
Deconstructing ‘Aspiration’: UK policy debates and European policy trends

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ABSTRACT Strategies of ‘employability’ and ‘activation’ are increasingly favoured in the European Union policy context. These strategies are aimed at fostering inclusion by stressing the responsibility of the individual to participate in education and employment. Similar tendencies can be observed in the United Kingdom (UK) over the last decade, among them a debate on raising young people’s aspirations. The article reports first findings from a research project on the construction of ‘aspiration’ in and through policy debates in the United Kingdom. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concepts of Archaeology and Genealogy, policy documents were analysed for the discursive strategies they employ. The analysis suggests that the debate on ‘aspiration’ constructs young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as deficient, conflates economic and social equality discourses and individualises structural problems. These discursive strategies mirror tendencies that can be observed in strategies of activation and employability in the United Kingdom and the European Union. Focusing on ‘aspiration’ can be regarded as a way to prepare young people for the responsibility to actively pursue labour market participation at an even earlier stage.

Introduction: the discovery of ‘aspiration’

The United Kingdom (UK) has seen an increasing number of debates around young people’s educational and occupational ‘aspirations’ over the last few years. Reports, policy documents and political speeches assert a ‘poverty’ or ‘lack’ of aspiration, especially among so-called disadvantaged young people (Archer et al, 2010). The debate is accompanied by initiatives aiming to ‘raise’ and ‘increase’ the aspirations of this group of young people (see, for example, Communities and Local Government/Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2008; DCSF, 2009; Cabinet Office, 2009). Ideas about ‘aspiration’ can be found in policies concerned with widening participation in post-16 education and higher education as well as in policies tackling social disadvantage more generally. The rationale that underpins these debates is the increasing demand for a more highly educated and skilled workforce in a knowledge-dependent economy.

The call for making young people fit for a changing labour market is not new. After the Second World War there was a lively debate on the new demands of a growing economy (Ball, 2008). The discussion centred on the problems of low educational participation of certain societal groups, especially working-class children (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 1954, 1963). Based on the assumption that unrealised potential could be tapped, policy initiatives focused on improving and widening educational provision for these groups. The historical perspective raises the question about the specific character of the ‘aspiration debate’. Is it simply a repetition of old debates under different social conditions or is it fundamentally new? Why are not-so-new issues addressed in this new fashion, namely by making ‘aspiration’ problematic? How is the idea of aspiration related to wider discourses and trends in policy at national and transnational level?

In seeking to address these questions, a discourse analysis of policy documents from the United Kingdom was undertaken. Inspired by the approaches of Michel Foucault, it aimed to understand the structure and logic of the debate on aspiration as well as gauge how the problematisation of 'aspiration' is related to the specific 'historical' situation of the present.[1] Locating the discourse on aspiration in the context of policy debates at a national and European level allowed for discussion of the relevance of such a policy within complex power relations.

The attempt to contextualise the rise of the concept of 'aspiration' in the United Kingdom is based on the assumption that policy is increasingly influenced by a European dimension. Although this is not understood as a straightforward top-down implementation process, it is assumed that the European Union (EU) has an 'agenda-setting' function (Biesta, 2006) and provides the terms and concepts that national policy actors draw upon (Nóvoa, 2002; Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2004). It is the concern of this article to identify these overarching 'higher morals' which guide policy making at a national and supranational level. The article argues that the discourse around aspiration in the United Kingdom shares key characteristics with policies of activation and employability which can be found across EU member states.

The article starts out by giving a brief description of the latest trends in social inclusion policies in the European Union and in the United Kingdom. The subsequent methodology section introduces the concepts of Archaeology and Genealogy and explains how they were applied to the analysis of policy documents. The findings are presented as three themes, which are then merged into 'discursive strategies'. The article concludes by offering some thoughts on the role that the debate on 'aspiration' plays in national and wider policies.

European Strategies of Social Inclusion

The inclusion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds has become a priority on the agenda of the European Union (Walther et al, 2006). Although traditionally collaborating in economic matters, the European Union has incorporated a social dimension since the late 1980s. It is still a matter of debate whether the economic or the social dimension should dominate EU policy and to what extent the two principles can be reconciled (Weil et al, 2005). The term 'European Social Model', combining the aims of economic growth and social cohesion, is an attempt to overcome this tension (Jepsen & Serrano Pascual, 2005). However, advocates for a more social Europe see policy as dominated by the economic agenda (Weil et al, 2005).

One indicator for the dominance of the economic agenda is the observation that employment has been placed at the core of policies of inclusion and combating unemployment is their foremost aim (Nóvoa, 2002). Central to this endeavour are the strategies of employability and activation (Goetschy, 1999), principles which stress the responsibility of the individual to adapt to labour market demands. Employability can be regarded as the more general strategy aimed at increasing people's readiness to acquire the qualities that are needed for the labour market. This usually involves acquiring knowledge and skills, which makes employability the link between employment and education (Nóvoa, 2002).

Strategies of activation, by contrast, are more specifically targeted at groups which are excluded from labour market participation (Lindsay, 2007). Among them are young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not in work or education and who are regarded as at risk of becoming long-term unemployed (Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2004; Weil et al, 2005). Policies around activation are usually built on the two principles of 'demanding' and 'enabling'. While, on the one hand, individuals are made more attractive to employers through training and financial incentives, they are also expected to increase their job search activity (Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl, 2008).

Although activation strategies take on different forms in different nation-states, they have some principles in common.[2] Firstly, they are targeted at individuals through demanding a change of behaviour, motivation and attitudes. Furthermore, they bring with them a moralisation of the contract between the citizens and the state (Serrano-Pascual, 2007). Both employability and activation strategies can be seen as individualising responsibility for economic participation. While employability is tied to educational policies such as lifelong learning, strategies of activation are to be seen in the context of changing welfare states.

The trends in European social inclusion policies can be related to wider policy discourses. Particularly influential is the discourse around the 'knowledge economy' and its need of a highly skilled and adaptable workforce. Like other concepts at a European level, the 'knowledge economy' seems to have acquired the status of a 'magical concept' that appears to provide universal solutions (Nóvoa, 2002). Although several authors have criticised the discourse's inherent assumptions [3], they seem to remain unquestioned by policy makers. Policies on social inclusion that promote a 'knowledge economy' suggest individual adaptability and up-skilling as the cure for persisting social and economic exclusion and disadvantage. In most member states of the European Union these discourses go alongside the adoption of 'Third Way' politics with the result that governments adhere to free market principles and at the same time actively interfere with labour market processes (Weil et al, 2005).

The subsequent section will outline the developments in social inclusion policies in the United Kingdom since the Labour government came into power in 1997, followed by an analysis of the discourse on 'aspiration' in this context.

The UK Background: equal opportunities and economic prosperity

Among the EU countries the United Kingdom is one of the states that has embraced Third Way politics. Over the last decade, the Labour government increasingly integrated social and labour market policies, both of which can be seen to be dominated by economic principles (Ball, 2008). Participation in the labour market was regarded as the golden way to social inclusion. Since the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government came into office in May 2010, this trend has intensified. The government places an even stronger emphasis on labour market participation as the duty of the individual. One example is the increasing pressure on welfare claimants to accept job offers if they do not want their benefits removed. The 'willingness to work' has become a criterion for receiving state support (see, for example, Department for Work and Pensions, 2010).

By drawing on the knowledge economy discourse and the resulting need to invest in human capital, the Labour government made education the key to integrating individuals in the labour market. This is particularly visible in policies targeting young people's transitions from compulsory education to post-16 destinations. Similar to other EU member states, welfare reform in the United Kingdom has increasingly embraced activation strategies over the last decade. Here, a concern with long-term personal development of young people goes alongside a more coercive approach with a focus on quick labour market integration (Lindsay et al, 2007).

Among the policies are several strategies geared towards young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, usually subsumed under the heading of promoting 'equal opportunities'. They take different groups of young people as their starting points. One strand is targeted at young people who are 'excluded' from employment, post-16 education or training or are considered to be 'at risk' of becoming so. A second group of initiatives focuses on increasing the participation of under-represented groups in higher education. The 'NEET strategy' falls into the first group. It aims to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) by supporting the transition from pre- to post-16 education and providing opportunities for training, supported employment or volunteering (Scottish Executive, 2006; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). Similar measures were adopted by the 'New Deal for young people', a branch of the 'New Deal' programme which was launched in 1998 and can be seen as the major activation policy in the United Kingdom (Lindsay, 2007). It comprises of a number of measures, such as subsidised employment, education and voluntary work with the aim of integrating unemployed young people into the labour market.

In contrast to the concern with immediate labour market integration of young people regarded as 'at risk', 'Widening Participation' aims at incentivising and enabling young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in higher education. One example is the England-wide programme AimHigher, which includes activities such as summer schools and mentoring schemes (Riddell, 2010). Viewed in the light of the European strategies of employability and activation, 'Widening Participation' is closer to employability, because it emphasises education as a way to employment. While the 'New Deal' can be seen as a decided activation strategy, the 'NEET

strategy' incorporates both principles, aiming at immediate labour market inclusion as well as providing young people with skills and education.

The debate on young people's aspirations is a central piece of discourse in policies on social inclusion. The remainder of the article will concentrate on the analysis of this particular debate. The next section will describe the methodological approach that was used to analyse policy documents, followed by a presentation of the findings under thematic headings and identification of 'discursive strategies'.

Methodology

The analysis undertaken for this article draws on principles derived from Michel Foucault's approaches of Archaeology and Genealogy. Archaeology is attributed to Foucault's work during his 'structuralist' phase and can be seen as an effort to 'excavate' discursive structures that have grown over time (Mills, 2003). Genealogy, by contrast, which was developed by Foucault in his later studies, has a focus on the historical process in which these discursive structures developed within specific power relations (Henriques, 1998; Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Archaeology has been described as offering 'a snapshot' while Genealogy is concerned with 'the processual aspects' (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). For the purpose of this article, principles from Archaeology and Genealogy were used. It is argued that a combination of both allows an insight into both the constitution of discourse and its embeddedness in social relationships (Carabine, 2001).

In the field of policy analysis, some authors have made use of Archaeology to identify the parameters that lead to the rise of a policy problem (see, for example, Scheurich, 1994; Gale 2001). Genealogical analyses are usually concerned with illuminating the historical development of policy and its entanglement with power. Often, a genealogical perspective is adopted to look at micro-processes of policy production, including the role of the actors and institutions involved (Carabine, 2001; Gale, 2001).

In this article archaeological and genealogical principles were drawn on to inform the intra-textual analysis. Particular analytic lenses were derived to deconstruct policy documents. Drawing in particular on the frameworks by Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2008), Willig (2008) and Carabine (2001), the analysis interrogated policy texts for their discursive features. This included identifying how 'objects' and 'subjects' are constructed in the policy texts, how 'problems' and 'solutions' are defined and which 'morals and logics' underpin the argument. In order to illuminate how policy shapes the perception of reality, the analysis also attended to contradictions and silences in the texts. In a second step, the findings were synthesised in order to identify overarching 'discursive strategies' (Carabine, 2001). Discursive strategies can be understood as ways in which discourses make sense of a 'problem' at a certain time. They shed light on the role these discourses play in a wider social context.[4]

Policy documents from the whole of the United Kingdom were analysed.[5] The sample included government reports, discussion papers and speeches. Within these texts 'aspiration' may be the central topic or it may feature as one strand or argument. The findings from the analysis were grouped into three themes: 'a debate on social inequality', 'promoting meritocracy and social mobility' and 'a focus on psychological dispositions'. These will be presented in the following before arriving at 'discursive strategies' and conclusions.

A Debate on Social Inequality

The debate on aspiration can be regarded as a particular way to address the problem of persisting social disadvantage. Most documents start with describing a vicious circle in that socially disadvantaged young people 'underachieve' in education, which leads to fewer chances on the labour market and thus to unfavourable later life outcomes:

Young people's aspirations – the goals they set for the future, their inspiration and their motivation to work towards these goals – have a significant influence both on their educational attainment and their future life outcomes. (Communities and Local Government/DCSF, 2008, p. 5)

Educational and career aspirations developed during adolescence can have lifelong significance, influencing future occupational outcomes. (Schoon & Parsons, 2002 cited in Communities and Local Government/DCSF, 2008, p. 9)

It is the 'lack of aspiration' or 'low aspiration' in young people that is problematised in this circle of disadvantage. The logic of the documents suggests that if 'aspiration' could be 'raised', educational achievement and later life success would follow.

Most of the documents state explicitly that the young people addressed are those from disadvantaged backgrounds or disadvantaged communities. One report strikingly links 'low aspiration' to socially disadvantaged young people. It constructs young people with a middle-class background as seeing their aspirations 'blocked', whereas other young people 'simply do not believe that they will ever progress' (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 7). This distinction can be interpreted as what Foucault called 'dividing practices': the objectification of individuals by practices such as classification (Foucault, in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). According to Foucault, dividing practices are a form of exerting power and have consequences for the ways subjects perceive themselves. Labelling people as having 'low aspirations' suggests a deficit view and could have a disempowering effect on individuals.

Some documents further differentiate the group of socially disadvantaged young people by identifying particularly problematic sub-groups:

White young people have lower educational aspirations than most other ethnic groups. Similarly, the educational attainment of white boys is failing to improve at the rates of most other ethnic groups. (Communities and Local Government/DCSF, 2008, p. 8)

The quote shows how social disadvantage is gendered and 'ethnicised'. The problematisation of boys reflects a general trend in educational debates to focus on negative educational experiences and outcomes of boys (Epstein et al, 1998).

Regarding the causal relationship between social and spatial disadvantage and aspiration, the policy documents usually draw on the existing research evidence in the form of large-scale quantitative studies. This body of literature sees the family – and in some cases neighbourhood culture and socialisation – as the crucial environment for determining aspiration:

Parental attitudes and circumstances play the most influential role in the formation of a child's aspirations, especially in the early years ... Parents' attitudes are informed by the society that they live in. (Communities and Local Government/DCSF, 2008, p. 12).

Although the material realities of social-spatial disadvantage, such as financial hardship, poor housing conditions, and restricted access to services, are mentioned in some texts, no direct impact is seen on young people's aspirations. Social disadvantage is described as exerting its impact mediated through cultural and psychological phenomena such as attitudes.

The tendency towards culturalising and psychologising the 'aspiration problem' also becomes apparent in the solutions that are promoted by the policy documents. The measures to 'boost' and 'raise' 'aspiration' are mainly targeted at changing attitudes. However, the suggested interventions differ in starting point, context, target group and type. While some of the documents aim at local contexts and parents, most policy suggestions address the young people directly, usually via initiatives in schools. The measures also differ in the degree of their invasiveness. While most documents envisage the provision of additional and more 'individually tailored' guidance, information and support, there was also one case in which the 'behaviour change' of whole communities is promoted (Communities and Local Government/DCSF, 2008).

Promoting Meritocracy and Social Mobility

The value of meritocracy, i.e. the idea that people can achieve occupational and social positions regardless of their origin, is prominent in all the studied documents. In some it is explicitly stated as a goal: 'We want to see a meritocracy, where individuals make the most of the opportunities open to them' (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 40). In contrast to traditional definitions, this text defines the concept of meritocracy not as a system providing equal opportunities but as a situation in which individuals are responsible for taking them. Realising meritocracy means promoting social mobility: 'The UK has not achieved as much in terms of social mobility as comparable countries.

We believe, however, that there are new opportunities to be grasped for a second great wave of social mobility in the UK' (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 40).

The promotion of social mobility is legitimised by both drawing on ideas of social justice and economic necessity. The emphasis is on the latter in that by subscribing to the discourse of the knowledge economy, the texts construct the need to increase the number of highly skilled people in the United Kingdom. Whether all the highly skilled people will eventually obtain adequate positions is not clear. Some documents state explicitly that the economy needs a broader range of people to choose from: 'It is not just in the country's interest for all the professions to fish in a wider pool of talent. It is in the professions' own interest too' (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 8). The call for more qualifications implies that young people from groups that traditionally have had jobs which required little formal education are supposed to 'do better'. Education is seen as the key driving force in the efforts to increase social mobility. However, young people are expected to be willing to take up the chances to participate and succeed in education. In the equation of ability plus achievement equals participation in the labour market and positive life outcomes, 'aspiration' can be regarded as the missing variable.

Yet, the documents vary in what they regard as desirable and achievable for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some documents aim at raising their aspiration to participate in higher education whereas others promote vocational routes as a 'realistic' goal for this group of young people: 'Vocational and applied options can help engage them and mentoring can help realign their aspirations' (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). The tension between 'aiming high', on the one hand, and aligning one's goals to reality, on the other, is striking. It certainly echoes some of the literature that assumes that aspiration is not enough but has to be matched with expectation and the ability to pursue one's goals (Smith-Maddox & Wheelock, 1995; Cowley et al, 2003). It could be interpreted as implicitly echoing the old idea that there are 'certain positions' for 'certain people'. Some documents do make clear that there are different slots in the labour market that have to be filled: 'Not everyone can, or needs to, get academic qualifications ... we need cleaners as well as brain surgeons' (Ipsos MORI, 2007, p. 48,).

While focusing on different sections of the labour market, all documents emphasise the importance of economic participation in that the ultimate point of having high aspirations is to be employable. Promoting 'aspiration' seems to fit two purposes: meeting the demand for a more highly skilled workforce and bringing people into employment. The latter is presented not only as an economic goal but as one of social justice.

In the debates on 'aspiration' economic discourses and discourses of equal opportunity come together. This can be seen as a case of 'discursive conflation' (Gillies, 2009). By conflating two discourses one serves to mask the other; here, the economic agenda comes in the guise of rhetoric about equality of opportunity and meritocracy (see also Radnor et al, 2007).

A Focus on Psychological Dispositions

As shown, the policies of 'raising aspiration' have a strong tendency to promote cultural and psychological explanations and solutions to persisting inequalities. Although reference is made to the material conditions in which young people grow up, these circumstances are not addressed by the proposed measures. Instead, they include guidance, information, and behaviour change – solutions that are targeted mainly at individuals or their families. This observation can be interpreted in the light of a more general shift in policy towards the responsibility of individuals for their life outcomes and their social situation (Kelly, 2001; Bradford & Hey, 2007; Ball, 2008). From a Foucauldian perspective, absences in discourses tell much about the power relationships that are involved (Carabine, 2001).

The explanations and solutions for the 'aspiration problem', however, are not only individualising; aspiration itself is regarded as a personal character trait. The term has its roots in psychology where levels of aspiration used to be measured (Quaglia & Casey, 1996). In the policy documents (low) 'aspiration' is often associated with other personal qualities: 'Inspiration, information, self-esteem and self-efficacy are all important components of high aspirations' (Communities and Local Government/DCSF, 2008, p. 10). Since self-esteem, self-efficacy and similar terms stem from a psychological discourse, individuals who lack them are seen as abnormal.

While some documents embrace this logic more firmly than others by advocating behavioural and attitudinal change, all seem to follow a mechanistic assumption that 'aspiration' can be 'boosted', 'lifted' or 'raised' by isolated measures. This certain type of (behaviourist) psychology is reminiscent of the simplistic psychological concepts embraced in recent management approaches.

Framing the social inequality discourse in pathologising terms draws attention towards the individuals' responsibility for success and provides a starting point for policy intervention. 'Aspiration' is therefore constructed as an individual quality, which is not static and can be influenced by policy interventions.

Discursive Strategies

It was possible to identify three discursive strategies by bringing together the insights from the in-depth document analysis. The first discursive strategy that can be identified is the construction of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as deficient. By attributing a 'lack of aspiration' to this group, the young people are measured against a normalised standard of 'high aspiration'. This standard is normalised in the taken-for-granted transitions of young people from middle-class backgrounds. By focusing on psychological features such as 'aspiration' alongside 'self-esteem', 'confidence' and 'self-belief', educational attainment and later life success are constructed as being dependent on intra-personal dispositions. The logical conclusion is to intervene in young people's attitudes and behaviour through policy measures.

Entangled with the construction of deficiency, the discursive strategy of individualising social problems was identified. As shown above, unequal outcomes are explained by emphasising the impact of cultural and socialisation influences. If material constraints are mentioned, they are not addressed by the proposed policy solutions, which tend to focus on young people's attitudes and behaviour. The texts not only regard the individual as the starting point for interventions, but also convey a message of individual responsibility for educational and later life success. By focusing on aspiration as the will to achieve, the texts call on individuals to make the most of both their personal talents and the opportunities that are provided by society.

Conflating the economic agenda with an equal opportunity discourse was identified as a third discursive strategy. By drawing on the discourse of the 'knowledge economy', the policy texts construct a scenario of an increasing economic demand for more and optimised human resources. This is translated into efforts to raise educational outcomes in forms of achievement and qualifications. In order to have more people meet this demand, a second discourse is drawn upon: equal opportunity and social mobility. Young people whose families have not previously participated in certain levels of education and subsequent positions should 'do better'. According to meritocratic values, everybody can achieve according to their talents, regardless of social origin. Yet, according to the documents, it is not enough to simply provide opportunities for upward social mobility; young people should want to achieve, i.e. be aspirational. Here, this third strategy intersects with the strategy of individualisation: making use of the opportunity to be socially mobile is not only described as a policy issue but as a responsibility of the individual.

Conclusion

The discursive strategies identified in the documents on 'aspiration' share several characteristics with the strategies of employability and activation which are adopted in social inclusion policies at national and European level. All are based on the idea of the active individual who is responsible for participating in society – participation in which is predominantly constructed in economic terms.

Constructing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as deficient by attesting to their 'low aspirations' has parallels with social inclusion policies that take 'excluded' groups as their starting point for interventions, rather than labour market structures. Much like educational achievement is sought to be boosted through raising young people's aspirations, activation and employability strategies are directed at up-skilling and training individuals. As persons from disadvantaged backgrounds are constructed as having a 'lack', tackling social disadvantage becomes the task of the individual.

Both debates in the United Kingdom and at European level draw on the discourse around the demands of the so-called knowledge economy when promoting the acquisition of more skills and educational credentials. Two solutions appear to be offered at the same time: meeting perceived economic demands and fostering social inclusion through social mobility. However, it remains questionable if equal outcomes can be realised on a broad basis if structural causes of inequality remain unchanged.

The tendency of the 'aspiration debate' to individualise structural problems and solutions echoes trends in economic and social policy in most European states. Social inclusion is defined in terms of labour market participation and unemployment is tackled by activating the (potential) individual workers to become more employable. As observed in the documents on aspiration, this means that not only are the structural causes of exclusion disregarded, but also the solutions become the 'moral duty' of the individual. While strategies of activation focus on unemployed young people, efforts to 'raise aspiration' address young people who are still in education. Thus, the call for 'aiming high' reflects a tendency to prepare young people for an active role in the labour market at an even earlier stage.

While social inclusion strategies in the United Kingdom during the 1950s and 1960s took place in a time of economic prosperity, the aspiration debate is embedded in a context of economic crisis and reduced public spending. Efforts to raise aspirations could therefore be seen to be shifting both problems and solutions for this situation to the individual. The critical reading of policy resonates with Raco's (2009) assertion that the recent 'politics of aspiration' mark a fundamental shift in the relationship between state and individual and create new forms of subjectivity. As the look at social policies across Europe has shown, citizens can no longer expect the state to provide for them in the way that it has done previously, and they have to take a greater responsibility. This self-reliance is supposed to be guaranteed through constituting citizens who display an aspirational orientation to economic participation.

Notes

- [1] Foucault called his studies 'histories of the present', arguing that only by looking at the past, could the present be understood (Oksala, 2008).
- [2] Under the heading 'policy convergence', there has been a debate on the question of how differently or similarly member states implement EU policy (see, for example, Starke et al, 2008; Mailand, 2008). With respect to 'activation strategies', Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl (2008) challenged the 'traditional' classification of activation policy models and argued for 'contingent convergence'. Other authors admit an increasing hybridisation of national policy while maintaining the view that due to specific institutional agreements national policies are influenced by the European level in different ways (Serrano Pascual, 2007).
- [3] The debate around the demands of the knowledge economy has been criticised as a myth (Thompson, 2004). The financial returns of up-skilling are questioned at both national and individual level. Several authors show that EU countries do not gain an advantage through knowledge. It is also doubted that there is a linear relationship between the acquisition of educational merits and monetary rewards (Brown et al, 2008; Souto-Otero, 2010).
- [4] Some scholars working in the Foucauldian tradition do not consider a distinction between discourse and context as valid (see, for example, Kendall & Wickham, 1999). In this article it is argued that contextualisation avoids too narrow a focus on the linguistic and makes the impact of power visible (Hook, 2001).
- [5] The different countries in the United Kingdom have different features regarding education policy (Arnott & Menter, 2007). Here it is assumed that the debates can be analysed together for two reasons: firstly, because their socio-economic structure is similar and they are all part of one national economy, and secondly, because many of the documents studied address the United Kingdom as a whole.

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