'Competitive job markets' and 'employable graduates'. A corpus-based critical discourse analysis of UK universities' Careers and Employability web pages.

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Introduction

This paper aims to explore the issue of competitiveness in the 'graduate job market' and the notion of 'employability', as presented by Universities in the UK through their career services webpages. It is part of a wider project that seeks to understand the role of careers services inside academia. With a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis methods and Corpus Linguistics tools, the analysis focuses on identifying, interpreting, explaining and evaluating (Baker and McEnery, 2015, pp. 2-3) the 'reality' presented by these services as students are expected to 'invest' their time at university in getting prepared for the transition from HE to the workplace.

HE in the UK and the concept of 'employability'

Since the early 1980s, UK governments have introduced numerous reforms to the educational system. By the mid-1990s, 'universities were considered by the policy makers to be more about conferring private benefit upon individuals than public benefit upon society as a whole' (Williams, 2013, p. 41). Emphasis on 'the individual' is also clearly expressed in the Browne review:

The primary beneficiary of higher education is the individual student. The student chooses where to study and what to study; and the student chooses where to use the new skills they have acquired. Businesses benefit from employing highly skilled graduates and they pay for that benefit through higher wages (2010, p. 54).

Besides the fact that the individual is considered the primary beneficiary of higher education and the one who has the 'power' to choose (the power of the consumer), this statement creates a direct link between higher education, students, and employers which all have one thing in common: the interest in teaching, acquiring and using (respectively) 'skills'.

The concept of 'employability' promoted by powerful groups, such as governments, business organisations, employers, HE institutions, and the media, emphasises the development of employability skills as necessary for those who wish to enter the 'global graduate job market'. The discourse of employability promotes a reality where economic insecurity and labour competitiveness are presented as natural, as 'common sense' (Fairclough, 2015). Individuals are considered responsible for their own success in the labour market and governments become the 'enablers' that can provide the possibility to 'make necessary choices to become employable' (Fejes, 2010, p. 99). As Boden and Nedeva (2010, pp. 43-44) note, the UK government has 'appropriated' itself from any blame about the 'market dysfunction' while universities were given the responsibility of preparing the 'workers' employers need. In other words, universities have taken up the task of preparing students to enter the 'iob market'.

More specifically, Careers and Employability services, which are considered a specialized branch inside the HE institutional system, aim to guide and help students towards becoming employable during their time at university. The concept of 'employability' in UK universities suggests that if HE students focus on 'gaining', 'developing', 'enhancing', 'improving' their skills while at university, they will become more employable and thus earn an advantage in 'securing' a job after graduation. It is thus perceived as a remedy to the problem of unemployment, especially in times of economic 'instability', where individuals are expected to adapt and become flexible to the needs of the 'global market' should they wish to become employed.

Methodology and Corpus

In line with previous research that follows a critical approach on the marketization of HE, such as Fairclough (1993); Mautner (2005, 2010); Askhave (2007); Mayr (2008); Zhang and O'Halloran (2013), this paper aims to critically examine the discourse used by careers services in UK universities. More specifically, it focuses on 'competition' and the notion of 'employability'. The study of language and its use in contemporary capitalism can unveil the promotion and circulation of ideologies that intend to influence people's perception of how the world works and also affect their choices and actions.

This corpus-based critical discourse analysis aims to identify and interpret linguistic patterns of the search terms 'competition', 'competitive', 'employability', and 'employable', using AntConc's concordance and collocates tools (Anthony, 2014). The Careers and Employability Webpages Corpus (CEW15) was built in 2015 and consists of 2.6 million words collected from 58 UK university websites and in particular their Careers Services sections.

Analysis

'Stand out from the crowd' in the 'competitive graduate job market'

Using AntConc's KWIC function, the analysis begins by looking closely at the terms 'competition' and 'competitive'. The idea of 'competition' in the context of employment, or the 'job market' as expressed by the careers services, is described as 'fierce', 'high', 'intense', 'stiff', 'strong', and 'tough' (Figure 1).

two-year training contract competition so it's vital to apply early. part-time staff. However, eighing supply. As such, lemand from students and to attend is just £95.00 ersity degrees, and so the NEEDED There is **strong** in 80 countries. However s appear infrequently and a 'good' application. The m and the **increasing**

competition competition competition competition competition competition competition

at each stage is **fierce** and can be **fierce** and you'll oft competition can be **tough** – there are a competition for jobs can be **stiff** and for placements is **high**. competition for places is **fierce** with on for places is **intense** and v competition for trainee positions, and are certain to face **stiff** competition from other well-qualified is **fierce**. According to the is **high**. In this situation is very strong and should from Europe, the US, Brazil

Figure 1: Concordance Lines - 'competition' in CEW15

Similarly, the adjective 'competitive' is used to characterise the availability of employment positions. Students and graduates are informed of the 'competitive employment market', 'competitive global economy', 'competitive graduate job/labour market'. It could be argued that the rhetoric of 'fierce' competitiveness addressed to students or graduates who are searching for employment, can act as stimulus to take 'appropriate' action. Thus, students are urged to gain a 'competitive advantage' or a 'competitive edge' in the 'graduate job market'. They are also encouraged to 'stand out from the competition' or 'the crowd'. The close examination of the pattern 'stand out from' - found 143 times in the corpus - shows that students are expected to 'improve', 'enhance', and 'boost' their CVs and skills, 'take action early', get 'work experience' and 'invest' in their 'employability' if they want to 'secure' a place in the 'competitive job market'.

The discourse of employability

The analysis then moves on to examine the concept of 'employability'. AntConc shows that within a span of -3 +3 words, the most frequent lexical collocates of the search term 'employability' are: 'careers', 'skills', 'service', and 'team' (Table 1):

	Freq	Freq(L)	Freq(R)	MI	Collocate
1	1593	863	730	3.48395	and
2	1504	1146	358	3.27564	the
3	984	916	68	5.53015	careers
4	683	473	210	2.31987	to
5	585	41	544	5.25245	skills
6	578	467	111	3.56048	your
7	426	290	136	2.25812	of
8	391	37	354	5.60622	service
9	349	34	315	6.19010	team
10	313	133	180	2.21464	in

Table 1: 'employability' collocates

In recent years, careers services in UK universities have integrated the term 'employability' in their services' titles ('Careers and Employability Service'), professional titles ('Careers and Employability Adviser', 'Careers and Employability team', 'the Global Employability Team'), events ('Careers & Employability Fair'), and resources used (Careers & Employability booklet'). In addition, students are instructed to 'develop', 'enhance', 'identify' or even 'sell' to employers a plethora of 'employability skills' while studying at university.

As shown in Table 1, one of the most frequent collocates of 'employability' that can provide information about the ideological stances that follow this term, is the possessive determiner 'your'. A close analysis of the concordance lines ('your employability') shows that students are directed to 'boost', 'build', 'demonstrate', 'enhance', 'improve', 'increase', 'shape' and 'support' their employability.

Similarly, the examination of the adjective 'employable', found 157 times in the corpus, shows that the services highlight their own helping role in making students become 'more/highly/globally employable graduates'. Most importantly, however, the services suggest that the students should take action and make themselves employable (Figure 2):

orking abroad **Make yourself** employable and for employment opportuni Employability? **Make Yourself** employable Being employable is about bei for First Years **Make Yourself** employable Finding jobs and Work experie Guide for First Years Make You Itimate) Years Make Yourself Employable k experience. **Make yourself** Employable Guide for Final Student Emplo Volunteering **Make yourself** Employable Guide for First Years If you're nts relating to **Make yourself** employable Link to Employability skills. Get ir future. Our **make yourself** employable Making yourself employable is Career Guide **Make yourself** employable Where to start Quick Guide: Networking **Making Yourself** employable whilst at university guide The s in the UK. **Making yourself** employable Work experience Working abro

Figure 2: Concordance Lines - 'employable' in CEW15

Discussion and conclusions

The discourse of careers services in UK universities is in line with the neoliberal thought and rhetoric that chooses to focus on an insecure and competitive way of living without really explaining the reasons that have led society and its economy in this problematic state. The concept of 'employability' is promoted as a solution to this challenging reality that students/graduates are asked to follow blindly should they wish to get employed. Students are urged to 'stand out from the crowd' and make themselves employable. Is this, however, the solution that will actually help young people in the long term? Who benefits from the concept of 'employability'? Is becoming 'employable' in order to compete in this 'tough' and 'fierce' 'graduate job market', a fruitful solution or a pseudo-therapy to the problematic neoliberal reality that students are asked to deal with? And finally, do careers services 'teach' students how to 'stand out from the crowd' or become a part of the 'job-hunting' crowd? These are the 'evaluating' questions that the final part of the analysis wishes to raise which is the element that makes the discourse analysis critical (Baker and McEnery, 2015: p. 3).

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