Introduction

1 Postdigital Positionality

This then is a debate that firstly, needs to acknowledge how multiple and diverse ‘actors’ (that are not all human) are now altering much of what may once have been described as ‘established’ or ‘inclusive’ practices in HE. Secondly, it is a debate that once recognised, can be explored across all of the key activities of HE, in order to notice how educational access, inclusivity and opportunities for individual people can now be altered in new ways depending on how each of us are positioned in postdigital society.

I refer to this discussion in terms of ‘postdigital positionality’ because ‘post-digital’ theory helps to capture the first point about the broader context in which HE now operates, where a digitalisation across all areas of life has intermingled with all that went before and is about to come. Postdigital refers in general terms to the conditions surrounding humans, where: ‘we are increasingly no longer in a world where digital technology and media is separate, virtual, ‘other’ to a ‘natural’ human and social life (Jandrić et al., 2018). This means that on an individual basis, the people who we are, the places we are in, the technological, social, historical, cultural, economic, biological and political contexts that surround each of us are interconnected. This has implications for what we discuss in HE as principles of inclusivity, access and participation. Such principles cannot simply be ‘plugged in’ to universities, when much of the complex ecosystem they now operate in, is external, commercial, data-driven and thus not directly under any institution’s control (Mortier, Haddadi, Henderson, McAuley, Crowcroft & Crabtree, 2020). It is also deeply personal in that humans and machines are interacting on an individual, as well as an institutional and societal level, concerning how things ought to be done. The digital platform, as Ben Williamson has observed, is now ‘a key participant in HE reforms that are intended to align the public mission of universities with the private interests of digital capitalism’ (Williamson, 2020b). Universities also have knowledge exchange frameworks to encourage many local and international partnerships with commercial agents. It is therefore time to include in this debate, all of the implications of these rapid digital developments, and their relevance for HE inclusivity frameworks, alongside many other factors that affect how humans experience ‘digital inclusion’ (Park, Freeman & Middleton, 2019).

Regarding the second point, ‘positionality’ theory (England, 1994, Cousin, 2010, Bourke, 2014, Torres-Olave & Lee, 2019) provides a productive route into

exploring how these recent technological, cultural and biological changes, interlinked with our political economy, support both educational and employment opportunities, for some people. By the same token, they can further marginalise others. How people understand and relate to their own diversity and that of their peers is also partly shaped across technological, as well as human networks. Neither remains static, or free from bias and they are deeply intertwined as intricate and fluid complexities that connect with our identity creation, biological composition, power relations and personal contexts. By drawing attention to positionality, the unique experiences of individuals in their varied cultural, postdigital surroundings comes to the surface. This is important when much of what is reported in the media and across social networks rationally captures only fragments, 'products' even, of peoples' identities, without the fuller personal narrative. It is important too when policy statements concern generalised constructs that omit subjectivity.

Having previously raised the concerns that HE policy texts lack inclusivity in their linguistic construction, I demonstrate now why a broader understanding of 'the principles of inclusive practice' in a postdigital context needs to be discussed and established across HE institutions and reflected in new policies and practices. The multi-layered cultural and technological challenges and disruption wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic makes this an even more pressing debate:

Covid 19 presents us with a real challenge and a real responsibility. These ideas invite debate, engagement and action by governments, international organizations, civil society, educational professionals, as well as learners and stakeholders at all levels. (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020)

2 Covid-19

The personal individual contexts surrounding each of us have come to the forefront more than ever when (at the time of writing) nations across the world are either still in lockdown, emerging from lockdown policies introduced in response to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, or re-entering further lockdowns. Therefore, many of the examples provided in this book reflect these unusual and uncertain times. Both the uniformity and diversity of national approaches towards a highly infectious virus and the measures to confront it have been reported globally. For me, the pandemic has shone a light into many places and personal spaces that rational, neoliberal policy discourse frequently conceals.

Each time blanket policies or measures are introduced there are also exceptional circumstances revealed. The diversity of positionality of those who are affected, or those who need to implement the rules, is demonstrated. One-size-fits-all approaches seem to either further disadvantage those already marginalised or reveal acts of entitlement from those in positions of privilege. From carers who have lost support or respite that they previously had, to Members of Parliament urging compliance, but then acting in a self-interested manner to break quarantine, each rational Covid-19 discourse also exposes how rationalities can become irrational (Ritzer, 1993, 2018). Furthermore, this also reveals numerous situations that are not easily controlled, either online or offline.

FIGURE 3
A 'cash only' notification

As illustrated in Figure 3, as protective measures, such as the use of credit and debit cards rather than cash to pay for goods was introduced, other businesses insisted on cash only, as limited opening times were imposed. Balancing the risk of infection from cash with a need to avoid fraud is a decision that will differ, when some companies are better placed than others to withstand economic upheaval.

FIGURE 4
A vape store selling hand
sanitiser

Some businesses such as the one pictured in Figure 4 added the sale of hand sanitiser to their stock (often at inflated prices) even when this seemed oddly out of place with the usual identity and range of goods sold. Opportunities for profit were also balanced with thoughtful gestures of targeted opening hours for the more vulnerable, key workers and carers.

3 Covid-19 Positionalities

As more has been learned from research into Covid-19, this seems to have demonstrated too, just how differently people's bodies are reacting. From being unaware of any symptoms, to becoming seriously ill or, in an increasing number of cases, experiencing longer term Covid-19 problems that have been popularly labelled as 'Long Covid' or 'Long Haul Covid'. A recent research report (NIHR, 2020) has flagged up the dangers though of applying terms that lead to assumptions that what each patient is experiencing is the same set of symptoms. They have therefore opted to refer to phrases such as 'ongoing Covid-19' and 'living with Covid-19'. Drawing on the experience of epidemiologists,

researchers, policy makers, professionals and patients, they also explain their decision to retain (not synthesise) different perspectives that emerge from each specialist area on the longer-term effects of the virus for individuals. This is an illustration of how positionality can inform research and also impact on policy.

As new strains of Covid-19 emerged from different parts of the globe we were learning that even the virus itself was able to demonstrate diversity in how it behaved, who it infected and to what severity. Such approaches to health can also be helpful in considering how inclusivity policy more broadly might be better understood. Rather than take one synthesised rational opinion that a set of inclusive practices have been firmly established for universities, a more holistic view means that, as things change, policy discourse might adapt as well, to encompass multiple positionalities. As the authors of 'Living with Covid-19' point out:

Covid 19 has a disproportionate effect on certain parts of the population, including care home residents. Black and Asian communities have seen high death rates and there are concerns about other minority groups and the socially disadvantaged. These people are already seldom heard in research as well as travellers, the homeless, those in prisons, people with mental health problems or learning difficulties; each having particular and distinct needs in relation to ongoing Covid19 that need to be understood. (NIHR, 2020)

Throughout the pandemic a key challenge has been for governments and leaders to balance health and economics. Variations between countries, and across regions of countries in the numbers of cases reported, have complicated things further. Choices are constantly being made by leaders balancing control of the virus (to save human lives) with the demands of productivity and profit (to maintain our unequal neoliberal political economy). Essentially Covid-19 has urged uncomfortable decisions concerning who and what we choose to protect. This is not a context where the rationality of McDonaldisation fares as well as usual either. Efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (the features that Ritzer argued that global chains of fast food and coffee shops survive on) all become a challenge, if individuals demonstrate their own positionalities in stepping away from waste and mindless consumption, towards a culture of sharing, re-use and sustainability.

As illustrated in Figure 5 many households are now placing items for others to re-use outside their homes instead of throwing things away. There is an

FIGURE 5
A box of free books outside a home

irony in seeing the box from a leading coffee machine brand being recycled in this way. There is also the unfortunate trolling by librarians of a book lover who built a swap box outside her home during lockdown. When she tweeted about it to encourage others to swap and share, amid thousands of 'likes', she was accused of doing 'such a middle-class thing' and told the books would spread Covid. Others called her 'stupid' and 'misguided' and slammed her for having 'no real understanding of the role of libraries'. A further troll said: 'So, take home a used book and maybe take home the virus that kills your mother' (Metro News Reporter, 2021).

It is poignant too at a time when the hospitality industry is also being crippled by the requirement for social distancing. In a striking video online, bar workers can be seen physically dumping huge quantities of ice outside the Scottish Parliament in protest at being forced to close by the Covid-19 restrictions imposed by their government (BBC, 2020f).

The consumer culture that has thrived for decades is currently looking unwell and displaying its own set of symptoms from the pandemic. These are emerging as irrational inconsistencies when McDonaldisation requires

FIGURE 6 Ice was dumped outside the Scottish Parliament in protest

rational, predictable behaviours of consumption from us all. Furthermore, if social welfare, human rights and inclusivity gain cultural domination, we will be forced to re-examine the technological platforms on which the case for this is being 'aired': namely, to look more closely at the corporate ownership of the Internet itself and who can still claim to have any level of control (Ball, 2020). The neutral positionality that we have for so long assigned to digital technologies in the neoliberal economy may begin to reveal these as politically interested 'actors' alongside humans in this context (Winner, 1980).

In academia an underpinning economic emphasis on productivity has in recent decades replaced 'open intellectual enquiry' (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In terms of university policy, this has in turn encouraged an instrumental, problem-solving approach where individual strategies are produced to address each issue (Harman, 1984). However, this form of rationality then neglects the broader 'socio-cultural dynamism of policy processes' (Nudzor, 2009: 503). These are tensions that I discussed in *The Labour of Words in HE* which concern whether policy is understood as a dynamic process (one that recognises the constant changes around each person, their cultural context and the technologies that they interact with) or simply as a means to solve problems, which yields more static isolated models, documents and 'established' principles aimed at meeting a set of performance standards. The latter tends to be accompanied by a belief that following these models will bring about the changes required, but such documents sit apart from the processes that actually effect institutional change (Hayes, 2019: 58). The disruption from the

FIGURE 7
A construction site notice advises workers to socially distance

pandemic seems to have opened up a window on just how dynamically interconnected social issues are. In a frightening but fascinating manner, Covid-19 has not only emphasised why attention to individual contexts matters, it has also drawn attention to a rich array of postdigital examples. These have emerged as emergency measures have been put in place for education, work, social care, lockdown and social distancing. In Figure 7 a construction site displays detailed advice on social distancing to keep workers safe.

In Figure 8 a highways sign advises that footway works are cancelled due to Covid-19. The biological and physiological circumstances that have made some people more likely to die, have intermingled with the social positioning that they occupy, risks in work or living spaces and their levels of access to advice and care via technology.

The stark reports of loss of lives, livelihoods, homes, relationships and human grief occupy web pages alongside incongruous attempts to recreate life as it was before lockdown, like creating 'MumDonalds' Happy Meals to replace routine, family fast food experiences (Abernethy, 2020) and creating 'social distancing logos' (Valinsky, 2020).

FIGURE 8
Footway works are cancelled
due to Covid-19

4 A 'New Normal' for Institutions, Different 'New Normals' for Each of Us, or Both?

As lockdowns came into place around the world during 2020, universities understandably had little existing policy for such circumstances. Even as they scrambled Gold Command-style committees to write temporary statements, those involved were adapting also to a need to discuss and write policy across online systems, rather than around a table on campus. With the main focus on continuity, references to a 'new normal' have focused since then mostly on the teaching context. What a 'new normal' might look like for HE policymaking has received less attention, as will be explored later. The rapid movement of so many HE activities into online platforms during successive lockdowns has implications for universities in terms of a larger 'shift in authority to private actors' (Hogan & Williamson, 2020: 67). The pandemic has brought governments and educational institutions into new alliances with commercial technologies, but over time this also has potential to undermine democratic control of public education (Hogan & Williamson, 2020: 67). This is because

such coalitions have different values. They are bringing 'new kinds of multi-sector public-private partnerships and policy networks in relation to edtech expansion, and the enhanced role of the private sector in educational delivery and governance' (Hogan & Williamson, 2020: 2). As time allows, this requires closer scrutiny from universities in terms of ethics, and alongside their strategies for inclusive practices.

A discourse of 'new normals' though, is not conducive to recognising what needs to change across the whole ecosystem of university policymaking. It is not helpful for noticing firstly, the problem that arises when educational technology policy is framed separately from inclusivity and diversity policy. Secondly, it is worth noticing the ease with which phrases like 'new normal' become routinely adopted, in a similar way to 'best practice' and other problematic buzz phrases (Hayes, 2019a: 1). Long before we become critically aware of it, such constructs start shaping academic practices. However, 'new normal' is a risky form of language, when little remains 'normal' presently in many academics' or students' lives.

In the shorter term for individual staff and students, we have each been subject to our own private merger between online platforms, our diverse home environments, our personal health and family circumstances, capabilities and responsibilities. Across the globe these individual positionalities differed enormously in terms of personal or family 'capital' to cope with what successive lockdowns thrust upon them (United Nations, 2020). Studies like *Moving to Online Teaching and Homeworking* (MOTH, 2020) were conducted to examine how people were adapting to the challenges posed by Covid-19 on their professional and personal lives. The researchers are considering findings alongside studies which have already identified the 'emotional' nature of academic labour, teaching and burnout before the pandemic brought new complexities to these relationships (Bodenheimer & Shuster, 2020). Research studies that have captured diverse academic lived experience from the start of the pandemic reveal inequities in how each of us was positioned to run with this situation at the point when the crisis struck (Peters et al., 2020, Jandrić & Hayes, 2020a, Jandrić & Hayes et al., 2020b, Watermeyer et al., 2020). This documentation of human academic subjectivities from across the globe is not easily captured in policy statements from the 'old normal' like these:

The student engagement framework represents our approach to engagement by, with and for students. (Hayes, 2019a: 123)

Packaging, marketing and communicating student engagement to applicants, current students and staff. (Hayes, 2019a: 122)

Frameworks do not represent how individuals engage, diverse people do. No amount of McPolicy statements that are ‘packaging, marketing and communicating student engagement’ will alter this. Many students took on roles as key workers alongside or in lieu of their studies, with much uncertainty as to when they might further their own goals once more in education and future employment. As reported recently, research published by women plummeted during the lockdown whilst articles written by men were alleged to have increased. Whilst ‘anyone with a family will be slowed down by lockdown’ it is ‘women who will probably be disadvantaged more strongly’ (Fazackerley, 2020a).

Following years of Technology Enhanced Learning policies, it was a biological virus in the end that took just days to whisk academia online wholesale, alongside a reduced footfall for the environment, in terms of travel. At the same time ‘the hidden labour of domesticity that is part of many academics’ real lives’ (Fazackerley, 2020a), visibly surfaced. These and other examples have implications for reviewing how policy is planned and phrased, in the future. After all, the buzz phrases that were previously attributed with our human labour of teaching and research in McPolicy don’t seem about to offer to home school our children (BBC, 2020e) or to care for our elderly relatives, any time soon.

It quickly became apparent too, that Covid-19 itself did not respect equality, diversity and inclusion values, as the figures of cases, hospitalisation and death by race and ethnicity were published (CDC, 2020). The Color of Coronavirus project (APM, 2020) monitors such statistics. Wide disparities by race seem to be due to numerous cultural, economic and technological reinforcing factors, including: workplace exposures, inability to work from home, no access to sick days, geographic areas where people reside, dependence on public transport where the virus is more easily spread, less access to testing, a higher presence of underlying health conditions, receiving delayed medical care, no access to online healthcare, or merely distrusting health providers. Thus, racial disparities from compounding, elevated risks termed as *systemic racism* (APM, 2020) have been further illuminated by the pandemic alongside challenges of gender and disability. In these circumstances it is worth reflecting on what passes for ‘normal’ (Fuller & Jandrić, 2019). How we might move from an ‘old normal’ to a ‘new normal’ in HE may simply be the wrong question to ask, if this is concerned with established principles and meeting generic standards, post-pandemic. A discussion on more dynamic ‘new normals’ that have befallen each of us, and an examination of their place in the inclusivity debate may be more useful in shedding light on each of our diverse, postdigital contexts.

5 HE Policies That Self-Isolate

In the context of educational opportunities, these interconnected issues illustrate why HE policies that self-isolate from each other, are a problem and not a solution. Rather than addressing single issues in strategies written and filed separately from each other, it is worth considering all of the factors together that now affect inclusive practices. There is a valuable opportunity to cast fresh eyes on these reading through the diverse accounts of postdigital positionalities that students and staff are voicing (Peters et al., 2020, Jandrić & Hayes, 2020a, Jandrić & Hayes et al., 2020b, Watermeyer et al., 2020, MOTH, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has revealed too why the many research papers written in the Global North about the pandemic should not be read in isolation from those bearing insights on crises from the Global South. Whilst approaches towards social distancing, face masks, travel, social care, mental health and ingrained inequalities of all kinds may differ between nations, Covid-19 has also presented many similar challenges to those that were already being tackled in the developing world. Steps to improve access and continuity of education for marginalised groups through technologies in Low to Middle Income Countries (LMIC) may now hold just as much relevance for disadvantaged groups living in local regions of developed countries in Europe or the United States (Traxler, Smith, Scott & Hayes, 2020). The starkly uneven human access to digital devices, skills and services revealed is a reminder that in postdigital society there are also huge numbers of humans and communities who remain pre-digital or semi-digital too.

6 Precarity, Disadvantage and the Rationalisation of Academic Labour

Despite the different challenges and experience that designing and teaching for online and distance learning requires, in comparison with teaching face-to-face, universities will often employ tutors for these courses on short-term contracts. This can be the case on collaborative international programmes, where teaching takes place in partner institutions as well as in the university that is hosting the course. As the pandemic took hold, for those university staff on precarious or flexible contracts life instantly became even more insecure (Collini, 2020, Ivancheva, 2020). Simultaneously, Covid-19 'empowered technology vendors to position themselves as frontline emergency response providers' (Williamson, 2020a, Hogan & Williamson, 2020). In HE there has also been a growing situation where many new scholars carry large debts into their

first academic appointments. On top of this, they meet intense pressures to perform in research, teaching, management and administration, yet their roles may also be fixed term.

I have worked with and taught many staff in this situation, when I have led teaching or research training programmes in the UK and abroad. Precarious or casual contracts are increasingly common (Hunsinger, 2020: 2). The expectation is for mobility from these staff too, who frequently need to seek employment far from where they live, leaving their family and any established networks that might have helped their career progression. This can leave them exposed and given the sudden conditions of lockdown keeping people at home, even more so, if they are unable to travel for work (Ivancheva, 2020). The postdigital positionality of a casual academic can thus differ enormously from that of senior, established academics. Whilst conditions will fluctuate between institutions and countries, staff on precarious contracts may be working full time for years but seeing very few of the benefits. They can find themselves expected to publish but without funding for conference fees, travel, or any form of professional development. If they need to attend meetings it may come at personal expense (Cantrell & Palmer, 2019).

Whilst the flexibility of the academic gig economy may work well for some people, for others it leaves them at risk and potentially omitted from the channels into inclusivity policy where they might have been able to input, to effect change. Meanwhile, Ovetz (2020: 1) argues that the turn to remote working, to stem the spread of the virus has added to an existing 'epidemic – the digital automation and deskilling of teaching in higher education' because the pandemic has now created ideal conditions for educational technology venture capitalists to support the outsourcing and rationalisation of academic labour (Ovetz, 2020: 2). Ivancheva (2020) refers to an 'unbundling' of content in universities that could have led to 'shorter, low-cost, flexible unbundled curricular units' that might have been:

made available online and used by previously 'atypical' and systematically disadvantaged students: women, people with caring responsibilities and disabilities, and mature full-time working students. Employers and communities could become more involved with universities, demanding need-based content. (Ivancheva, 2020)

Unfortunately, unbundling has instead 'developed mostly as public-private partnership between universities and education technology' (Ivancheva, 2020, Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo, 2016). How education more globally is becoming

rationalised through partnerships with commercial providers, has considerable implications for inclusivity policies. These connections are currently under-explored. Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo (2016) have questioned why so many countries with such different cultural, political and economic contexts are engaging in processes of education privatisation reform and who resists this situation. Additionally, now that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought such reliance on technology and forms of monitoring and controlling human activity, other authors are questioning what resistance these are meeting (Taylor, Sharma, Martin & Jameson, 2020).

There is now a strong rationality that surrounds the gaining of digital skills which are widely deemed by governments and educational agencies to improve opportunities for those in disadvantaged situations. There are many complexities though, that need to be surfaced in this arena. This requires multi-agency, cross-sector discourse and contextual, community-based understandings to inform initiatives. Whilst local areas develop all manner of schemes to support citizens to gain digital skills, or to re-skill following displacement from work during the pandemic, there are many larger powerful commercial players participating. For example, Holon IQ argue on their website that they are:

Powering decisions that matter at the world's smartest institutions.
(Holon IQ, 2020)

Hogan and Williamson (2020: 37) highlight the way in which Holon IQ is assuming a powerful position to both 'catalogue and catalyse' global edtech market activity but also to frame what is offered as more 'affordable and equitable' in an 'education economy' (Hogan & Williamson, 2020: 38). Holon IQ have their own Higher Education Digital Capability Framework which is billed as 'an open-source capability framework for higher education. 4 dimensions, 16 domains and 70+ capabilities' (Holon IQ, 2020). I have argued before that in university employability strategies, students are frequently referred to in terms of 'graduate attributes', 'skills', 'assets' and 'components' with academics urged to develop 'best practices' to deliver such capabilities (Hayes, 2019a: 2). I pointed to Employability McPolicy which appears to follow the patterns of the McDonaldisation principles of *efficiency*, *predictability*, *control* and *calculability* based on a simple, rational exchange value where: 'student learning = gainful employment' (Hayes, 2019a: 129).

The issues that follow such approaches include education becoming framed 'through market logics' and 'the narrowing of education goals, privileging

certain types of knowledge and information over others, such as subjects that can be easily tracked and translated into data (Hogan & Williamson, 2020: 62). Furthermore, there are now new players jumping in to help education institutions when they find that 'packaging, marketing and communicating student engagement' isn't enough. Companies like Noodle will package a whole lot more for universities under the mission of 'building online capacity':

Building online capacity means integrating technology, learning design, marketing, recruiting, support, placement, and financial services. And doing so with flexibility, transparency, and efficiency. (Noodle Partners, 2020)

Such 'packaging' changes the nature of academic labour bringing questions to the surface about what narratives and values universities now wish to retain. Hunsinger (2020) has argued that:

Universities are meaning-making machines, much like everything else in the knowledge ecologies of late capitalism. They are full of people and things, creating a plurality of meanings and interpretations, and eventually developing knowledge. With that in mind, each university signifies a plurality of purposes to many different public and private interests. (Hunsinger, 2020: 1)

However, he points to the problem that these ideas and interests are caught now in an acceleration that 'complicates their capacity to be meaningful knowledge systems to many possible participants because the speed erases the possibility of the distributed cognition needed for knowledge' (Hunsinger, 2020: 1). I would argue that this is important in the case of university policy frameworks too, particularly in relation to the challenges of writing meaningful inclusivity policy that does not immediately lose its relevance. Policymaking and civic engagement in the writing of policy is something that does not sit aside from either the cognition or compassion that is needed for developing knowledge. These are intertwined with the rapid technological and biological developments that we are immersed in and consequently in this postdigital landscape we have interconnected ethical challenges to tackle. We cannot inhabit only the parts of 'the cloud' we choose to or keep data to ourselves, any more than we can pick and choose what we take out from the virtual airing cupboard. If reaching into my hall cupboard I pull down more than I bargained for, I can replace it unseen. In the virtual version of this scenario, what I am about to download, is already anticipated.

7 Politics, Ethics and Human Attributes in the Virtual Airing Cupboard

I have previously argued that the discourse of university McPolicy is:

Deeply implicated in maintaining a particular organisation of academic labour. As human attributes become discussed objectively in strategy documents, in terms of exchange value, this risks alienating people from their more tacit understandings (or use values) in terms of what they do'. (Hayes, 2019a: 52)

Thinking about ourselves subjectively in terms of personal attributes is one thing, but a rational breaking down of each of us into a recognised objective set of attributes is a different matter. It is though, an approach that serves algorithms very well (Amoore, 2020, Alpaydin, 2020, Jandrić, Knox, Macleod & Sinclair, 2017, Beattie & Hayes, 2020). Of course, if I describe some of my perceived personal attributes to readers of this book, I am likely to share them from my own individual positionality, to reflexively give them context, explain where these have sometimes been of help (or hindrance) to me in certain situations. Amoore (2020) points out why such positionality and context does not hold relevance for an algorithm:

At the level of the algorithm, it scarcely matters whether the clustered attributes are used to define the propensities of consumers, voters, DNA sequences, financial borrowers, or people gathering in public space to make a political claim. (Amoore, 2020: 4)

Amoore (2020) describes as an example a case where algorithms were trained to recognise what a human protest is. This was based on 'the attributes of urban public life, the norms and anomalies latent in the data streams extracted from multiple sources, from Twitter and Facebook to government databases' (Amoore, 2020: 1). Amoore's concern though, is that such algorithms 'condense multiple potential futures to a single output' and therefore:

machine learning algorithms that anticipate our future propensities are seriously threatening the chances that we have to make possible alternative political futures. (Amoore, 2020: 1)

Alpaydin (2020) describes machine learning as: 'programming computers to optimise a performance criterion using example data or past experience'.

As Amoore points out, it is this example data and the algorithmic decisions based on it that have been the main focus of critique, with arguments concerning ‘removing the bias’ or the ‘value judgements’ being the dominant ones (Amoore, 2020). This is the perspective raised earlier where HDI scholars present the case for greater agency, legibility and negotiability concerning the data on which algorithmic decisions are made (Mortier, Haddadi, Henderson, McAuley & Crowcroft, 2014).

Amoore takes a somewhat different perspective to the assumption that:

there is an outside to the algorithm – an accountable human subject who is the locus of responsibility, the source of a code of conduct with which algorithms must comply. To call for the opening of the black box, for transparency and accountability, then, is to seek to institute arrangements that are good, ethical, and normal, and to prevent the transgression of societal norms by the algorithm. (Amoore, 2020)

Instead, for Amoore:

What matters is not primarily the identification and regulation of algorithmic wrongs, but more significantly how algorithms are implicated in new regimes of verification, new forms of identifying a wrong or of truth telling in the world. (Amoore, 2020)

In these terms, Amoore believes that we have ‘no need to look beyond the algorithm for an outside’ as such, where humans are underwriting its conduct. Instead she proposes ‘a different way of thinking about the ethicopolitics of algorithms’. She refers to this as a *cloud ethics* which is concerned with the political formation of relations to oneself and to others that is taking place, increasingly, in and through algorithms (Amoore, 2020). These are important considerations in relation to each of our postdigital positionalities. Rather than humans as underwriters of algorithmic conduct, they concern instead the analysis of humans as literally made ‘of data’ (Cheney-Lippold, 2018).

8 Inclusive Practice for Algorithmic Identities

Based on these ideas, it not easy to see how any university inclusivity framework or policy could feasibly write and enact policy founded on a claim that ‘the principles of inclusive practice are well established’ (Department for Education, 2017). These are constantly being re-worked in the cloud, as our

‘algorithmic identities’ shape and reshape, based on data each of us continually produce inside and outside of universities:

Algorithmic interpretations about data of our web surfing, data of our faces, and even data about our friendships set new, distinct terms for identity online. And it is through these terms that our algorithmic identities are crafted – terms in which race is described by ones and zeros and emotions defined by templates of data. (Cheney-Lippold, 2018)

The case for claiming and developing our own postdigital positionalities has never been stronger, unless we want the only account of ourselves to be the algorithmic version:

Algorithms assemble, and control, our datafied selves and our algorithmic futures. It’s about how algorithms make our data speak as if it were a man, woman, Santa Claus, citizen, Asian, and/or wealthy. And it’s also about how these algorithmically produced categories replace the politicised language of race, gender and class with a proprietary vocabulary that speaks *for* us – to marketers, political campaigns, government drag-nets, and others – whether we know about it, like it, or not. (Cheney-Lippold, 2018)

This then is the virtual airing cupboard producing knowledge: ‘that shapes both the world and ourselves online’ via ‘algorithms, data and the logics therein’ (Cheney-Lippold, 2018). How universities might respond, as centres of knowledge themselves, is now a pressing question. As Hunsinger (2020: 12) puts it: ‘corporations and governments with neoliberal agendas are taking strategic aim at universities in this pandemic’. If bureaucratic imperatives undermine ‘the relationships, research, shared governance, and learning that we seek to develop in university’ (Hunsinger, 2020: 12) we can still rationally point to a growing stockpile of data. Whether we will still be able to identify any of us as individuals within it though, ‘as the existential core of the university’ (Hunsinger, 2020: 12), remains currently in the balance

9 Rationality or Positionality

The Labour of Words in Higher Education was concerned then with a rationality in HE policy that has seen universities addressing a ‘menu’ of issues such as *student engagement*, *employability*, and *Technology Enhanced Learning*

one-by-one, in discrete strategy documents. This approach towards 'solving' each of these topics reflects the means-to-an-end logic of neoliberalism where 'quick fixes' tend to predominate. Students from recent generations have been viewed instrumentally as if they were a 'problem' in relation to each perceived 'issue' (Partington, 2020). They have been stereotyped as 'snowflakes' or 'careerists' in the media, or said to prioritise value-for-money above the 'love of learning' when they do not fit the 'ideal' student who 'would enable HE to continue to deliver the same curricula in the same way' (Partington, 2020). Even though many universities have now produced equality, diversity and inclusion policies and frameworks which acknowledge their varied communities and state their commitments, still a rational policy discourse persists which suggests that such values can simply be 'embedded' (Hayes, 2018, Partington, 2020). Here are just a few examples:

Through this strategy, we will embed a University-wide culture of inclusion. (University of Leicester, 2017–2021: 2)

Embed equality into all aspects of University life. (University of Leeds, 2014–2019: 7)

Our teaching and learning strategy will embed policies and processes that ensure no group with protected characteristics is systematically disadvantaged at any stage from admission to graduation and into employment. (Brunel University London, 2015–2020)

I argue that this form of rationality in HE policy discourse needs to change because equality and inclusion are experienced differently by each individual. As illustrated above, the many factors that now influence these experiential positionings in postdigital society are not under the control of any university to simply be embedded.

Indeed, for diversity to be thoroughly explored, examining more individual postdigital experiences is necessary. There are now many new disciplinary and cross-disciplinary research fields that are contributing to postdigital insights. Some authors have drawn close links between the effects of Covid-19 on the cultural infrastructure of societies across the globe, including education. They point to the need to fundamentally rethink the transactional approach where education has tied itself so closely to economic markets and to look more closely at relationships that cut across learning, biology and technology. For example, to consider insights from 'epigenetics', the study of the interaction between environmental conditions and organic development. In education therefore, to examine links between learning, human cells and technologies:

The relationship between nature and culture in education requires a deep level analysis of the biological and physical substrate of human learning. Only with a sufficiently fundamental level of analysis can society reorganise its systems of learning and scientific inquiry to this rapidly changing environment. (Johnson, Maitland & Torday, 2020: 1)

By exploring the individual, diverse positionalities of those who study and work in the postdigital context that HE now operates in, a more honest dialogue about the dynamic nature of inclusive practices can take place. Extending what is meant by inclusivity to include all key participants is now even more pressing when the global pandemic has also thrust so much of education into commercial online platforms. This has exposed related data and ethics concerns requiring new attention to avoid underprivileged groups becoming further disadvantaged. A striking example at the time of writing is the rational use of an algorithm to replace A level results for thousands of UK students unable to sit exams (Sodha, 2020). This situation discussed as 'inequalities exacerbated by an algorithm' (Powell, 2020) was followed by an even more striking U turn, as attempts to avoid damage limitation for individual students has led to new practical problems for universities and anxieties about retention (Fazackerley, 2020c). These interactions back and forth across humans and technical processes have played out before our eyes revealing the individual postdigital situations of students, teachers, researchers, politicians and algorithmic platforms, in an astonishing set of circumstances, that I will return to discuss in rather more detail a little later.

10 New Postdigital Understandings of Interpersonal Relations and Inclusivity

Postdigital positionality then is a new perspective towards inclusivity through which such cases might be examined to further broaden debate on HE policy reform. This original concept is established by extending ideas on the well-theorised topic of positionality in research practices but re-examining and applying these through a 'postdigital' lens across academia as a whole. This dual focus enables alternative routes into contemporary debates on inclusive practices in HE. In particular, ways that highlight the many new means through which a blend of human, technological, biological, economic 'actors' (such as individuals, groups, digital devices, ecological systems, platforms and data) are now dialectically influencing policy discourse and social practice in seen, and unseen, ways. This is important in order to demonstrate issues of empowerment or discrimination that can be overlooked when HE policy still treats

digital technologies as instruments alone, to simply 'enhance' the core activities of academia (Hayes & Jandrić, 2014, Hayes, 2015, Hayes & Bartholomew, 2015, Hayes, 2019c). This narrow discourse has furthered a generalised, universal view which unfortunately masks the deeply individual, contextual nature of human technological encounters in learning and research (Jandrić & Hayes, 2020c).

Therefore, a key part of this debate concerns the powerful positional and fluid nature of the individual interactions we each experience in postdigital society and educational encounters. How postdigital positionality translates into interpersonal relations has profound but often veiled relevance for inclusivity agendas. Inclusivity policies currently remain at the level of measuring pre-defined categories of disadvantage and seeking to educationalise sets of actions into strategies to address these within the boundaries of universities. This approach may purport to aspire to 'excellence', but it lumps together aspects of individual identity under the generalised banner of phrases like 'the student experience'. As such it assumes a 'macho consumerist identity' (Bartram, 2020) that overrides individual positionalities within a broader 'audit culture' (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, Shore & Wright, 1999, Ball, 2003, Olssen & Peters, 2005, Biesta, 2009, Rudd, 2017). Given the complex intersections that we each encounter across the virtual airing cupboard, I raise the question as to whether we can even refer to 'interpersonal' now, without some acknowledgement that the 'inter' of human interactions is no longer with 'persons' alone (Fuller & Jandrić, 2018, Braidotti, 2019a, 2019b, Savin-Baden, 2021).

In summary, this book will act as a significant source of reference by signposting much that has been written so far about the new postdigital context and ecosystem in and around HE. In bringing these perspectives together with a body of literature on positionality, I propose a counter response to the narrow, dehumanising discourse of McPolicy, as discussed in *The Labour of Words in Higher Education* (Hayes, 2019a) by opening this broader debate. Interventions accompanying Covid-19 may have distanced us all from our campuses across the globe but this has also flooded cyberspace with human voices expressing their personal contexts via digital platforms (Jandrić & Hayes, 2020a, Jandrić & Hayes et al., 2020b). As such, the pandemic is a dreadful reality but also a stimulus that illuminates how important biological matters have become in our postdigital era, as we contemplate what shape a post pandemic HE might look like. It is now time to collectively disrupt redundant, rational agendas that seek only to 'embed' generic, static principles of inclusive practice, supported by opaque data and metrics. This is because these have little bearing on individual and dynamic postdigital experiences of inclusivity. If the best that our HE policies can do is to repeatedly give agency to inanimate statements, then we can only expect (at best) to preserve a status quo of inequalities, rather than to further social justice and equal opportunities.

11 The Debate to Come

Examining positionality in the postdigital context of HE enables new diverse perspectives to be heard on the constitutive role that technological platforms, biodigital science, data and human activity now play in people's lives. This postdigital context has implications for inclusivity, bringing both visible and invisible effects to bear, providing new opportunities but also exacerbating disadvantage. Debate needs to follow on how to 'unlearn' former approaches towards policy that focus on humans, but then proceed to write McPolicy statements that miss them out in the discourse. New methods that are more cognizant of a 'postdigital gathering between humans and machines' (Jandrić & Hayes, 2020c) could help to write a more honest account of diversity and inclusivity. This is necessary within a broader global context where sustainability and collaborative movements towards a bioeconomy will provide a new focus for education. The shift from a knowledge-based economy to more of a bio-based economy (Saachi, Lotti & Branduardi, 2020) is likely to yield new cooperation that cuts across subjects such as science, economics, education, law and social science. A recent move by international lawyers to draft plans to criminalise ecosystem destruction is one such example. The new legal definition of 'ecocide' will soon be a complement to other existing international offences such as crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide (Bowcott, 2020). Such changes will in turn impact on disciplines that are taught in universities and on the positionality of students, teachers, researchers and policy makers. As we contemplate a post-pandemic university (Carrigan, 2020a) there are new 'postdigital ecopedagogies' that might be imagined (Jandrić & Ford, 2020). As technological and scientific convergences lead to new globally agreed ecopolicies, a more organic approach to these shifts in HE policy could go further towards addressing the many systemic inequalities that the pandemic has revealed. Whatever new discourse eventually replaces McPolicy, it will have more chance of being effective for inclusivity if it reflects a twofold and converged debate:

1. To acknowledge a new 'postdigital' context in HE where multiple and diverse 'actors' (that are not all human) are now altering much of what may once have been described as 'established' or 'inclusive' practices in universities.
2. To recognise and explore what this means across all key activities of HE, to notice how educational access, inclusivity and opportunities for individuals are now altered in new ways depending on their positionality and yielding new interpersonal relations.

Therefore, in the chapters to come the role of positionality in a postdigital context will be examined firstly in Chapter 1, to inquire as to why this is a matter for

everyone. Considering when human identity becomes data, or data becomes identity is central to this debate, as rapid new biodigital developments (Peters, Jandrić & Hayes, 2021a) and ‘precision education’ (Williamson, 2019a) bring new intensive scientific advances in the biological sciences into the lives, bodies and brains of learners. The possibilities or potential alienation from such developments depends on how values and educational purposes are conceived within policy. This leads into a reflexive look at some tenets of positionality that are omitted in McPolicy but relate to subjective ideas of individuals about their identity and who they might become. It requires personal reflexivity for each of us to choose our positionality before this is chosen for us via human and technological systems. The disruption wrought by the pandemic has been documented by viral viewpoints that do not sit outside of HE. These have intertwined with existing social, political and technological reactions and responses to inequalities, including vaccine distribution. Yet some believe that Covid-19 could also act as a portal through which alternative approaches in HE might now start to be realised.

In the first half of Chapter 2, the background to McPolicy claims is reviewed to shed light on a problematic, unrealistic separation of two broad policy areas: technology and inclusivity, and their associated forms of discourse. HE policies for digital research, scientific progress and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) sit apart from strategies and regulatory frameworks seeking to address inclusivity for students. Policy for TEL has mostly ignored the intersection of digital learning with diversity and inclusivity strategy documents. Meanwhile, inclusivity policies focus on recruitment, participation and other social issues, with little critical attention paid to rapid, widespread digital and scientific change (OECD, 2020) and the inequities, possibilities and ethical issues that accompany this. The second half of Chapter 2 looks at why shared political economic spaces of technology and culture are important for airing varied debates on what inclusivity means for individual positionality in postdigital society. Without this, contradictory policy statements around social justice risk cancelling each other out and social mobility stalls (Sandel, 2020). Widening participation policy discourse therefore now needs to widen much further. There is an urgency to include intimate and fluid linkages between commercial data-driven platforms, digitalisation of biology, artificial intelligence and all human characteristics and endeavours. There is a need also to reflect this fluid, emerging context in which I write, where Covid-19 is a biological actor contributing to altering existing political economic spaces of technology and culture.

In Chapter 3, alternatives to the increasingly irrelevant discourse of ‘the student experience’ in HE policy are contemplated. This has perpetuated a myth

that all societal issues might be educationalised into policy and delivered back to students as a package deal. This reductive discourse drives a wedge between teachers and students. It metaphorically ‘cages’ students, and as Covid-19 so graphically demonstrated, it can physically restrict their movements too. The pandemic revealed digital poverty and exclusion, issues of connectivity, a lack of skills, confidence and spaces where students and staff might work, as well as consequences from an algorithmic calculation of grades. Meanwhile promises and profound ethical challenges accompany rapid digital convergence across disciplines and innovations in AI. The lives of learners and teachers are now digitised and datafied, with implications for lifelong learning, human wellbeing and personalised education. As such, HE policy cannot meaningfully sit apart from news and social media or corporate data driven platforms that universities have adopted. HE needs to develop a new unifying role that spans these areas. A positionality that is less insular and controlling, and more able to take the lead on these critical postdigital debates, as they intersect with technological, ecological and societal change.

In Chapter 4, the tired culture of ‘measuring excellence’ in HE is met with questions concerning what is included, and what gets excluded, in this rational consumer focused approach towards teaching. This form of McPolicy seems to originate from the government mantras that sought competitive advantage in a so-called ‘information age’ driven by technology. Now that political economic focus seems to be shifting, as a global sustainability agenda is looking towards more ecological approaches (UNESCO, 2020d). The Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE) focus is giving way then to a more circular bio-based economy, reinforced by biodigital progress, where education flexibly and organically supports new interdisciplinary liaisons to help meet sustainability goals (Aguilar, Twardowski & Wohlgemuth, 2020, Saachi, Lotti & Branduardi, 2020). For teachers, who have experienced a loss of identity, with their academic labour invisible in policy, yet with selected aspects of their roles incessantly ‘measured’, there are new opportunities to assert their positionality and develop ‘postdigital ecopedagogies’ (Jandrić & Ford, 2020).

In Chapter 5, the McPolicy discourse of measuring research in terms of impact assessment is discussed initially, to show why positionality is important to academics. Neoliberal forms of discourse, as opposed to classical liberal discourse have altered the positionality of academics and divided different (but connected) academic activities in universities. Individualised incentives and performance targets are a model of accountability for research that sits at odds with both the ‘idea of the public good’ and with new cutting-edge scientific research in support of sustainable futures (Peters, Jandrić & Hayes, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Therefore, if we are intent on working towards inclusive practices

in universities, why do our HE policies exclude so many aspects of society that now impact on inclusivity for individuals? The 'industrialised' nature of science and implications for quality are discussed alongside the need for new merged and inclusive policies that reflect the postdigital positionality of the university itself and the local context it occupies.

In Chapter 6, rational conceptions of leadership in HE are reviewed, to consider how marketised McPolicy discourse and related practices have culturally distanced students and staff from their institutions. As universities have made rational edtech alliances to manage activities during the pandemic, this has irrationally created new challenges. The student data that institutions sought to gather, measure and control has increasingly merged with new cloud-based systems and commercial interests. This creates new ethical challenges that make it harder for universities to embed inclusivity agendas, as if these existed apart from global digital advances. As technology consortiums seek to influence HE policies based on values of investment and profit, this places less emphasis on emancipatory education for those on the margins, in terms of inclusivity, widening participation and levelling up. HE now has new responsibilities in this context, amid a global focus on education for sustainability, supported by digital technologies and biological systems (Peters, Jandrić & Hayes, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) Given the disruption this brings to former assumptions about society, the economy, and human existence, McPolicy discourse on inclusivity has new participants to include.

In Chapter 7, the book concludes by revisiting the key arguments surrounding our changed postdigital positionalities in this new landscape of digitalisation and biodigital convergence. There are opportunities for sustainable development using natural and synthetic materials but there are also ethical and political implications that will change our assumptions concerning 'established inclusive practices'. The university now has an opportunity and a responsibility to reconnect the broad cultural and technological spheres that neoliberal political economic McPolicy rhetoric separates. We can permit instead a new political bioeconomic policy discourse to develop, as we encourage open debate on the inclusive, ecological routes HE policy might now take (Peters, Jandrić & Hayes, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).