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Discourses of practice: an examination of KEF and its effects on the AL/HRD community

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ABSTRACT

The contribution of scholarship to practice is an on-going concern of the AL/HRD community. This paper explores how one influential discourse may shape AL/HRD's understanding of that contribution. In 2020 the UK Government implemented the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) to gather data on English Universities' knowledge exchange activities. Using Gee's tools of enquiry and building tasks we undertook discourse analysis of two key KEF texts to explore its likely impact on the AL/HRD community's understanding. We compare the discourses used in those texts with three AL/HRD orders of discourse identified in existing literature to explore which if any are reinforced by the KEF discourses, and the potential material consequences this may have for AL/HRD understandings and practice. We find evidence of performance/performance discourses but no evidence of learning/emancipatory and critical discourses in the first text, but some limited elements of learning/emancipatory and critical discourses in the second. In contrast to models of inter-organisational learning, analysis of other texts referred to in this second source suggests that this change did not arise from the documented formal processes but micro-level informal interactions. We suggest this gives individual AL/HRD community members the space to develop alternative, non-performance discourses and practices of knowledge exchange.

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Research-practice gap; discourse; action learning; human resource development; knowledge exchange; knowledge translation; organisational learning

Introduction

The relationship between scholarly research and practice is an on-going concern of human resource development (HRD) and action learning (AL) literature (Brook, Lawless, and Sanyal 2021; Ross et al. 2020a; Stewart and Sambrook 2017), and management literature more generally (Wickert 2021). It is also a concern for the state in the UK and beyond (European Commission 2011; UKRI 2020a), prompting governmental initiatives to develop closer ties between scholarship and practice. This paper explores how the discourses used by the State may shape (or be shaped by) the AL/HRD communities' understanding of that relationship.

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In the UK, the Government has recently introduced two approaches to understanding the contribution of academia to practice, the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) creating with the more established Research Evaluation Framework (REF) a 'performance evaluation system for our universities' (UKRI 2017, p.1). The 2014 and 2021 REF exercises assessed economic and societal research impact through case studies (Ross et al. 2020b). KEF seeks to extend this by focusing on knowledge exchange between universities and business. Chris Skidmore, UK Minister for Universities announcing the launch of KEF, observed that although research and teaching in British Universities were globally respected, the UK needed successful knowledge exchange 'to unlock the potential of universities to shape our economy and society for many years to come' (UKRI 2019).

Although the impact on performance has been identified as a defining characteristic of HRD (Wang et al. 2017), HRD literature has also drawn attention to a gap between research and practice (Ghosh et al. 2014; Stewart 2007). Research has been accused of not addressing issues of relevance to practitioners (ibid.) and emphasising rigorous research rather than solving immediate problems (Jacobs 2014). Turning to AL, relevance is again central to the paradigm that underpins it, which has taken better decisions as its first element (Revans 1982). To contribute to research as well as practice, however, Coghlan and Coughlan (2010) argue that AL research must also be rigorous, adopting defensible research methods to enable a contribution to knowledge outside the immediate AL context.

One suggested way of doing this is through combining AL and action research approaches (Coghlan and Coughlan 2008), embracing AL's emergent and adaptive nature to 'claim legitimacy in both [academic and practitioner] worlds' (Brook, Lawless, and Sanyal 2021, 3). Similarly, it has been suggested that HRD may adopt different roles to strengthen the relationship between scholarship and practice, sometimes doing so through relevant research in its own discipline and sometimes through being a vehicle for bridging the research-practice gap in other disciplines (Ross et al. 2020a). However, Foucauldian analyses would suggest that AL and HRD's freedom to adopt different roles and approaches may be constrained through control of the discourses available to them. Thus, Lawless (2008) finds available discourses limiting participants' discussions (and thus the learning) within AL sets.

Foucault identifies three groups of procedures by which discourse is controlled. The first is systems of exclusion, including prohibitions – that which may not be said; claims to 'reason', and claims to 'truth' (Foucault 1981, 52–54). The second is internal procedures: commentaries, which by commenting on the primary text re-actualize and complete it; the concept of the author, which provides a focus and coherence, and the creation of disciplines which permit the construction of new discourse but only if it meets the discipline's theoretical requirements (ibid. 58–61). Finally, Foucault points to systems of application which limit who is able to use the discourse (ibid. 61–64). Crucially, Foucault argues that controlling discourse has material effects, indeed, that discourse is controlled precisely to 'gain mastery over its change events' (ibid. 52). Given the power of the KEF to affect English universities' reputation and funding, we seek to identify the discourses being promoted by those designing and leading the KEF to explore their possible impacts on the discourses adopted in AL and HRD and the consequent development of the research-practice relationship in those disciplines.

Our paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss literatures on inter-organisational learning and knowledge translation (KT) to explore the processes by which knowledge

may enhance practice. Second, we discuss literature on existing AL and HRD discourses which may or may not fit with those promoted by the KEF. Adopting AL's reflexive approach, we then consider the challenges this paper's research may face in contributing to practice and present the discourse analysis approach and consequent research questions we adopt to facilitate this. This is then followed by a discussion of the methods and the findings. Finally, we pose some questions about the ways we in the HRD and AL communities could respond to the potential challenges raised.

Inter-organisational learning and KT

The UK government's establishment of the KEF evidences an increasing concern with learning between organisations or systems (specifically in the case of the KEF between academic institutions and other systems). Although we accept Wang et al.'s (2017) argument that the host system does not have to be an organisation, they themselves refer to organisations in their analysis, suggesting that it often is (particularly in the Western context). It is to inter-organisational learning literature that we therefore now turn.

While intra-organisational learning focuses upon interactions between employees of a single organisation and the resulting development of rules of behaviour, inter-organisational learning has been defined as 'processes in which collaborating formal organisations learn together from experience by producing and reproducing various kinds of rules and routines (Holmqvist 2003, 458). In Holmqvist's conception, the different organisations start as equals. In this conception, inter-organisational learning differs from intra-organisational learning, at least initially, through the lack of dominant individuals who are able to impose their learning agendas, and thus the greater need for negotiation and compromise (ibid.). This leads, again at least initially, to more explorative learning, in contrast to intra-organisational learning which exploits only particular experiences (ibid). Over time, however, power relations between the organisations and rules arising from these become established, and the learning shifts from explorative to exploitative (ibid.)

This conception of inter-organisational learning as taking place between equal partners contrasts with that presented by Jenkin (2013). Jenkin extends Crossan, Lane, and White's (1999) 4I model of organisational learning which describes four learning processes within organisations: intuiting – the preconscious, preverbal recognition of patterns of experience at the individual level; interpreting – the process of verbalising that at the individual level; integrating – developing a shared understanding at the group level, and institutionalising- formalising learning into rules at organisational level, adding a fifth process: 'Information foraging'. The information foraged may be either impersonal – for example, data – or personal, involving 'locating, communicating and coordinating with individuals', and either internal or external to the organisation (Jenkin 2013, 100). The power relation with those external sources, however, is very different from that presented by Holmqvist. Here the 'forager' is the active participant, initiating the search for information, articulating the goal for which that information is required, and assessing the information received (ibid. 100–101), and the source of the information passive. The learning achieved is therefore likely to be exploitative, used to meet pre-conceived and accepted goals.

Jones and Macpherson (2006) also extend the 4I model to add a fifth process of organisational learning which involves moving outside the organisation: 'Intertwining'. However, as the word implies, this learning involves more 'active engagement' (ibid).

68) between the organisation and external parties. Although Jones and MacPherson argue that organisations prefer to exploit existing knowledge, in this model a crisis prompts the organisation to go outside its boundaries to explore new knowledge (ibid. 166). The external organisations then influence the distribution and institutionalisation of learning within the original organisation, and the resulting relationship may be one in which ‘knowledge sharing benefits both parties’ (ibid. 169). Interestingly, for our purposes, the external organisations in Jones and MacPherson’s research included consultants and academics who are labelled ‘knowledge providers’ (ibid. 166). While the relationship between some of the organisations may be mutually beneficial, therefore, there is an implication that the relationship with scholars is more likely to be one way, the scholars ‘providing’ (rather than receiving) knowledge.

This one-way relationship from scholarship to practice is reflected in some models of KT. El-Jardali and Fadlallah (2015, 1) for example adopt an ‘impact-oriented approach’, conceiving of KT ‘as a continuum from the evidence synthesis stage to uptake and evaluation’, with no translation of knowledge back to the scholar. A similar uni-directional, linear approach is implicit in both of Fredericks, Martorella, and Catallo’s (2015) forms of KT. In ‘End-of-Grant’ forms, completed research findings are disseminated without any practitioner involvement. ‘Integrated’ forms involve the research user throughout the research process, although they do so to ‘apply science to practice accurately’ (157).

However, others present KT as a non-linear, multi-directional process. Thus, Waerass and Nielsen (2016) argue that knowledge may be translated from one group to another ‘in different directions’ (ibid. 237), while Bowen and Graham (2015, 546) argue that it is a process of ‘continual evolution’, in which participants should ‘look sideways’, continually seeking new information to challenge existing assumptions.

The latter conceptions suggest exploratory rather than exploitative learning and chime with some approaches to AL. Lawless (2008), for example, argues the case for AL to be a ‘peripheral’ community which challenges the wider work community. Schumacher (2015) presents an AL approach to inter-organisational learning which emphasises participants from different organisations challenging and prompting reflection on each other’s assumptions, in contrast to other forms of inter-organisational learning in which knowledge is exchanged unquestioned. These suggest a broker role for AL in KT, facilitating that translation of knowledge ‘in different directions’ (Waerass and Nielsen 2016, 237). A similar brokerage role, facilitating the transformation rather than just the transmission of knowledge, has been argued for HRD (Ross et al. 2020b). Conceptions of AL and HRD themselves, however, are varied, and this is reflected in the discourses used in relation to them, far from all incorporating the ‘peripheral’ role and ‘critical repertoire’ Lawless (2008) advocates. In order to explore which of those AL and HRD discourses the KEF supports, it is therefore to consideration of them that we now turn.

AL and HRD discourses

Lawless (2008) identifies two dominant discourses of AL: the ‘organisation’ and the ‘individual’. The former emphasises contribution to the performance of the organisation and the goals of the individual in relation to that; the latter individual self-development and personal achievement (ibid. 123). These bear similarities with the ‘performance’ and

'learning' discourses of HRD (Corley and Eades 2006, 31), the former again focusing upon learning as a means of improving organisational performance, and the latter upon improving individual capacities.

Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke (2005) draw upon the Lyotardian triangle and its identification of three positions with regard to learning – 'performative', 'emancipatory' and 'speculative' – to discuss AL. The first two again resonate with the 'organisation/performance' and 'individual/learning' discourses, while the third is interested in learning for its own sake rather than practical application. For Edmonstone (2019), mainstream AL is located at the midpoint of performative and emancipatory learning positions, enhancing individual development and improving organisational performance.

While 'emancipatory' implies that the discourse is able to free individuals from oppression, the outcome of emancipatory discourse is often articulated as 'learning' rather than 'freedom' (Raelin 2008), underlining the similarities between the 'learning' discourse of HRD and the 'emancipatory' discourse of AL. The assumption of both is that individuals have free choice over their learning. Thus, Raelin notes that HRD interventions are not only often performative, but even when 'emancipatory' often reproduce existing power relations by developing a 'false consciousness' of freedom which leaves them unchallenged (ibid. 523).

These criticisms of dominant approaches to AL and HRD, and the discourses that reproduce them, find expression in Trehan and Rigg's (2011) first two criticisms of traditional HRD. The first is HRD's assumption that its purpose is to improve the economic performance of the organisation, thus accepting performance/performance discourse. The second is HRD's adoption of humanist assumptions which suggest that individuals are autonomous beings capable of rational choice, as in learning/emancipatory discourses. In addition, Trehan and Rigg criticise HRD's traditional representationalist organisation focus, which reifies organisations and thus fails to explore the networks and discursive practices *within* organisations through which discourses and power relations may be challenged. Finally, they criticise the traditional approaches to pedagogy in HRD which do not recognise the power relations underpinning them and the political consequences they have.

Although Trehan and Rigg identify AL as a possible alternative pedagogy capable of enabling this more critical discourse, the dominance of the performative and emancipatory discourses discussed above suggests that it often does not do this (Edmonstone 2019), avoiding discussion of the emotional and political context and leading to 'learning inaction' (Vince 2008) which reproduces existing structures. In recognition of this, 'Critical action learning' (CAL) (see for example Edmonstone 2019; Rigg and Trehan 2004; Vince et al. 2018) and 'Critical emancipatory discourse' (Raelin 2008, 534) have been put forward as alternative methods and discourses which support participants in recognising and challenging the emotional and political context of their learning. A similar call for 'Critical HRD' (CHRD) has been made to recognise and change the power structures which traditional approaches to HRD reproduce (see for example Callahan 2007; Sambrook 2014; Sambrook and Poell 2014; Stewart et al. 2014). In each case, the call is for pedagogies which open up 'discursive spaces' in which dominant discourses may be challenged and changed (Lawless et al. 2011). It follows, therefore, that there is no single CAL/CHRD discourse (although Edmonstone 2019, has already suggested CAL is developing its own dominant discourse which focuses on inter- and intra-organisational

power structures). Rather, we define CAL and CHRD discourses as any which challenge dominant discourses. What they have in common is that they critique those assumptions of traditional HRD (and, we have argued, traditional AL) presented by Trehan and Rigg (2011).

For the purposes of this paper, therefore, we identify three AL/HRD discourses which we seek to map against those promoted by the KEF: the 'performance/performance'; the 'learning/emancipatory', and those which critique the performance/humanist/representationalist organisation and traditional pedagogical assumptions presented by Trehan and Rigg (2011).

Discourse analysis and research questions

Raelin (2008) questions whether critical discursive practices can change power structures in the material world, and suggests that this could be achieved through praxis, the public reflection on how one puts theory into practice. In this section therefore we reflect on how we seek to use the theory of discourse and discourse analysis to achieve practical change.

The gap between scholarship and practice in general and in AL and HRD specifically has been discussed above. Discourse analysis itself faces a challenge to overcome that gap, scholars struggling to clarify how discourse relates to social structures (Wozak and Weiss 2005). While some discourse analyses focus on detailed textual examinations which demonstrate rigour but may be seen as 'myopic' and irrelevant by practitioners (Alvesson and Karreman 2000, 1145), others present apparently significant arguments but fail to rigorously identify the specific operations by which the discourse is produced (ibid.)

Alvesson and Karreman present a typology of discourse analyses which identifies four types according to their position on two dimensions: whether they focus on discourse as having structuring effects or not, and whether they are at the micro- or macro-level. The four types arising from this they label: close-range/autonomy analyses which focus on micro-level discourse separate from its effects; long-range/autonomy analyses which focus on macro-level discourse separate from its effects; close-range/determination analyses, which focus on the structuring effects of discourse at a micro-level, and long-range/determination analyses which focus on structuring effects of macro-level discourse. Foucauldian analyses, Alvesson and Karreman argue, explore discourses as culturally-standardized expressions which inform social practices (ibid. 1134 and 1128) and so maybe identified as 'long-range/determination' approaches.

Alvesson and Karreman (2000) argue that combining micro-level and macro-level in one analysis is problematic, the former starting with analyses of the emerging discourse, and the latter with 'well-established prior understandings of the phenomenon in question' (ibid. 1134). However, they imply that seeking to combine both in a single study has merit and may increase relevance: 'Rigour should sometimes be downplayed for the benefit of social relevance' (ibid.).

Such comments speak to the afore-mentioned debates about rigour and relevance in management research and the potential for bridging the two (Hodgkinson and Rousseau 2009; Keiser and Leiner 2009). While Alvesson and Karreman imply the gap between rigour and relevance is not easily bridged, they do suggest that in order to be relevant discourse

analyses may need to adopt more than one approach. Given that our purpose here is not solely to undertake what we hope will be regarded as rigorous research, but also to consider possible implications of our findings for HRD and AL practice, we seek here to span all of Alvesson and Karreman's four approaches to discourse analysis, and our research questions reflect this, illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

Our first question involves close-range/autonomy analysis, looking at specific texts in isolation from their possible structuring effects, asking:

RQ1 what are the understandings of the contribution of academia to practice being presented in the KEF?

In starting at this micro-level, we hope to avoid the key tension Alvesson and Karreman identify in attempts to combine micro- and macro-level analyses: their two different starting points. While our later research questions seek to identify the implications of these specific discursive practices for macro-level orders of discourse, we start clearly at the micro-level.

Our second research question then moves to consider that macro-level. It engages with long-range/autonomy analysis, seeking to identify the extent to which those specific, micro-level discursive practices support or conflict with the macro-level orders of discourse previously identified in AL and HRD. In so doing we aim to consider whether those micro-level discourses might change more macro-level orders of discourse. This follows Fairclough's (2003) argument that discourses contain many other discourses, and that articulating these discourses in differing ways may lead to the production of new discourses. We therefore ask:

RQ2 to what extent do the understandings of the contribution of academia to practice presented in the KEF agree with understandings of contribution to practice presented in existing HRD/AL discourses?

Our concern to consider the relevance of these insights then leads us to the long-range/determination sector of Alvesson and Karreman's figure, and consideration of the possible impacts of those discourses on AL/HRD practice. In so doing we recognise the discontinuous nature of discourse (Foucault 1981, 67) and that it is through recognising and questioning the multiplicity of discourses identified in the previous paragraph that 'the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth' may be changed (Foucault 1991, 74). Whilst researching their actual effects is beyond the

4 Research Questions	Structuring	Non-structuring
Macro	3. Long-range determination (Impact on HRD/AL field)	2. Long-range/autonomy (<i>Orders of Discourse</i>) (3x HRD/AL discourses)
Micro	4. Close-range determination (Local practice impact)	1. Close-range/autonomy (<i>Discursive practices</i>) (KEF texts)

Figure 1. Research questions, drawing on Alvesson and Karreman (2000) and Fairclough (2003).

scope of this project, we hope thereby to generate debate and reflection amongst members of the HRD/AL communities, asking:

RQ3 what might the implications of KEF discourses be for HRD/AL communities' contributions to practice?

Finally, our research questions move us to Alvesson and Kärreman's close-range/determination sector, and the ways in which these insights might influence how members of the AL and HRD communities seek to contribute to practice in the future. In so doing we recognise that discourse production can only be understood in context (Lawless et al. 2011), and thus we move from consideration of the AL/HRD community at a macro-level to the micro-level production of discourse by scholars and practitioners and the possible implications of this for the social structures within which they are embedded. Our fourth research question is thus:

RQ4 how might this affect the understanding of HRD and AL communities' members as to how they might contribute to practice in the future?

Methods

We started by addressing research question 1 through detailed discourse analysis of two key KEF texts. The first is the 2017 letter from Jo Johnson, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation to David Sweeney, Executive Chair of Research England, asking Research England to establish the KEF (UKRI 2017). The second is the KEF home webpage as of February 2021 developed by Research England to communicate their understanding of the KEF to the outside world (UKRI 2020b). The former was analysed as it is the first public text setting out the UK government's rationale for adopting the KEF and so permits analysis of the discourses used at its establishment. The second was analysed as it is the key text through which Research England communicated the KEF externally, and so enables analysis of the discourses used as the KEF was being implemented.

In our attempt to ensure the rigour of our research we adopted Gee's (2011) approach to discourse analysis, using examination of discursive practices such as vocabulary, semantic relations, collocations, metaphors, assumptions and grammatical features identified by Fairclough (2003, 129–133) to elucidate Gee's 6 tools of inquiry: situated meanings, social languages, figured worlds, intertextuality, discourses and conversations. Pieces of text were mapped against tools of enquiry by one researcher and checked by a second researcher. Although focusing on the detailed examination of individual texts at the micro-level, these tools of enquiry enabled us to start to explore how the discourses in our two texts related to other discourses, including those at a more macro-level, for example through identifying examples of intertextuality and social languages. Tools of enquiry were then mapped against each of Gee's 7 building tasks: significance, practices, identities, relationships, politics, connections and sign systems and knowledge, by the first researcher and again checked by a second researcher (see exemplar analyses in Tables A1 and B1 in Appendices A and B). Any disagreements arose only in relation to the allocation of specific pieces of text to particular tools of enquiry/building tasks and did not affect the answers to the research questions. This point is expanded in the limitations section below.

The findings of the building task analysis were then mapped against the macro-level learning and performance discourses of HRD (Corley and Eades 2006); speculative, emancipatory and performative positions of AL (Lyotard, 1984; cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) and traditional assumptions of HRD (Trehan and Rigg 2011), in order to answer research question 2 (see Tables C1 and D1 in Appendices C and D).

Given that these building tasks aim to show how the discourse may produce and reproduce structural relations, they also formed the basis for us to present possible answers to research questions 3 and 4. Whilst recognising that in order to answer these questions we did not research the actual impact of the discourses on practice at either the macro or micro-level, and thus did not meet Keiser and Leiner's (2009) definition of rigorous research in addressing these final 2 research questions, we argue that the adoption of Gee's framework of building tasks provides us with a sound basis for proposing possible practical implications. Moreover, we agree with Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009) that some of the questions about rigour posed by Keiser and Leiner arise from positivist assumptions. By presenting possible implications for HRD/AL practice at a symposium for debate with other HRD/AL scholars and practitioners we hope to promote discussion on these issues.

Findings

In this section, we present our analyses of the two documents, starting with earliest, the ministerial letter. We discuss how each of Gee's building tasks is presented in each, giving examples of discursive practices and tools of enquiry which support those findings.

Discourse analysis of ministerial letter

Examining first Gee's **significance** tool of enquiry; business and the economy are presented as the most significant systems universities have impact on. In the statement: 'Collaboration with business is a core part of the mission of all universities and we need them to be more deeply connected to their local economies and the wider world than ever,' business and local economies are the only named systems, and the co-location of 'wider world' with 'local economies' implies that it is only economies in the wider world that are significant. Moreover, knowledge is significant only in as much as it provides benefit to the economy:

'To succeed as a modern economy in the twenty-first century, we need our universities to be ever more competitive in the creation, transmission and exploitation of knowledge.'

In relation to practice, the previous quotation builds the practice of exchange between universities and business as a one-way process of knowledge exploitation from universities to business. Similarly, the letter states: 'It's vital for the UK's economy that ground-breaking discoveries make it all the way *from* idea to implementation and *from* prototype to profit and emphasises the 'economic benefits our universities *bring* to the country' (our italics).

Turning to **identity**, 'the country' is presented as a purely economic entity: 'the country as a whole' referred to in the very first sentence, morphs immediately into 'to succeed as a modern economy' at the start of the second. Moreover, geographically, 'the country' is not identified directly as being England, and only at the end of

the letter is it made clear that the government has no power to impose the KEF on universities in other parts of the UK, allowing initial ambiguity over exactly which 'country' is to be covered by the KEF.

Turning to the creation of other systems' identities, collaboration with business is presented as a key aspect of university identity: it is part of universities' missions, and the 'Minister of State for Universities, Research, Science and Innovation' is within the 'Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.' The construction of the identity of 'businesses/business' meanwhile varies within the letter, being plural when first referred to, and singular subsequently. Whilst recognising a variety of business identities initially, the letter therefore then merges them into one singular identity, implying a single interest.

In terms of **relationships**, as some of the preceding quotations reveal, it is the relationship between universities and business which is built up; there is one reference to 'and others' (other than business) that universities might engage with, but these 'others' are never defined or referred to again.

With regard to **politics**, acceptable allocation of resources is determined by competition between universities, the KEF being presented as developing a 'constructive competitive dynamic', 'providing comparable, benchmarked and publicly available performance information'. The appropriate information upon which the resource allocation is to be based is purely quantitative: using '*data already gathered*', with Research England only asked to consider '*additional metrics*' (our italics). Intertextual references to previous government surveys and data collection exercises make clear that the KEF will reproduce the same methods of resource allocation as previous exercises (such as REF). Moreover, intertextual reference to the 'Industrial strategy' as the goal of the KEF gives the ultimate power to decide what is rewarded to the government, which wrote the industrial strategy, and again makes clear that resources are to be allocated based solely on impact on economic and business systems.

With regard to resource allocation in countries other than England, the ambiguity over the identity of the 'country' until late in the letter leaves it unclear initially whether the KEF's resource allocation is to be implemented across all UK nations. By not clarifying this early on the thought that this might apply to all nations is allowed. This, of course, creates in the reader's mind the very scenario to which the UK government aspires, of all nations adopting the same allocation process.

Finally, key **connections** are presented between the REF and the creation of knowledge, the TEF and the transmission of knowledge, and the KEF and the exploitation of knowledge, the KEF being to 'evaluate the contribution our universities make to the exploitation of knowledge.' Knowledge exchange is therefore connected with knowledge exploitation and not with creation or transmission.

Discourse analysis of KEF webpage

Looking again firstly at things and people presented as having the greatest **significance**, the first sentence identifies only systems of 'universities' and 'businesses' by name, otherwise referring to unspecified 'other users,' suggesting, like the ministerial letter analysed above, that universities and businesses have the greatest significance. However, the second paragraph deviates from this construction, stating that universities should serve

'the economy *and society* for the benefit of the *public*, business *and communities*' (our italics). Naming 'society', albeit after 'the economy', makes it clearly significant, as does naming 'the public' and 'communities.' Moreover, the use of the connective 'and' indicates that society and the public and communities are separate from the economy and business respectively, and significant in their own right.

In terms of the development of the KEF itself, academic systems are built as being most significant. It is notable that the vast majority of the stakeholders referred to in relation to the consultation on the KEF ('HEPs, learned societies, PraxisAuril, the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB), the devolved funding councils and other UKRI councils') are academic bodies.

The **practice** of knowledge exchange is also created differently on the webpage than in the ministerial letter. Whereas in the latter universities 'bring' expertise to business, here the presentation of their role is more conflicted. On the one hand, universities are referred to as 'Higher Education providers' (HEPs) implying again that universities 'provide' knowledge to passive recipients. On the other, the purpose of the KEF is stated as being to help businesses and other users 'access the world-class knowledge and expertise embedded in English HEPs'. Making 'businesses and other users' the subject of the clause allocates them a more active role in finding knowledge, albeit still no role in developing or transforming that knowledge: knowledge exchange is still a process of university-generated expertise being accessed but not changed. Nevertheless, the conflicted discourse opens up the possibility of a more active role for those outside the university in seeking knowledge.

In relation to the practice of developing the KEF itself, the many intertextual references (for example to the 'consultation and pilot outcomes report' and the 'KEF decisions' report) build the process as being democratic and transparent. Nevertheless, the fact that the first intertextual reference is to 'The Government's Industrial Strategy' makes clear that it is this government strategy and discourse which drives the practice. Furthermore, it is also clear that some aspects of the practice remain undisclosed. Following some intertextual links reveals that two shifts from the KEF as created in the ministerial letter to its creation on the webpage – the inclusion of the 'public and community' as significant systems, and the use of narratives to allocate resources (see discussion of politics below) – were already in the initial consultation questions sent out by Research England. Clearly therefore they arose from some unspecified practice prior to the consultation, and not from the consultation practices identified on the website. Moreover, and as noted above, the majority of those consulted were academic, suggesting that the practice of developing the KEF is the responsibility of academic bodies.

Turning now to the construction of **identities** on the web page, University identity, as noted above, varies according to the context. Thus, universities tend to be referred to as 'universities' when independent of other relationships; 'Higher Education providers' or 'HEPS' when discussed in relationship to business and other users and as givers of knowledge, and 'Higher Education Institutions' or 'HEIs' when in relationship with Research England. They are thus identified as academic bodies when considered independently, providers when considered in relation to business and other users, and bureaucratic bodies when considered in relation to Research England.

In relation to other identities, the web page follows the ministerial letter in referring to businesses in the plural initially, then as business, allowing (but then rejecting) a notion of

plurality of interests. Regardless of this, the presentation of 'businesses' as key identities adopts a representationalist approach, identifying the business organisation as a homogenous identity and ignoring the other identities it might contain.

Other systems are also presented as singular and with a homogenous interest in some places ('the public'; 'society') and plural in others, implying a diversity of interests ('communities', 'other users').

In terms of **relationships**, the focus on consulting mainly with academic stakeholders, noted above, and the use of abbreviations and terminology unlikely to be known outside academic circles (for example 'the HE-BCI table references'), constructs Research England's key relationship as being with universities and academic bodies, and not with those outside universities. The purpose of the web page is clearly to build relationships with the former systems rather than the latter.

As noted above, the discursive practices also build the relationship between Research England and universities as a democratic one, and that between universities and business/society as that of the former creating knowledge for the latter to use. This largely passive role of the users of knowledge is further underlined by the aforementioned use of academic discourse, which excludes non-academics from the development and assessment of the KEF.

Turning to **politics**, a key change from the way appropriate resource allocation is built in the ministerial letter is the previously mentioned inclusion of narrative statements in addition to quantitative measures. While these are not compulsory, the web page states that 'in AY2019–20, we believe that the narratives add valuable contextual information and we would strongly recommend HEPs in receipt of our funding submit them'. However, again, there is no role for any system outside academic and government systems in the allocation of funding – the narrative statements are written by the universities.

A second change from the ministerial letter is that the first iteration is not to be linked to funding, and indeed is created as a possible way of changing the method for allocating resources: 'We believe that KEF ... could therefore provide the basis for a new method of allocating funds in the future.' This raises the possibility of the KEF contributing to the development of funding methods rather than reproducing existing ones.

Finally, in relation to **connections**, the discursive practices already discussed serve to disconnect those outside academic systems from the process both of knowledge creation and the KEF process itself. In relation to knowledge creation, knowledge is presented as being created by universities and used by businesses. The disconnection built by the web page is even greater than in the ministerial letter: the letter's reference to 'collaboration' between business and universities is lost. The terminology adopted also serves to exclude those outside academia from the KEF processes and thus the assessment of knowledge exchange.

Discussion

Our first research question asked: What are the understandings of the contribution of academia to practice being presented in the KEF? Through their discursive practices, the two texts present the process for overcoming the gap between scholarship and practice as one of ensuring that relevant research is transmitted across the gap, rather than by removing

the gap. In both texts, the process of knowledge exchange is therefore presented as a one-way process from universities to those outside. This follows a linear model of KT (El-Jardali and Fadlallah 2015), rather than a multi-directional process (Bowen and Graham 2015; Waerass and Nielsen 2016), with no role for those outside universities in the creation of knowledge, and no opportunities for Bowen and Graham's 'sideways' looking and the potential for knowledge exploration that brings. Indeed, the frequent references to knowledge exploitation make clear that the purpose of the exchange is to enable business to exploit existing knowledge to meet their pre-determined goals, and not to develop or transform either the knowledge or the goals.

This role of universities as 'providers' and those outside as recipients of knowledge also reinforces this gap between the two systems and reflects the two 5I models of Organisational Learning discussed above, which present academic bodies as 'knowledge providers' (Jones and Macpherson 2006). The two texts do vary however in the role they build for those knowledge recipients in the accessing of knowledge, only the web page suggesting the active role of recipients in seeking and finding the knowledge suggested in the OL models' Information foraging and Intertwining stages (ibid.; Jenkin 2013). By contrast, the ministerial letter implies that universities bear sole responsibility for ensuring those outside access the knowledge they require.

Our second question asked: To what extent do the understandings of the contribution of academia to practice being presented in the KEF agree with understandings of contribution to practice presented in existing HRD/AL discourses? In building knowledge exchange as a process of exploitation of knowledge for the purposes of meeting organisational goals the ministerial letter clearly adopts a performance/performative discourse. This is further underlined by the emphasis on economic impact, and the very limited consideration of any systems other than business and economic ones. Systems for assessing university KEF, with their use of quantitative measures, are further evidence of this performative discourse. The lack of significance of individuals within business organisations, and ignoring of any non-economic goals, means that there is little evidence of any learning/emancipatory discourse.

As the above analysis makes clear, the ministerial letter does not challenge performative discourse and reproduces representationalist organisational assumptions. In so doing it ignores individuals and other interests within the business organisations, and thus the political and emotional context of knowledge exploitation, and the barriers which might prevent some individuals from benefiting from the knowledge. Similarly, in building only business and the economy as significant users of knowledge it does not recognise any non-economic interests, and thus again presents a homogenous, apolitical vision of knowledge exploitation. Finally, the presentation of knowledge exchange as a linear process from the university to the user reproduces traditional pedagogical assumptions. There is therefore no evidence of critical discourses.

On the KEF web page, the presentation again of business as a significant user of knowledge, the assumption that business goals are homogenous, and the emphasis on measuring and improving university performance, provides evidence of performance/performative discourse. However, alongside this performative discourse with its emphasis on business and economic goals, reference to 'society' and 'communities' leaves space for other groups to define other goals, and thus introduces elements of learning/emancipatory discourse. This learning discourse is also introduced in the

introduction of qualitative narrative statements in the KEF return, which provides a space for universities to challenge quantitative performative measures and introduce alternative agendas.

In relation to critical discourses, therefore, while a performative discourse is largely adopted, some space is opened up for it to be challenged. While for the most part adopting representationalist organisational assumptions, with for example no recognition of diverse interests within business, the reference to benefits to 'communities', with undefined boundaries, allows consideration of less formal systems. While the above makes some space for critical discourses to emerge in relation to those assumptions, however, there is no consideration of the political and emotional context of knowledge exchange which again is presented as an unproblematic linear process, reproducing traditional pedagogical assumptions.

Our third research question turned to the long-range/determination quadrant of Alvesson and Karreman's model, to look at the potential practical implications of the discourses presented, asking: What might the implications of KEF discourses be for the HRD/AL communities' contributions to practice?

In measuring knowledge exchange through its contribution to business, the economy and the achievement of the industrial strategy, the performative discourse adopted in the ministerial letter and largely adopted on the web page, we argue, puts pressure on members of the AL and HRD communities in universities to ensure their knowledge can be used to achieve the economic goals defined by those with power. More critical AL and HRD approaches, with their development of spaces to challenge those dominant goals, are likely to struggle to make such a contribution. Even, we would suggest, learning or emancipatory approaches, with their focus on developing individual needs, and AL sets which have both emancipatory and performative agendas may find it more difficult to demonstrate achievement of those goals.

In relation to the roles adopted by the members of AL and HRD communities, we suggest that the KEF discourses may reinforce rather than overcome the gap between AL/HRD scholars and practitioners which many in our communities have been eager to close. In referring to and engaging with the KEF it may be difficult for those of us working in academia to avoid using the discourses presented in the KEF texts, which present practitioners as having no role in knowledge creation and indeed actively exclude them from the process of assessing universities' knowledge exchange. We fear that this may encourage traditional pedagogical conceptions of HRD and side-line alternative approaches, such as AL with its more exploratory and collaborative generation of knowledge. At the least, by engaging with the KEF, the AL and HRD communities working in academia risk being seen by the rest of their communities to be giving tacit approval to that conception of the scholarship – practitioner gap.

And yet, turning the to the close-range/determination quadrant of Alvesson and Karreman's grid, and our response to our final research question – ***How might this affect the understanding of HRD and AL communities' members as to how they might contribute to practice in the future?*** – we find some space for individual community members to challenge the scholarship – practice gap, and to maintain the diversity of AL and HRD agendas and approaches. In the first place, references on the webpage to 'communities', 'public' and 'society' introduce some aspects of learning and more critical discourses which provide the opportunity to challenge performative discourse. Since the identity of 'communities', public and 'society' remain undefined on the KEF webpage, individual members of the AL/HRD communities may be able to use their own discursive practices

to present their own varied conceptualisations of those users' identities. Similarly, the ambiguity in the KEF webpage discourse as to what the benefits to these users might be and thus how they might be assessed gives space for AL/HRD community members to develop their own definitions. The narrative statements in particular provide a discursive space where individual writers can develop the discourse in diverse ways, and resist the imposition of any single discourse.

In the second place, the shift in discourse about the KEF between the ministerial letter and the later KEF webpage provides some insights into how individual AL/HRD community members may influence the development of the discourse around the scholarship – practice gap. While existing models of inter-organisational learning focus on formal interactions between organisations, it is apparent that the shift in the KEF discourse did not arise from inter-organisational learning in the formal consultation, but from other, unspecified interactions. It is in contributing to learning in this informal manner, through discursive practices and micro-level interactions, we suggest, that individual AL/HRD community members may influence the developing discourse and thus its material effects.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the two KEF documents reveals not only how the discourses adopted there may impose particular processes and outcomes of knowledge exchange, but also how individual AL/HRD community members may use their own discursive practices to challenge those. It shows how unspecified, micro-level interactions may lead to shifts in discourse, which can then be further exploited through more such interactions to present alternative discourses and develop alternative outcomes.

Specifically, it shows how this may be used to challenge the dominant performative discourse of the KEF. In so doing, we are not necessarily arguing that performative discourse should be replaced, or presenting the discourse which should replace it, but rather that the AL/HRD communities should use discursive practices to keep alive debates about knowledge exchange.

This analysis makes us reflect upon our own use of discourse in this paper. In drawing on OL literature and literature on formal AL/HRD interventions, we ourselves may be guilty of promulgating organisational representationalist assumptions, focusing on those formal interactions rather than the hidden, informal ones which we suggest are where discourses may be most readily changed. Secondly, in engaging with the language of the research- practice or scholar-practitioner gap we risk reinforcing that gap ourselves – hence why we have moved here to using the somewhat clumsy term of 'AL/HRD community member', to encompass those working within and outside academia. Even AL/HRD communities' attempts to overcome the gap between practitioners and researchers, through identifying 'scholar-practitioners', for example, may actually reinforce and reproduce not only the gap between the two, but also the linear direction of travel from scholar (first) to practitioner (second) which we have challenged in the KEF discourse. As a final answer to our fourth research question, therefore, we suggest one way in which we might contribute to practice in the future is through changing our own discourse by identifying alternative terminology to refer to AL/HRD community members as one collaborative community regardless of employer. In the spirit of AL and collaborative learning we therefore ask: any ideas?

Limitations and further research

Our analysis is limited by being based on only two, albeit key, texts. Our focus on documentary analysis also means that we are unable to identify the precise interactions through which orders of discourse are altered and how they affect practice, and can only suggest what those might be. A longitudinal study examining how members of the AL/HRD community respond to the latest iteration of the KEF, and why, might therefore be insightful. Utilising AL in this research would additionally enable exploration of the role AL might play in that alteration of orders of discourse.

A second potential limitation arises from our implementation of Gee's framework. We sometimes found it difficult to distinguish between particular tools of enquiry and building tasks, and recognise that others may have allocated particular quotations to different tools or tasks. Nevertheless, we argue that Gee's framework is, as 'tools of enquiry' implies, a means to an end. As long as ultimately it reveals the key assumptions and positions presented by the text, we contend, the actual categorisation of quotations is of little significance.

Finally, as already noted, we acknowledge that in writing this paper we too are adopting discursive practices which support certain orders of discourse and the material effects they seek to reproduce. Those of a positivist mind might therefore see as a limitation our inability to remain independent of the research object, and our contribution, in however small a way, to the development of the orders of discourse ourselves. Those of a CAL/CHRD mind, meanwhile, will doubtless identify discursive practices in our discourse which uncritically either reproduce the political status quo or promote an alternative. To both, we say, that is the price of engaging in discourse. The alternative is silence. Our purpose in writing this paper and contributing to this symposium is therefore not to promote a particular discourse or position but rather to eschew that silence, and encourage others to do the same. In so doing, we hope our paper will make its own contribution to practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A

Table A1. Exemplar analysis of tools of enquiry mapped against Significance building tasks for ministerial letter.

Building tasks and tools of enquiry	
Significance: How are tools of enquiry used to build relevance of significance for things and people in context?	
Situated meanings	Assumption that knowledge is only significant in as much as it is providing economic benefit: 'economic benefits our universities bring' is related to 'exploitation of knowledge'; 'it is vital for the UK's economy that ground-breaking discoveries make it all the way from. to implementation and from prototype to profit' KEF will enable universities to 'benchmark and develop their own performance' – so performance related to economic impact Knowledge important for economic success most of the economic benefits our universities bring to the country as a whole To succeed as a modern economy in the twenty-first century, we need our universities to be ever more competitive in the creation, transmission and exploitation of knowledge Collaboration with business is a core part of the mission of all universities and we need them to be more deeply connected to their local economies and the wider world than ever Knowledge in context of economic success Significant for our country Purpose of universities – engagement with business to ensure a successful economy
Social languages	Business language Evaluate, judge, performance evaluation system Written from business dept to education
Figured worlds	The university as driving forward economic performance
Intertextuality	
Discourses	
Conversations	'As I said in my speech to the HEFCE conference in October, there are already many examples of our universities engaging effectively with businesses and others,' (others not worthy of identifying) – business is the only one worthy of identity

Appendix B

Table B1. Exemplar analysis of tools of enquiry mapped against Relationships building task for KEF website.

Building tasks and tools of enquiry	Example quotations
Relationships: How are tools of enquiry used to build and maintain (or change or destroy) relationships? Situated meanings	<p>'Research England assumed responsibility for this as part of its wider KE policy and funding remit in April 2018' – assumption that reader knows what that remit is; so relationship is from Minister to HEFCE to research England and funding and policy remit is basis of that relationship</p> <p>'KEF dashboard' – means something different in society as a whole – only HEPs will understand; excludes others</p>
Social languages	
Figured worlds	
Intertextuality	<p>'We launched this consultation in response to the commission set out in the Government's Industrial Strategy White Paper asking us to develop a KEF, detailed in a November 2017 ministerial letter. An offline export of the consultation questions can be found here and a video walkthrough of the proposed KEF dashboard is available below.' So relationship is from Gov and ministerial letter to HEFCE and thus Research England – Gov set initial agenda. But note gov only 'asked' – gives impression Research England may have had some choice, although they didn't. But they set themselves up as having some autonomy. 'The KEF consultation and pilot outcomes report which presented a summary of the main themes emerging from the consultation responses' – ref to report, highlighting rel with pilot universities –but research England had resp for producing summary of main themes and writing the report 'In March and April 2020 Research England hosted two webinars to assist higher education providers participating in the KEF with their preparations' – so research England is dominant in relationship, setting agenda and assisting HEPs. Note business and society again have no role 'As set out in our publication 'Knowledge Exchange Framework: Outcomes of Consultation and Pilot Exercise', we have undertaken a thorough analysis of information received during both the consultation and the pilot. Whilst we believe that the fundamental design of the KEF as proposed is sound, there were several areas of focus (e.g. on some individual metrics and structure of narrative templates) that were changed as detailed in the final decisions report published in January 2020.' -Research England keeps power in relationship, but has adapted in response to consultation on detail</p>
Discourses	<p>Economic Discourse to describe relationship– gov buying services from HEFCE. Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation commissioned the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Title of minister links universities, science, research and innovation</p>
Conversations	<p>Ref back to earlier conversation: 'Work to create the KEF began in 2017, when the Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation commissioned the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to provide more information about HEP achievements in serving the economy and society for the benefit of the public, business and communities REF to conversations around pilot: At the same time, we also invited English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to participate in a pilot exercise to further test and refine the proposals outlined in the consultation 'Research England is working with various stakeholders to</p>

(Continued)

Table B1. Continued.

Building tasks and tools of enquiry	Example quotations
	develop the KEF, including HEPs, learned societies, PraxisAuril, the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB), the devolved funding councils and other UKRI councils' – so mainly academic orgs consulted with, no direct consultation with business and none with community groups etc.

Appendix C

Table C1. Building tasks in ministerial letter mapped against AL/HRD discourses.

	Evidence of performance (Corley and Eades 2006)/ performative (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of learning (Corley and Eades 2006)/ emancipatory (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of critical discourses: Challenging humanist, performative, representationalist assumptions and ignoring of politics and emotions (Trehan and Rigg 2011)
Significance	Yes – -Business and economy are most significant -Knowledge significant only in as much as it provides economic gain	No	No
Practices	Yes -Knowledge is to be created, transmitted and exploited by universities in one-directional process from university to business -KEF is about exploitation not creation or transmission	No	No
Identities	Yes – -Country = the economy -Business is a significant group -University identity is bound up with collaboration with business, science, research and innovation; -Education and Business, Energy and Industry are identified with each other -Shared identity between Gov and Research England	No	No
Relationships	Yes – -Key relationship: between education/ universities and business. Direct relationship. Apart from early reference to 'and others' business/economy is the only group universities have relationship with -Research England expected to build relationships with other funding bodies -Close relationship presented between Gov and head of Research England, but power with Gov	No	No
Politics	Yes-Allocation of resources (gov funding) to be unequal -Based on competitive	No	No

(Continued)

Table C1. Continued.

	Evidence of performance (Corley and Eades 2006)/performative (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of learning (Corley and Eades 2006)/emancipatory (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of critical discourses: Challenging humanist, performative, representationalist assumptions and ignoring of politics and emotions (Trehan and Rigg 2011)
	performance -Based on quant measures which measure contribution to economic performance as defined by the government in its Industrial Strategy -Drawing on much of same data already gathered for other surveys so likely to reproduce same allocation of resources -Could be used by other funding bodies so again reproducing status quo further		
Connections	-Connection between knowledge exchange and exploitation -No connection between knowledge exchange and creation or transmission -Responsibility for this connection is solely the universities' -Connection to previous gov data gathering	No	No
Sign systems and knowledge	Yes- Business/economic language for universities; -Informal for relationships between Gov and Research England -Not academic	No	No

Appendix D

Table D1. Building tasks on KEF webpage mapped against AL/HRD discourses.

	Evidence of performance (Corley and Eades 2006)/performative (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of learning (Corley and Eades 2006)/emancipatory (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of critical discourses: Challenging humanist, performative, representationalist assumptions and ignoring of politics and emotions (Trehan and Rigg 2011)
Significance	Yes	Slightly – 'other users' – doesn't specify how they might want to use it. Allows potential for learning/emancipation according to different agenda. 'Benefit of business, economy and society' – doesn't specify what form that benefit might take	Slightly – 'serving the economy and society for the benefit of the public, business and communities' – does not specify what benefit is; allows for changes in power relations, alternative measures of effectiveness etc. To count as 'benefits'
Practices	Yes	Slightly – introduction of qual narratives allows possibility of different interests/agendas	No

(Continued)

Table D1. Continued.

	Evidence of performance (Corley and Eades 2006)/ performative (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of learning (Corley and Eades 2006) /emancipatory (Lyotard, 1984 cited in Pedlar, Burgoyne, and Brooke 2005) discourses	Evidence of critical discourses: Challenging humanist, performative, representationalist assumptions and ignoring of politics and emotions (Trehan and Rigg 2011)
Identities	Yes	No – those outside unis are passive recipients of knowledge	Slightly – although usually presented as homogenous and with same interests, occasional use of plural introduces possibility of differing interests in users of academic knowledge
Relationships	Yes – key purpose of relationship is to improve performance of unis and others	Slightly – some possibility of other agendas in reference to ‘other users’. Knowledge and expertise forming basis of relationship not specified	No – presents as democratic relationship with universities but no questioning of underlying power relations allowed. Very representationalist and performative relationship with universities. Little relationship with business
Politics	Yes –distribution largely quant based on pre-existing metrics. Focus on rewarding uni performance assessed according to business-like measures	Slightly – intro of qual narratives (not clear by whom) introduces possibility of assessment not purely based on economic performance; permits possibility of introduction of other measures of success which could be learning/ emancipatory	Slightly– assumption gov and Research England know best and mostly assumes homogeneity of interests but some slight possibility via use of plural of some plurality of interests. Representationalist and humanist
Connections	Depends on system to be improved? – if system is industry, then no – business disconnected from the process; connections not built to improve performance against industrial strategy as set out. If system is to make universities perform better against some measure – yes – connections with universities are set up on basis of university performance	No – connection between unis and Research England based on financial performance; No connection with individuals outside universities set up	No – business, public, economy, society connected implying same interests; representationalist