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Markets, metrics, and modernisation: Higher Education strategy makers' conceptualisations of digital empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Digital empowerment is a recurrent theme in the discourse of educational technology in post-pandemic Higher Education and a leitmotif of organisational strategy. Yet, despite its prevalence, digital empowerment is a poorly understood concept. As organisations reimagine themselves as the digital Universities of the future, attention must turn to strategy and its role in defining the digitally empowered student, teacher, and organisation, and how such definitions manifest through policy. This study combines a synthesis of institution-level digital strategies from UK Higher Education with the voices of the strategy-maker, including senior leaders. This study reveals that conceptualisations of digital empowerment are underpinned by an assemblage of neoliberal narratives, including those associated with marketisation, metrics, and modernisation. The findings of this study are illustrative of the role that strategy plays in the alignment of Higher Education with neoliberalism and why notions of digital empowerment therein are inherently problematic.

KEYWORDS

EdTech; Higher Education; digital; strategy; empowerment

Introduction

The prefixation of 'digital' to learning and teaching has become synonymous with notions of empowerment, including technology's capacity to empower the student, teacher, and organisation. Digital empowerment is the leitmotif of modern digital strategy and a recurrent theme in the discourse and rhetoric of educational technology in post-pandemic Higher Education (HE) (see Clark, 2024; Moore, Jayme, & Black, 2021; Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020). As Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) capitalise on the apparent new dawns afforded by technology and embark on transformation projects to reimagine the digitally enabled learning environments, curricula, assessments, and interactions of the future, the underpinning institutional strategies and frameworks supporting these activities play a crucial role in defining and communicating the imagined future of an organisation, its vision, and its aspirations.

Yet digital empowerment is a poorly understood concept and one beset with complexity; it is enmeshed with issues of power (Apple, 2010; Ball, 2013; Lawson, 2011), reproductive

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of social inequalities (Costa, Murphy, Pereira, & Taylor, 2018; Lovink, 2012), reliant upon liberal sentiments of choice and agency (McCarthy, 2011; Selwyn, 2013), and underpinned by an assemblage of neoliberal ideological positionings (Taylor, 2004). As HEIs develop projects and initiatives built around notions of digital empowerment, we must therefore turn our attention to institutional-level strategy and the role of the institutional strategy-maker in defining and forming conceptualisations of the digitally empowered student, teacher, and organisation, and how these conceptualisations manifest in physical terms, through investment, resourcing, and policy at an institutional level.

This study represents the first of its kind to combine a synthesis of institution-level digital strategies from UK Higher Education with the voices of the strategy-maker, including University senior leaders. Focussing specifically on conceptualisations of digital empowerment, this study combines primary interview data with a thematic analysis (TA) of strategy texts, asking the following two research questions: (1) How is digital empowerment being conceptualised and defined by institutional strategy makers and strategy texts? (2) How are notions of digital empowerment being enacted through strategy in relation to investment, procurement, and resourcing at an institutional level?

This study is situated within a framework of prior research that has drawn critical attention to the complexities of educational technology (Macgilchrist, 2021; Rafalow, 2020; Selwyn, 2013, 2021), including the need for a more nuanced understanding of its subjective nature (Czerniewicz, 2018; Freeman, 2011; Selwyn, 2006) and its tacit relationship with broader discourses of marketisation and neoliberalisation (Jarke & Breiter, 2019; Komljenovic, 2019; Komljenovic & Robertson, 2016; Williamson, 2017; Williamson, Bayne, & Shay, 2020). This study focusses on the interplay between the discursive process of strategy formation and strategy enactment at an institutional level, offering both a new angle of critique and addressing a paucity within the Critical EdTech canon.

As this study will show, the interview data and documents analysed reveal that conceptualisations of digital empowerment are underpinned by an assemblage of neoliberal narratives, including those associated with marketisation, dataism and metrics, modernisation, and deinstitutionalisation. This study argues, therefore, that notions of digital empowerment represent a series variegated transformatory mechanisms through which neoliberal narratives come to be legitimised through strategy and enacted through strategy implementation. Consistent with the critical framing of its situating literature, this study problematises the various conceptualisations of digital empowerment within their sociocultural contexts, illustrating the complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes of this poorly understood area.

To provide context, and to situate this study within an appropriate theoretical framework, this introduction is followed by a review of existing research concerning digital empowerment in HE. A methodological approach is then provided, followed by a discussion of the study's findings. Finally, implications for future research are tendered, including a call for further research into this complex and increasingly prevalent area of HE.

Empowerment and the HE lexicon

Whilst notions of power and control have been closely associated with education for centuries, empowerment as a distinct concept entered the educational lexicon in the 1970s. Empowerment theory (see Rappaport, 1984) is closely associated with social psychology,

although its roots can be traced back to Marxist sociological theory and the construction and maintenance of power relations (Burton & Kagan, 1996).

Rappaport refers to empowerment as the process through which people, organisations, communities, and groups ‘gain mastery over their lives’ (1984, p. 4), but warns that this process is in itself infinitely variable, and its end product inconsistent. As Adams (2017) contends, ‘empowerment is a multifaceted idea, meaning different things to different people ... it is used academically to theorize about people’s relationship with power and powerlessness in society ... [and] it may be used rhetorically, to make a case for people to achieve power and assert it.’ (2017, p. 4).

Empowerment as emancipatory practice

Consonant with this, in education, empowerment is conceptualised differently depending on the subject of that empowerment, and the conditions of its bestowal. Lawson (2011) argues that the concept of empowerment is manifested in two key ways in education; the first manifestation is of empowerment as emancipatory practice, whereby power is transferred from those who traditionally hold it, to subsidiary groups. This is exemplified through the works of Freire (1970), Willis (1977), and Giroux (1988), where notions of empowerment informed pedagogic approaches such as student-centred and personalised learning; approaches that destabilised power relations and shifted the locus of instruction from the teacher to the student.

Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the mounting ubiquity of the internet and the resultant possibilities for connected learning and knowledge networks (Castells, 2015) breathed new life into such pedagogies repackaged within a digital context (Costa et al., 2018). As the use of technology in HE became more sophisticated, emergent digital pedagogies decreed the opportunities that technology afforded as emancipatory practice – engaging students as equal partners in the educational process and as agents in control of their own learning (see Beetham & Sharpe, 2007; Daniela, 2020; Nelson, 2008).

Proponents of educational technology have heralded the capacity for technology to enhance the reach, opportunity, and potential of education (see Beetham & Sharpe, 2007; Conole, de Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2008; Spector, 2016; Weller, 2011) and successive UK governments have reinforced this through the HE policy agenda (see Browne, 2010; Department for Business, Information, and Skills, 2016; Department for Education and Skills, 2003; Office for Students, 2021). However, as McCarthy (2011) contends, this emancipatory view of technology is problematic because technology mediates the social, political, and economic tensions of its application; a view that disavows the widely held libertarian sentiment of the technology-enabled level playing field, and of individuals making informed and unrestricted choices which, as Selwyn contends, is a ‘highly privileged position’ (2013, p. 137). Consequently, research has viewed rhetoric of empowered learners succeeding through personalised forms of digital education with a degree of scepticism (see Costa et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2009; Watling, 2012).

Economic empowerment

The emancipatory discourse is also depicted in terms of economic empowerment and evident in the progressive marketisation of HE (see Czerniewicz et al., 2023; Komljenovic,

2019; Komljenovic & Robertson, 2016). From the late 1990s, HEIs have operated under the increasing demands of marketisation (see Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017; Raaper, 2019; Williams, 2013), and the marketised model of HE is predicated on the neoliberal view of individuals acting as ‘agentic beings’ (Raaper & Komljenovic, 2022, p. 4) and as rational economic actors (Munro, 2018). As Selwyn (2013) observes, technology is fundamentally entangled with notions of neoliberal individualism and HEIs have based much of their technological developments around this view. In this sense, digital empowerment is multifaceted; it affords greater levels of personalisation, it amplifies the student voice, and it affords flexibility (and therefore choice). However, as neoliberalism cedes responsibility from the state to the individual (see Harvey, 2005; Selwyn, 2013), the digitally-empowered student-consumer becomes accountable for both the success and failure of their actions.

Empowerment, governance, and discipline

Lawson (2011) observes a second manifestation in the form of empowerment as a method of governance and discipline; a notion that Ecclestone refers to as ‘moral authoritarianism in the guise of liberal intentions’ (1999, p. 333). The disciplinary technologies (Foucault, 1977) used to digitally empower staff and students within HE (e.g. data, metrics, personalisation, assessment) rely on notions of self-governance, however, as Lawson warns, the introduction of ‘micro-disciplinary techniques’ (2011, p. 93), applied as a method of ‘empowerment’, creates a paradox of unfreedoms and a system of discipline (Foucault, 1977).

Researchers have drawn particular attention to how this paradox manifests in the use of data within HE, including personalised and organisation-level data (see Jarke & Breiter, 2019; Komljenovic, 2021; Williamson, 2017; Williamson, Bayne, et al., 2020). Within sector literature (see Jisc, 2020, 2021; Office for Students, 2021), there is a growing chorus asserting the capacity for data to empower a range of actors, including students, staff, organisations, applicants, and sector bodies more broadly. Indeed, organisations frequently rely on analytical processes and predictive modelling to monitor, support, and retain students and, as Williamson (2019) contends, data drives the metrics through which leaders, students, policymakers, and those in the public sphere appraise, measure, and compare organisations. As Williamson (2017) observes, data is seen to super-empower HE and its constituent parts.

Nevertheless, through the critical lens of empowerment as governance and discipline, research has drawn attention to data as a ‘persuasive culture of governance that seeks to exert control through economic rationality, efficient and individual accountability’ (Tsai, Perrotta, & Gašević, 2020, p. 557). Wintrup observes how, in the case of learning analytics¹, ‘new forms of self-regulating subjectivity, and self-monitoring behaviours have the potential to alter relationships between students’ (2017, p. 99). More broadly, research continues to draw attention to the increasing reliance on metrics as a method of accountability within HE, including quality and standards (see Tomlinson, Enders, & Naidoo, 2020), assessment (see Yorke & Zaitseva, 2013), and student engagement (see Mandernach, 2015).

The complexities of empowerment

Lawson (2011) highlights the contradictory nature of empowerment, noting that notions of empowerment and control be not regarded as oppositional, but as interrelated

processes formed and played out within variegated contexts. Critical approaches to empowerment highlight the complexities of emancipatory practice, including notions of economic empowerment and the student-consumer nexus. Equally, notions of empowerment as a form of governance highlight the contradictions and tensions of accountability and self-regulation. It is with these issues in mind that this paper will now explore the complexities of digital empowerment as imagined through strategy and enacted at an organisational level.

Method

This study adopts a mixed methods approach to data collection, combining participant interviews with a thematic analysis (TA) of strategy texts. Data collection was undertaken in three phases: Firstly, a systematic review of digital strategy was undertaken for all HEIs with university status in the UK ($n = 129$).² The systematic review took place online using a combination of search terms with the intention of identifying digital strategy documents in the public domain. In support, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were submitted to all 129 organisations with specific questions relating to the publication of their respective digital strategies; this helped to identify the presence of strategy documents not in the public domain and also those currently in development. Secondly, once all available documents had been collated, a TA was undertaken. Focussing specifically on references to empowerment, and consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-stage model, the thematic analysis focussed on finding, examining, and interpreting patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in relation to conceptualisations of digital empowerment within the available documents. Thirdly, using the digital strategy documents as a guide, semi-structured interviews were conducted with principal authors of digital strategy at nine HEIs. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain a deeper understanding of how strategy makers define notions of digital empowerment and how these definitions are enacted at an organisational level. As noted, there has been a significant sectoral trend to review and publish digital strategy in response to the global pandemic; as a result, a sizeable proportion of the documents analysed were either newly published, or awaiting publication. As a consequence, in most cases, the enactment and implementation of such strategy, in real terms, had not yet been realised, or at the very least is in its infancy. Herein, therefore, enactment is considered and defined in broad terms – as both the concrete embodiment of strategy and the *stated intention* of said strategy.

Document selection and analysis

Digital strategy is defined herein as any formal organisational document that outlines a high-level plan of the future use of technologies, including their use within learning and teaching both physically and online. This definition is derived from a range of sources, including recent publications by sector consortia and regulatory bodies with significant influence and authority within the sector (see Jisc, 2020, 2021; Office for Students, 2021). As nomenclature may differ between organisations, and different aspects of digital education may be covered by multiple strategies (such as IT Strategies and Learning and Teaching Strategies), this definition guided both the initial systematic review and subsequent FOI requests.

In total, from the 129 organisations included in the systematic review and subsequent FOI requests, 83 organisational documents were identified for analysis. The remaining 46 organisations either had no appropriate document available to share, were unable to share due to document sensitivity and/or the commercial interests of the organisation or did not respond in time.

Consistent with the TA approach, all available documents were collated for analysis and then read and re-read. 52 documents (from the 83) contained references to digital empowerment. Across the corpus, statements and propositions relating to digital empowerment were coded, and these initial codes were then combined to form overarching themes. TA is iterative and so, to ensure robustness, a further round of coding was carried out using the themes identified to find statements of *inferred* empowerment.

Some of the strategy documents contained more comprehensive references to digital empowerment than others and, whilst all 52 were included in the TA, a subset of 29 were tagged as being of substantial interest based on their research significance and their linkage to the theoretical framework (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). On this basis, the subset of 29 authoring organisations were approached for prospective interview participation; nine organisations agreed to participate.

Interview participant selection

For reasons of scope, the interview requests were made to the principal author(s) or executive sponsor(s) of such documents in the understanding that, whilst not necessarily responsible for writing the documents in their entirety, these actors have sufficient oversight, vision, budgetary control, and resource allocation to enact said strategy. Of the nine participating organisations, there was a mix in organisation type, including Russell Group members, plate glass (1960s) universities, and post-1992 universities. Interviews were conducted with a range of role holders including Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Pro Vice-Chancellors, Directors of IT, and other senior roles.

Interview design and analysis

Nine interviews were undertaken online. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, providing the necessary framework for the researcher to garner responses relevant to the study, whilst offering sufficient flexibility for emergent issues or observations to be pursued in further detail. Question design focussed on conceptualisations of empowerment, and how this was enacted at an organisational level through investment, procurement, and resourcing. The semi-structured format of the interviews enabled the researcher to adopt an interpreting question technique (see Kvale, 2007), enabling the participants to be interviewed in relation to, and in the context of, their respective strategy texts.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analysed. Consistent with the TA analysis of the strategy documents, the interview transcripts were coded, and these initial codes were then combined with overarching themes. All organisations have been anonymised and participants will be listed by role title only, with the exception of one participant whose title is too specific to afford anonymity; in this case, their role title will be simplified. For the presentation of findings, out of the 52 organisations included in the

study, universities for which interviews were conducted will be listed as *University 1 to 9*, with all others being listed as *University 10 to 52*.

Findings and discussion

The interviews and the corpus of documents reveal that conceptualisations of digital empowerment are underpinned by an assemblage of neoliberal narratives: Marketisation – the notion of the student consumer exercising choice and seeking flexibility, personalisation, and value for money; Dataism – the compulsion to measure, quantify, and control all functions of HE and to utilise competitive logic; Modernisation – the desire for change and reform, with technology occupying a fundamental role as both driver and enabler; and Deinstitutionalisation – the reimagining of organisational structure and the unbundling of provision as facilitated through technology.

As Couldry (2010) warns, neoliberalism should not be regarded as an archetype of market competition and deregulation, but as a *social imaginary* (see Taylor, 2004) – a broader range of underlying (and deeply embedded) principles. Indeed, Ball notes that neoliberalism's reach into education 'precipitates processes of commodification, monetarisation and instrumentalisation of all activities, responsibilities, practices' (2017, p. 218); it becomes the lens through which we view the world as neoliberal subjects.

In response to the research questions, in addition to positioning digital empowerment within a neoliberal ideological framework, the master narratives and their sub-themes discussed below highlight the complexities, paradoxes, and contradictions of what is meant by digital empowerment and how this becomes enacted at an organisational level.

Whilst the interview data has been useful in highlighting this complexity, the corpus itself offers a broader perspective of the intended beneficiaries of digital empowerment as posited in each individual strategy. Across the 52 documents, 94 references to empowerment were made. Of these, 45% ($n = 42$) noted the beneficiary as the student, 33% ($n = 31$) noted the beneficiary as the organisation, 11% ($n = 10$) noted the beneficiary as staff, 4% ($n = 4$) as prospective student/applicant, with 7% ($n = 7$) being unclear or generalised. The findings are presented below and are displayed thematically; *the empowered student-consumer, personalisation and individuality, data empowered organisations, and modernisation*. Where available, tangible examples of practice will be provided.

The empowered student-consumer

The marketisation narrative appears frequently across the corpus and is often manifested as the portrayal of student as *consumer*, and HE as *product* (see Brooks, 2022; Brown & Carasso, 2013; Raaper, 2019; Williams, 2013). There are frequent references to students being empowered through technology to fulfil their needs and exercise their rights, particularly in relation to choosing how they engage with their studies.

We will augment and enhance our digital learning tools and resources to empower students with freedom of when, where, and how they learn. [Digital Strategy, University 6]

Through modern digital learning, we will offer students up-front clarity and significant flexibility, so that they can make advanced decisions based on an informed understanding of

when and how they can study and so be empowered to take greater control over their educational journey. [Digital Transformation Strategy, University 1]

Elaborating on the above point at interview, the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education at University 1 noted increasing competition within the sector as a driver for significant investment in technology.

We are in an increasingly volatile environment and cannot kid ourselves into believing we are not in competition. Organisations must adapt their offering and recognise that the students of tomorrow will be looking for programmes that fit seamlessly around their jobs, their caring commitments, and so forth. Technology is key to delivering this flexibility, it is key to providing students with choice. [Pro Vice-Chancellor for Education, University 1]

While the analysis demonstrates a clear predominance of neoliberal narratives that frame students as consumers and universities as data-driven entities, it is important to acknowledge that these narratives are not entirely unidimensional or deterministic. Neoliberalism, as a technology of power, operates through ambivalence. As Ball (2017) suggests, neoliberal governance is not merely about domination and control but also invokes a call to action on the part of the subject – students, staff, and institutions. In this sense, the process of empowerment involves both enabling and constraining dynamics.

To that end, although students are often constructed as consumers within these discourses, they are also positioned as active agents in shaping their educational journeys. As seen in some of the strategy texts and interviews, there is room for student agency and participation in decision-making processes. The notion of ‘personalisation’ frequently highlighted in the strategy texts provides students with choices about when, where, and how they engage with their studies, and this could be seen as a form of empowerment that deviates from the strictly passive consumer model. Similarly, while institutions are driven by metrics and performance indicators, some narratives also emphasise the role of universities in fostering innovation and preparing students to actively contribute to society beyond their roles as consumers. These examples suggest that digital empowerment, even within a neoliberal framework, can manifest in ways that are not purely about domination but also about facilitating agency. Therefore, the ambivalence of these narratives reflects the dynamic power relations at play, where students and institutions are not only subjectified but also invited to engage in self-governance and action.

These complexities highlight that, while neoliberal discourses may privilege consumerist logics, the student-organisation relationship is often more nuanced than a straightforward transactional dynamic. As we turn to the role of digitalisation and its relationship with tuition fees, this becomes even more apparent.

The timeline of HE’s continuing digitalisation has coincided with the introduction and subsequent rises in tuition fees, reinforcing a consumerist framing. However, as discussed earlier, this relationship is more complex, involving both transactional and more nuanced dynamics of agency and choice (Williams, 2013), as illustrated in the following quote:

There are expectations around student choice. We seem wedded to this idea of our provision being static, but technology affords remarkable potential for us to better respond to the needs of our students, and for them to influence us. [Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University 5]

The above quote is reflective of what Raaper (2020) describes as a consumption-production nexus; students are not merely passive recipients but an active voice in the

educational relationship, as empowered through legal frameworks such as the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).

Whilst interviewees tended to eschew simplistic notions of the student-consumer in favour of more nuanced approaches to flexibility and choice (e.g. investment into HyFlex³ teaching to facilitate virtual classroom attendance), it can be argued that the technological ecosystems as envisaged and enacted through the respective strategies create a consumer-oriented operating model by proxy. Indeed, as Selwyn (2013), notes, the assemblages and functions of organisational technical infrastructures are formed around neoliberal social imaginaries. Consequently, as organisations empower students through neoliberal apparatus (Jones, 2019), they participate in shaping the student-consumer model, though this model – as discussed – also contains spaces for agency and participation. This has ramifications across the academy, including: A destabilisation of HE for public good, focusing discussion onto individual gain and value for money (Munro, 2018); an ignorance of the complexities between the student and the educational process, positing oversimplistic solutions to inherently complex problems (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Williams, 2013); a reduction in teaching quality as educators focus on the ‘entertainment value’ of teaching, rather than intellectual value (Morley, 2003); and a reduction in academic performance through instrumental approaches to learning (Bunce et al., 2017).

Personalisation and individuality

Consonant with the empowered student-consumer narrative, there is a strong sentiment of student-centred learning that occurs frequently in both the corpus and interview data. This narrative describes the use of technology to empower students through the affordance of personalised learning and individualisation, for example:

Using innovative digital approaches to empower our students through personalised and student-centred learning [IT Strategy, University 48]

Students should not expect a tailor-made educational experience, but there are certainly ways that we can make better use of our technologies and digital infrastructures to enable students to be more active in the learning process. [Director of Digital Transformation and IT, University 2]

As evidenced in the above quotes, a broad definition of technology-supported personalised learning emerges from the data and this is consistent with Major, Francis, and Tsapali's (2021) description of learning driven by student interest, the optimisation of learning based on student needs, and of data-driven decision making. Indeed, there are various examples cited of institutional investment into learning analytics to enable students to monitor their own engagement and performance metrics often benchmarked against cohort averages. In this sense, we see a reflection of Lawson's (2011) notion of empowerment as emancipatory practice and a shift in power relations through which responsibility is ceded from institution to individual under the self-regulatory model of neoliberalism (see Harvey, 2005).

The data also indicates congruence with Bulger's (2016) distinction between adaptive and responsive personalised learning, for example:

Think of the potential of the LMS⁴ – we ought to be moving ourselves away from a mindset of content dissemination and think more creatively about personalised support, or feedback, or

even more sophisticated approaches like modifying content so that it responds to behaviour and performance. [Dean of Learning and Teaching, University 4]

As Bragg (2014) contends, personalised learning is the embodiment of the student-consumer nexus in that it reshapes the relationship between the organisation and the student. Indeed, as Hartley (2008) observes, the empowerment of students through personalisation introduces notions of students as active partners with a voice, thereby recasting students as users and mediating the student-organisation relationship through 'terms of services, consumerism, usability and efficiency' (Ramiel, 2019, p. 488). As Munro (2018) warns, whilst the sentiment of the personalised and empowered student journey may look appealing to digital strategists, the concept problematically relies on the neoliberal notion of the self-interested individual and on an individual's perceived needs. Consequently, the empowering principles as understood within the corpus and interview data are predicated on students being able to both recognise and act in their best interests, but this modelling assumes equal and unconstrained levels of access, capability, and opportunity – concepts shown to be untrue (see Freeman, 2011; Selwyn, 2013).

Data empowered organisations

Throughout the corpus, there is an underlying sentiment of organisations striving to make increasing and more strategic use of data. Whilst there are a variety of beneficiaries and uses purported, including the use of data to drive personalisation, and to assist in teaching and assessment, the primary conceptualisation of data empowerment is in the overall desire to harness data for the purposes of measurement, planning, efficiency, and control. In practice, we see this manifested as investment into sophisticated data infrastructures, including enhanced metrics to inform activities such as the Teaching Excellence Framework, alongside reporting to the Office for Students and UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI). The following quote is illustrative of Tsai et al.'s (2020) notion of data as governance and the recasting of education along 'business-orientated data-driven lines' (Selwyn, 2013, p. 34):

We will deliver timely and consistent business intelligence, with an effective data governance and management framework, to inform and empower decision making. [IT Strategy, University 9]

There is a high degree of acquiescence between the neoliberal compulsion for metrics and the strategised futures of HE. Indeed, as Beer (2016) notes, neoliberalism is based on the pursuit of 'contemporary data assemblage ... [it] aims to ramify the presence of networked technologies in practices and process on an individual, organisational, and state level ... [and] the attendant industry of analytics' (p. 14) to facilitate decision-making, choice, and valuation. Indeed, as one interviewee expounds:

We need greater maturity in our organisational decision-making. Data drives actionable insight. Jisc⁵ talk about hindsight, insight, foresight – this is key. What does our data tell us about how students are engaging with their studies, how they are performing. It also tells us how we are performing as educators, as education providers. How do we use these insights to model future opportunities and mitigate risks? [Director of IT and Library, University 7]

The findings are indicative of the digitalisation of HE becoming progressively entangled with forces of marketisation (see Komljenovic, 2022) with conceptualisations of data empowerment representing what Williamson (2018) refers to as the ‘utopian ideal of the smarter university’ (p. 1). Nevertheless, there is a vagueness in the collective sentiment of what being data empowered *means* in practice – there exists an apparent longing for a fetishised model of data which is based largely on technobabble and *imagined* possibility, for instance:

Our systems sit independent of one another, largely, and yet they each contain valuable information about a particular component of our organisation. Imagine the possibilities if those systems talked to one another. [Dean of Learning and Teaching, University 9]

With this mind, as organisations make significant investment into their data infrastructures (as the corpus indicates many intend to do), there is considerable risk that this is done so in haste and with scant affordance for data literacy and due diligence (see Raffaelli & Stewart, 2020; Williamson, Bayne, et al., 2020). As Pangrazio and Selwyn (2019) warn, when it comes to data, there is often an overwhelming temptation for organisations to focus solely on technicality, implementation, and deployment, overlooking the social and ethical dimensions of data assemblages. Indeed, as the findings show, data empowerment is presented as a matter of fact, and as a key component of progressive digitalisation; where caution is tendered, it is purely from the perspective of legitimate interest – a concept enmeshed with power imbalances and the reinforcement of existing inequalities (Brown & Klein, 2020).

Modernisation

Congruent with the notion of the data empowered organisation, there is an underlying sentiment of digital technology empowering organisations to modernise their systems, processes, and structures. Within the corpus, modernisation is broadly defined, but incorporates a greater reliance on data, interoperability between systems and platforms, and greater agility in decision-making. These sentiments are often manifested as a desire to design out ‘old ways’ of working and is reflective of what Moore et al. (2021) refer to as the rampant opportunism of neoliberal reform, for example:

We will empower our organisation through modern and innovative approaches to information technology [Digital Strategy, University 11]

This rhetoric is consistent with an increasingly mainstream view that HE has become outmoded and outdated, and that digitalisation offers a remedial mechanism through which modernisation can occur (see Moodie, 2016; Selwyn, 2013) (e.g. the automation of administrative processes). Alongside sentiments of operational and administrative modernisation, there is a recurrent theme of organisations being emboldened and empowered to draw upon the affordances of technology to fundamentally diversify their operating model through a process of unbundling and disaggregation (see Czerniewicz et al., 2023; Komljenovic & Robertson, 2016), as illustrated by the following:

Well, think about short courses, micro credentials, MOOCs, and more modularised delivery. Technology empowers us to do those sort of things. [Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching, University 8]

The drive for modernisation is manifested in organisations being empowered to unbundle, and therefore futureproof, their provision. Within the corpus, this is evidenced in two different ways; through engagement with Online Program Management (OPM) to out-source curriculum delivery to commercial partners, or through the provision of platformed assets (see Komljenovic, 2021). One of the key complexities of this relationship is in the use and governance of student data, of which students have little control, reiterating one of the paradoxes of digital empowerment.

Implications for future research

As part of its critical analysis, this study has highlighted how the strategy texts, and the accounts of the strategy maker, define and conceptualise digital empowerment as a series of variegated mechanisms through which narratives of marketisation, metrics, and modernisation are embedded and mediated. Collectively, these conceptualisations position digital empowerment within a neoliberal ideological framework, and align with existing research within the field of critical EdTech (see Jones, 2019; Munro, 2018; Selwyn, 2021; Williamson, 2019; Williamson, Bayne, et al., 2020).

As Peck (2010) contends, neoliberalisation acts not as an explanation in itself, but as a starting point for explanation. Indeed, as Hall (2011) suggests, neoliberalism is a convergence of multiple meanings; it has no one fixed path, nor is it a singular system. Nevertheless, as Peck (2010) reminds us, neoliberalism represents a lens through which critical questions can be asked, and through which the status quo can be challenged.

It is through this lens that this study has highlighted the complexities and contradictions of digital empowerment. From the emancipatory view of empowerment, to the notion of empowerment as a mechanism of governance and discipline, this study has drawn attention to how different conceptualisations of digital empowerment are defined through organisational strategy. In doing so, this study has highlighted the role that strategy texts play in reflecting and legitimising a particular world view, and the resultant complexities of this at an organisational and individual level.

This study is not without its limitations; strategy formation and strategy enactment are not linear processes, and the utterances and rhetoric of a text do not always neatly translate into action. Indeed, research has highlighted the propensity for organisational strategy to become decoupled from practice, and whilst the corpus of texts and interview data make inferences towards investment into future organisational resources, structures, technologies, and incentives, there is a paucity in concrete examples of how, for example, digital empowerment is being enacted in institutional settings. More detailed institutional-level case studies may elucidate this, and indeed may negate the outcome of a given discourse analysis from becoming decontextualised. Nevertheless, as noted in the methodology, the sentiments in this paper should be considered as a starting point – a rhetorical blueprint of where and how institutions should invest their funds. Couple with this, for reasons of scope, this study focussed only on *digital* strategies (or the equivalent) and these often sit within a broader strategic framework. Consequently, the inter-connectedness of such frameworks may ultimately shape how digital transformation is played out within a broader strategic context.

This study is significant in its scope and should be considered as an invitation for further research to build on its findings. Digital empowerment is a mainstay in modern

digital strategy, and as organisations accelerate their efforts to reimagine the digitally enabled learning environments, curricula, assessments, and interactions of the future, it is becoming increasingly important for researchers to analyse, highlight, and communicate the complexities, contradictions, and impact of this work.

Notes

1. The collection, measurement, and analysis of data about the progress and engagement of learners within the digital learning ecosystem.
2. Excluding three private/for-profit organisations.
3. Technology-enabled synchronous teaching delivery allowing face-to-face teaching sessions to be live-streamed to remote participants.
4. Learning Management System
5. Joint Information Services Committee – a not-for-profit company that provides IT services, digital resources, and consultancy support to HEIs.

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