, promises of performativity are inextricably linked to the regulation and control imposed by bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). What is important to this study is whether the move by such bodies to encourage market competition, and thus self-promotion, in order to safeguard quality, compromises product differentiation. Indeed, concerns have been voiced about the threat that these prescriptive regulators pose to institutions' use of unique linguistic constructions to meet their promotional ends (Gibbs and Knapp 2002: 49). To investigate this, the collocational behaviour of *quality*, as one of the two highest collocates of RESEARCH, and a marker of value, shall be explored in an attempt to identify how its connotative impact attempts to encourage students to invest in their product.

Initially, a wordlist has been generated using *Wordsmith Tools 6.0* (Scott 2011) for each of the sub corpora (Table 4) in order to establish the extent to which the mission groups prioritise QUALITY. This list appears to point towards a lack of inter-group variation in institutions' representation of RESEARCH value, though this remains to be seen. At this stage, however, it is fair to say of this initial projection that there are some commonalities in mission groups' prioritisation of QUALITY. This may be indicative of how QUALITY is realised similarly in linguistic constructions alongside the product to which it adds value: *quality*[L1] + RESEARCH.

*Quality*[L1] collocates most frequently (31%) with the adjective *high*(-)[L2] as a modifier preceding some other head of a noun phrase which *high*[L2] also modifies: 'high quality research' (1994 Gp. Birkbeck. About.), 'high-quality,

research-led education' (Russ. Gp. Bristol. About.); 'high-quality, research-led teaching' (M+. Gp. Bedfordshire. About.). The need to specify *high*[L2] is perhaps mostly to do with rank given that quality alone is typically used as shorthand for something that is high quality. It is noteworthy that, in these constructions, RESEARCH is deemed such a marker of success that it is employed as an adjective evaluating the product as opposed to the product itself; RESEARCH is at once the modifier and the modified. That it modifies the head noun EDUCATION reiterates its interrelatedness with RESEARCH and TEACHING as three mutually reinforcing higher education keywords where one implies the other. This notion is exemplified by exploring the collocational environment of RESEARCH-LED: where this node is employed as an L1 adjective, RESEARCH-LED premodifies the head noun TEACHING in 35% of constructions. It seems, then, that the word *quality* does not have to be directly deployed to mark value. Instead, its semantic 'spill over' is such that RESEARCH too has come to connote quality. Quality, though 'ambiguous in denotation', is clearly 'rich in connotation' (Mautner 2005a: 95).

| Sub corpus | Rank in wordlist | Frequency n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1994 Group | 94 | 25 | 0.13% |
| Million+ | 72 | 43 | 0.18% |
| University Alliance | 60 | 41 | 0.21% |
| Russell Group | 65 | 67 | 0.19% |

Table 4: Frequency of QUALITY in the four sub corpora where percentage is the frequency of QUALITY in corpus as a whole

Similarly, another common evaluative L1 collocate of *quality*[L1] is the superlative form. That is, the recurrent patterning of *highest*[L2] + *quality*[L1] (see Table 5): 'highest quality teaching' (1994 Gp. Leicester. About.); 'highest quality research' (Russ. Gp. Queen Mary. About.); 'highest quality education' (UA. Sheff. Hal. About.). This develops the previously stated point of *high* as rank marker, its co-occurrence with *quality* proving a doubly powerful force in the promotion of the product. These adjectival phrases connote something of remarkable *quality*. Yet it is not so remarkable considering it is used in mostly questionable the truth value of the proposition and is ultimately contradictory since it makes generic that which was intended to

differentiate. The notion that the use of *quality* is generic across university websites is exemplified by Mautner (2005a: 105) who identifies *quality* as a 'keyword [that is] characteristic of contemporary higher education discourse'.

| Sub corpus | L1 collocate of *quality* | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| 1994 Group | high | 56% |
| | high-quality | |
| | highest | 12% |
| Million+ | high | 21% |
| | high-quality | |
| | highest | 2% |
| Alliance | high | 51% |
| | high-quality | |
| | highest | 12% |
| Russell Group | high | 15% |
| | high-quality | |
| | highest | 9% |

Table 5: Percentage frequency of *high*(-) and *highest* in the four sub corpora noting that the percentage frequencies of *high*(-) are collective.

These adjectival constructions most frequently modify the head words RESEARCH (13%) and TEACHING (15%) (see Fig. 1). This gives weight to the argument that "universities are spending more and more time [...] developing marketable "products" (Askehave 2007: 724); the products in this case being research, teaching and education. Indeed, the recurrence of the verbs *offer(-ing)* and *providing* and the noun phrase a *provider* (Fig. 2) uphold the idea that higher education and, more specifically degree certificates, are packaged as a purchasable product and so enter into a metaphorical 'shopping mall of education' where prospective students can pick and choose the most attractive deal from those on 'offer'. It can be said that there is a common inter-group marked structure that pervades university websites' discursive practices:

$$\text{Offer(-ing)/Providing} + high^{L2}/highest^{L2} + quality^{L1} +$$
$$\text{EDUCATION}^{N}/\text{TEACHING}^{N}/\text{RESEARCH}^{N}$$

Using the *British National Corpus* (*BNC*)[1] as a reference corpus highlights the markedness of this structure as a defining feature of university websites. A KWIC[2] search returns limited results for the following collocates: *quality teaching* (8 tokens) and *quality research* (6 tokens). Interestingly, in 5 out of 6 tokens for *quality research* the L1 collocate is high. Likewise, for *quality teaching* 2 out of the 8 tokens collocate with *high*(-*est*). There are stronger collocational ties between *high + quality* (852 tokens) without an educational head word. This is perhaps suggestive of the somewhat uneasy marriage of business–academic contexts in the traditional sense. Tracing the context in which quality most frequently occurs in the *BNC* is evidence of this (Fig. 3). It is noteworthy that, out of the 65 different *BNC* sub-corpora, the third and fifth most frequent sub-corpora in which *high + quality* occurs are adverts (637 tokens/million) and commerce (337 tokens/million). Thus, there is evidence of a two-pronged point of contact between a) language and promotion and b) language and business. In relation to the latter, quality assurance is defined as 'the maintenance of a desired level of quality in a service or a manufactured product' (*OED*). This exemplifies the idea that higher education discursive practice increasingly draws upon business-related lexis. Further, quality relates to 'rank or position in (a) society. Frequently with the modifying adjective, as high […]' *OED*. Quality is being used almost as a performance indicator; in an attempt to differentiate, university websites are attempting to make performance measurable by institution. In fact, differentiation is discouraged as a result of universities conforming to a common discourse. Ultimately, the generic references to quality in the language of university websites could be the product of assembly line academia where '[…] academic activity is modelled on industrial production' (Mautner 2005a: 105).

Yet, this begs an interesting question considering business discourse is based on product differentiation. These overused generic tactics of univer-

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[1] The British National Corpus comprises 100 million words of written (90%) and spoken (10%) data that are synchronic in nature having been gleaned from general sources of British English of the late twentieth century. Though designed to represent a wide cross-section of current British English, the corpus construction spanned from 1991 to 1994 which might help to explain the lack of similarity of terms with my specialised corpus of university website discourse.

[2] Key word in context (KWIC) is a display format in computational corpus analysis that displays the occurrences of a particular user-specified term or phrase, the node, in its immediate context. The node is highlighted in the centre of the display with its context either side in an L–R span.

sity websites, although semantically similar, are somewhat different to business discourse where product positioning is driven by a USP, or multiple. In the *Cambridge Business English Corpus*[3], *high* retains the abstract denotation found on university websites (Nelson 2006: 226). It is suggested, then, that such semantically opaque lexical items are intentionally deployed by universities as agenda-furthering devices since their inherent connotative fuzziness means that they cannot be contested.

| | | |
|---:|:---:|:---|
| technology and services. We offer a | **high quality** | , research-led teaching that |
| how we will continue to achieve | **high quality** | research that benefits |
| of world changing research and | **high quality** | , inspirational teaching |
| Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008 and | **high quality** | research-led teaching |
| engaged in leading-edge research and | **high quality** | teaching. High |
| lot more to UEA than | **high quality** | teaching and excellent |
| the School of English is well-reputed for its | **high quality** | of teaching, wide range of |
| their primary purpose to be | **high quality** | research, others concentrate on |
| with world-class facilities. We offer | **high quality** | education, research, |
| well established reputation for providing | **high quality** | teaching, learning and research |

Figure 1: Sample concordance of *high quality* in the entire corpus

| | | |
|---:|:---:|:---|
| with world-class facilities. We offer | **high quality** | education, research |
| international university offering | **high quality** | student experience |
| we are dedicated to providing | **high quality** | educational programmes |
| investigating our options for offering | **high quality** | educational programmes |
| a long and proud history of providing | **high quality** | , progressive and inclusive |
| well established reputation for providing | **high-quality** | teaching, learning and |
| long and proud history as a provider of | **high quality** | education in north London |
| with a proud tradition as a provider of | **high quality** | education and a focus on |

Figure 2: Sample concordance of *high quality* in entire corpus to show verb lexemes *offer* and *provide*

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[3] *The Cambridge Business English Corpus* (*BEC*) is a 200 million word corpus of spoken and written business English drawn from a range of global sources including business meetings, minutes, reports, proposals, presentation and articles.
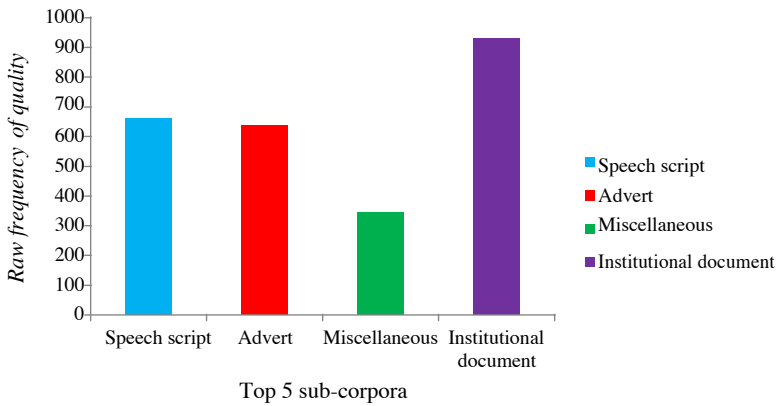
Figure 3: Top 5 BNC sub-corpora in which quality most frequently occurs

## 6   Competing in a global arena: The collocational behaviour of WORLD on university websites

The higher education landscape in the UK is one that is as much oriented towards students from outside the European Community as it is Home Participation rates (Bohm et al. 2004). The changing student demographic is itself evidence of this with the percentage of international students making up the total student population almost doubling between 1979–80 (7.6%) and 2011–12 (14.5%). International students can be expected to pay fees of up to £25,000 per year for some undergraduate courses (*Education UK*). This makes tapping into the overseas market a lucrative investment for UK universities who saw their public funding significantly reduced in reforms outlined in the Coalition Government's White Paper (DBIS 2011). Indeed, it would not be overstating the case to suggest that 'many institutions are effectively dependent on their ability to attract such students' (Brown and Carasso 2013: 6). It is not surprising, then, that these concerns are both reflected and reinforced in the discourses of university websites.

Notions of quality and value lend themselves to this globalised context where institutions' abilities to compete successfully in a global arena have come to rely on higher quality, value-added products. In the corpus, this

manifests itself most markedly in terms of *worldly* value; worldliness is currency and international visibility key for those universities unwilling to be superseded by the 'super-league of global universities that are now engaged in battle for intellectual talent and academic prestige' (Wooldridge 2005). The most significant marker of prestige and rank, irrespective of mission group affiliation, is WORLD:

| Sub-corpus | Rank |
|---|---|
| 1994 Group | 5 |
| Million+ | 13 |
| University Alliance | 10 |
| Russell Group | 4 |

Table 6: Rank of WORLD in sub-corpora noun wordlists

It is clear that institutions are keen to market themselves and, perhaps, most importantly, their products as competitors in a global 'educational arms race' (Graddol 2006: 40). The high rank of WORLD (Table 6) across all four mission groups reflects the impact that globalisation has had on the institutional agenda; 'participation in the global exchange of information is now a prerequisite for promotion' (Hyland and Tse, 2009: 18). However, there is some difference; Russell Group and 1994 group members prioritise their global agenda (WORLD is the fourth and fifth most frequent noun respectively) to a greater extent than those belonging to the other mission groups. This notion is reflected in the language found on these groups' websites. The Russell Group outlines their aim for universities to make "impact through their *world-leading* research and education" (2013), whilst, on the homepage of their website, the 1994 Group claims to "bring together 11 of the UK's *world-class* universities" (2013). The behaviour of WORLD in these instances, as a premodifying evaluative adjective, permeates university websites. This difference should not be downplayed. There is an order in frequency of the use of WORLD such that it follows the higher education 'esteem' lineage with these mission groups. The Russell Group make most use of WORLD as the most esteemed group closely followed by the 1994 Group as second most esteemed.

### 6.1   *World*[L2] + RESEARCH[N]

The product that is most commonly packaged with global interests in mind is RESEARCH[N]. Indeed, a collocational analysis of the node RESEARCH[N] identifies *world*[L2] as the most frequent premodifying evaluative adjective, occurring seventy nine times. That is, 10% of all RESEARCH[N] constructions will contain *world* as collocate. However, *world* does not behave evaluatively in all of these instances. Rather, the concern is with those constructions where *world* is found as an L2 collocate—this is true for almost half (49%) of the instances—since it is absent in L1 position. All thirty nine occurrences of world as an L2 collocate of RESEARCH[N] can be considered evaluative making it the most frequent evaluative L2 collocate in the corpus as a whole (Table 7) and across the four sub-corpora (Table 8).

| Evaluative adjectives of RESEARCH[N] (L2 collocates) | Frequency |
|---|---|
| world | 39 |
| internationally | 12 |
| high | 9 |
| leading | 7 |
| quality | 6 |
| cutting(-edge) | 5 |

Table 7: Evaluative adjectives used as L2 collocates of RESEARCH[N] in the corpus

Although *world*[L2] is the most common evaluative L2 collocate of RESEARCH, it is noteworthy that *internationally*[L2] is the second most. A combined force, they constitute 65% of all L2 evaluative collocates of RESEARCH (Fig. 4). This builds the semantic profile of RESEARCH[N] so that it is a product with a golden global standard to which institutions should aspire. The strict collocational profile of RESEARCH would suggest that most institutions attain such a standard. In actual fact, the high use of *world*[L2], in particular alongside *leading*[L1] (Section 6.2), makes questionable the truth-value of the proposition as one that may not be strictly truth-conditional. Rather, over time it has become assimilated into the discourse of university websites as a 'conventional way of expressing an evaluative meaning' (Stubbs, 2007: 165).

Indeed, if receivers recognise its promotional content they may not be inclined to contest it since marketised discourse has become 'naturalised' so that it is 'no longer perceived as marked' (Mautner 2010: 2).

| University Alliance | | 1994 Group | | Russell Group | | Million + | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| World | 7 | World | 13 | World | 14 | World | 5 |
| Internationally | 2 | High | 4 | Internationally | 3 | Internationally | 4 |
| Quality | 2 | Internationally | 3 | Leading | 3 | | |
| Best | 1 | Leading | 2 | High | 3 | | |
| High | 1 | Highest | 2 | Cutting(-edge) | 3 | | |
| | | Cutting(-edge) | 2 | | | | |

Table 8: Evaluative adjectives used as L2 collocates of RESEARCH[N] across sub-corpora
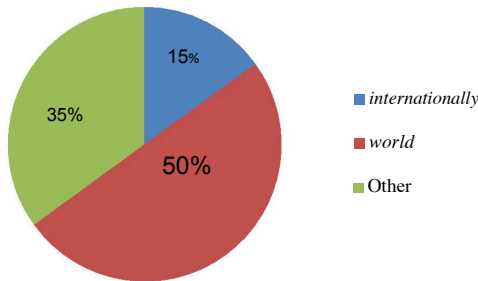


Figure 4: Evaluative L2 collocates that are INTERNATIONALLY and WORLD in the corpus

## 6.2  *World*[L2] + *leading*[L1] + RESEARCH[N]

The analysis thus far in this section has shown *world* to be the most frequent evaluative L2 collocate of RESEARCH. This implies that the L1 in such constructions does not exist as a vacuum devoid of matter. Rather, the L1 collocate is such a necessary component that it is often compounded to that which precedes it: *world*[L2]-*leading*[L1]. Of the 32 occurrences of *leading*[L1] in the corpus, twenty three exist alongside the L2 collocate *world*[L2] (72%) to form the construction (Table 10, Figure 5):

$$world^{L2} + leading^{L1} + \text{RESEARCH}^{N}$$

The implication is that $world^{L2} + leading^{L1}$ is being employed as a marketing strategy to signal the high quality of the work the university is producing. This contributes to the idea of RESEARCH$^N$ as a 'product' that can be ranked and modified to advance claims of quality. Indeed, RESEARCH$^N$ is evaluated as *world* (-)*leading* in 33% of the constructions in which it occurs. Yet this also begs an interesting question as to what other 'products' *world* + *leading* constructs modify. Most significant are those 'products' that are not projected into the global arena. In particular, this absence is marked for TEACHING$^N$ and EDUCATION$^N$ whose semantic profiles do not denote worldliness in any of the mission groups. This is in sharp contrast to $high^{L2} + quality^{L1}$, an evaluative construction that is used freely to modify the nodes TEACHING$^N$, EDUCATION$^N$ and RESEARCH$^N$ (see section 5). It seems that $world^{L2} + leading^{L1}$ is, for the most part, reserved for RESEARCH$^N$. Perhaps this is the notion that 'research performance [has] emerged […] as a major signifier of institutional value' (Brown and Carasso 2013: 7) being mirrored at the level of discourse. This is traceable by examining how this construction is used in general use via the *BNC*:

| | | Node: RESEARCH$^N$ | |
| | $leading^{L1}$ frequency | $world^{L2} + leading^{L1}$ | |
| Sub-corpus | | Freq. | % |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Million+ | 5 | 5 | 100% |
| University Alliance | 4 | 4 | 100% |
| 1994 Group | 5 | 4 | 80% |
| Russell Group | 18 | 10 | 56% |

Table 9: Percentage of L1 collocate leading that is preceded by L2 collocate world to form the construction $world^{L2} + leading^{L1} + \text{RESEARCH}^{N}$

Stepping back from the data, it is important to investigate whether the collocational patterns identified in this corpus are represented in general language use. Running a BNC search for the node WORLD(-)LEADING returns just twelve hits: WORLD-LEADING (2) and WORLD LEADING (9). It is noteworthy that of these twelve instances, two occurred in the commerce sub-corpus, two in the institutional documents sub-corpus and one instance in the ad-

vert sub-corpus. Further, WORLD(-)LEADING collocates with QUALITY and RESEARCH:

> the work we've done is of very high quality and, and certainly WORLD LEADING (institutional doc)

> SmithKline Beecham is a WORLD-LEADING, RESEARCH-based pharmaceuticals company (advert)

Although the BNC is almost silent on WORLD(-)LEADING, perhaps due to the difference in time between the 1990s and the present day, it can tell us a great deal about WORLD and its semantic profile. It is most likely to collocate with a superlative adjective ('largest', 'biggest', 'greatest', 'oldest', 'fastest', 'easiest', 'toughest', 'richest', 'finest') that connotes rank and implies competition. This highlights the priority of universities to develop a competitive edge over other institutions in a bid to secure students' custom (Askehave 2007; Melewar and Akel 2005). The limited representation of WORLD(-)LEADING in the BNC reinforces its markedness; this construction seems to be an adjectival compounding predominantly used in higher education discourses. Nevertheless, the discursive practice on university websites is so saturated with promises of *world leading* RESEARCH that it undermines its potential as a 'unique selling point'. Ultimately, it means that institutions' self-promotion rests on some rather abstract claims for uniqueness (Morrish and Saunston 2013). These claims are reinforced through other orders of discourse, in institutional documents such as the White Paper (DBIS 2011) and on the website of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2013). In this way, a study by Hemsley-Brown (2011) found that university applicants recycle specific nouns, adjectives and phrases found on the British Council website and that of their target university when writing personal statements. These findings recognise how the discourses on institutional higher education websites and those specific to a university intertextually develop out of one another and so are mutually reinforcing.

## 7   Making sense of the semantics: opacity and malleability

It has been questioned whether markers of the quality and worldliness of RESEARCH are semantically transparent given their overuse and common promotional function on university websites regardless of mission group affiliation. The fact that the modifying evaluative adjectives *high*[L2], *highest*[L2]

*quality*[L1] and *world*[L2] *leading*[L1] are at once ideologically loaded and semantically empty is perhaps a result of their entering into lots of phraseological expressions where RESEARCH is the head. Indeed, Carter (1998: 38) posits that the frequency of co-occurrence between one word and another is revealing of how 'core' that lexical item is. There is evidence to suggest that quality has emerged as a buzzword, though not one that is restricted to a particular semantic field. Indeed, Stensaker (2007: 100) sees the contemporary currency in 'quality as fashion', pointing to overuse in a range of discourses and thus its extensive connotative base. Crucially, whilst RESEARCH cannot be considered ideological in itself, its co-occurrences with those buzzwords that are salient in the marketised context is likely to taint its semantic load so that it too is assimilated into the macro-social context as key. It would not be unfair to say, then, that *quality* is a keyword distinctive on university websites and higher education discourse generally. Tracing this construction in general use via the BNC, and noting OED definitions, alerts to the seeping of semantics from business into academe with quality and worldly value permeating discourse boundaries so much so that their semantics become blurred rather than distinct.

The 'malleability' (Mautner 2005a: 103) of keywords[4] is tapped into by text producers as an agenda furthering device; they negotiate the tension between opacity and transparency, specific enough so that their RESEARCH represents something 'unique' enough to sell an education and ambiguous enough to be naturalised as common sense. The ambiguity of the attributive adjectives *high quality* and *world-leading* suggests that institutions prioritise their business-facing and globalised agendas ahead of RESEARCH. Thus, the denotation of RESEARCH is diluted by its ambiguous collocates.

## 8   Conclusion

Ultimately, this discursive profile of the evaluative phraseology around the higher education keyword RESEARCH has revealed this to be a product around which the institutional discourse of self-promotion manifests itself. The importance of this should not be downplayed since it provides evidence for the case that an education can no longer be relied upon to sell itself. Rather, the increasingly competitive higher education landscape creates the need for

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[4]Keywords so-called for their high frequency in the corpus rather than their socio-cultural significance, as in the Firthian tradition.

universities to carve out distinctiveness in the language used on their institutional websites. Whilst there are traces of an attempted discourse of competition between university mission groups, by nature evaluation contrasts one thing with another (Stubbs 2007: 166), the overriding trend toward standardisation is such that universities are catapulted toward a centralised middle.

The discovery of keywords based on their high frequency in the corpus, as opposed to their cultural currency in the Corpus Linguistic sense of the term, is equally as revealing of the words' ideological load. Indeed, highlighting RESEARCH as the node around which one aspect of the macro-level institutional discourse of self-promotion is realised provides useful insights into how collocates offload ideology. It is argued that RESEARCH, a high frequency keyword, is assigned ideology (it is the done to) whereas cultural keywords generally are the assigners of ideology (the doers) having been born out of their undoubtedly value-laden context. Collocates are just as constitutive of ideology as the node itself since they themselves may be 'buzzwords', as is the case with *quality*[L1] + RESEARCH[N]. It should be realised how the strict collocative potential of seemingly 'neutral' nodes alongside buzzwords take away their non-evaluative nature. It would be interesting to investigate how buzzwords, such as *enterprising* (Mautner 2005a), are present in a corpus of media texts but absented from a specialised corpus of institutional university websites in order to negotiate the tension between being market-oriented but not actively seen as doing so.

It is clear from the sub-corpora noun wordlists that research is a product that is most privileged for all four of the university mission groups on their websites, making differentiation a priority (see Table 3). Crucially, this noun is non-evaluatively modified in only 6% of constructions. The heavy ideological load assigned to research is mostly to do, then, with the company it keeps in terms of the evaluative adjectival modifiers *high*[L2] + *quality*[L1] (RESEARCH[N]) and WORLD[L2] + LEADING[L1] (RESEARCH[N]). These are recurrent promotional constructions that are used consensually by institutions irrespective of mission group affiliation. However, there is some difference with the use of WORLD; the more esteemed Russell Group and 1994 Group prioritise their global agenda to a greater extent than the University Alliance and Million+ Groups (see Table 8). Although the former use *world* more frequently, the collocational behaviour within these constructions is used in the same way as the latter two groups. Nevertheless, this does not close the

gap between a competitive marketised context and the need for further differentiation; the vacuum remains due to the generic promotional discourse that overrides what very little difference there is. This analytical trend looks set to stay given that these constructions also permeate the institutional websites of the mission groups and higher education regulatory bodies, such as the HEFCE, in a mutually constitutive intertextual dialectic. Further, the repeated use of such constructions stretches their semantic value to the point that the rich connotations assigned to *quality* and *world* entrenches their ambiguity and delay moves to redress this semantic opacity precisely because this intertextuality naturalises their use to the point that they are no longer marked. This is manipulated by text producers so that self-promotion is ideologically coded as selfless promotion to hide the concerns expressed by Michael Farthing, chair of the 1994 Group, that students are positioned as 'consumers purchasing degree certificates' (BBC News, 15 November 2011).

It has been shown that business-like language has made inroads into the discursive practices found on university websites. This is achieved via the synthesis of quality and worldliness as two key sites of marketisation. Indeed, the BNC, as a twenty year old language repository, provided a diachronic perspective on the influx of these constructions into academia, absent then but present now in this study's specialised corpus. However, universities should come to recognise that their self-promotion is about more than just tapping into generic business terminology. If universities are to effectively sell themselves and embrace their individual identity, then they need to remove their hands from the promotional 'discourse kits' shared by all. This may be easier said than done if it is a case of some universities playing catch up once those considered to be 'the best' change their discourse. Nevertheless, the recycling of the same adjectives, and reliance on an 'abstract claim for uniqueness' (Morrish and Morrish 2010: 81), discourages the distinctiveness at the core of many successful business negotiations where a unique selling point is prioritised. As it stands, mission groups are, to a great extent, homogeneous, contradicting claims that there has been a move towards member institutions embracing the stance 'All for one and none for all'.

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# Appendix: Universities sampled according to mission group affiliation

| Mission Group | Member universities sampled |
| --- | --- |
| 1994 Group | Birkbeck, University of London<br>Goldsmiths, University of London<br>Royal Holloway, University of London<br>University of East Anglia<br>University of Leicester<br>University of Surrey<br>University of Sussex |
| Million+ | Birmingham City University<br>Edinburgh Napier University<br>Middlesex University<br>Staffordshire University<br>The University of Greenwich<br>University of Central Lancashire<br>University of East London<br>University of Bedfordshire<br>University of the West of Scotland<br>University of West London |
| Russell Group | Cardiff University<br>Newcastle University<br>Queen Mary, University of London<br>University of Bristol<br>University of Edinburgh<br>University of Exeter<br>University of Glasgow<br>University of Leeds<br>University of Manchester<br>University of Nottingham<br>University of Southampton |
| University Alliance | Bournemouth University<br>Cardiff Metropolitan University<br>Coventry University<br>Glasgow Caledonian University<br>Liverpool John Moores University<br>Manchester Metropolitan University<br>Nottingham Trent University<br>Sheffield Hallam University<br>Teesside University<br>University of Hertfordshire<br>University of the West of England |