JOURNAL OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2025.2549937

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# What does it mean? Exploring staff and student understandings of pedagogical buzzwords in Higher Education

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**ABSTRACT**

Many 'buzzwords' are used to describe approaches to teaching and learning in Higher Education, but what do they actually mean? Do students actually need to know about these terms? If so, how should universities communicate this information? Whilst existing studies have been conducted on the interpretations of individual buzzwords in Higher Education, relatively little research has explored how multiple buzzwords are understood and managed within one particular Higher Education institution. This explorative study involved an analysis of public-facing documents at a UK university in order to gather a broad picture of the pedagogical terms used within the institution. The researchers then conducted focus groups with lecturers and students to explore their perspectives of the meanings of four key terms: *student-centred learning*, *inclusive learning*, *independent learning* and *blended learning*. The study found that there was a lack of understanding of some terms, inconsistency of interpretation, and a lack of knowledge on the part of lecturers with regard to how their students understood such terms. Two distinct approaches were suggested regarding how universities could manage staff and student understandings of buzzwords in Higher Education. The first implied the introduction of explicit strategies to help stakeholders reach shared understandings of key terms. The second implied a more implicit approach, in which stakeholders learnt how to operationalise concepts through their practical use. This study provides stimulus for reflection for stakeholders and decision-makers in Higher Education, encouraging them to identify their own approaches to 'terminology management'.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 24 November 2023
Accepted 13 August 2025

**KEYWORDS**
Higher Education; terminology; student-centred learning; inclusive learning; independent learning; blended learning

## Introduction

Higher Education (HE) institutions often rely on particular terminology and concepts to help describe approaches to learning and teaching for students. A multitude of terms are commonly used in HE practices, such as *student-centred learning*, *inclusive learning*, *independent learning* and *blended learning*, among others. This is of course not an

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exhaustive list, but what do they mean, exactly, and not to researchers or textbook writers, but to the teachers and students on the ground?

Such specialist terms may be interpreted in multiple ways in the academic literature (e.g. Bremner 2021; Stentiford and Koutsouris 2021) and on this basis, it seems reasonable to assume that HE staff and students may understand these terms in multiple ways. Unclear messages on what changes mean are often cited as constraints to the implementation of pedagogical innovations (Fullan 2015). In the context of HE, miscommunication and unmanaged or mismatched expectations might lead to issues with student experience and student satisfaction, which are vitally important metrics for university evaluation and decision-making (McLeay, Robson, and Yusoff 2017; Santini et al. 2017). Despite this, to the knowledge of the present authors, to date, there has been a dearth of research that explores how HE staff and students make meaning of such key terms used in HE practice, the extent to which there is consensus in meaning-making of such terms, and perspectives regarding what might be the university approach to 'managing' understandings of such terms. The present study therefore explored the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Higher Education lecturers and students understand common conceptual terms?

(a) How do *lecturers* understand these terms?
(b) How do *students* understand these terms, and what are their expectations of study on the basis of the use of these terms?
(c) How do *lecturers perceive students* understand these terms?
(d) To what extent do lecturer and students' understandings *match or overlap*?

RQ2. How do lecturers and students believe terms should be managed, in order to enhance the student experience?

In the sections that follow, we first outline the theoretical foundations of social constructivism and meaning-making, which underpin ideas behind terms being interpreted within HE. We then contextualise the study by providing a background of the emerging importance of buzzwords in HE in the United Kingdom. Finally, we examine a selection of empirical studies on buzzwords in HE in other countries. The relatively small number of such studies, coupled with limited similar work in the UK context, emphasises the relevance and timeliness of the present study.

## Theoretical framework: social constructivism and meaning-making

When examining understandings of pedagogical buzzwords in Higher Education, an essential theoretical notion is that of 'meaning-making', i.e. how people construct and reconstruct both individual and collective meanings through their experiences over time. Relatedly, constructivist learning theory emphasises that our evolving understandings shape both what we know and how our knowledge structures interpret new experiences

(Bruner 1960; Piaget 1964; Vygotsky 1978). These structures are unique, given that no two individuals perceive or process new information in the same way.

Piaget (1964) identified two cognitive processes central to this meaning-making process: *assimilation* and *accommodation*. *Assimilation* involves integrating new information into existing knowledge structures, while *accommodation* modifies these structures in response to new experiences. Furthermore, it is important to stress that meaning-making does not occur in isolation. Social constructivist theory (Vygotsky 1978) places importance on the role of shared environments in shaping understanding, emphasising the interplay between individual and collective meaning-making. Indeed, knowledge itself has sociocultural and historical roots, and as such, meaning-making must be viewed as a social process influenced by contextual conditions such as time, place, history, and shared interactions (Radović et al. 2023).

Such theoretical perspectives are central to the present study, given its focus on the way students and staff construct individual and collective meanings of common 'buzzwords' relating to their experiences of learning and teaching. We now briefly introduce the background of the UK Higher Education context, and in particular, how recent trends have led to buzzwords acquiring increasing importance.

## Buzzwords in the UK Higher Education context

The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press 2024) defines a *buzzword* as a keyword or phrase that is 'currently fashionable', but also adds that such terms are 'used more to impress than to inform'. The importance and management of buzzwords have been especially prominent in the UK HE context, the focus of the present study, although similar issues will of course be relevant in other countries to varying degrees. In this brief section, we focus on two particularly relevant developments: the regulatory and market environment and the rapid changes to learning and teaching emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Regarding the marketisation of UK HE, the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997) led to the move to student fees and more marketisation in UK HE, as well as arguing for further training and professionalisation of teaching. This led to a higher level of scrutiny regarding the language found in university, programme, and module level documentation. Moreover, since 2015, universities in the UK have been regulated by the Competitions and Markets Authority (CMA). The CMA provides advice to universities (CMA 2023) on consumer law which includes the provision of important information ('material information') to prospective students. In this consumerist and market-driven environment, accurate information about particular courses has become increasingly important for students in order for them to make informed choices and for the universities to be held accountable. As such, there are direct legal and regulatory pressures to communicate relevant information to students and set expectations accurately. Over this period, the embedding of at least initial teaching development and professionalisation has meant some greater exposure to the scholarship of learning and teaching, and the terminology associated with it, to a new generation of lecturers.

Furthermore, with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, universities were forced to make rapid changes to their teaching and learning approaches, in particular with the use of technology and online learning environments. Naturally, this meant the

prior expectations of teaching methods were in many cases not being met, nor possible to meet, and universities had the challenge of managing expectations. In the post-pandemic era, the extent to which many universities have kept aspects of methods, approaches, and lessons learnt is of interest both pedagogically (see e.g. Broadbent et al. 2023), and publicly in the media (see e.g. Standley 2023), and consequently by regulators as well, leading to the Office for Students (OfS) to launch a review of the term *blended learning* (Office for Students OfS 2022). This review took the view that 'a student embarking on a course at university should be able to understand why their course is designed in a certain way and how this is intended to support their learning. It is important that students are clear about the approach so they can plan for it' (p. 16).

These recent developments and uncertainties, with accompanied rapid shifts in experiences of staff and students, means that investigating how the language used to communicate teaching and learning is understood has become increasingly timely and important for institutions. Important questions remain as to what information or terminology students actually need, and how best to communicate this with them; decisions on these types of questions might be subsumed into the phrase we have used in this paper: 'terminology management'.

## Empirical studies on buzzwords in Higher Education

To our knowledge, there have been relatively few empirical studies that have explicitly explored the interpretation and management, of 'buzzwords' in Higher Education specifically (see Stenersen and Prøitz 2022 for a discussion on the use of concepts and ideas in Basic Education). A lack of published literature on the management of buzzwords may be, in part, due to the fact that individual terms may not, themselves, be identified as 'buzzwords'. One interesting recent example is that of Waddington and Bonaparte (2024), who examined the use of the term *compassion* from a UK HE perspective. The authors argued that this term has been used more intensively in HE settings since the Covid-19 pandemic as an 'antidote' (p. 1) to underpinning neoliberal ideologies, where education is primarily framed as a commodity: promoting instrumental and vocational skills at the expense of the broader development of well-rounded persons.

In a South African HE context, Heleta and Dilraj (2024) suggested that buzzwords, in some cases, may be used as 'smokescreens' (p. 1). For example, they argue that the term *decolonisation* has become a popular buzzword in South African HE, but that the term has become relatively meaningless because it is not a strategic priority at most universities and does not feature in the Department of Higher Education and Training's Strategic Plan. Similarly, in the United States, Harris and Patton (2019) argue that since 1989 the term *intersectionality* has become a 'traveling theory' (p. 348) and a buzzword that has moved into and influenced almost every aspect of the education literature, including within HE. Through a summative content analysis of a large body of literature in HE, the authors argue that *intersectionality* 'is regularly situated in research that positions it as little more than a buzzword, limiting the realization of its meaning and commitment for social justice' (p. 365).

Also in the US context, Vuori (2014) conducted a multiple case study based on interview and documentary material examining the meaning of the term *student engagement* within three different HE settings. The study reported differences in social patterns of

meaning-making between universities: one university reported that across its campus there was shared understanding of the concept in one university; in another university the meaning was multiple and ambiguous; whereas in the third university the term was no longer popular and was replaced with alternative concepts. This study highlights that some buzzwords may be interpreted in multiple ways depending on their context of application and further highlights that buzzwords, by their vary nature, may come in and out of fashion. Similarly, in the Chinese context, the study from Gan, Wei, and Yu (2024) identifies that the term *feedback engagement* has become a buzzword in HE; however, the multiple meanings of this term has led to confusion and misunderstanding. Through psychometric tests with 872 Chinese university undergraduate students, the authors identified four dimensions of the term *feedback engagement*: 'behavioural engagement', 'cognitive engagement', 'social engagement', and 'emotional engagement'. This study exemplifies the potential complexity of buzzwords, in respect of the possibility for their multiple interpretations and applications in HE. Finally, the study by Feng et al. (2024) questions whether *metaverse*, as a trending topic in several fields, is a buzzword in education. Through a critical systematic review that examined the conceptual understanding of the use of the term in education, the study identified that the clarity of the meaning of *metaverse* in education will keep evolving along with continued developments in technology. The study thus further emphasises that the meaning of such buzzwords may change over time.

Overall, these studies provide a glimpse of the type of research that has been conducted on buzzwords in HE. Several common themes emerge across these texts, for example that terms may be interpreted differently by different people and across different institutions, or that terms may simply be used as 'soundbites' that seem appealing on the surface, but with little practical meaning on the ground. These studies tended to focus on specific individual terms (*compassion, student engagement* and so on), and although such studies allow a deep exploration into the specific term in question, they are limited to one individual term. In this study, we have taken a different approach: by focusing on a selection of four common terms found within one particular UK-based institution, we sought to explore some of the overriding themes about how buzzwords are used and interpreted (cf. Stenersen and Prøitz 2022 for a comparison of two key terms in basic education). This exploration helped us better understand the institution's approach towards 'managing' terms, which, as established in the previous section, is increasingly important as universities seek to communicate and manage the expectations of their students.

## Methods

The present study employed a small-scale, qualitative, exploratory research approach (Stebbins 2001). The intention was not to provide generalisations, but rather to explore emerging themes relating to how stakeholders interpreted key terms in HE, as well as their perspectives on how such understandings could be managed. The research took place at a UK university. This university was selected because the researchers were based there, enabling a deep familiarity with the institutional context and facilitating access to participants and data collection. Small-scale internal funding was obtained from the same university in order to carry out the research. Owing to busy working schedules and

participant availability, the data collection period spanned between June 2022 and April 2023.

The project initially sought to understand, in rather general terms, the 'terminological culture' of the institution; i.e. what conceptual terms were used in the university to describe teaching and learning practices. To establish this, we conducted an analysis of public-facing institutional documents available on the university website. Such documents were roughly divided into three main types: a) programme-level descriptors; b) module-level descriptors; and c) miscellaneous information found on the institution web site, such as the 'vision' and 'mission' statements.

The focus of the study was on those terms related to pedagogy (i.e. methods and approaches to teaching and learning) and thus searched specifically for words or phrases that preceded the word 'learning' in the documents above. Although there may have been pedagogically relevant terms that we may have missed during this process, we decided that this would give us an overall idea of the types of terms used to describe teaching and learning at the university. Table 1 summarises all terms emerging from the document analysis, in alphabetical order. We did not calculate the numbers of mentions of each term, as we were interested in the breadth of terms used in the university documentation, not which terms were more prominent or important than others.

Having established, very broadly, the terms that were found in the university's documents, we then sought to explore people's interpretations of some of these terms in more detail. We took the decision to focus on four terms that represented a group of very common terms used at the institution, and in particular within the participants' disciplines, namely: *student-centred learning*, *inclusive learning*, *independent learning* and *blended learning*. The aim of the study was not to meticulously debate the meanings of the terms individually, but rather to examine how the participants navigated the use of terms more widely, using these four terms as a stimulus for the discussion.

The specific method we employed to examine participants' perspectives was focus groups, as we felt this would allow a wider range of perspectives to emerge in a more efficient manner than if we had utilised individual interviews. In these sessions, we began by asking participants to provide examples of terms that they had been exposed to at the university. We then showed them the examples from Table 1 and asked them to reflect on which terms they were familiar with. Finally, we proceeded to discuss each of the four terms in more detail. The focus groups were semi-structured, allowing us the flexibility to discuss a range of sub-questions as they emerged. The typical kinds of questions we asked included:

**Table 1.** Terms related to 'learning' found in public-facing documentation at the study institution.

| Terms A-D | Terms E-N | Terms O-Z |
|---|---|---|
| Asynchronous learning | E-learning | Online learning |
| *Autonomous learning* | *Experiential learning* | *Peer learning* |
| *Blended learning* | *Group learning* | *Person-centred learning* |
| *Collaborative learning* | *Immersive learning* | *Personalised learning* |
| *Community learning* | *Inclusive learning* | *Practice-based learning* |
| *Creative learning* | *Independent learning* | *Problem-based learning* |
| *Cross-curricula learning* | *Informal learning* | *Social learning* |
| *Deep learning* | *Interactive learning* | *Student-centred learning* |
| *Digital learning* | *Multimodal learning* | *Work-based learning* |

- What does [*e.g. student-centred learning*] mean? (RQ1a; RQ1b; RQ1d)
- What would be your expectation if you were told that learning would be [*e.g. Student-Centred*]? (RQ1a; RQ1b; RQ1d)
- [For lecturers] How do you think your students interpret the term? (RQ1c; RQ1d)
- [For lecturers] Do you use this term with your students? (RQ2)
- [For students] Do your lecturers use this term with you? (RQ2)
- Do you think it would have been useful for the term to be discussed more explicitly? Why? Why not? (RQ2)

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines as stipulated by the British Educational Research Association (British Educational Research Association 2018), such as ensuring informed and voluntary consent, and strict anonymity and confidentiality protocols. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Faculty Ethics Committee on 13 April 2022. After obtaining ethical approval for the research, we sent an open invitation via email to all staff and students at the University. Participating in the research was on an 'opt-in' basis, and thus it proved challenging to recruit participants, as very few volunteered to participate, and/or those who volunteered were often not available at mutually agreed times. In our experience, this has been a particular challenge in the context being researched: the 'post-pandemic' HE environment in the UK.

A total of 15 participants agreed to take part in the study, comprising 9 members of teaching staff and 6 undergraduate students. Given the researchers' backgrounds in the area of education, most staff and all students came from the School of Education. However, one lecturer from Criminology and another from Psychology also volunteered, thus representing disciplines taught in a similar way and with some degree of overlap of students on certain modules. A total of 5 focus groups were conducted: 3 teacher focus groups (TFGs) and 2 student focus groups (SFGs). A summary of the focus groups and essential characteristics of the participants are included in Table 2.

All focus group data were recorded using Google Meet, and subsequently transcribed by an external company. The data were analysed thematically using QSR NVivo, with all participants anonymised and pseudonyms used for quoting contributions from either the teacher focus groups and the student focus groups. Researcher

**Table 2.** Summary of focus groups and participants in the study.

| Focus group ID | Length | Participants | Participant name (pseudonym) | Gender | Discipline |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TFG1 | 61 mins | Teachers | Brian | M | Education |
| | | | Cassie | F | Education |
| | | | Fiona | F | Criminology |
| TFG2 | 73 mins | Teachers | Barbara | F | Education |
| | | | Caitlin | F | Psychology |
| | | | Evelyn | F | Education |
| TFG3 | 70 mins | Teachers | Alan | M | Education |
| | | | Ethan | M | Education |
| | | | Karen | F | Education |
| SFG1 | 60 mins | Students | Daisy | F | Education |
| | | | Erica | F | Education |
| | | | Eva | F | Education |
| | | | Neil | M | Education |
| SFG2 | 47 mins | Students | James | M | Education |
| | | | Sophie | F | Education |

1 carried out the first round of data analysis independently, creating codes and sub-codes inductively as they emerged. Researchers 2 and 3 then read through the codes created. Finally, all three researchers engaged in a process of constructive dialogue until they agreed on the themes that are presented in this paper.

## Findings

**RQ1.** How do Higher Education lecturers and students understand common conceptual terms?

Participants' understandings of the terms varied considerably, but certain terms appear to have been clearer than others. In some cases, there were differences between the interpretations of the lecturers in comparison to the students; moreover, lecturers' assumptions of how they thought students would interpret terms were sometimes different to the understandings expressed by students in the focus groups.

### *Student-centred learning*

*Student-centred learning* was understood very broadly by the lecturer participants, with one defining the concept an 'umbrella' term (Evelyn, TFG2). Lecturer interpretations varied from:

- A focus on *active participation*: 'focusing on what the student does rather than what the teacher is doing' (Caitlin, TFG2); 'it's not me talking [. . .] but it's them doing' (Cassie, TFG1).
- Developing *autonomy*: 'allowing more autonomous learning' (Ethan, TFG3), 'it's more about them rather than me spoon-feeding' (Evelyn, TFG2).
- Teaching *real-life skills*: 'we prepare students really for life, for when they are out of uni' (Cassie, TFG1).
- *Adapting to learners' needs*: 'designing it around the students' (Barbara, TFG2); 'you have to be prepared to be flexible' (Evelyn, TFG2); including responding to *human needs*: 'you look at the *whole* person' (Barbara, TFG2); 'the emotional dimension' (Karen, TFG3).
- Incorporation of *power sharing*: 'collaboration and dialogue [. . .] students have some control over what they learn as well as how they learn' (Alan, TFG3).

After providing their own understandings of *student-centred learning*, lecturers were asked how they felt students understood the term. Some lecturers openly admitted they had no idea what their students would understand by the term:

> I don't know really. [. . .] I haven't asked them [. . .] I really don't think I have any information at hand that I could say 'they think about it in this way'. (Cassie, TFG1)

One lecturer suggested that students might struggle to put into words the term, especially given its broad nature:

> It could be broadly interpreted [. . .]. And I don't know whether a new student would be able to imagine what that would look like. [. . .] I'm not sure that they would know, if we just put it up on a screen, what *student-centred learning* would be in a university context. (Evelyn, TFG2)

The most common interpretation expected by staff related to *adapting to needs*, in the sense of providing individualised attention to students:

> I think there's possibly an expectation that it would mean individualised, a lot more one-to-one teaching, and focusing on supporting the individual learner. (Caitlin, TFG2)

However, a few lecturers highlighted that the notion of *adapting to needs* through tailored support might be seen in quite a 'consumerist' way in terms of 'student experience' or satisfaction; a transfer of responsibility *away* from them and to the teacher or institution:

> I wonder whether some students might see it as transferring the onus of responsibility away from them and onto the lecturer to support them. (Karen, TFG3)

> That we should answer all their needs and be available 24/7. [. . .] And also I think they interpret that as 'We're paying and therefore we should be getting the most [positive experience]. It should be about us'. (Fiona, TFG1)

Although we were only able to interview a small number of undergraduate students, those we interviewed focused on two main aspects of *student-centred learning*: *adapting to needs* and *power sharing*. Students focused on learning being adapted to them: learning 'tailored to the students' (James, SFG2); 'building everything [. . .] around the student needs rather than the teacher's needs' (Neil, SFG1), with a particular focus on *human needs*: 'teaching is conducted in a way that prioritises the wellbeing of the student' (Daisy, SFG1).

In the sample of students' understandings we gathered, there was no mention of students feeling 'entitled' to a certain student experience given the fees they pay, but there was a clear notion that learning should be built around them: 'it comes from [the students] and is led by them as much as possible' (Sophie, SFG2). Students also highlighted the notion of learner voice and agency: 'the teacher giving the students more freedom or agency to choose' (Erica, SFG1).

In sum, the findings suggest that there was often a lack of consistency regarding lecturer and students' understandings of *student-centred learning*. Moreover, lecturers often had little knowledge of the way students themselves would understand *student-centred learning*.

### *Inclusive learning*

*Inclusive learning* was also understood somewhat broadly by the lecturer participants, for example:

- *Allowing all students to be and 'feel' part*: 'what barriers can I remove?' (Alan, TFG3); 'working together to [. . .] ensure that somebody isn't being excluded' (Barbara, TFG2).

- *Adapting to learners' needs*: 'you can shift and adapt according to the students that you're working with and according to their needs' (Brian, TFG1); 'sessions that are sensitive to the complex learning needs' (Ethan, TFG3).

When lecturers were asked how they felt students would understand the term *inclusive learning*, some suggested that students might find the concept challenging:

> They're not really understanding how that might be in a classroom, or what that might require. [. . .] It's one of the areas that might be often really misinterpreted. (Evelyn, TFG2)

Other lecturers suggested that many students might understand *inclusive learning* in terms of more procedural or instrumental aspects such as changes to assessments:

> I think they've got quite a narrow focus on what it might mean in terms of accessibility, whereas for me, it's more than that. (Alan, TFG3)

Conversely, a view emerging from some lecturers was that students were further ahead of staff in terms of understandings around inclusion (Caitlin, TFG2), for example in relation to more recent social developments such as LGBTQI+ issues and Black Lives Matter (Brian, TFG1).

In terms of how the students we interviewed perceived *inclusive learning*, they began by mentioning the notion of 'inclusion' at a wider university level: 'essentially the idea that the university itself is trying to be inclusive' (Daisy, SFG1). As suggested by some lecturers, students tended not to give very specific procedural examples of *inclusive learning*, but rather provided more broad statements of what made learning 'inclusive'. For instance, they discussed broad interpretations such as the notion that 'education would be accessible by everyone, regardless of their individual needs or characteristics' (Daisy, SFG1), with examples given such as those with Special Educational Needs: 'making sure that they're all in the same classroom and everyone's learning in the same ways' (James, SFG2). There was also a general feeling that students understood *inclusive learning* to imply making learners feel as 'comfortable' as possible:

> Being able to choose content that everyone's comfortable with and making sure we're discussing issues with each other in a kind of sensitive way and making sure everyone has that space within to share their opinions. (Sophie, SFG2)

At the same time, they also suggested that *inclusive learning* implied adapting teaching and learning to *all* people's needs – i.e. not just for those with 'special' or additional needs:

> The only expectation I'd maybe have is that I would be able explain what I needed to learn and then that would be incorporated into how the teaching would be done and then that same thing would happen to everyone in the class. (James, SFG2)

Without entering into more detailed or nuanced debates regarding what is inclusion or inclusive pedagogy, in this study, there seemed to be a certain degree of consistency both between lecturer and students' understandings of the term '*inclusive learning*'.

### *Independent learning*

*Independent learning* was a term for which lecturers offered somewhat concrete understandings; however, there were still multiple interpretations, for example:

- *Students doing things by themselves*: 'more time to work alone and less contact time' (Evelyn, TFG2); 'expecting the students to go and work, without so much guidance' (Karen, TFG3).
- *Going beyond what is prescribed*: 'handing over responsibility [. . .] you're going to have choices now about what you study and the topics that interest you' (Evelyn, TFG2).

For *independent learning*, the overall assumption from the lecturer participants was that their students would have a clear understanding of what the concept meant, but perhaps this might not always be in line with their understandings as lecturers. For example, some lecturers felt that some students would view *independent learning* as merely 'doing things by themselves', which might differ from the more complex expectations of *independent learning* expected by staff:

> They were asking us to give them some questions to answer based on the reading. And that didn't fit with my understanding of *independent learning*, that actually *they* should be taking out what they find interesting on that particular topic rather than me guiding them. (Fiona, TFG1)

Another perceived misunderstanding of *independent learning* was that students would expect to be left to do *everything* themselves:

> I think that there's always the danger [. . .] that students might think, 'I'm expected to do it all myself', and then that can be, you know, quite overwhelming. (Caitlin, TFG2)

When we asked the students what they understood by the term *independent learning*, a range of different perspectives emerged. Two students expressed the more simplistic notion of them 'doing it themselves': 'I would say independent learning is quite straightforward: you're learning by yourself' (James, SFG2). However, other students were able to develop this notion of *independent learning* a little more deeply. For example, Daisy highlighted that *independent learning* implied increased sense of responsibility to ensure they understood ideas or to develop their own ideas:

> 'If it doesn't make sense still, then it's your job to go out there, look it up, do some reading around it'. (Daisy, SFG1)

Building from this, some students pointed out the importance of 'going beyond' what was expected of them:

> *Independent learning* is a necessity as a student to grow and learn. [. . .] You are prompted in directions, and it is giving you the foundation, but it is up to you to then do the independent learning to build up that knowledge. (Neil, SFG1)

Overall, in terms of the students we interviewed, understandings of *independent learning* were quite consistent with lecturers' views. Most students seemed to be aware that the lecturers would not simply 'spoon-feed' them information and recognised they had a broader responsibility, not only to learn by themselves but to go beyond the more foundational content.

### *Blended learning*

The final term we explored with participants was *blended learning*. Although there were slight issues with the similarities and differences between 'blended' and 'hybrid' learning, all lecturers seemed to understand *blended learning* as having some elements of face-to-face teaching and some elements of online learning: 'some of your teaching will be face to face, in a room with human beings, and some of it will be conducted in some way through some online means' (Karen, F3).

The general feeling from lecturers was that students would find *blended learning* easier to navigate than the previous three others, given that it had been given a lot of attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Having said that, there was still some degree of uncertainty regarding what information had actually been transmitted to students:

> I don't know if the students are going to understand coming in until we tell them. And I'm not really sure what they're told, if I'm brutally honest!. (Brian, TFG1)

The students we interviewed confirmed that they had been exposed to the term *blended learning* quite frequently given the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Mostly, students echoed the views of teachers that this would imply a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching:

> Basically it would be a mix of in person and online teaching. [. . .] Some classes will be online, and others will be 'come to campus'. (James, SFG2)

However, as suggested by Brian above, we found that students in both focus groups expressed some degree of uncertainty when it came to *blended learning*. Although the term had clearly been used by various people and documentation during the pandemic, students did not appear to have received totally clear guidance on what *blended learning* meant:

> I would say *blended learning* is probably the *least* clear [. . .] Without that context of it being used so much during the pandemic, I'd have no idea what that would mean. (James, SFG2)

In fact, when asked to define *blended learning*, students put forward a range of diverse ideas, such as blending traditional and more modern pedagogies (Daisy, SFG1) blending the locations of the classroom or learning spaces (Neil, SFG1), or mixing with groups from other disciplines (Eva, SFG1). In the words of one student:

> That term could really mean anything. It could mean 'blended' between two completely different things. (James, SFG2)

The assumption from staff, therefore, that *blended learning* would be a simple and uncontroversial term for students, was not totally accurate.

**RQ2.** How do lecturers and students believe terms should be managed, in order to enhance the student experience?

As exemplified in the last section on *blended learning*, a theme emerging from the focus groups was that, in some cases, there was a lack of clarity in what key buzzwords meant. Several lecturers admitted they did not understand what certain terms referred to:

> I don't understand what *student-centred learning* is. [. . .] *Inclusive learning* and *student-centred learning* [. . .] I was trying to think, 'Oh gosh, what would be the difference?'. (Fiona, TFG1)

> I have no idea what *inclusive learning* means really, no idea whatsoever. (Cassie, TFG1)

In many cases, lecturers highlighted that these terms had not been defined explicitly to them, despite appearing in official university documentation such as the 'mission' statement or module descriptors:

> When you come to teach at university these are all terms that appear somewhere, [. . .] and I don't think there is anywhere that kind of says, 'This is what that means'. [. . .] There is no clear guidance for us when we come in because we're so much more focused on course-specific content. (Fiona, TFG1)

The idea that terms existed but were not explicitly examined, was confirmed by the students, for example in the case of *student-centred learning*:

> I feel like with *student-centred learning*, we've heard of that in the course, but unless my memory's slipping, I don't feel like we've actually discussed in-depth what it actually means [. . .]. It was sort of like a buzzword. We never actually went into it and sat down to actually read or discuss what it actually is, where the concept derives from and things like that. (Daisy, SFG1)

The previous points indicate that whilst terms may be introduced on official documentation, the actual understandings of them may be rather superficial or in the words of one lecturer, 'tokenistic' (Brian, TFG1). This point was further highlighted by Evelyn, who felt that certain terms might be introduced for 'policy speak':

> There'll be lots of references to 'child-led' this and, you know, 'the autonomous child' or whatever, and then when you actually look at what's happening, it might not really be that at all, but it sounds good. It's got 'policy speak' around it, hasn't it? (Evelyn, TFG2)

Several lecturers expressed the idea that some terms, in particular *student-centred learning* and *inclusive learning*, were so broad, and had been so much 'overused', that their meaning had been diluted:

> I think the problem with 'student-centred' and 'child-centred' learning is that it's overused. [. . .] These things can become so common in parlance that they sort of lose their real power and meaning. (Ellie, TFG2)

> They don't mean anything anymore. [. . .] A lot of those terms are too broad to be useful. (Karen, TFG3)

A further point raised was that terms would be interpreted in different ways in different contexts:

> These terms are often nebulous and meaningless outside of a context. [. . .] That's part of the importance of making sure that, where these terms are used, that they are unpacked. (Ethan, TFG3)

Ethan's point about 'unpacking' key terms led us to ask participants whether they felt key terms needed to be introduced and discussed more explicitly. In some cases, and for some terms, participants expressed that they took an active role in discussing terms with students, for example, at the start of the module in terms of 'managing expectations',

'problematising' the concept (Ethan, TFG3) or to establish 'authority as somebody worth listening to' (Alan, TFG3). Indeed, several lecturers expressed that it would be useful to have a more explicit approach to exploring the meanings of pedagogical terms with their students:

> It makes me think how valuable it would be to be more explicit about this, actually. [. . .] Maybe we don't encourage the students to do it enough, like really look at those words. 'That word you've put in your title, what does that word mean?'. (Evelyn, TFG2)

Barbara emphasised that the process of discussing terms should be an ongoing process, especially given the multiple meanings of terms and the constantly changing educational landscape:

> Words are like little mice running around all the time, aren't they? It's like you can't pin them down. So, as soon as you think you know something, it kind of moves. [. . .] I think it's something that requires constant work, when you're trying to find a common language. (Barbara, TFG2)

As a counterpoint, some lecturers highlighted that they would not introduce or discuss certain concepts in such an explicit fashion. For example, Fiona (TFG1) highlighted that she would often mention the terms 'in passing' but that these terms would often be mentioned on the virtual learning environment site. Moreover, some participants reflected that they might employ the strategies involved, but not necessarily explicitly with students. As Karen reflected:

> I tend not to label the kinds of approaches I take with students. Even if I've got a label in my own mind, probably my kind of overarching label to self is 'dialogic' [. . .] but I don't always use that with students. (Karen, TFG3)

Brian made similar points, suggesting that it may not be necessary for terms to be unpacked theoretically, at least with students:

> I don't know to what extent I would use this kind of vocabulary [. . .] I might use these terms with other academics. We've debated a lot about things like *blended learning* and whether or not that actually works, [. . .] but I don't think I've used the word *blended learning*. [with students] (Brian, TFG1)

Perhaps these ideas can be linked to a tendency to avoid telling students 'about' it, and just 'do' it. Moreover, understandably, academics may have tended to focus on the *content* of their teaching, as opposed to *how* they were going to teach it:

> Rather than giving them a term for it, I think it's been more important to set out what it's going to look like. I've never actually directly said to them, 'What do you think *blended learning* is?', because it was kind of 'Let's get into Criminology'. [. . .] I've never asked them, so I don't know. (Fiona, TFG1)

We asked students whether or not, from their perspective, it would have been useful for the university to more explicitly unpack terms. A student in Focus Group 1 expressed that it would be useful:

> If you don't [unpack terms] then it just leaves room for misunderstanding, and I think if you can get a good idea of what you're going to be getting from the beginning then I think you can have a more solid learning experience. (Eva, SFG1)

However, similar to the perspectives of some lecturers, some students expressed that it may not always be necessary for there to be such an explicit unpacking of terms. For example, James described how a more implicit approach of being 'thrown in at the deep end' was sufficient for him:

> I had an assignment last semester. [. . .] The support was there, definitely, but the emphasis was kind of 'just try it out and learn as you go'. [. . .] And at the end of that, I did have some sort of experience of how to do it. [. . .] I feel like it can just be a quick mention, like, 'we're going to teach you like this', but I don't think it needs to be an explicitly explained: 'this is exactly how you need to learn' (James, SFG2)

This perspective was echoed by Sophie:

> Whilst initially I was like 'yes, it would have been really good' [for there to be more explicit unpacking of terms], I think in some ways the *not* defining it was quite helpful. [. . .] Being almost kind of pushed to find my own way of learning, to find what worked for me, has, I think, ultimately helped me in the long run [. . .] It's helped to not be too 'definite' about defining learning. (Sophie, SFG2)

Whilst again only coming from a small sample of students, the final quotes offer an interesting alternative to the idea that HE institutions must spend time explicitly unpacking and explaining key terms.

## Discussion

This exploration of staff and students' understandings of key concepts in Higher Education has provided a variety of themes which may be of interest to HE stakeholders. A key theme emerging from the study was that there was a certain degree of inconsistency, difference in understandings, and in some cases, a complete lack of knowledge of what terms meant, despite them appearing in many public-facing institutional documents. This builds upon previous study findings that specialist terms used in HE may be interpreted in multiple and often contradictory ways over time (e.g. Feng et al. 2024; Gan, Wei, and Yu 2024; Vuori 2014).

In some cases, terms were seen as meaningless 'buzzwords', or as one participant put it, 'policy speak', but without there being an obvious practical purpose for them. These ideas resonate with those expressed in HE settings in other countries, such as Harris and Patton's (2019) analysis of the term *intersectionality* in the United States, and Heleta and Dilraj's (2024) critique of the term *decolonisation* in South Africa. Albeit not in HE context specifically, parallels may be drawn with terms like *student-centred learning* being branded a 'hooray word' (Harber and Davies 1997, 111) in education policy. In other words, terms such as *intersectionality*, *decolonisation* and *student-centred learning* (to name just three examples) may sound very positive and evoke enthusiastic emotions but do not necessarily lead to concrete or practical outcomes. Of course, there may be 'other' value in using such terms (for example, politically or for marketing purposes); and thus, from a somewhat cynical perspective, HE institutions may have good reason to continue including them in their public-facing documents. However, in terms of staff and students' experiences on the ground, this study found that there was a degree of scepticism regarding some of these buzzwords.

From a social constructivist perspective (Bruner 1960; Piaget 1964; Vygotsky 1978), it became evident that students' prior experiences – whether at school, university, or in society – had often not led to a shared understanding of key terms. This lack of 'shared meaning' between staff and students likely stemmed from the absence of meaningful discussions about these definitions. The study revealed instances where lecturers' assumptions about students' understandings were inconsistent with what the students themselves expressed. Such assumptions are unsurprising when there is little dialogue about terms that feature prominently in university documentation. Without these discussions, students are unlikely to reflect on and refine their pre-existing interpretations, hindering the development of a common understanding. Notably, the study highlighted that lecturers often did not know students' perspectives simply *because they had not asked*.

Distinct perspectives emerged regarding whether the university should adopt a more explicit approach regarding students' understandings of key terms. Perhaps inspired by taking part in the study itself, several lecturers expressed that there should be a more explicit approach in terms of exploring with students what such terms meant. At least in theory (Fullan 2015), there would seem to be clear benefits of doing so, as this would potentially lead to more 'shared understandings' that might reduce ambiguity and provide learners with more clarity as they navigate their degrees. We might also link this to the notion of 'learner training' (Wenden 1995) – i.e. if students are expected to be taught, and act, differently in an educational setting, it is reasonable for them to receive at least some degree of training, or awareness raising, on how to act differently under different pedagogical approaches.

On the other hand, several participants suggested that such an explicit approach to 'terminology management' was not necessary. Given the potential critiques of some terms being meaningless 'buzzwords' (e.g. Harris and Patton 2019; Heleta and Dilraj 2024), some participants argued that a more implicit, approach would be sufficient for students to acquire understandings of concepts through practically using them. To a certain extent, this was supported by some students, who cited examples of a) learning by doing, for example by being 'thrown into the deep end'; and b) appreciating being left alone to decide for themselves how to navigate the pedagogical challenges of university life. This is an example of social constructivism but in the sense of people creating their own meanings, often through experiential learning processes (cf. Morris 2019), as opposed to 'being told' in a more prescriptive or behaviourist fashion.

## Theoretical implications

This study further contributes to theoretical understandings of meaning-making in Higher Education by illustrating how pedagogical buzzwords are interpreted through socially constructed processes. Drawing on social constructivist theory (Bruner 1960; Piaget 1964; Vygotsky 1978), the findings reiterate the importance of context, dialogue, and prior experience in shaping individual and collective understandings of key educational terms. The inconsistencies and ambiguities that we found in staff and student understandings suggest that meaning-making around key pedagogical terms is not only variable but may also be under-examined.

Theoretically, this study outlines two distinct pathways through which such understandings may be developed: *explicitly* through discussion and clarification, and *implicitly* through experiential engagement. This suggests a need to refine theoretical models of meaning-making in HE to account for both deliberate and emergent learning processes. Finally, the concept of 'terminology management' introduced in this paper offers a new lens through which institutions might view their role in shaping shared pedagogical language. This might potentially inform future work on institutional communication and educational discourse.

## Practical implications

What could HE institutions do differently in response to the findings of this research? This research cannot, and does not pretend to, provide sufficient data to inform concrete changes in policy. For example, larger scale research would be needed to further examine if a more explicit approach to 'terminology management' would be favoured by university staff and/or students. That said, the themes emerging from the study provide significant scope for reflection and discussion on the part of HE stakeholders and decision-makers. More specifically, we would invite stakeholders to consider the following:

- What terms are we introducing in our public-facing documentation?
- Do we need those terms? i.e. what value is there in including them? To what extent do they support or detract from the provision of 'material information' to help students make informed choices? Could there be any negative consequences in doing so?
- If including these terms within public facing documentation, who are they for? Who is the audience?
- Does there need to be 'shared understandings' between lecturers, students and other stakeholders? Might there need to be 'negotiated' understandings?
- What procedures and/or policies need to be put in place to achieve such understandings?
- Will understandings be standardised across the institution, or will they be context-dependent?
- Is the above the case for all terms, or will certain terms be addressed in certain ways and other terms in alternative ways?

In sum, having examined the use of a range of buzzwords within one particular HE institution, the main contribution of this paper has been to provide a stimulus for further debate and reflection on the role of buzzwords in Higher Education. In particular, we would encourage stakeholders and decision-makers to carefully consider their approaches to 'terminology management' in their institutions.

## Limitations and recommendations for future research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in respect of its explorative nature and sample size. In terms of external validity, it seems important to consider that, whilst the choice was deliberate, this study took place at one UK-based HE

institution, with most participants (and all students) from the School of Education. It is unknown, therefore, if participants at other institutions or from other degree disciplines would have expressed similar findings; moreover, one might expect staff and students at a 'School of Education' to have higher levels of knowledge of pedagogical terms in comparison to other disciplines. Finally, in a voluntary study operating on an 'opt-in' basis, there is always the possibility of participant bias; indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that those participants who did volunteer were particularly interested in the topic, and thus demonstrated a higher-than-average level of engagement.

Future research may seek to address the aforementioned limitations by carrying out similar studies in different institutions, in different degree disciplines and with a higher number of participants. More specific questions could be asked with larger samples: for example, the focus could more on whether or not staff and students value an approach that explicitly engages with HE terminology, or examining and evaluating further in practice the two distinct approaches of explicit vs. implicit strategies to develop mutual understanding. Finally, case study and/or (quasi-)experimental studies could be conducted to report the experiences of different strategies towards 'terminology management'.

## Disclosure statement

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

## Funding

This work was supported by the study University's Internal HEQR Funding 21-22.

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