The portrayal of the role and agency of students and higher education institutions in highly ranked business school discourses

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how highly ranked business schools portray ideal students in terms of their attributes and their agency. Understanding how these higher education institutions (HEIs) discursively construct their present and prospective students also shed light on the institutions' self-representation, the portrayal of the student–institution relationship and eventually the discursive construction of higher education's (HE) role.

Design/methodology/approach – To understand this dynamic interrelationship, this study uses mixed methodological textual analysis first quantitatively identifying different modes of language use and then qualitatively analysing them.

Findings – With this approach, this study identified six language use groups. While the portrayal of the business schools and that of the students are always co-constructed, these groups differ in the extent of

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student and organisational agency displayed as well as the role and purpose of the institution. Business schools are always active agents in these discourses, but their roles and the students' agency vary greatly across these six groups.

Practical implications – These findings can help practitioners determine how students are currently portrayed in their organisational texts, how their peers and competitors talk and where they want to position themselves in relation to them.

Originality/value – Previous studies discussed the ideal HE students from the perspective of the students or their educators. Other analyses on HE discourse focused on HEIs' discursive construction and social role This study, however, unveils how the highly ranked business schools in their external organisational communication discursively construct their ideals and expectations for both their students and the general public.

Keywords Student portrayal, Business school, Higher education, Mixed methodological textual analysis, Agency of students, Agency of higher education institutions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Looking at higher education institutions (henceforth HEIs) as open organisations (Scott, 2003), we see that their operation, internal and external communication and self-image are largely dependent on their relationships with their stakeholders. One of the main stakeholders in this regard are students themselves. Students and HEIs have an interesting interrelationship: while institutions form and educate students, student expectations and characteristics also shape institutions.

Nevertheless, the relationship between HEIs and students changed in recent decades as the higher education (henceforth HE) sector got increasingly globalised (Krücken and Meier, 2006). Consequently HEIs, especially the highly ranked institutions, compete in a global arena attempting to entice the best and the brightest students (Marginson, 2014b, p. 108). How they attempt to do this is a highly interesting research theme, as well as a topic worthy of attention from organisational and sectorial policy perspectives. Hence, our study aims to contribute to this theme by exploring how students are portrayed on business schools' websites and how business schools and HE's role are portrayed on the very same websites.

Considering this globalised HE sector, our research specifically focuses on business schools. This narrower focus is both practical and reasonable in two aspects. Firstly, business education is the single largest area of global HE (Beusch, 2014), so through its graduates it has a significant impact on social and economic matters (Miotto *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, global aspects of HE might be more apparent in business education. This is because graduates of highly ranked business schools also aim for the international labour market and their knowledge and skills might be less culturally or institutionally context-dependent than in other fields. Business education is, thus, an enticing field of research to understand the current approach and strategies of HEIs from a global perspective.

In connection with this, our paper aims to contribute to two existing research streams. The literature on the portrayal of ideal students grasps how students and lecturers identify characteristics of the best students. However, the organisational communication side, that is, how institutions specifically describe the ideal students fit for their education programmes is less developed by previous research. Therefore, our initial methodological focus on the organisational discourse on students contributes to this literature. We also aim to offer new insights into the organisational discourse analysis of HEIs. This field attempts to grasp competing discourses on and of HE, often to understand a shift towards the overarching discourse of marketisation and neoliberal values. This paper offers a more nuanced picture delineating several competing discourses in the external communication of highly ranked business schools. Overall, we grasp the portrayal of students and their agency in a dynamic

relationship with the agency of institutions (in our case business schools), and through that also reflect on the HE narrative the text invokes which might provide additional insights to the existing research findings.

The paper also proposes new methodological approaches to investigate student portrayal and the student–institution relationship. Firstly, our research is based on international data of 100 highly ranked business schools providing a rich comparative research perspective. Secondly, we applied mixed methodological textual analysis following an inductive, data-driven research approach for quantitatively mapping out latent topic-based patterns in the textual data; and qualitatively delving into the discursive details of the topics identified.

2. Conceptual framework

Our conceptual background draws on three different theoretical strands. Firstly, we use an organisational discourse perspective to understand how universities as organisations produce texts to construct themselves and convey specific images about themselves (Phillips and Malhotra, 2008). In this sense, we lean on that aspect of organisational discourse theory, which highlights, that organisations are rooted in a structured collection of texts. In this manner, organisational discourses define the norms and ideas framing how social actors make sense of and act in organisational realities (Phillips *et al.*, 2004, p. 638). In our case, we focus on the external communication of business schools and attempt to understand how these organisations construct themselves in relation to one of their main stakeholder groups, namely, the students. While something is happening with and by students at business schools, these specific actions also portray these institutions as making this happen. Hence, communication about students is an important part of business schools' self-construction and legitimation process from an organisation discourse perspective (Suddaby *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, beside that student portrayal contains the business school's student-related self-representation, and thus discursively constructs the student–institution relationship, it also reflects the general HE narrative of the business school, as the organisational reality the organisation operates in.

Secondly, building on the "ideal student" research and the concept of "imagined identity", we look at how business schools delineate the specific attributes of the students they claim to teach and attempt to entice as prospective students. Imagined identity is a concept which grasps not only present qualities but also future ones, that is, not only what someone is but also what someone wishes to become in the future (Wong and Chiu, 2021). This imagined identity can not only be self-referential but also come from the outside as expectations or prescriptions, for example, from an organisation (Guziec, 2015; Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021). This concept, thus, fits nicely to our interest because HEIs (at least partly) legitimate themselves by claims of what prospective students will be able to do at the organisation, and in turn in their (working) lives, and who they will become (Géring *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, we turn to the concept of agency to understand "who does what with whom" in relation to students. As it was mentioned, HEIs legitimate and construct themselves through describing the actions and transformations of which students are either subjects or objects of. Given the future-oriented nature of these actions and transformations, we draw on a temporally sensitive understanding of agency elaborated by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). As they emphasise, human agency can be understood as:

> [. . .] a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963).

Furthermore, agency is a social engagement, that is, individual or organisational agency is always connected to others, because every individual and organisation is embedded in complex networks of social relations (Burkitt, 2016). Accordingly, agency is always relational, "co-authored" by the involved actors. To translate these aspects to a practical level in our text analysis, we used the actual verbs in the student-related textual parts as starting points to understand how business schools construct ideal students, and in turn, how they construct themselves through these communicative acts in their organisational discourse.

3. Previous research on higher education students

Much of the literature in HE research is focused on understanding the student experience (see, for example, Tan *et al.*, 2016). Some of these conversations focus on the "desirable and ideal student characteristics" as Wong *et al.* (2021) have used the term. They see the concept as promoting an "indicative but not prescriptive" set of student characteristics (Wong and Chiu, 2021). Researchers in this field of HE research construct Weberian "ideal types" based on "the aspirations and imaginations of desirable student characteristics, which may not exist in reality, particularly as one individual" (Wong *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). As Wong *et al.* (2021) define them these are "conceptual spaces where a range of desirable student characteristics are mapped out" (p. 2). Some of these studies are based on the student perspective on the "ideal" or "typical" student (Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021; Leathwood, 2006; Wong *et al.*, 2021), who is often young, white, living away from home, able-bodied, without caring responsibilities or financial worries.

Other studies focused on highlighting student diversity and that the onus is on institutions to respond to the diverse needs of their student body (Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021; Reay, 2004; Reay *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, several studies (Thunborg *et al.*, 2012; Thinyane, 2013; Ulriksen, 2009) have been conducted from the perspective of academic staff about the "ideal student", often focusing on characteristics and attributes that they should possess, like reading and preparation before lectures, mental maturity in the sense of being able to prepare and plan for the future, as well as students engaging in intellectual conversations.

This highlights that although the "ideal student" is a well-researched topic of HE research, it is usually examined through the lenses of HE teachers or students themselves, and not in the context of coordinated and purposefully communicated organisational communication.

HEIs' external communication, and thus HE discourse has been in the limelight in several research projects in the past decades. Linking the analysis of HEIs' external communication to the marketisation of the HE system is prevalent in the literature. Pioneering research in this area is Fairclough's (1993) critical discourse analysis of British university materials. In his research, Fairclough provides evidence for the discursive construction and legitimisation of the marketisation of the whole of HE, and, in doing so, he also points out how this is reflected in the portrayal of students. Another example of this approach is Askehave's (2007) study on the international student prospectus of Stirling University in which Askehave is focusing on rhetorical moves and lexico-grammatical features of the text. He concludes, that "[. . .] the university is cast in the role of a service-minded, supportive, and in many cases, customer-driven organization whose main purpose is to offer an interesting and challenging university 'experience' to meet the needs of the picky student who is spoiled for choice" (2007, p. 739).

Gottschall and Saltmarsh (2017) analysed Australian universities' promotional videos and have similar results to those of Askehave (2007). In their research, they use multimodal discourse analysis to conclude that the videos rather "sell lifestyles" and that "In university

promotional videos, education is cast as a secondary concern to lifestyle" (Gottschall and Saltmarsh, 2017, p. 775). Lazetic (2019), albeit relying on content analysis, also addresses the discursive construction of HE students as consumers, embedding it into the critique of the marketisation of HE. In his analysis, Lazetic (2019) underpins Fairclough's (1993) findings on "personal" language use and the student-consumer persona. Zhang and O'Halloran (2013) examined the website of the National University of Singapore (NUS) with a critical discourse analysis-based approach focusing on the ongoing marketisation of HE discourse. In connection with students' discursive construction, they emphasise that "students are virtually and discursively constructed as potential consumers on the NUS' journey toward a global knowledge enterprise" (2013, p. 482).

As the previous literature suggests, analysing organisational communication in HE with a discourse analytic approach is not new in the research area. Discourse analysis frequently appears in the above-outlined research projects, either as theoretical framework or as methodology or sometimes both. Alas, research usually focuses on the discursive construction of the university or HE in general, and only analyses the students through that. In our research, we draw on the area's discourse analytic tradition with the aim of carrying out a discourse analysis-informed analysis on a larger corpus. Furthermore, we intend to explicitly address the HE students and reflect on the business schools' and HE's social role through the portrayal of students. Moreover, our aim is to move away from the binary marketised/non-marketised HE and student approach and provide a more nuanced framework for the understanding of the discursive construction of HE students.

4. Methodology

Based on the outlined conceptual framework and previous research findings, our research questions are the following:

RQ1. How are students, with particular attention to their agency, discursively constructed and portrayed in the external online communication of highly ranked business schools?

RQ2. How are business schools and the role of HE discursively constructed through the portrayal of students in the external online communication of highly ranked business schools?

To answer these research questions, we developed the following research strategy and methodological approach.

4.1 Sample and data collection

The corpus of our analysis consists of the online external communication of highly ranked HEIs. Namely, in 2019 we collected the "about us" sections of the top 100 business schools from the Times Higher Education World University Ranking 2019 Business and Economics list [1]. Such university rankings are often mentioned on the HEIs' own websites as quality markers while also being an almost inescapable information source for prospective students and their parents (Blanco and Metcalfe, 2020). There is legitimate criticism towards reliance on rankings (Barron, 2017), but research shows that in practice they play an important role in the allocation of funding and in students' and academics' choices (Bowman and Bastedo, 2011).

4.2 Research strategy

In line with our conceptual framework, and to answer our research questions, we followed a data-driven, inductive research strategy and applied mixed methodological textual analysis. This approach enabled us to find hidden patterns in the organisational discourse of HEIs with the use of quantitative tools, which were then further examined and interpreted with qualitative textual analysis.

As the first step, we have chosen to analyse the organisational discourse of highly ranked business schools using a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model (Blei *et al.*, 2003) on all "about us" texts from their websites, without selectively focusing on student portrayal. LDA is a bag-of-words model, which means only word usage matters and any syntactic information, including word order, is discarded. This Bayesian method fits a topic distribution on all texts, given a predefined number of topics. Topics are – in line with the bag-of-words approach – distributions over the whole vocabulary of words. Structural words that do not convey information by themselves (such as "and" and "or") are left out. This is a robust method to identify topics – i.e. what each text is substantively about – in a large corpus where human annotation would be infeasible.

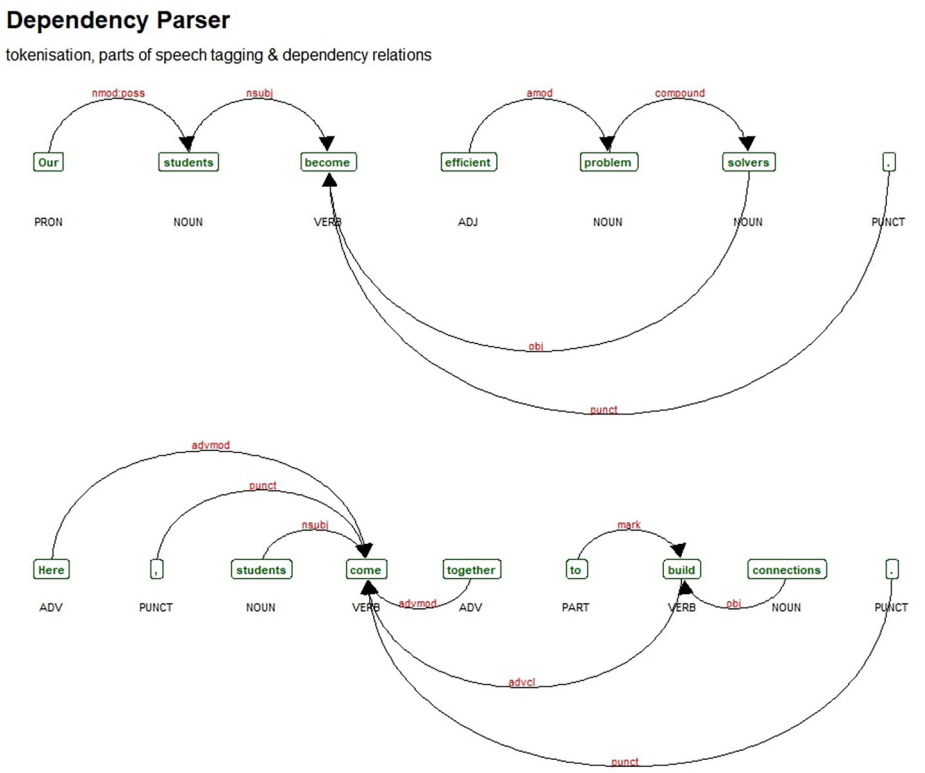
We determined the number of topics by iteratively trying to increase human interpretability based on the prominent words (having relatively high probability in the given topic) and decreasing perplexity which is proportional to the likelihood achieved by the model on the data (Blei *et al.*, 2003). The optimal number of topics turned out to be six. A text could be a mixture of topics, but the model with six topics basically segmented the schools because the distributions over topics were highly concentrated on one of the topics for each school. This result did not separate topics within the schools; however, it allowed us to cluster the schools themselves, yielding groups of schools.

Since foremost we wanted to focus on the portrayal of student identity and agency, we selected all sentences containing the word student(s) and applied universal dependency parsing with UDPipe in R (Straka and Straková, 2017). Automated parsing allowed for the identification of student-related verbs without manually going through all sentences in the texts. This procedure is not perfect (nor would manual annotation be), but UDPipe is reported to have an F1-score of 93.5 for English language text (Straka and Straková, 2017).

As a simplified hypothetical example of the above analysis process, let us consider two single-sentence texts from two business schools as our corpus: text A – "Our students become efficient problem solvers"; and text B – "Here, students come together to build connections". The bag-of-words representation of these texts is the set of words in each sentence, irrespective of their order. LDA would show that word usage is different in the two texts, except for the word "student". We could identify the topic of text A considering word usage as being about "problem-solving" and text B as "building connections". Parsing these sentences with UDPipe gives the dependency structure seen in Figure 1.

With dependency parsing, we were able to identify the most important student-related verbs in each group to aid interpretation (see the verbs in Table 2, or the bold verbs in Supplementary Table 1). Two criteria were considered for importance in this case: the relative frequency of a verb in the group, and the ratio of this compared to the verb's general relative frequency. The most important verbs thus had high relative frequency in a given group while also being comparatively rare in other groups.

After identifying the LDA model fit for our purposes, we applied qualitative textual analysis to explore each group's portrayal and thus discursive construction of agency (Gee, 2011; Tonkiss, 2012). Our analysis incorporated those sentences at a given group of the LDA model, which contained the determining verbs of the group (see Table 2 or Supplementary Table 1). In these sentences we analysed the actors and whether they are active or passive,



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 1.
Dependency structure of sample sentences using UDPipe

the role of the students and the business school, and the main actions related to students ("who does what with whom and for what purpose"). Figure 2 illustrates the procedure with two sentences as examples.

Based on these coded elements and the connected language use (chosen verbs, adjectives etc. – coloured in the example) we were able to determine the general portrayal of the ideal student, the role of the business school and the connected narrative about HE in each group (see Table 2 below). This way, we mainly focused on the so-called "activity building" and "socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building" aspects of the discourse (Gee, 2011, pp. 93–94). However, as it can be seen later, we were able to connect these identified student-portrays and institutional roles with the general academic discourse about HE and previous research in the topic. In this manner, we can say that we touched upon the other (more general) levels of discourse analysis, like interdiscursivity, coherence-creation and stabilisation of discourses or institutions (Gee, 2011).

5. Results

The six language use groups that we identified were offer and receive; professional and self-development; entrepreneurial success; student formation; motivation and support; and academic perfectionism. As we emphasised earlier, the analysis focusing on the portrayal of

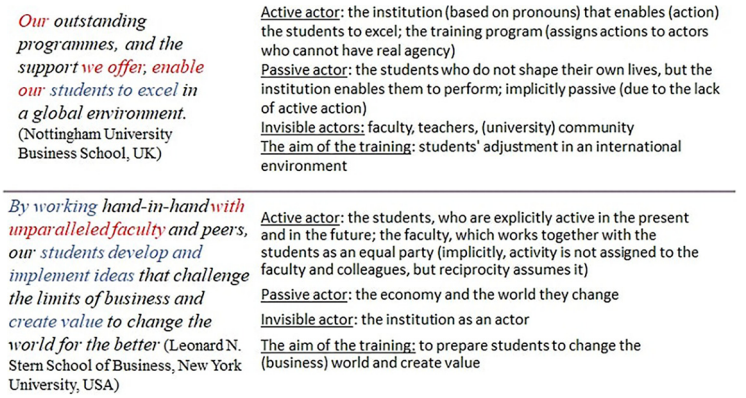


Figure 2.
Illustration of qualitative textual analysis

Source: Authors' own elaboration

students' agency also highlights the role of business schools, the relationship between the institutions and the students, and the role of HE in society, due to the nature of the texts.

As Table 1 shows, business schools are almost evenly distributed across the six groups, with group number 5 ("motivation and support") being the largest ($n = 21$) and group number 6 ("academic perfectionism") being the smallest ($n = 12$). Two schools are missing from the top 100 as they did not have the word "student" in their texts.

Table 2 shows the outline of the portrayed student identity of each group and the HEIs role that is mirrored through the discursive construction of ideal students. We highlighted some of the relevant verbs to give a glimpse of the base of our qualitative textual analysis and also provided a short description of each group.

The six groups identified with LDA are visualised in Figure 3 with a graph representation of their relationship. The size of a vertex is proportional to the number of schools in the group it represents, while an edge is present between two vertices if the correlation between the topics these refer to is higher than average.

Given that the 100 analysed HEIs are quite diverse, we checked for correlations between the institutions' location (shown in Table 3), their position on the 2019 THE list (shown in Table 4) and their language use group [2]. However, we could not find a significant correlation between these characteristics and the portrayal of students, thus these aspects will not be discussed in the upcoming description of the language use groups.

5.1 Description of groups

In this section, we give a rich description of the portrayal and discursive construction of students in each group. We also present the institutions' self-ascribed roles and values and

Group	Offer and receive	Professional and self-development	Entrepreneurial success	Student formation	Motivation and support	Academic perfectionism	Total
N	20	15	13	17	21	12	98
P	20.4%	15.3%	13.3%	17.3%	21.4%	12.2%	100%

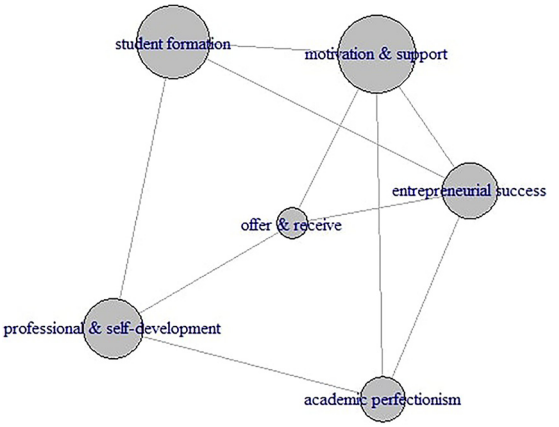
Table 1.
Distribution of schools according to groups

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Table 2. Main characteristics of the six identified groups

Name	Portrayed student identity	HEIs' role	Highlighted relevant verbs
Group 1: Offer and receive	- less emphasis on students in general - work together with each other and faculty members	- offer excellent opportunities - help those in any way, who want to learn and become the best business professionals	offer; bring; find; lead; teach; serve; excel; feel; network
Group 2: Professional and self-development	- students are malleable - open to professional and self-development to become the shapers of the future	- provide the latest knowledge - encourage students to become successful and responsible future leaders	develop; immerse; encourage; participate; earn; training; draw; begin
Group 3: Entrepreneurial success	- hard-working students with a strong entrepreneurial mindset - open to innovation and exploration	- offer cutting-edge technologies, hands-on business experience, real-world learning opportunities - close industry links	work; graduate; deliver; engage; mentor; make; find design; educate
Group 4: Student formation	- students are passive recipients of their education - to achieve ambitious career goals	- educate and train the students - providing a safe and diverse environment - strong and up-to-date business skills	train; connect; pursue; integrate; achieve; educate; contribute; turn; design
Group 5: Motivation and support	- high performing, entrepreneurial students - becoming a member of a community	- provide support in several aspects - motivate the students to achieve their career goals - caring about students' everyday needs	become; motivate; support; benefit; join; meet; perform
Group 6: Academic perfectionism	- the finest of students - students shall study hard and meet the stiff expectations of the institution and their future employers	- "just as good" as their higher-ranked siblings - providing excellent academic resources	require; recruit; study; receive; assign; acquire; attract; expect; aspire

Source: Authors' own elaboration



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Figure 3.
Similarity graph of school groups

Table 3.
Distribution of analysed business schools by language use groups and the business schools' region. (cells show counts of business schools; total $N = 98$; two schools are missing because of no relevant data)

Region	Offer and receive	Professional and self-development	Entrepreneurial success	Student formation	Motivation and support	Academic perfectionism
North America	6	9	8	8	9	3
Western Europe	11	4	2	4	6	4
East Asia	2	2	1	4	4	5
Australia	1	0	2	1	2	0

Source: Authors' own elaboration

the HE narratives through the portrayal of students. We are doing this by going into detail regarding frequently mentioned, or absent HE actors, as well as the agency and actions ascribed to them.

5.1.1 Group 1 – offer and receive. Institutions in this group emphasise their own role in the education process, namely, what they can offer and in what quality for their current or prospective students, as displayed by an excerpt from a Western European university, ranked between 80 and 100:

> Our outstanding programmes, and the support we offer, enable our students to excel in a global environment.

Even though students are not explicitly passive in these texts, they are rarely mentioned as active shapers of their own environment or learning experience. Rather, they are mostly portrayed as the sole receivers and beneficiaries of the offered great opportunities and excellent education programmes. There is little to no focus on the ideal students' features. On those rare occasions when students are portrayed explicitly active, they are working together with other students as part of a community, for example, in student-led groups and initiatives.

On the contrary, the most frequently mentioned actors with agency in the analysed sentences are the institutions. Other mentioned academic actors include "researchers", "faculty" and "thinkers and experts", although these actors do not hold significant roles compared to the institutions or the general "we" pronoun. Furthermore, the institutions emphasise the quality of their offered courses and "real-world experiences" (e.g. excellent, fantastic, unique, etc.) and offered a kind and safe learning environment over portraying their ideal students.

Regarding the HE narrative, we found an active institution, that strives to provide the best possible education, inspire its students and offer state-of-the-art practical knowledge both for the sake of excellent learning opportunities, and for the future business success of its students. In this perspective, learning appears both as a goal and as a tool to achieve business success in the future. In this narrative, students are offered the opportunity to learn in the highest quality environment, but it is their responsibility to use and capitalise on these opportunities.

5.1.2 Group 2 – professional and self-development. These business schools accentuate the importance of their students' self-development in addition to their professional one. The following sentence from a North American university's (ranked between 1–20) website illustrates the essence of the student portrayal of this group:

> By working hand-in-hand with unparalleled faculty and peers, our students develop and implement ideas that challenge the limits of business and create value to change the world for the better.

Students at these schools not only choose the institution to be able to build a successful career, but also because they are still on the road to finding themselves. Hence, students are discursively constructed as malleable and open to self-development. Their education journey includes immersing into the latest business trends and is certainly not only taking place between the walls of the school but through "real-world" experiences and international internships as well. Furthermore, students are portrayed as generally active participants in

Table 4. Distribution of analysed business schools by language use groups and the business schools' rank on the Times Higher Education World University Ranking 2019 Business and Economics list in ranges of 20 (cells show counts of business schools; total $N = 98$; two schools are missing because of no relevant data)

Rank range	Offer and receive	Professional and self-development	Entrepreneurial success	Student formation	Motivation and support	Academic perfectionism
1–20	4	3	3	4	3	1
21–40	0	2	3	5	8	2
41–60	4	6	3	1	2	5
61–80	8	2	2	4	2	1
81–100	4	2	2	3	6	3

Source: Authors' own elaboration

their own professional and ethical evolvement; for example, they participate in student organisations. Moreover, they are portrayed bearing agency not just in the present, but also in regard to the future, i.e. "writing the future".

In this group, the business schools are just as active as their students. The institutions offer education, programmes, the latest trends and connection to leading companies for students so that they can become the very best business professionals. Nevertheless, the schools also encourage their students to grow personally and morally and become ethical business leaders. Community, culture and social responsibility are also often adopted keywords by the institutions to describe the learning environment they wish to provide.

The overall HE narrative of this group is that the business school is a place which teaches the most modern knowledge and innovative mindset to its students. The role of HE does not stop at educating the best business professionals but has to address social responsibility and self-development as well. Nevertheless, university is a necessary step towards a successful business career, hence learning is merely a path to a great career and is not a goal in itself.

5.1.3 Group 3 – entrepreneurial success. Aptly, business schools in this group have the most exclusively career-focused language use out of the six, as the website of an Australian university (ranked between 80 and 100) displays:

> Our learning and teaching approach captures what real-world learning should entail so our students can graduate with a finessed business mindset and real business experience.

The students are portrayed active and are assigned agency concerning their educational and, most importantly, future career success. Prospective and current students are expected to have an innovative mindset and to take an active role in their own educational path. Their ideal student is very hard-working, determined, has a strong entrepreneurial mindset and takes every opportunity to become the most successful business leader/professional of all.

Important mentioned actors from the side of the business school include the institution itself ("we" pronoun and its forms), faculty and business professionals. In this aspect, business leaders and representatives are essential to the education for providing "real-world knowledge". The business schools offer "hands-on" and "ready to use" knowledge, or rather skills. Therefore, the texts place a great emphasis on the newness and practicality of their offered opportunities. Furthermore, the schools are active in providing cutting-edge technologies, personalised educational methods (e.g. mentoring) and introducing their students to a network of high-profile business professionals. There is a definite focus on entrepreneurship (the most frequent mention of the word "entrepreneur*" of the six groups) by which the schools help the students to get an entrepreneurial mindset, pushing them towards innovation, to try new ideas and re-think taken-for-granted issues.

Regarding the HE narrative that emerges in this group, business schools shall provide state-of-the-art learning opportunities and strictly professional help to the dedicated and success-oriented students to achieve their notable career goals. The boundary between the HEI and business is blurry, the strong business relations purposefully affect and shape the education.

5.1.4 Group 4 – student formation. Business schools in this group focus on their own role and agency when presenting the educational process, almost as if students were merely passive subjects. The following excerpt from an East Asian business school (ranked 1–20) can help grasp the language use of this group:

> Through our dedication and commitment to high quality, technology-enhanced teaching and learning, we are confident of educating students to become experts and leaders in industry and academia.

The ideal student of these institutions is portrayed to be a passive recipient of their "excellent" education. The lack of students' agency portrayal is not only implied by not portraying them as active agents (like in the first group, "offer and receive") but also explicitly communicated by language. That is, the student picture, even when it occurs, is very general, not contributing to a particular student identity.

On the other hand, the institutions claim to offer exquisite learning opportunities, up-to-date knowledge and a skillset that ensures success in both the business world and on the academic path. The schools also provide a safe, diverse, inclusive and international space for the training of their students. In both roles, the institutions are the active agent of the field. Faculty is also often mentioned, in most cases they possess agency, but sometimes even they are subjects of the institutions' actions.

Regarding the HE narrative that is apparent in this group, learning is a path to future success and not a goal in itself – as in almost every other group as well. However, in this case, "success" is not limited to the labour market or the entrepreneurial/business world, because the possibility of an academic career is also represented through the mention of doctoral schools and researchers. The business schools are safe and inclusive spaces, providing innovative programmes and the latest technology for students who merely receive their education.

5.1.5 Group 5 – motivation and support. Business schools in this group pledge to take care of their students throughout their education in several aspects. As the following sentence from a Western European business school (ranked 20–40) exemplifies, student support is at the forefront:

> We are here to support and motivate every student to unlock their full potential and achieve their ambitions.

Students are portrayed somewhat active in this group, although they do not seem to have as much agency as the business schools. Their activities and thus portrayed direct agency concern enrolling to the school and benefiting from the outstanding education programmes. Moreover, students are also portrayed as joining different clubs, groups and such, emphasising the community experience the school can offer. Nonetheless, the institutions of this group do not construct a very particular ideal student, other than being motivated and high performing.

Institutions, on the other hand, are portrayed possessing agency and mostly regarding the support of their students. This support appears not only in close connection to education but also as economic support (grants, for example) and housing (family-friendly living conditions). The business schools provide international connections and networking opportunities as well, so their students can get in contact with other students, alumni and business professionals. As for assigning these tasks, the schools refer to themselves and the faculty as active shapers of the students' learning experience.

Pertaining to the HE narrative of this group, the focus of these texts is still on the future business success of the students through the education programmes and "unique", "international opportunities" the schools provide. Nevertheless, there is a slight difference to topics 3 and 4: in the two aforementioned groups the schools provide the "best" technology and knowledge, and it is up to the students to take the opportunities, while they are more vocally expected to be the best. On the contrary, schools engaging in this mode of language use are also motivating and clearly supporting students in being the best. The expectations are high in all cases, but the provided help and approach are different.

5.1.6 Group 6 – academic perfectionism. Business schools of this group put expectations about academic performance in the limelight in their student-related communication. This excerpt from an East Asian university's (ranked between 20–40) website represents this group's language use:

> Students in this department are expected to choose a few of these special fields and work on them intensively after having mastered the basics of economic theory and statistical analysis.

The ideal student at these business schools is excellent both before applying to the school and during their education. Working and studying extremely hard is a clear expectation in these institutions, for which in exchange the schools provide the best possible education programmes. Concerning the portrayal of students' agency, they study and acquire knowledge and degrees, therefore can directly affect their academic career in this sense.

The business schools provide "cutting-edge" educational programs – the very best faculty, opportunities, etc. and form rather clear expectations towards their students. The short-term demand is to be the best student one can be and to get a degree. The long-term demand, on the other hand, is to meet future employers' expectations or achieve a successful academic career. The schools and the faculty are portrayed to have agency not only in providing excellent educational opportunities but also in selecting the best applicants for the school. Strong international connections are frequently emphasised, as well as operational aspects like specific teaching methods and classes are discussed in detail. Entrepreneurial mindset and such that are popular in all other topics are uncommon here. These institutions focus especially on providing knowledge and guiding students towards international programs, double degrees and in some cases academic careers.

With regards to the represented HE narrative, these schools portray a clearer hierarchy between students and the HEI, as the former are explicitly reminded that their first and foremost task is to meet the expectations of others, i.e. the schools' and later their employers'. In this discourse, HE is the fountain of knowledge and skills where high-quality, selected students are introduced to both fundamental academic knowledge and business-related skills.

6. Discussion

The previously presented results clearly indicate a diverse landscape in the highly ranked business schools' online organisational communication. The identified six groups mirror the complexity of the connections between business schools and their students. This complex relationship can be examined either from the HEIs' side or from the students'. Accordingly, in the following we discuss the different characteristics, roles and responsibilities of both sides constructed by this heterogeneous organisational discourse.

6.1 Student-portrayal in business schools' discourse

The first dimension of the portrayal of students in the communication of business schools is the students' general agency-level. In half of the groups (groups 1, 4 and 5) the students are portrayed as passive actors, who get educated, get support and good educational programs are offered to them. In these texts, the students are the recipients of the activities the schools provide. They are learning, but they do not actively shape their own education or future. The only student activity which appears in these groups are those, in which the students are connected to their peers in student-groups and initiatives working and learning together. At the same time, the other half of the groups (groups 2, 3 and 6) portray the students as

motivated, enthusiastic actors, who are open and self-determinant. The goal of their commitment could be either their personal future success in the business sphere or academic accomplishments. Either way, they are portrayed as willing, open-minded and hard-working actors, with high-level involvement in their education. These different agency-levels mirror the complexity of the student population as it appeared in previous research (Wong *et al.*, 2021).

However, it is quite clear, that the ideal students can be determined only in relation with the educational institutions. This leads to a more nuanced and diverse student portrayal, than those concepts, which tried to describe the students with one label (e.g. students as consumers). For example, we could find examples of the "students as empty vessels" concept (Marginson, 2022), when they are passive learners, who can be filled with knowledge (e.g. in "student formation"). Similarly, we can find Marginson's (2014a, 2021) self-determinant and enthusiastic student portrayal as well, for example, in the "professional and self-development" group. Furthermore, in those discursive constructions where the students' future personal business success is in the focus, we could discover the characteristics of the "student as consumer" picture (Askehave, 2007; Lazetic, 2019), too. However, these are not the only student portraits present in the business schools' discourse. There is also the peer-oriented student, who is active in student groups, initiatives and networking. Just as there is the construction of the students, for whom learning is the goal in itself, not the tool to reach success in the labour market or other targets. This complexity highlights the diversity of the HEIs themselves and the effect of the broader social context in which they are operating.

All in all, we should emphasise again, that although business schools are organisational actors (Krücken and Meier, 2006) competing with each other in an international arena (especially the leading ones), they are embedded in their local context as well. Accordingly, not only their mission and identified educational roles will affect their student portrayal but their social and cultural environment. That is, the student picture a given business school conveys is a result of the interconnectedness between its goal and role, its stakeholders' expectations and its social and cultural background. This leads to a complex and diverse student portrayal, which is mirrored in the complexity of the business schools' own institutional identities and roles.

6.2 Business schools' educational roles

When we look at the six identified groups of business schools, one characteristic is quite prominent: business schools are always portrayed as active actors. In these relationships, they are always diligent and ready partners independently of students' perceived involvement. However, their identified roles are diverse.

These roles and tasks can be connected to three overarching educational goals which appear in business schools' texts in relation with students. The first is providing practical knowledge, actual "in-business" experience and insight to students (either involving businesspersons and/or using real-life problems and situations during classes). That is, closely connect knowledge-providing with practice, emphasising the "applicability" of education. This aspect is clearly manifest in the first three groups (groups 1, 2 and 3), while the other groups (groups 4, 5 and 6) mention it rarely if at all.

The second role business schools mention in relation to students is active student-development. In this function they actively contribute to their students' development and self-formation not only by supplying knowledge and learning opportunities, but by providing open-mindedness and a safe place to grow and try new ideas. However, this role appears only in groups 2, 3 and 6 where the students are portrayed active and highly

dedicated either to their own personal progress ("professional and self-development" group) or to their business success ("entrepreneurial success" group). A special case is the "academic perfectionism" group, where this student formation appears mainly in relation to the academic aspects of student development. That is, students are portrayed active and hard-working in their learning and schools are determined to help them in this endeavour by offering cutting-edge educational programs.

This leads to the third encompassing role identifiable in these discourses, namely the emphasis on academic knowledge transfer. Naturally, offering education is present in all of the groups, because this is one of the main missions of all educational institutions. However, academic knowledge as a goal in itself appears only in some of the business schools. It is most prominent in the "motivation and support" and the "academic perfectionism" groups (groups 5 and 6) and occurs in the "offer and receive" group (group 1) to some extent. This knowledge-transfer role is mostly attached to a passive student role in these texts, except the "academic perfectionism" group, where students are quite eager and determined in their learning.

As it can be seen from this short overview, the agency of business schools is always relational (Burkitt, 2016), as we emphasised previously. In our research, we focused on one of their numerous stakeholders and searched for those aspects which appear in relation to students. The portrayed agency towards students takes form in three educational roles encompassing applied and academic knowledge, as well as student-development. However, if we broaden the circle, and take into account the wider context of these HEIs, we could see, that the agency of business schools can be seen from different aspects. It can be positioned both on a personal level or a social level.

6.3 Personal and social agentic roles of business schools

The personal level on which the agentic role of business schools can be identified is the contribution to the personal success and personal future of their students. All the above-mentioned goals of business schools play an implicit or explicit role in shaping the future opportunities of their students. Students' personal success can be connected to either the academic or the business world or to individual self-development. Whichever it is, business schools always play an active part in it. This lends them acknowledgement and appreciation, that is, contributes to their legitimacy.

Nonetheless, they are open institutions (Scott, 2003) and they are operating in a broader social context. As organisational actors (Krücken and Meier, 2006), they have to answer to the demands of their other stakeholders as well. Accordingly, even in their student-related discourse and communication, their macrolevel background appears. Their communicated agency at this level is a general responsibility towards the business sector and society. This responsibility is twofold. On the one hand, through the education provided by these business schools, the students will be competent, prepared and diligent members of the business world (or in some cases academia). The business schools are active agents in this regard with their fine-tuned programs, "excellent" educational opportunities and "real-world knowledge". On the other hand, the issue of social responsibility and business ethics appeared in more than one identified group. This could be seen as some kind of "mediated" agency towards a more sustainable future. Namely, emphasising that these students will shape the future, the business schools can contribute to a more sustainable future by equipping them with ethical and responsible principles. This is clearly an answer to the growing criticism related to neoliberal business education and its perceived responsibility in the economic and environmental crises of the past decades, as it was discussed previously (Miotto *et al.*, 2020).

6.4 Implications and further research

Regarding the implications of our research project to practitioners, our findings point out that decision makers have more options than the discursive construction of their students as consumers/non-consumers. That is, although the marketisation of HE was reflected in our results, a wider range of possible business school student portrayals have been found and presented. The unveiled modes of student portrayal help practitioners determine which of the presented ideal student identities is currently portrayed in their organisational texts and whether it is in line with the business schools' strategy. Furthermore, it highlights which strategies are being pursued by other institutions, therefore shedding light on the field of organisational discourse in business HE. Hence, these results help practitioners in strategy management, that is, to define how their institutions talk, how their peers and competitors talk and where they want to position themselves in relation to them.

The findings also point out the dimensions and the specific linguistic tools with which the business schools' organisational identity can be strengthened or even a new institutional identity constructed and thus presents discursive means that can help distinguish the institution from others.

Regarding further research, these findings could provide a basis for a similar analysis of student representations in other sectors and faculties of HEIs, reflecting the different shades of consumer and non-consumer student portrayals. Furthermore, a comparison of university citizens' own perception of their agency and HE's social role to the findings of this paper could reveal whether there are cross-sections between the official organisational discourse and the perceptions of the members of the organisation.

Finally, we would like to reflect on the limitations of this research. Firstly, while the LDA model is based on the "about us" sections of the business schools' websites, the agency-focused analysis of the language-use groups targeted those sentences that contained each group's most important student-related verbs. This affects the interpretation of our results: the findings can only speak for the business schools' explicit student portrayal, and in no way are reflective of the entire universities' communication. Moreover, one should keep in mind, that the corpus represents only a specific point in time, namely 2019, as the websites can change easily and often. It shall also be mentioned that the qualitative analysis is inseparable from the researchers' own interpretations because words and sentences are understood through the personal and social processes of meaning-making, as they do not have inherent meanings (Gee, 2011).

7. Conclusion

In this final, concluding section of our paper, we highlight the most important findings. Firstly, while in the academic discussion HEIs communication is often depicted in simplistic, binary divisions (e.g. marketised and non-marketised forms of communication) we showed a much more nuanced picture. Through an inductive, data-driven research strategy, we found six different language use groups which are characterised by not only different student images but also by the posited relationship between institutions and students. It is important to note, that all six modes of student portrayal are equally valid. Thus, there is no "winner" or "loser" language use in this sense, but only different discursive constructions of students that determine and legitimise the business schools' attitudes towards their students, and through them towards themselves and the role of education in society.

Secondly, the discursive construction of ideal students does not happen independently from the institutional contexts in which they are embedded. Instead, the portrayal of the business schools and that of the students are co-constructed in the corpus.

Thirdly, this statement is also applicable to the portrayal of agency, in other words, the agency of business schools and the agency ascribed to students are also interrelated. Nevertheless, our research pointed out that while business schools are always portrayed as active agents, some grant more agency to students in their communication than others (see, for example, "entrepreneurial success" vs "student formation" groups).

Notes

1. As all texts were collected in English, there is a difference worth noting between the target groups of the HEIs' „about us" sections. Namely, the organisational texts of HEIs in English-speaking areas both target local and international audiences, while the English-language „about us" texts of HEIs of non-English-speaking countries obviously primarily target international audiences.
2. Each analysed institution's location and rank on the 2019 THE World University Ranking can be found in Supplementary table 2.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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