Article

Future and Agency Frames: How Business Schools Construct the Term Future and What they Claim to do About it?

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Abstract

Recent years have brought dramatic changes in the social and economic world. This shows that futures are both unpredictable and uncertain, as well as important points of reference. This is also true for business schools. Therefore, this paper aims to understand how business schools construct the term future and what they claim to do about it in terms of their agency. Our findings are based on discourse analysis of the external communication of 100 business schools globally. Through the examination we identified 6 agency frames, namely (a) preparing, (b) shaping, (c) responsibility, (d) exploring, (e) personal futures, (f) adapting.

Introduction

Given the unpredictable and dramatic changes in the world right now (Sukhorolskyi, 2022), it is an important issue how we can deal with probable and possible futures as individuals and as societies (Ross et al., 2022). One of the functions of education (especially higher education, henceforth HE) is to have a clear orientation towards the future and support both individuals and their societies to be open to what lies ahead (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016; Gáspár et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this expectation can be quite contradictory since the future is enveloped in epistemic uncertainty shaped by unpredictable events and unintended consequences of intersecting actions (Matus & Talburt, 2015). This means that no expert can have solid knowledge on future states. At the same time, higher education institutions (henceforth HEIs) are expected to put their students in trajectories leading to future success, as well as inform society about best courses of action regarding futures (De Saint-Georges, 2012; Király & Géring, 2019, 2021).

While this seems a mission impossible, the term future is often invoked as a communication tool to claim for organisational legitimacy and to be used for impression management (Goffman, 1959) towards present and future clients, as well as society at large (Yu & Bondi, 2019). HEIs also follow this pattern utilising the term future to prove that they have a clear understanding about what lies ahead and what to do about it. This is especially true to one of the subsectors of HE, namely business schools. These institutions tend to be more open to external connections and to be closer to the labour market than other areas of HE. Moreover, at least in theory, they are more ready and open to change their present operation based on their anticipation of future economic and technological transformations (for an overview of these challenges please see: Schlegelmilchm, 2020).

How business schools construct different futures and what they claim to do about them are intriguing questions which can be explored deeper. Therefore, in this paper we aim to shed light on the agentic orientation of business schools towards futures appearing in their external communication. We would like to explore how these

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organisations talk about futures, and how they construct their or others' (e.g., students', leaders') agency in relation to the concept (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Wong & Chiu, 2021). By doing so, we can get a detailed picture about what role they wish to fulfil in society and how they use linguistic means to convey this impression towards their stakeholders.

The added value of our paper is that we use a relatively large sample with international coverage, that is, we examine the external communication of 100 highly ranked business schools. Moreover, many excellent papers were published on different forms of futures (Adam, 2008, 2010; De Saint-Georges, 2012; Clegg, 2010; Matus & Talburt, 2015). Our paper wishes to contribute to this discourse, by following a data-driven approach in understanding the discursive function of the term future, as well as its different forms in relation to business schools.

As for the structure of the paper, the first section covers the main theoretical and empirical studies in relation to agency and the different forms of futures. In the second section, we give a detailed overview of our methodology. This is followed by the results section where we discuss the agency frames identified in relation of the term future. Lastly, in the discussion section we put the main findings of the paper in broader theoretical and social context.

Conceptual Background

The temporal understanding of agency

As for agency, one of the most important and comprehensive papers is written by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). They focus on the relationships between agency and embeddedness in temporal and social contexts. As with agency in general, the main question of their paper is how actors can become capable to (re)assess and (re)shape the frameworks of their lives.

Nevertheless, agency never appears in a vacuum being separate from the rest of the social world. Structures framing our actions are already in place and in motion even before we were born. This does not mean that these structures would necessarily determine behaviour. However, they can narrow our room for manoeuvring when we attempt to mobilise our agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Agency from a temporal perspective, then, can be seen as the 'resultant' of three vectors: our (past) habits, our imaginations (about possible futures) and our practical evaluations (regarding what to do in the present). All three elements are present in each action, but not with the same weight. Emerging problems and situations call for a different approach each time, yet with different orientations towards the past (habits), present (evaluations), and future (imagination) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

So, in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) understanding, our capacity to act is coming from the interrelationships between these three temporal orientations. Our agency is partly shaped by the past because the necessary knowledge and information come from previous learning and experience. Agency is also based on the future, since actions are inherently future oriented aiming to achieve some outcome in the future. That means that we possess a projective ability to imagine alternative possibilities and scenarios. Future-orientedness in this respect means that we can devise and elaborate possible future courses of action. Lastly, the present is also important, since actors' agency is mobilised and realised in the present. We can utilise our practical-evaluative ability mobilising past habits and future projects and responding to the contingencies of the present moment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

As far as the present paper is concerned, we are especially interested about the future related aspects of agency, that is, how future considerations permeate agentic statements in the present. Based on the above-mentioned arguments, future is an essential element of agency since it shapes our understanding of our present and frames our evaluations on how we should act now.

Relational agency

Apart from this temporal understanding, agency can also be understood through relational terms. To do so, we can draw upon Burkitt's (2016) work who emphasises that relational connections are essential ingredients of agency. In this understanding actors are always embedded in social and material web or relationships. This means that they

are not separate actors but interactants, that is, when they act on the world they are not alone because they always act with the help of others.

While it is easy to imagine a network of interactants affecting each other in countless ways, it is important to mention that interactants are not necessarily equal. Some interactants have more power in relationships and, in turn, these power imbalances can be utilised to attain more power and control over key resources (Gundersen, 2021). For example, business schools are related to each other in myriad ways both directly and indirectly. In this web of relationships, some institutions are more influential in setting educational and research trends, as well as they are more able to secure key resources such as enticing the best and brightest students and staff. Another example can be a relationship between business schools and students. While these schools depend on students as a collective body, individual students have less power to influence their educational content and form, as well as the resources they can get from the relationship with the institution.

As for our research, relational understanding of agency might be important in a business school context where relations between different actors are crucial. For example, what students can do in the present, and what capabilities will they be able to mobilise in the future are mediated through their institutional affiliations to particular schools. Following the arguments above, this relationship (between the individual student and their institution) is not equal since students and their agentic possibilities might be constrained by the schools, yet this is less so the other way around. While relational understanding of agency emphasises the relationships between interactants, it is also an interesting question whether actors can have relationships to their future or imagined selves (Tamássy et al., under review). The examination of discursive elements related to personal futures might shed some light on these questions (see details below in the findings section).

Forms of futures

As we can see, the concepts of agency and future are intertwined at several levels. Apart from these considerations, the different understandings of the term future can also inform our research. In the next paragraphs, we discuss what forms of future are identified by theoretical and empirical studies.

Adam (2010), for example, argues that there are three distinctive forms of future. The first approach might be seen as the dominant understanding of premodern societies where the term was mostly understood as 'fate'. That means that we cannot change its predetermined nature, the best response is to attempt to adapt to the inevitable. The second 'modern' understanding envisions future as an empty and open space ready to be exploited and harnessed according to our needs and desires. The third approach might be interpreted as a reaction to the modern understanding since it emphasises the connections between different temporal dimensions and between different generations.

Our actual present is the consequence of past generations better and ill-conceived dreams of a brighter future (Adam, 2008). In this manner, the accumulation of 'past futures' is what presents itself for us now. Since we can no longer deny these relationships between generations, we become responsible for what kinds of futures we envision and shape through our action (or inaction) for those who will come after us. This means that we should start taking care for the future in the present (Adam, 2010).

In relation to the topic of our paper, there are studies that especially focus on temporal orientations in HEIs. For example, Clegg (2010) argues that in higher education today future is often portrayed as an empty and open resource. Furthermore, in the accelerating present of HEIs, the main focus is on the employability of future workers (who are the students of today). This strong focus on employability squeezes out more responsible and ethical orientations towards collective futures, since 'future' is only interpreted in individual and professional terms (Clegg, 2010). Bennett and Burke (2018) also argue that HE employees experience significant time-squeeze and constant urgency which pushes them toward the re/production of the taken-for-granted assumptions of the present in their futures.

Knowledge and agency

We can also examine different future forms from a discursive perspective (De Saint-Georges, 2012). According to the proponents of anticipatory discourse approach, future-oriented discourses can be analysed utilising two distinct

yet interrelated axes, that is, the knowledge axis and the agency axis.

The first dimension emphasises that statements about the future lack empirical proof. Given the epistemic uncertainty of our predictions, any assertation about the future can only remain hypothetical and assumed. Nevertheless, that does not mean speakers would restrain themselves about making seemingly solid and certain knowledge claims about future states. From a discourse analytical point of view, we can analyse what discursive strategies are used to scaffold these statements and what purpose(s) these knowledge claims have (De Saint-Georges, 2012).

The second dimension concerns the agentic utterances about the future. That means that statements often contain information about how specific actors and actions might bear on and influence the future. If speakers have little confidence that they have such transformative capacity, they are more on the fatalistic side, while if they are confident, they are on the agentic side of the spectrum. As with the other dimension (knowledge), discursive strategies and purposes can be examined and the analyst can focus on broader implications these statements have on the surrounding social and economic contexts (De Saint-Georges, 2012).

As for empirical works in relation to this approach, De Saint-Georges provide examples from the field of education. According to her argument, the purpose of education is often described as preparing learners for the future. This is an odd expectation given that nobody (including educational experts) knows what lies ahead. Nevertheless, curricula are supposed to support students to stay on successful educational trajectories leading them to the future. These successful trajectories, however, are not open to everyone since future-oriented education practices can both include and exclude potential learners (De Saint-Georges, 2012).

These conclusions are also in line with Matus and Talburt's (2015) paper on future-oriented curricula. They highlighted inherent contradictions in US curriculum reform proposals. In these documents, HEIs are portrayed as entities that can grant students access to a complex globalised future, while this future remains unknown and ambiguous. Moreover, in these proposals, students who are supposed to become potent and capable actors in the future remain rather passive, neutral disembodied 'subjects' regarding their education and their aspirations in society (Matus & Talburt, 2015).

This might also highlight the practice that institutions attempt to predefine imagined identities and narrow subject positions for their prospective students (Tamássy et al., under review). Furthermore, the way business schools describe (ideal) students often include agentic relationships between the school and the students and/or the students and different futures.

In the following section, we give a detailed overview on the methodological aspects of our research.

Methodological Process

The business schools chosen for this project means the top 100 business schools' based on the THE World University Ranking 2019 Business and Economics list. To this analysis we used webpage texts which were gathered from the institutional introductory pages and general descriptions (for example title page, about us pages etc.).

The corpus-building process started with identifying explicit future-related textual segments in the collected material, i.e., collecting those sentences which contained the expression 'future' and its inflected forms. This resulted in a corpus of 376 sentences, which was reduced to those 320 sentences that contained processes/activities and agency related to future.

By examining these sentences, we were able to identify 6 typical, not mutually exclusive agency frames about the future: preparing, shaping, adapting, exploring, personal future, and (social) responsibility. The next step was the detailed analysis of the agency frames, where we coded the texts at the given frame according to the agentic actors, the implied objects of action, the mentioned goals, and tools. Furthermore, we coded the different dimensions (malleable or not, fix versus changing, knowable or not) of the implicated future-picture, if it was relevant.

The aim of our exploratory research is to reveal the agency-field built around the future in these texts. In this sense we follow the approach of interpretive discourse theory (Heracleous, 2006) and focus on the meaning-making processes, the active and implied actors, and their agency based on the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) school (Keller, 2012; Keller et al., 2018).

Findings

During our analysis we identified six frames to capture the diverse agency patterns in the future-related communication of business schools. The 'preparing' frame explicitly or implicitly states that somebody/something can be prepared for the future. The 'shaping' frame emphasizes the ability of affecting the future. The 'adapting' frame suggests that the future is inevitable and the students, the schools, or other actors have to adapt to it. The 'exploring' frame explicitly thematizes the future as something to be explored. These four frames are built around definite actions related to the future. The remaining two frames, however, are built around the level of responsibility. That is, the 'personal future' frame is focusing on the person's own future, while the '(social) responsibility' frame puts emphasis on (social) responsibility in creating a 'better' future.

In the following sections, we describe the inner structure of these frames, focusing on the described actors and their agentic role, the objects, the tools and goals of the main actions. Additionally, we examine the level of elaboration and the mentioned characteristics of the future-picture at every frame (Table 1). The order of the description follows the frequency of the frames on the corpus, starting with the most frequent (for more details see Géring et al., 2022).

Table 1: Summary of the agency-fields by agency frames

	Who …? (provider)	What is …? (recipient/ object)	With what? (tool)	Why? (goal)	Future-picture
Preparing	school	future leaders, students	[course, program, knowledge and skills, culture]	general future, personal success, value-related aims	[changing, unknown]
Shaping	student, school, alumni & supporters	future, future of business, future of society	education, specific knowledge & courses, skills, (financial) support, investment	[secure future success, shape/reshape and impact the future, - an organization]	malleable
(Social) responsibility	school, student	generic responsibility, economic responsibility, sustainability	teaching, helping, empowering	to be responsible, to be better, to make a better future	[malleable]
Exploring	school, student, [experts]	future, knowledge and skills	[academic content, process, skills]	general future, knowledge and experience, personal success	knowable and understandable (at some can be shaped)
Personal future	student, school, the program	professional future, generic personal future	skills, network, education	professional success, general success	[malleable]
Adapting	school, student	future, changes and challenges	[knowledge and skills]	[navigate and manage (business) future]	knowable and changing but cannot be shaped

[] – low frequency

'Preparing' frame

In the texts connected to the most numerous 'preparing' agency frame, dominantly institutional actors, the schools and school-related entities are the active agents. That is, the school, the program, the faculty or its members are the providers - they are in an active role. These institutional agents cover not only the institutions (school, program) and their members (teachers), but in some cases they refer to intangible assets of the business schools, like 'the Darden approach', 'the Smith School 's mission', 'our passion'. Students are scarcely mentioned in the active provider role in this frame, which is understandable, based on the general content of the frame, which is typically the preparation of students for the future.

However, when we look at the recipients of the preparation (implied actors), that is who is prepared, then we could see that not students appear most frequently, but (future) leaders. Naturally, the special characteristics of business schools are behind this result because programs and trainings for business managers and leaders are among the core profile of most business schools. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see, that in this agency frame the 'present and future leaders' had the prominent role. Understandably, the students are the next group among the named recipients. Additionally, the addressed recipients are labelled informally in some of the cases, like 'you',

which could cover both groups.

The most diverse part of this agency frame is related to the goal of preparation. While approximately one third of the sentences left the goal of preparation unaddressed, the remaining ones focus on different levels and objectives. From the personal success and career through new skills and knowledge to leading and managing, we can find different goals. Furthermore, these goals are thematized in relation to values in several cases. That is, the values and important normative messages, like sustainability, diversity, mostly are related to the goal of preparation, not so much to the involved actors.

When we look at the 'how' question, that is to the tools of preparation, interestingly we could find very few details. Almost two third of the sentences in this agency frame did not talk about the instruments which help preparation. Those, which did, mainly mention basic institutional apparatus, like program, research, teaching, or the vaguer 'opportunities', 'experience', or 'culture'. Interestingly, skills and knowledge appear here, among the tools of preparation, not only among the goal of preparation.

The prominent role of the institutional actors (namely the school and its apparatus) both as the active (providing) agent and among the tools, mirrors in the applied verbs, too. Typically, the schools prepare, develop, provide and equip their subject, or – in more explicit school-related forms – they educate, train and help them. The verbs, like create, catalyse, challenge, are extremely rare, only 'empower' seems slightly more prevalent.

Regarding the depicted future in these sentences, it is very surprising how rarely it is delineated. Almost three quarters of the analysed sentences of this frame did not say anything explicit about the future, just use the expression without any further deliberation. Like in case of Carroll School of Management at Boston College, USA*:* SNU Business School offers various academic programs for future leaders in business. In those cases, where the future-picture is more detailed, it is represented rather as a changing and unknown future, and less as calculable and fixed. However, this is not strongly connected to the malleability of the future. Only half of the sentences, where the future is delineated in some way, define it as shapable. The least thematised attribute about future is about its cognition. This dimension is rarely mentioned, and if it is, it shows a future which can be discovered, that is knowable and manageable.

Altogether, this is an active agency frame, where the institutions (either the school itself, or its programs or its approach and culture) are the active agents. The main subject of preparation are the future leaders and the students. The goal of the preparation is a very interesting and diverse area, oscillating between general future, personal success, and some value-related aims, like becoming responsible leaders. The tools are naturally education-related; however, they cover not only programs and courses, but experience, culture, skills and knowledge.

'Shaping' frame

'Shaping' is the second largest of the defined frames with 94 sentences. Regarding the question of 'who', the agency frame employs a wide range of active agents who shape the future, or something in connection with the future. The main active agents are the institutions and the students, the latter, however, only as the subject of the business schools' education programs that allow them to shape the future. Other active agents include for example alumni, financial supporters of the institutions, specific parts or programs of the institutions, while several of the sentences simply do not specify their agents. The great variety of active agents suggests that the business schools' texts are trying to involve all sorts of their possible readers/stakeholders as active shapers of the institutions and the future.

The recipients of shaping are just as diverse as the active agents. The future of business, the future of the planet, the students, the society/community, the future of business schools and the future itself are all recipients of construction and/or transformation in the texts. Nevertheless, there are some recipient groups that appear more frequently than others, like the future of business (sometimes referred to as 'industry', 'management', 'economy', 'finance', etc.), in which shaping can indicate action affecting the whole industry, or some specific elements of it (supply systems for example).

Another common recipient of shaping is 'the future', as more than quarter of the analysed sentences claim to affect it. This group also comes with a wide range of active agents: mostly the students trained by the business schools, but the schools themselves, the students directly and the alumni are also represented. Moreover, the

schools' and the students' futures, as well as the future of industry are the recipients of the financial supporters and alumni's shaping.

There are two other prevalent recipients of the desired power to shape, namely the future of the students and the future of community/society. Both topics are so dominant that they form agency frames themselves (see 'personal future' and '(social) responsibility' sections below). Regarding the tools with which the active agents shape the recipients, they are rarely described. In more than a third of the corpus no tools are delineated. In the rest of the sentences, there are a great variety of the tools mentioned. The schools indirectly shape the future mainly through the education of students, as this quote from Saïd Business School at University of Oxford, UK shows: "We do this by: developing change leaders of the future through world-class graduate education." Other mentioned tools include the (financial) support of the schools by alumni and organisations, that also appears in the texts in the form of 'investing' in the future.

As the goal is shaping the future, the analysed texts remain in the terrain of generic statements, if any. Half of the analysed sentences do not name any goals, while the other half concentrates on either economic success, leaving a positive mark, (social) improvement or present transformation itself as a goal. Future economic success as a goal appears both as 'remaining at the forefront' and as 'securing future growth'.

The depiction of the future is defined by a shapable future-picture, with very few instances of 'unknown' future representations. In the latter case the future is still depicted as something that can be shaped.

In sum, the shaping agency frame is a highly active one, in which several kinds of business school stakeholders are represented as capable of shaping the future. The wide range of active agents affect a variety of recipients – the industry's future, the future in general, a student's personal future, society's future, and the future of our planet are just a few that are claimed to be shaped with the help of the business schools and in collaboration with their students, alumni, supporters, etc.

'(Social) responsibility' frame

Out of the analysed 320 future-related sentences 66 concern responsibility in HE. As it will be presented, these are mostly but not only social and economic responsibilities.

While analysing the sentences regarding active agents – those, who take responsibility for something – we found two main active agents: the business schools and the students. The business schools in these cases claim to carry out activities or processes through which they take responsibility for their community, the society, the environment, etc. The institutions are directly represented as shaping the future in a responsible way.

In case of the students, however, the relationship between agency and responsibility is somewhat entangled. That is, students are almost exclusively appear as active agents in those sentences that also emphasize that the students are taught or prepared to be responsible by the schools. Therefore, although the students are the ones achieving the change, the business schools are those who make it possible for the students to act responsibly. As Arizona University's W. P. Carey School of Business' statement exemplifies: "The W. P. Carey School of Business creates leaders who Rethink the nature of business, Engage the world, and Create a better future." Even though these directly active agents are often called 'future business leaders' and different variants of that, they refer to the same group: those, who attend the schools' education programs. In these sentences the schools are represented as those who help or make it possible in the first place for the students to achieve their goals concerning responsibility, and therefore are just as active agents, as the students are. There are relatively few sentences in which the students are appointed the solely active agents.

Regarding the recipients or topics of responsibility, the sentences can be divided into four groups: generic, equality, sustainability, and economic responsibility. One-third of the responsibility-corpus refers to generic responsibility towards society or the community. These sentences do not highlight one particular field for which the school or the student who was taught there will take responsibility for, nor a specific aim of their responsibility. Rather, they tokenize responsibility with language use like 'inspire future generations of students' or 'empower future leaders to positively transform business and society'. Responsibility in these sentences cover a rather wide scale from one's personal environment (community, working environment, or business community) to the whole world.

Although sentences in responsibility that group equality, sustainability and economic responsibility are

somewhat more tangible in their commitments and targets, most of them specify only the topic of their responsibility. For example, in economic responsibility almost all sentences state only that the school aims to develop responsible business leaders for the future.

Through the analysis we found only two exceptions: first, almost two thirds of the sentences taking responsibility concerning inclusion specify their targets. These nine sentences focus mainly on gender and disabilities, but claims also mention modern slavery, ethnic inequality, and employment inequalities, just to name a few. These statements are strikingly precise compared to the 'generic responsibility' group. Second, almost half of the sentences dealing with economic responsibility specify their target as not just economic, but ethical responsibilities. Even though these are less precise in their aims compared to the previous group, they are still more elaborate than others.

Moving on to the tools of taking responsibility we found a wide variety of answers to the question of "how". While there are some very specific sentences that, for example, mention scholarships, or accessibility goals, most of the claims are broader than those. In the case of sentences in which students only become responsible active agents through the education the schools provide, the tools can be divided into three main groups: the schools either teach their students ('educate', 'develop', 'train'), help their students ('help', 'support') or empower ('empower', 'embolden') their students to be responsible future leaders. The schools directly take on responsibility by collaborating with different sectors and doing research, as well as developing, teaching and helping learning students to become responsible future leaders.

Only half of the sentences imply some kind of future-picture. Nonetheless, where it is delineated, the future almost exclusively appears shapable, even though this malleability is sometimes implicit.

In summary, (social) responsibility is an agency frame in which the business schools are almost always active agents: either directly working for a 'better future' or indirectly by educating their students to be better employees and leaders. Although the students are many times depicted as active agents, in the very same sentences they are also represented as the subject of the schools' responsible teaching. Explicit tools of responsibility are mentioned in connection with the business schools. The depicted future-picture is, therefore, mostly malleable and aims to create a 'better' world.

'Exploring' frame

When we look at the 'exploring' agency frame, it can be seen that it is a rather compact, not too diverse but active set. The most prominent agent is the business school itself, appearing in almost two thirds of the frame. The students appear with much less frequency, and in a very few cases some kind of experts (like 'modern-day managers', 'accounting professionals') are the exploring actors.

The objects of the exploring activities are either generally the future itself, or a more particular future related to business and its different areas (e.g., 'supply systems of the future', 'future of marketing'), or some knowledge, issues, solutions (for example 'future-oriented and integrative solutions', 'new knowledge for future generations'). In very few cases the student's career appears as the object of exploration.

One of the least specified areas in the exploring frame is the tools of exploration: almost two thirds of the involved sentences do not contain information about tools. Those, which provide a description of the tools of exploration, however, dominantly name some academic content, process or skill. These cover both macro and general level educational tools (e.g., 'cutting-edge business education', or 'thought-provoking content'), and course or classroom-related instruments and skills (e.g., 'through coursework and by interacting with students and faculty'). Another explicitly identifiable but rare tool beside the academic content is the 'network'. This can be connected to the business characteristics of the analysed schools. The network in this frame refers more to school-related networks, like alumni, 'leading finance professors' than general business connections.

When we look at the goal of exploration, we can see that this is again a neglected area: more than half of the sentences left it out. Where it occurs, it shows a very diverse picture featuring all of the beforementioned aspects of this agency frame. Among the goals of exploration, we can find the general future, just as some kind of new knowledge or experience (e.g., 'to understand the global macro-economy in which their business operates', 'first-hand experience'). But a business or personal career also is among the goals so much as education related topics (like 'bridge the gap between theory and practice').

Naturally, the verbs, which convey the actual action mirror these specificities. They are either related to understanding and prediction (e.g., 'think about', 'envision', 'forecast'), or exploration and discovery (like 'observe', 'map', 'discover and chart'). However, there is one more interesting category among the verbs, which shows a much more interfering attitude, namely those verbs, which refer to inspiration, creation and influence (like 'create', 'provide', 'encourage').

This dichotomy is reflected in the representation of the future which is predominantly knowable and understandable. Naturally, the meaning of exploration is to recognize and comprehend something, therefore the future in this frame is depicted as a phenomenon which can be known and explained. This is generally a neutral attitude, which not necessarily brings any influence or change in the explored entity. However, as we saw earlier, beside this impartial and non-intruding feature, we can find a more active and involving stream, which portrays the future to be malleable and changeable.

In sum, this agency frame typically invokes the academic side of the business education, where the school is the most active agent using dominantly academic tools and content to the exploration either contributing to the (knowable) future itself or to some new knowledge or experience. Like at Wharton Business School at University of Pennsylvania, USA: "We are your education partner, and we strive to provide thought-provoking content that encourages students' curiosity about the world and their own future and inspires them to become critical and innovative thinkers." Interestingly, in this frame academic knowledge and skills can be both the tools and the goals of exploration.

'Personal future' frame

Regarding the active agents in the 'personal future' frame, five categories can be defined, although only three play a major role in the discourse. The five categories are: the students, the business schools, the education programmes, alumni, and the schools' community. As in every other agency frame, in personal future there are sentences that do not specify the active agent. However, the three most used active agents in this frame in descending order are overwhelmingly the students, the business schools, and their education programmes.

In almost all the sentences the recipients, or the topic in connection with personal future, is the students' personal future. Yet, what sets them apart is the perspective in which they depict the students' future. We can differentiate between generic, professional, and private perspectives concerning the students' personal future. The most prevalent is the representation of the 'professional' personal future. In these sentences the schools claim to 'prepare', 'equip' and 'help' their students to reach their professional goals. Like for example in Ivey Business School at Western University, Canada: "With this training in hand, Ivey graduates are well prepared for success in their future careers." The second most popular, 'generic' personal future is portrayed through making comprehensive statements about the students' future, like 'fuel your future' or 'future-proof yourself'. The 'private' take on the students' future is underrepresented in the texts: only a few sentences suggest that the students can develop themselves in other than generic or professional ways. These mention 'critical thinking', and in one sentence, 'personal goals' is also featured.

The tools with which the personal future can or will be reached are often in connection with the education programme – the education, the courses, the skills the schools help to develop, and the practical knowledge they provide. Another tool is the 'network' the students get access to through the schools or the education programs.

In case of depicted goals in this agency frame, they overlap with the topics in connection with personal future: the goals the active agents aim to achieve are the different kinds of private successes.

In this agency frame, the represented future-pictures show somewhat of a variety. Approximately half of the analysed sentences contain latent or manifest future-pictures. Most of these define the future to be shapable, however, a few sentences describe the future as fixed, in some cases even something that one must adapt to. The phrase 'ever changing' future also appears, along with a future that can be explored. Hence, all possible interpretations of the future appear in the sentences, although the shapable approach is the most prevalent one.

In conclusion, the personal future agency frame is mostly concerned with the students' professional success, in which the students are primarily the active agents. To achieve their future success, they are mostly given educational tools and access to networks.

'Adapting' frame
The adapting agency frame is the least frequent, it contains only 22 sentences. Here, the active agents are mainly institutional actors, however, the students and in a few cases 'the future leaders' appear as well.

The object of adjustment is mainly the future itself, or its different aspects (like 'future of business' or 'future of work and technology'). Among the objects of adaptation, we could also find those changes and challenges which appear in relation to the business worlds. Like in this statement from QUT Business School at Queensland University of Technology, Australia: "We take time to understand what future entrepreneurs need to develop their business ventures, as well as their study success."

The tools of the adjustment are not really thematized. Where they are mentioned, they cover mainly skills and knowledge (like 'with the analytical skills', 'understand what future entrepreneurs need') and a few school-related devices, like curriculum, or program.

In accordance with these characteristics, the painted future picture (which again is a rather underdeveloped area, appears less than half of the sentences) shows mainly a knowable, although changing, not stable future (e.g., 'changes the future will certainly bring', 'anticipate change in their future working environments'). Although future is delineated as something recognisable and understandable, and changing, it is rarely pictured as something which can be shaped by the involved agents. That is, if the future is changing, it is not shaped by the schools or the students.

All in all, this is a rather passive agency frame, where the future is mainly the object of recognition, understanding and knowledge, not an entity which can be shaped and affected by the actors of the higher education. However, if some activities occur, they are provided mainly by the schools themselves using skills and knowledge or school-related instruments to cope with the future and its change.

Discussion

In the following discussion section, we relate our findings to the broader theoretical and empirical discourse, as well as attempt to contextualise them in social and economic changes. Accordingly, we will focus on four main topics: (1) the issue of different future forms, (2) the topic of relationality, (3) the question of innovation (or traditionalism) in educational matters, (4) and the issues of personal and organisational futures and their relationships to responsibility.

As for different forms and formulations of the term future, we could see that there is quite a diverse array of future-types in the theoretical and empirical academic discourse. Nevertheless, in this discourse we could not identify clear future forms or categories in relation to the term. The reason for this is that in the discourse it remained mostly underspecified what the future is.

Following the argument of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), based on our findings, we can claim that the future is an essential element in the discursive construction of agency. Business schools use this expression often and these sentences also contain an agentic character. Nevertheless, what these institutions mean by the term future it is rather ambiguous. In most cases, other parts of the future related sentences are more specified in terms of actors, goals, and tools, while the term 'future' is not elaborated or defined in any way. That means that we could not use the orderly theoretical categories to neatly separate different forms of the future and we could only code latent content in this regard.

We can presuppose that this is not an omission on behalf of the business schools. From a discourse strategic point of view, when an expression's meaning is fuzzy that might mean that it is left deliberately open. In other words, it can mean anything and everything and different readers might interpret it differently according to their own perspectives. Similarly, future can be seen as an empty token in this regard. This result is in line with one of our former papers analysing the usage of the term sustainability where the meaning of this latter expression is also fuzzy and undetermined. This shows that business schools utilise these terms (Csillag et al., 2022) in a strategic manner, harnessing their power to create a positive organisational impression while leaving their actual meaning to the imagination of their stakeholders.

In the conceptual background, we discussed the relational approach to agency. According to this viewpoint, actors cannot be understood as bounded unified entities but only in relation to each other. Agency, then, is not an

individual attribute, since interactants can only mobilise agency located in their web of relations (Gundersen, 2021). Moreover, from the point of view of relational sociology, relations are not equal in terms since certain actors are more powerful relative to other parties (Burkitt, 2016). In this discourse the business schools themselves are the most active agents. This is understandable regarding the genre of the gathered texts, i.e., organizational introductory texts. However, the second most active group, namely the students, are often defined as being in relation to their school (implied actors), and their (future) agency is granted insofar as they participate in the activities offered by the institutions. So, even in sentences where students have agency to act on, shape or adjust the future, schools are at the background to provide them the necessary 'tools' (skills, pieces of knowledge, connections) to do so. This leads us the next point, that is whether schools offer a future-oriented innovative education or not.

As for the issue of innovative educational offering, we can say that using the term future is also employed in order to create the impression that the business schools are future-oriented, innovative institutions. Under closer scrutiny, however, business schools seem quite traditionalist as far as the involved actors, tools and goals are concerned. As for the actors involved, while XXIst century HEIs can be understood as open and networked organisations, the sentences examined shows a limited and habitual set of actors involved, that is, students, teachers and the school itself. Concerning the tools and goals, these are also located in the conventional academic field emphasising the importance of skills and knowledge (these can be both tools and goals). This is especially true for the preparing, exploring and adapting frames, while the others (responsibility, shaping and personal future) are relatively more open for interpretation and less academic in their orientation.

Lastly, we focus on the issues of personal and organisational futures and their relationships to responsibility. As we point out above, in the personal future frame, students are mostly understood as subjects who are first and foremost preoccupied with developing their professional selves. When the discourse focuses on future attributes of students the most frequent terms used are related to success and professionalism. While responsibility is present in the discourse, this is mainly interpreted at the level of the institutions themselves (see below), neither individual responsibility nor ways to develop this through education appear in the sentences examined. In line with this, the expression 'responsible leader' is also understood in relation to the business context. So, responsibility is mainly defined through an economic viewpoint (please see Csillag et al., 2022 for similar results as far as the term sustainability is concerned). Responsibility is limited to this field of life and to a particular role (business leader) and not cultivated in students to become a general and permanent character trait. This result is in line with previous research (Clegg, 2010; Matus & Talburt, 2015).

From these results, it seems that business schools' seemingly only educational aim is to create individual trajectories into the future (De Saint-Georges, 2012) providing the means for successful professional lives. Other educational aims such as the development of ethical judgements related to professional socialisation, or the development of critical consciousness through subjectivation (i.e., development of unique personalities separate from cultural and professional expectations; see Biesta, 2010) do not appear. This is in line with Clegg's (2010) diagnosis on the primacy of employability in HE which can only be understood at a personal, individualised future level, leaving no room for other educational aims.

As far as responsibility as a collective trait of organisation is concerned, this expression does appear in the sentences examined especially in relation to other terms such as diversity, equality and sustainability. However, similarly to the personal future frame, the responsibility frame is also defined and interpreted in relation to business contexts. Moreover, what organisations understood by the term responsibility is not specified, remaining general and vague. This is similar to what Yu and Bondi (2019) have found in CSR reports, where actions (predictions) were underspecified and organisations utilised commissive statements instead. However, the question remains whether the appearance of this frame in the discourse signifies a general shift towards a more responsible operation or just 'lip service' paid (Painter-Morland et al., 2016) in response to business school critiques following the economic crises of the last decades (see for example: Giacalone & Wargo, 2009). Further research initiatives can map changes in future-related discourses of business schools to see whether issues about collective futures such as responsibility and sustainability gain momentum in the coming years.

Notes

1. This paper was prepared as part of the project 'Agency in higher education – from individual to global level' funded by National Research, Development and Innovation Office, Hungary (K142227).

2. We utilise the term in relation to Goffman's (1959) concept on how actors attempt to shape the impression they make on others. This can also be interpreted at an organisational level.

3. The general description of the corpus, the frequency and co-occurences of the agency frames and the identified discursive legitimation strategies can be found in Géring et al., 2022.

4. One possible explanation for this 'underspecification' is that business schools define their understanding of the future in other organisational documents. This (i.e. how futures are described in organisational policy documents) can be the subject of further research intiatives. Nevertheless, as far as this paper is concerned, if we here focus on external communication and look at the matter from the perspective of readers, we can state with confidence that the term is relatively underdefined compared to other parts of the sentences.

5. Texts sometimes mentions experts but more often than not it is not clear whether they are internal experts (i.e., teachers) or external specialists.

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