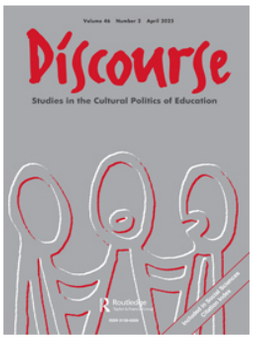

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Regulating truths, indeterminate practice and ways of being: a biopolitics of Professional Standards in UK Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the professional frameworks for teaching and supporting learning in UK higher education. Applying the concept of biopolitics from Michel Foucault's work, we discuss the Professional Standards Framework [Advance HE. (2023a). Professional Standards Framework (PSF 2023), accessed 11.2.24 at https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning/psf] and Education Inspection Framework [Ofsted. (2019). Inspecting the curriculum at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-the-curriculum retrieved 26.11.24; Ofsted. (2023). Education Inspection Framework (EIF) retrieved at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-september-2023 accessed 6.12.24] as part of a discursive *dispositif* which create specific forms of being in higher education with a distinctive biopolitical objective. By aligning and marginalising global objectives and ways of being through indeterminate practice, they extend governance beyond the classroom and into the biopolitical regulation of educational truth itself. By examining the exclusions and silences within these frameworks – particularly those of alternative pedagogical voices and approaches – we underline the paradoxes inherent in these frameworks' proclaimed values of neutrality, inclusivity and equity, as well as their role in the complex dynamics of knowledge production.

KEYWORDS

Professional standards; professional practice; Foucault; policy analysis; space

Introduction

Policy discourse is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon with enactments, effects and affects which solicit constant re-evaluation and re-mapping (Ball, 1993; Hay, 2024; Maguire, Gewirtz, Towers, & Neumann, 2019). As such, it is perhaps best to see policies as networked 'dispositifs'[1] which produce experience the possibility of truth (Foucault, 1976; see also Agamben, 2007) thereby defining, as Frost (2019) points out, how one becomes both a subject and an object of power. This process of subjectivation draws our attention to policy's epistemological role in knowledge-making practices over time,

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and its ontological role in producing subjects and the living processes they literally embody.

This echoes an ontological turn more generally in education research (Brown, 2009; Marginson, 2024; Zembylas, 20172011). In particular, concerns for policy actors (e.g. Ball et al. 2011), 'biodigital subjects' (Williamson, 2016; Williamson, Bayne, & Shay, 2020), and extractive approaches to educational life (Bourassa, 2020b) are frequently critiqued. Studies by Fleming (2014; 2022) and Virno (2004; 2013) highlight trends in what Pierce (2012, p. 722) calls a 'co-productive project' that creates 'subjects who both embody an extractive ethic and whose body is also the target of extractive forms of biopower'. This reference to the bio-politicisation of the (educational) body, which co-opts expressions of life (including resistance) can be attributed to the fundamental operation of capital itself. The latter's axiom implies the destruction and reappropriation of the body in order to extract and repurpose immanent life as economic property (Henri, 1976, pp. 512–515): it is thus 'in the irrationality of the full body that the order of reasons is inextricably fixed' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 402).

The irrationality in question – the reappropriated or reterritorialised body as desiring, decoding and deterritorialising machine – is particularly relevant to the higher educational (HE) sphere where policy documents cannot be assumed to be fundamentally rational[2] in the way they configure their objects. This seductive – but obviously simplistic – understanding of policy-making has often been challenged by a more generative view as the creation of ways of being:

> this conception suggests participatory politics publics are constituted by discourses that are affectively charged and expressed and which gesture towards other possible *ways of being*
>
> (Gerrard, Goodwin, & Proctor, 2024, p. 455, *our emphasis*)

The central claim here is that discourses of public policy-making have a generative ontological outcome: they create ways of being. Discursive *dispositifs* simultaneously create the ontological possibility of particular beings and of the mechanisms which create – and destroy – an object which is weaponised to an extent set out below.

This paper addresses this production of ways of being by discursive governance in UK higher education (HE). Focusing on a specific regulatory policy (Advance HE, 2023a), we examine how ways of being are created for the purposes of value extraction. We focus specifically on Advance HE's Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE 2023a) for three reasons. First, as we show below, the recently-updated 2023 Framework is central to an organisational approach which overtly seeks to regulate higher education on the world stage and promote certain ways of being. Second, while theoretically optional, adherence to this framework has become 'close to the norm' (van der Sluis, 2023, p. 426) in some HE settings. Third, and perhaps most significantly, we show how the mechanisms used in the PSF are shared and reinforced by other actors of the HE regulatory *dispositif*, notably the OfS (2024b, 2024c) and Ofsted (2024). The latter's smokescreen of inspection frameworks, reporting guidelines and data collection methods 'keep other agents occupied with ever-evolving inspection demands for the purpose of sustaining a hierarchy of power' (Tian & Diamond, 2024, p. 1).

An underexamined element of this hierarchy is its reliance on *indeterminate practice*, a concept we discuss below and which includes, excludes and precludes potentially

valuable forms of practice in HE. We show the impact of this indeterminacy on ways of being and its downplaying of the disjuncture between the everyday practices of teaching and, for instance, those selectively staged for the purposes of regulation. This Foucauldian approach to the analysis of power places the dynamic relations between the onto-epistemology of practice / truth at the heart of these educational governance *dispositifs*:

> that power is productive and not only repressive are the central critical and innovative ideas of Foucault's intervention *against* classical state-centered and juridical theories of power.
>
> (Schubert, 2021, p. 6, *our emphasis*)

We follow this logic to the conclusion that discursive effects centre on the generation of specific ways of being and their own generative capacity. This focus implies a turn to 'biopower' and its governmental correlate, 'biopolitics' (Foucault, 1976; 1997a, 1997b), a concept discussed in detail below. We show how this policy *dispositif* involves division, normalisation, and exclusion as a form of 'educational biopolitics' in higher education governance (see Bourassa, 2020a; Pierce, 2013; Wittman, 2016).

After a brief background to these documents and their importance in the UK and international HE landscapes, we discuss our analytical framework. The latter draws on the shift in Foucault's writings from archaeological and genealogical techniques towards the practice of biopolitics as a means of population governance (Foucault, 1997a, 1997b; 2008). We analyse a key framework document (Advance HE, 2023b) and the ways its approach is shared by other bodies (OfS, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Ofsted, 2023). Together, these imply the biopolitical goal of generating, maintaining and exploiting the biological continuum itself and thus exemplify the fragmentation, opposition and exclusion expressed by 'dispossession', 'violent erasure' and 'deep fissures in the liberal democratic imaginary of participation' (Gerrard et al., 2024, pp. 459–460). Analysis of texts such as the PSF does not, we argue, simply reveal the fragmented nature of educational policy-making, but situates it in a much broader and deeper attempt to manage life by a state pursuing war with itself (Foucault, 1997a, 1997b, p. 229).

Background: practice frameworks and higher education

While it is perhaps tempting to treat higher education *en bloc*, great diversity exists in a sector profoundly affected by trends in, for instance, globalisation (see, for instance, Schildermans & Tröhler, 2024). UK HE provision itself is very diverse, including small specialist providers, Further Education (FE) colleges as well as traditional universities and their various national and international partnership operations (OfS, 2024b, p. 9).

Inevitably, perhaps, practice frameworks issued by influential UK bodies such as Advance HE, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), and the Office for Students (OfS) trade on the possibility of commonality between these very different HE providers. Such bodies aim to play leading roles in regulation through policy-making, notably in UK HE. While claiming to be noncoercive, these bodies rely on powerful motivations to participate. Thus while membership of Advance HE is optional, it seeks consensus in promoting shared understanding of effective pedagogy and discourses of professionalism (Friedman & Afitska, 2023). Although not always linked to high status (or indeed teaching quality) by academics, this 'internationally recognised badge of success for those who

teach and support learning in HE' (Spowart & Turner, 2020, p. 546) also claims to be 'compelling wherever and however higher education teaching and learning are delivered' (Advance HE, 2023a). This helps explain why the percentage of academics with HEA Fellowship grew from 20% in 2011–2012 to 50% in 2017–2018 (van der Sluis, 2023): there are currently 192,000 fellows worldwide (Advance HE, 2025).

This 'soft/hard' discourse echoes that of the Office for Students' 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (TEF). While ostensibly merely 'encouraging' HE providers to deliver excellence, failing to participate 'will affect their ability to achieve the highest ratings' (OfS, 2024b). The TEF's promotion of unspecified 'learning gains' and, more recently 'educational gains' (OfS, 2024b), has been criticised as an 'open definition and anything-goes measure' which 'does a huge disservice to the sector' (Kandiko Howson, 2022).

The actual impact of frameworks such as the PSF and their indeterminacy are naturally subject to debate. Some question its restrictive, managerialistic nature, and others highlight its limited academic relevance (van der Sluis, 2023; see also Cathcart et al., 2023; Ketsman, Kennedy, & Reeves, 2024; Shaw, 2017). Nonetheless, the impact of non-compliance can be serious in a competitive HE environment increasingly concerned by the 'serious financial crises that most English universities are confronting' (HEPI, 2025).[3] Indeed, the potential of such regulatory frameworks to affect practice, especially when negative judgments ensue, is significant: their interventions (discursive and otherwise) can and do lead directly to concrete outcomes such as reputational damage, job losses and even institutional closure. The fear of such interventions is, arguably, even more potent, as recent controversy regarding Ofsted inspections show. In particular, the 2023 suicide of school leader Ruth Perry was directly attributed to '[p]arts of the Ofsted inspection [which] were conducted in a manner which lacked fairness, respect and sensitivity' leading to criticisms of 'the system, policies and training' in place at the time (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2023).

We suggest that the regulatory frameworks to which HE is subjected have much in common in this regard. We therefore briefly present Advance HE and Ofsted, their standards frameworks, and their claims, before turning to the ways in which such frameworks construct truth through indeterminate practice and its effect on ways being.

Advance HE and Ofsted

Advance HE is an ambitious UK-based organisation founded as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2003. With 'partners across the globe', it aims to 'improve higher education for staff, students and society' (Advance HE, 2024b). Its Professional Standards Framework (PSF) serves as a benchmark for professional practice in teaching and supporting learning (Advance HE, 2023a; 2023b), using descriptors for roles ranging from Associate Fellow to Principal Fellow which allow the PSF to provide a structured approach to the 'recognition' of professional practice (Advance HE, 2023a, p. 6). The declared goal is to establish teaching standards, align professional development with institutional priorities, and promote inclusivity and equity (Advance HE, 2022).

While Advance HE's influence involves a 'network of global associates and partners' and 'people, providers and systems around the world' (Advance HE, 2024a), Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills) is confined to regulating and inspecting institutions within England. As a regulatory body, Ofsted is tasked with

'improv[ing] lives by raising standards in education' (Ofsted, 2024), notably by inspecting UK educational institutions and, since 2021, higher education institutions providing Further Education (OfS, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Ofsted, 2023).

Thus while Ofsted's role in HE is limited, HE provision such as teacher education and/ or higher-level apprenticeships in skills-based subjects are subject to its Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2023). Ofsted's framework does not recommend specific practices or approaches, as we will see, but is legally required to implement (much contested) inspection processes (see for example, Colman, 2021; Courtney, 2014; Perryman, 2009). The regulator's Education Inspection Framework (EIF) outlines the criteria used to evaluate provision. Emphasising quality of education, behaviour, personal development, and leadership (Ofsted, 2019), this framework matters because it has long held institutions accountable, shaping educational priorities, and influencing day-to-day practices. However, it also embeds hierarchical classifications which pressure educators and institutions to align their practices with inspection standards which, as we have seen, have recently come under much public scrutiny (Tian & Diamond, 2024; see also Ball, 2003; Colman, 2021; Courtney, 2014; Perryman, 2009).

Regulating truth and ways of being

Such scrutiny draws attention to the way these organisations influence professional development, institutional accountability, and to the broader discourse on quality and equity in education through frameworks like the PSF and EIF. Such accountability necessarily involves the construction of truth via an investment of the (professional) body. This approach to the biological space is often associated with French thinker Michel Foucault (1926–1984), for whom no power relation can exist without a corresponding network of power/ knowledge relations (Foucault, 1972, pp. 279–280). Such a network assumes both the authority of the truth and the power to actually 'make itself true' over time (Foucault, 1997a, 1997b, p. 27). Foucault claims that one such temporal shift occurred in the late eighteenth century, when the administration of populations underwent a turn from governance by the regulation of death to that of life (1976, pp. 177–179). Having identified the wasteful inefficiency of upholding sovereignty by (threats of) punishment, incarceration and death, new techniques of measurement, classification, and evaluation of territorial characteristics enabled the management of populations *en masse* by extracting value from living processes and their ways of being. This 'biopower' became the focus of sovereignty through the normalisation, administration and distribution of living processes as an epoque of 'epistemologisation' shifted to one of 'biologisation' (see Foucault, 1972, p. 265). Managed via statistical tools such as census data, birth and death rates, and metrics on disease and poverty, whole populations were rendered visible and subjected to biopolitical investment (Foucault, 1976, p. 186).

Biopower's focus on hygiene operates through distinct systems of knowledge and practice, excluding abnormality and nurturing only that which *actively* contributes to the polis (Foucault, 1997a, 1997b). Biopower makes life both an instrument *and* an effect of power, Foucault, claims (1976, p. 216), using strictly *biological* divisions enabled by scientific and demographic development. Truths, anchored in the materiality of biological fact, are thus created by the institution of arbitrary classifications explicitly

tied to the taxonomies, colonialism, and (racist) violence which underpin biopower and its ways of being (Foucault, 1976; 1997a, 1997b).

From the point of view of policy-making, this tendency has important implications, as we show below. While Foucault's own thinking famously moves on from this idea, its potential relevance to contemporary concerns of the post-pandemic educational world is undeniable (c.f. Powell & Beighton, 2023; Xu, 2024; Zembylas, 2023). Strongly influenced by the violent events of the mid-1970s (1977, p. 257; see also Veyne, 2008), Foucault's thinking is freshly relevant in a post-pandemic era of violent political polarisation, climate emergency, and military conflict (Aries, Giegerich, & Lawrenson, 2023; Guardian, 2025; Hodge, Brandi, Hoggan-Kloubert, Milana, & Howard Morris, 2024)

The truth of life: policy as dispositif

For Foucault, truth only exists within a regime wherein power and knowledge intersect to define what is legitimate:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth — that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true.
>
> (Foucault, 2000, p. 131)

Thus, just as populations were historically rendered visible and subject to intervention through techniques of measurement and classification, policies construct frameworks that govern institutions and individuals through, for instance, education as part of a 'carceral archipelago' (Foucault, 1976). Foucault describes this 'internal war' (1997a, 1997b, p. 194) as a response to indigenous threats whose 'useful energies' are subjected to 'surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, writings, reports' (1997a, 1997b, p. 215) in the early enlightenment period. However, this disciplinary regime, focused on individuals, was subsumed into an overarching biopolitical approach in the late eighteenth century, when living masses as populations were targeted, reflecting what Foucault describes as a form of 'autodialectisation'-a process of self-justification (Foucault, 2012, p.76).

If speaking is necessarily doing something (Foucault, 1972, p. 283), what do educational policies *do* in such a context? If they produce and sustain specific truths about teaching, learning, and institutional performance, how do they shape the legitimacy of knowledge and practice both within *and outwith* the educational landscape? Our analysis examines how the standards frameworks reflect and shape historical discourses in education, define the educator's role, and privilege certain forms of knowledge while excluding others. These dynamics are situated within a broader biopolitical framework, revealing how education policy frameworks standardise practices and shape professional identities *en masse*. Through this lens, we interrogate a biopolitical dispositif operates '*in* the practice of government and *on* the practice of government' (Foucault, 2008, p. 2, *our emphasis*).

Indeterminate practice

One method of achieving this in HE is by prescribing fixed standards for *good quality teaching* without actually defining what it entails. The aim is not to develop specific

products but productivity *per se* as a way of being. Whereas the former are by definition limited, the latter's axiomatic potential is infinite. In this way all practice is potentially exploitable, even – or especially – resistance.

A specific example of this can be found in Advance HE (2022), which promotes 'excellence' while refusing to define what constitutes it:

> We do not seek to compel our members to adopt particular theories, methods or stances – indeed, we have no power to do so even if we wanted to
>
> (Advance HE, 2022)

Similarly, candidates for 'senior fellowship' must evidence 'comprehensive understanding', 'effective practice', and support for 'high-quality learning' by establishing for themselves – and the accrediting organisation – what they are (Advance HE, 2023a, p. 9). The means to evidence such indeterminacy are equally numinous: scholarship research, professional learning, or 'other evidence-informed approaches' form the 'basis for effective practice' (Advance HE, 2023a, p. 5).

Ofsted adopts a similar stance in its inspection framework, explicitly refraining from stating what constitutes effective practice. While promoting for instance 'clear, direct feedback' and not 'unnecessarily elaborate or differentiated approaches' (Ofsted, 2023), the EIF eschews specifics and 'has no preferred teaching style' (Ofsted, 2024). Inspectors, instead, judge the quality of education by evaluating 'the ways in which learners acquire knowledge', how they 'develop skills' and 'exhibit appropriate behaviours for work and success in life or study' (Ofsted, 2024)

Thus the gatekeepers of quality and excellence reject responsibility for specific teaching methods or approaches, claiming instead to act as 'a trigger' to others to take action (Ofsted, 2023). Thus, it is left to practice to imagine (and conform to) undefined 'appropriate behaviours', 'teaching style' and 'good teaching', outsourcing both of the specificities of method and its regulation. Simultaneously devoting their frameworks to the highly indeterminate characteristics as the (impossible, ideal) standard against which practice must be either measured, recognised and accredited, the apparent neutrality of not endorsing any particular method is naturalised and rendered unquestionable. Masking the historical and social forces that have shaped it, the construction of truth becomes a seductive process whereby what is presented as a guiding principle becomes self-evident as 'common sense'. Ofsted's directive to plan lessons 'as usual' (Ofsted, 2024) thus operates as a form of power subtly embedded within what is accepted as knowledge.

Thus Ofsted's claims of neutrality are open to question: many would argue that regulatory preferences are clearly expressed by, for instance, the evaluative choices made by individual inspectors. SecEd (2020) for instance highlights Ofsted's need to clarify its stance on teaching styles to avoid misunderstandings and biases among inspectors. In a similar vein, research by Jerrim (2021) reveals significant variability in how inspectors assess the same lessons, underscoring the influence of personal interpretation on the inspection process and the subsequent inconsistencies in evaluations. Is it perhaps unavoidable Inspectors' personal biases and prevailing educational trends may well influence their judgments, reflecting preferences for certain teaching methods over others. Civitas (2020) also uncovered evidence suggesting a distinct bias for educational fashions in

Ofsted reports, with inspectors favouring 'trendy' or child-led teaching styles while downplaying traditional approaches.

This disavowed preference for particular methods points to an implicit alignment with current educational trends, despite the claims of neutrality from bodies such as Ofsted, Advance HE and the OfS. This is, however, not the only zone of indeterminacy within such regulation, and now the place of discourses of inclusivity in this dispositif.

The illusion of inclusivity

This strategic indeterminacy within policy discourse creates an illusion of inclusivity while systematically marginalising alternative ways of being and practising. For Bourassa (2017) these policy frameworks function as mechanisms of exclusion, not through outright prohibition but by privileging certain knowledge systems while rendering others unthinkable. The supposed openness of these frameworks – claiming no allegiance to particular pedagogies – masks the deep historical and ideological investments that sustain them, ensuring that dominant epistemologies remain uncontested. This absence of prescription operates as a strategic silence, erasing nonconforming pedagogies not by banning them outright but by offering no institutional recognition, no pathway for validation, and no space within the official discourse of regulated truth and ways of being.

The effect is an active foreclosure of possibility. No prescription means no protection for alternative methods, no legitimacy for divergent approaches, and no challenge to dominant models of performativity and accountability. Teachers are left navigating an impossible space of compliance with an ever-retreating ideal whose burden of interpretation and execution falls onto educators themselves. In this way, the non-specificity of policy appears neutral but functions as a technology of governance, subtly coercing educators into aligning with dominant expectations while disqualifying alternatives. What emerges is not just a framework for quality assurance but a powerful dispositif – a regime of truth that legitimises certain ways of teaching while making others invisible, unviable, or illegitimate.

These 'outsourced' definitions of acceptable practice favour regulatory bodies *capable of reproducing* both themselves and the biopolitical gaze. They indicate a discourse which abstains from stating precisely which *products* are expected, focusing instead on *productivity per se* through frameworks which structure the way educators define, promote and police their own practice and exclude those who do not. This implies a subtly coercive paradox: the power to regulate excellence is exercised, yet responsibility for defining it is conveniently outsourced. As we have seen, failure to adhere to these prescribed (non) markers results in tangible and often serious consequences that can go well beyond lower grades for institutions or the denial of 'fellowships' for HE practitioners.

Contingent truths and indeterminate standards

These attempts to appear consensual, objective and neutral can mask the fact that the biopolitical mechanisms of power that shape and legitimise knowledge are inherently precarious, Subject as they are to constant negotiation, recalibration, and contestation, these frameworks are not neutral or apolitical: those in control of professional frameworks

exert significant power over what is considered legitimate and valuable knowledge. Wielded as tools of governance, they regulate and reshape educational practices in accordance with prevailing sociopolitical agendas, presenting contingent decisions as common-sensual truths.

The EIF exemplifies this construction of contingent truths to assert control. Its repeated policy shifts and re-presentation of each framework iteration as a rational outcome demonstrates how institutions produce knowledge as improvement:

> Ofsted exists to be a force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation […] The primary purpose of inspection under this framework is to bring about improvement in education provision.
>
> (Ofsted 2024; see also Ofsted Strategy 2022–2027)

Like 'trigger', above, the word 'force' is telling from a biopolitical perspective whose bellicose *ratio essendi* echoes in terms such as 'range' and 'strategy' (Ofsted 2023) which pepper the framework. They work to legitimise the regulator, implying a foundation of power and expertise, even though historical shifts such as the move from a focus on differentiated teaching and learning to a singular emphasis on curriculum content for all students reveal the constructed nature of these truths. Similarly, the shift from performance data in the 2015 Common Inspection Framework (CIF) to the proposed replacement of single grades with a 5-point scale acknowledges the limitations of previous frameworks (DoE, 2024). Truth's construction is presented here as a sequence of ameliorative milestones with a teleological permanence belied by their politically contingent nature. This matters when terms such as 'improvement' and 'force' legitimise specific practices, like the prioritisation of measurable outcomes and their attendant, well-known, problems over alternatives which might contest the latter. The recent emphasis on providing 'a much clearer, much broader picture of how schools are performing' (DoE, 2024) reinscribes the tension between the ostensibly-clear-but-actually – murky indeterminacy of these standards, which are continuously tailored to shifting political imperatives. Inclusion and exclusion are, thus, two sides of the same process as policy frameworks such as the EIF and PSF fragment and subdivide knowledge. This fragmentation, as we still see, indicates a biopolitical approach to regulating ways of being

Knowledge creation and the inclusion / exclusion paradox

This ambivalence, however, extends beyond the purely epistemological. The fragmentation of the biological continuum is central to biopower (Foucault, 1976), and these frameworks make the division of knowledge a matter of professional *identity* rather than knowledge *per se* (see for example Beighton and Naz, 2024). The PSF's hierarchy of descriptors is just one example: itemised descriptors (D1 for Associate Fellow, D2 for Fellow, D3 for Senior Fellow, and D4 for Principal Fellow) prescribe (and thereby proscribe) criteria by which practitioners are evaluated, detailing how they are expected to identify, perform and display professional values, how they apply 'core knowledge', and exhibit 'effective practice' within predefined areas of activity (Advance HE, 2023a). Five further categories, designated K1 to K5, specify five corresponding areas of activity through which acceptable knowledge must be identified, performed and displayed to gain 'the opportunity to be professionally recognised' (Advance HE, 2024b). Both the

performance *and the performer* are thus 'recognised' by parameters which articulate principles which claim to 'provide invaluable insights', but not specific indicators of good practice (Advance HE, 2024a). While this may seem to include anyone and anything, we will see below how this effectively achieves the opposite.

Similarly, Ofsted employs a structured mechanism for categorising institutions. Until recently, a '4-point grading scale was used in all inspections to deliver principal judgments (Ofsted, 2024). Following the intense controversy referred to above, a new 'report card' system is proposed (Gov.UK, 2025). Its colour-coded five-point grading scale perpetuates the desire to classify practice and institutions into discrete evaluative categories while relying on such frameworks' leitmotiv, indeterminacy. This approach is echoed in the EIF's judgment of leadership and management (Ofsted, 2023): leaders should show 'a clear and ambitious vision' for 'high-quality, inclusive education and training' and. Assessment should be 'appropriate', and (undefined) practice and subject knowledge should be 'built up' and 'improve[d] over time' (Ofsted, 2023).

While these expectations are both suggestively and deliberately imprecise examples of indeterminacy, the policing of unspecified processes by leaders being 'receptive to challenge' and 'reflective of their own practices' guarantees the spread of indeterminacy. This continuous self-surveillance is not incidental, but serves to construct ways of being: the requirement to 'engage effectively' in this way, to show 'strong, shared values, policies and practice' (Ofsted, 2023) is striking in this regard. Providing 'false, misleading, inaccurate or incomplete information' is of course proscribed, as inspection increasingly focuses on the personal attributes of the inspected (EIF, 2023). Rewarding providers who create 'active citizens who contribute positively to society', the biopolitical gaze also requires attitudes, performances and practices which both constitute specific forms of generative, self-regulating identity *and* erase its own contingency by claiming to be 'underpinned by consistent, researched criteria for reaching those judgements' (Ofsted 2023).

This information exists to fragment and assign labels: institutions in the case of the former and individual practitioners in the case of the latter. Naturalising terms such as 'outstanding', 'inadequate', 'associate' or 'principal' within a normalising discourse of categories and their inside/outside relations, such judgments valorise certain interpretations as truth, rendering them authoritative while simultaneously shaping the effects of that truth in terms of how it is internalised and enacted.

For instance, it has long been noted that the judgments that underpin this system are grounded in financial imperatives and the competitive milieu shaped by the economisation and instrumentalisation of education (Beighton & Naz, 2023; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009; Naz, 2021; 2023; Newman & Jahdi, 2009). This familiar neo-liberal logic assumes that the hierarchical ordering of institutions will elevate the quality of teaching and learning, reinforcing governance, control and financial accountability. But the use of this grading system is fraught with complexities. For example, the PSF defines the criteria under Descriptor 2 for fellowship applications as follows:

> D2 is suitable for individuals whose practice with learners has breadth and depth, enabling them to evidence all Dimensions. Effectiveness of practice in teaching and/or support of high-quality learning is demonstrated through evidence of'
>
> (Advance HE, 2023a)

This regulation through norms and standards involves a process of categorisation which not only defines who is deemed a 'Fellow' but also creates distinctions between levels of competency, shaping professional identities and hierarchies within the framework's remit. On one hand, as Gerrard et al suggest (2024), such categorisations fail to account for the irrational, incidental, and non-linear nature of pedagogical processes which unfold within complex environments resistant to simplistic classifications. The requirement to 'evidence all Dimensions' and demonstrate 'effectiveness of practice in teaching' (Advance HE, 2023a) becomes a reductionist gatekeeping mechanism, where failure risks exclusion through rejected applications. Such frameworks, under the guise of objectivity, produce forms of knowledge that render teachers and lecturers objects of evaluation and control. Creating inequalities and exclusions by privileging certain practices and marginalising others, the framework exemplifies the biopolitical attempt to purify practice by fragmentation and render professional capabilities visible, measurable and exploitable.

If we agree with Foucault's axiom that '[a]ll knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects' it follows that such knowledge becomes 'true', admittedly only in this limited sense (Foucault, 1972, p. 27). If 'what is held to be true will be obeyed' (Veyne, 2008, p. 141), the PSF deploys the authority of 'truth' about what constitutes effective teaching and professional competence as a knowledge-power mechanism that shapes and disciplines professional practice in education. A framework that purports to reward 'inclusive and effective practices' across the five prescribed 'areas of activity' (Advance HE 2023a) simultaneously produces knowledge by establishing specific criteria for legitimising certain types of knowledgeableness, which can be measured, assessed, and rewarded. In doing so, it subtly silences or excludes alternative ways of being and practicing, creating a form of exclusionary discourse. This process, cloaked in the rhetoric of inclusivity, functions to reinforce the boundaries of what can be legitimated within contemporary pedagogy and thereby a regime of knowledge that excludes as much as it claims to include. No knowledge is possible, for Foucault, without such an imbrication of discourse and practice (1972, p. 247) and as we have shown, the self-policing of ways of being:

> […] one would only be in the true […] if one obeyed the rules of some discursive 'police' which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke. (Foucault, 1972, p. 224)

Conclusion

Our examination of the exclusions and silences embedded within the PSF and contiguous frameworks from Ofsted and the OfS identifies the subtle paradoxes at play within their professed commitments to inclusivity and equity. This exclusionary discourse implies a regime which ensures the reproduction of prevailing educational ideologies. But our analysis underlines the irony of discourses which do the opposite of what they seek to rationalise. In reflecting on the kind of ways of being education might foster, we raise questions about whether such frameworks are as rational, ineluctable or equitable as they seem. Today's 'sanitization of academic idea formation' (Visser, Stokes, Ashta, & Andersson, 2024, p. 1032) reflects a troubling biopolitical trend whose regulation through the discursive practices of hygiene have an unsavoury record, to say the least. Critical analysis of this irony may be the only way of participating in educational

policymaking without actively contributing to our own erasure as components of such a dispositif.

Thus, like Schubert (2021, p. 2), we see little optimism in the Foucauldian oeuvre. Certainly, power undoubtedly implies resistant ways of being. Opposition, confusion and strategic game-playing and performances within policy-making are integral to policy enactment (Cohen, 2024; Naz, 2024; Naz & Beighton, 2024). But this dialectic reflects neither the waxing and waning of some Hobbesian authority, nor the sovereignty of the resistant, but instead the biopolitical axiom of a state at war with itself (Foucault, 1997a, 1997b, pp. 253–256). In line with the geopolitical shifts that are currently in train, these educational shifts must be understood in the context of a biopolitical trend and its extractive logos. Even resistance, which is as centreless, irrational and unconscious as dominion, provides precisely the vitality that biopolitics seeks and exploits in the fullness, the virtuality, and the 'concrete essence of humanity' as a way of being (Foucault, 1976, p. 191).

Notes

1. We have decided to retain this term for its cognate status, which is likely to facilitate comprehension among the widest possible public (following, for example, Albera, Tortajada, & Le Gac, 2021; Peltonon, 2004).
2. Readers will recognise here the critique of McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 2002) defined in part by the irrational outcomes of its practices.
3. Many related forms of insecurity and/ or precarity are prevalent in the literature (e.g. McCulloch & Leonard, 2023; Kahn, Moreau, & Gagnon, 2024; Marques, Lopes, & Magalhães, 2024).

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