Brexit metaphors in UK higher education: loss, agency and interconnectedness

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary study examines how senior leaders in UK higher education use everyday metaphors to convey their perspectives on Brexit and its implications. By analysing a corpus of 127 interviews conducted between 2017 and 2019 as part of a larger ESRC-funded project spanning 12 universities across the UK, this research employs critical sociocognitive theories and established metaphor identification methods to systematically uncover and interpret metaphors and metaphor scenarios related to Brexit in higher education discourse. The study reveals that seemingly neutral metaphors such as 'access', 'networks', 'streams', 'links' and 'barriers' carry significant ideological weight, subtly conveying evaluative perspectives that might otherwise remain guarded. These metaphors illuminate deeper and longer-term concerns about interconnectedness, loss of resources, talent and opportunities, and institutional agency within the higher education sector. Notably, the analysis of metaphor scenarios reveals a paradoxical juxtaposition of apprehension and hope, reflecting the complex ways in which university leaders conceptualise and respond to Brexit's uncertainties. By examining everyday metaphor use, this study offers a unique window into how Brexit was understood and framed within UK higher education leadership circles during a critical period of uncertainty. Our findings not only contribute to our understanding of Brexit's impact on UK higher education but also underscore the value of metaphor analysis in elucidating complex sociopolitical issues with likely lasting implications. This calls for further research on Brexit's discourse and effects on higher education while highlighting the crucial role of discourse during major policy shifts.

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Introduction

In the wake of the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and the subsequent UK exit from the EU in January 2020, the UK higher education sector faced multiple challenges stemming from the geopolitical and economic implications of Brexit. EU student enrolments have halved, access to EU research funding has become fraught with uncertainty, the pull of UK institutions on EU researchers and academics has waned and finally, academic collaborations with EU institutions have faced disruption, potentially jeopardising years, and sometimes decades, of productive collaboration in various disciplines (Highman et al., 2023). These effects raise concerns about the general consensus regarding UK higher education as a thriving global brand (Lomer et al., 2018), as well as the kinds of visions and senses of purpose that universities now hold or need to formulate in the post-Brexit era. In this paper, we investigate how those in senior leadership positions within a sector that is vulnerable to Brexit, such as higher education and research, utilised metaphors to comprehend and communicate the process of Brexit and its effects on UK universities and their role in the post-Brexit landscape.

Brexit has been a deeply polarising and divisive political issue (Sobolewska et al., 2020). With the majority of the UK university sector taking a pro-Remain stance (ICEF Monitor, 2016), this necessitated strategic management of public relationships with both the government, which actively pursued the UK's breakaway from the EU, and regional stakeholders, staff and students, who may or may not have supported the dissociation. Furthermore, in response to the changes brought by Brexit, universities, like other sectors, have been urged by the government to actively pursue new growth opportunities and view the crisis as a chance for success.

In complex and polarised policy environments such as the UK faced following the Brexit referendum, metaphorical language empowers speakers to convey their perspectives and insights emphatically, yet without becoming entangled in evidence-based arguments that could subject them to critique or contestation. This becomes particularly valuable in situations where evidence is scarce or disputed and when envisioning the future in uncertain and ideologically charged times. For example, Brexit may be referred to as a natural disaster, the EU as a machine or a university as a football team. Here are a few examples from our data:

(1) I think we know that there's a tsunami about to hit us and I think it's just which direction to swim in really, isn't it?
    (Academic leader, post-92 university, Wales).[1]
(2) The fact that Europe was so integrated and so connected meant that … there is machinery that looks after its workings, so at the point where you remove a cog, obviously that cog can spin on its own but it doesn't move the whole machine, so you have to build further frameworks in order to connect the cog back in.
    (Senior administrator, pre-92 university, Scotland).
(3) It's like saying, if you're a football team and you lost your goalkeeper with a bad injury, it may not matter too much if you're in the middle, but if you're going for the Cham-

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[1] In all numbered examples from the data, metaphoric expressions that relate to Brexit, the EU or UK universities in relation to either have been underlined. We additionally give the role of the interviewee, the type of university they represent and the nation of the UK where that university is located.

pions League or you're facing relegation, I mean, it's what's the context in which the hit happens.

(Senior executive, Russell Group university, England).

Although a researcher's focus may be drawn to deliberate (Steen, 2017) or creative metaphors such as those in the above examples (1) to (3), our objective in this paper is to examine metaphors in everyday language, which tend to go unnoticed by both speakers and listeners. Despite being overlooked, these metaphors have a profound impact on conveying meaningful social representations. Therefore, we investigate how leaders in higher education employ metaphors—often unintentionally—in everyday language to make sense of the effects of Brexit and its potential impact on their institutions and the broader landscape of UK higher education.

While metaphors may *prima facie* appear devoid of political or value-based connotations, their ability to 'define in significant part what one takes as reality' (Chilton & Lakoff, 1995, p. 56) nonetheless gives them ideological power, making them inherently political. This ability extends to shaping visions of the future, endowing metaphors with the potential to become 'self-fulfilling prophecies' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 156). Therefore, through the use of metaphors, one can seek to persuade and shape the audience's perception of reality, exclude alternative modes of understanding and influence how social actors are likely to respond to changes and how social institutions are likely to be impacted.

Identifying and analysing frequent metaphors in the everyday language of leaders at UK universities enables us to proceed with the construction of 'metaphor scenarios', which are 'figurative mini-narratives' (Musolff, 2017, p. 643) that convey evaluative perspectives on complex and uncertain issues. This approach is particularly well suited for uncovering meanings that participants may guard for political or institutional reasons and sensitivities. It provides insights that are not accessible through more standard thematic analysis. Our study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What metaphors and metaphor scenarios do UK university leaders and other internal stakeholders use to talk about Brexit and its consequences for their institutions and the sector?
RQ2: What do these scenarios suggest about the identities of UK universities post-Brexit?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: The following section provides a concise overview of Brexit's impact on UK higher education. We subsequently delve into the conceptual understanding of metaphor use in everyday language and its relationship to policy issues. By doing so, we aim to underscore the importance of metaphors in providing valuable insights into contested policy arenas and complex policy landscapes, such as Brexit. Next, we discuss the ways in which we prepared and analysed our data. Given their size and richness, we present selected but indicative findings in the penultimate section, focusing on the scenarios that are related to the most frequent metaphors in the interviews. The final section answers the research questions and outlines both the contributions of this paper and possible future work.

Brexit and its effects on UK higher education

In June 2016, the UK held a national referendum on its EU membership and voted to leave the European Union (EU). The actual departure, however, did not occur until January 2020, following an extended period of complex and often contentious negotiations. These discussions focused on both the financial implications of the UK's exit and the future UK–EU relationship.

At the time of the data collection between 2017 and 2018, the future UK–EU relationship was still being debated and was edging towards tense, even acrimonious diplomatic negotiations. Consequently, the ambiguity surrounding the future UK–EU relationship was at its peak, making the parameters for planning highly uncertain. The effects of Brexit on UK universities intertwine practical and financial concerns with deeper issues such as belonging, identity and the future of higher education.

This section provides a brief overview of Brexit's effects on UK universities, highlighting key challenges and sectoral impacts.[2] Brexit has significantly altered and will continue to alter the landscape of UK higher education, affecting student mobility and demographics, research funding and academic talent attraction (Highman et al., 2023; Marini, 2024).

First, affordable studies for EU students and student mobility through Erasmus + have been compromised. As predicted by many higher education actors, EU student enrolment sharply declined in the first year after Brexit in 2021–2022. Based on HESA data, in 2020–2021, 66,880 new students from EU countries entered UK institutions. In 2021–2022, that total was more than halved to 31,400. EU students accounted for 6.0% of all new students in UK higher education the year after the Brexit referendum in 2017–2018 but only 2.4% of new students in 2021–2022. The effects on higher education institutions are less monetary, as they have been able to offset lost tuition fees but are more consequential for academic quality and cultural diversity, as well as increased intrasectoral competition for filling in places (Papatsiba & Marginson, forthcoming).

Second, Brexit significantly altered the UK's position in the EU Horizon research programme and prompted a shift in research partnerships. Following 3 years of uncertainty and fractious discussions, the UK eventually rejoined the EU research framework programme on September 7, 2023, as an Associated country until 2027 in the first instance. The UK's participation in Horizon Europe from 2024 onwards involves two key safeguards: first, a mechanism to prevent the UK from benefiting excessively financially and second, protection against the UK contributing significantly more than it receives.

The former safeguard is likely to have significant implications for the UK, which historically had been one of the most successful countries in securing research funding, meaning it was a net beneficiary of EU research monies. Between 2017 and the end of 2020, the UK's position dropped from joint first place with Germany to seventh place, resulting in missed opportunities for involvement in 2742 projects. Over the 5 years leading up to 2020, grant income for UK institutions fell by 38%, from €1.484 billion to €0.919 billion. This sharp decline, particularly from the 2020/2021 academic year onwards, can be attributed to the perceived risk associated with partnerships involving UK universities, especially in leading roles.

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[2] Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics in this section were drawn from the following sources: Technopolis Group (2017), Scientists for EU (2021), House of Lords European Affairs Committee (2022), UK Government (2022), Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023) and Universities UK (2023).

Third, the impact on EU academic talent in the UK has been less severe than initially feared. While there has been a 14.4% decline in the number of EU doctoral students from 2017–2018 to 2021–2022 and a slight decrease in the number of EU academics employed at British universities, established academics have largely remained. However, Brexit has had an emotional toll on UK-based academic staff and seems to discourage younger EU researchers from pursuing careers in the UK (Marini, 2024).

Despite avoiding a large-scale 'brain drain', the cumulative effect of declining EU student numbers, a diminished role in large multi-country research networks and reduced appeal to young EU researchers will continue to negatively impact UK higher education. This poses a significant challenge, as UK universities strive to maintain their global connections and reputation.

As we demonstrate later in our findings, these concerns strongly resonate with the perspectives shared by our study participants. The tension between the aspiration for global engagement and the constraints imposed by Brexit creates a complex landscape for UK higher education institutions to navigate.

A critical, sociocognitive approach to everyday metaphors

Metaphors—realised in language as metaphoric expressions—involve a mapping of semantic features from a 'source' to a 'target' domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Source domains are the concepts from which a metaphor derives its meaning, whereas target domains are the concepts that are talked about metaphorically. For example, in example (3), the speaker uses the source domain of football teams to talk about the target domain of universities, resulting in the metaphor that UNIVERSITIES ARE FOOTBALL TEAMS.[3] This metaphor is realised by the underlined words, all of which are part of the source domain of football teams.

As such, metaphors not only help the speaker make sense of actors, processes and their potential consequences but also assist the audience in understanding concepts. Abstract concepts, such as complex impacts of geopolitical changes, become more accessible through comparisons with experiences that people have either directly or vicariously encountered within their specific context. Finally, metaphors influence our perception of changes and shape our disposition to act in a certain way, which is significant when a social institution undergoes changes that can potentially redefine its mission, role and identity. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 156) emphasise, 'a metaphor may thus be a guide for future action [that] fit the metaphor'. Brexit is a prime example of such a change. By exploring and analysing the implicit meanings conveyed through metaphors used to talk about Brexit within UK higher education, we gain valuable insights into how UK universities prepare to navigate the complex landscape of Brexit and how they envision themselves in the post-Brexit world.

Metaphor analysis, as a methodological approach, remains relatively uncommon in higher education studies. With only a few exceptions, such as research into students' learning and experiences (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021; Sever et al., 2022; Wegner & Nückles, 2015) and the function of metaphor in argumentation (van Poppel, 2020), the potential of metaphors to express beliefs and values about higher education institutions—as investigated in the present study—has not yet been fully acknowledged. In contrast, metaphors

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[3] It is customary in metaphor research to present conceptual metaphors in small capitals.

have long been used both as an analytical tool and as a methodological approach to theory building in organisation studies (e.g. Cornelissen, 2005; Morgan, 1986; Örtenblad, 2024). Given that higher education studies include research on higher education institutions as specific types of organisations, an interdisciplinary dialogue seems desirable.

In our everyday language, metaphors can first be perceived as unique and creative before they become conventional. Eventually, they are so common that we do not even notice them anymore. Everyday metaphors thus gradually fade into invisibility. According to conceptual metaphor theory (Kövecses, 2020; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), metaphor is not only a way of talking about something but also, first and foremost, a cognitive phenomenon that structures human thought and knowledge and is only secondarily expressed in language (and other modes).

We complement and enhance this cognitive approach to metaphors by emphasising that metaphors are not merely cognitive tools used to express oneself and make personal meaning. Rather, metaphors are deeply and inherently social and political. This perspective allows us to move beyond understanding them as individual thought processes to examine how metaphors function as processes of social meaning-making charged with ideological power. They reflect internalised social structures, collective ideologies, values and experiences within communities. Metaphors offer glimpses into shared social experiences and the professional and institutional frameworks within which these experiences are embedded. As such, metaphors can help us establish connections between discourse, society and social cognition (van Dijk, 1993). This aligns with Musolff (2017), who advocates for a discourse-oriented approach to metaphor analysis, particularly in the context of political speeches. As explained in the 'Introduction' section, Musolff (2017) recommends identifying metaphor scenarios, which encompass the assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community.

In this paper, we combine theoretical perspectives from conceptual metaphor theory and critical discourse studies to probe the inherently social and political nature of discourse in higher education and thus link the microlevel of text to the macrolevel of institutional and political context. Integrating metaphor analysis with discourse analysis can provide deeper insights into the sociopolitical aspects of discourse and uncover the ideological drivers of language use.

This is important for understanding higher education as a social institution that is infused with 'values, traditions and collective identities' and is equally 'heavy with affect and nonrational involvement' (Clark, 1973, p. 11). Examining the metaphors used in UK higher education discourse on Brexit sheds light not only on constructions of Brexit as individual thought processes (however powerful and influential the individuals may be) but also on how different organisations and the higher education sector as a whole consider their purposes and roles in the post-Brexit landscape. In the next section, we introduce our data and methods and look at how university leaders and other internal stakeholders talk about Brexit-related changes.

Data and methods of analysis

Data

This study utilised an anonymised dataset from the UK Data Service, consisting of 127 interviews conducted between 2017 and 2018 as part of an ESRC-funded project (ES/
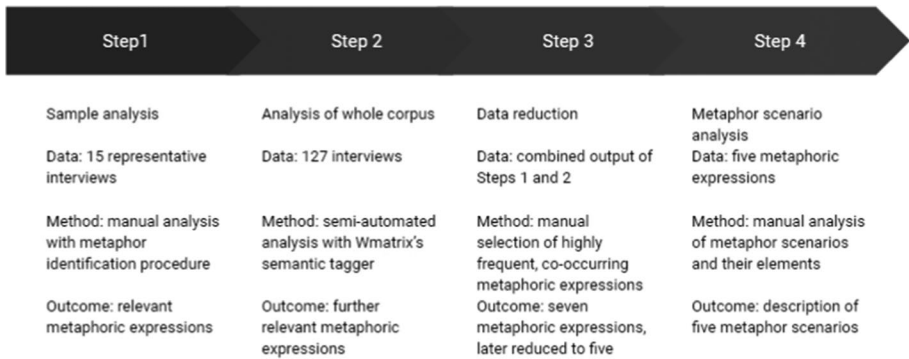
Fig. 1 Overview of the analytical procedure

R000166/1) (Marginson et al., 2019). The interviews involved senior executives, senior administrators, academic leaders, governing body members and student representatives. Various sizes and types of universities are included, encompassing teaching-oriented institutions (referred to as post-92 universities), research-intensive universities from the self-selected Russell Group[4] and other pre-92 universities with a focus on research and/or teaching. Among the 12 universities represented by the interviewees, eight are located in England, two in Scotland, one in Wales and one in Northern Ireland. These higher education institutions were also selected on the basis of their locations in areas that voted either Leave or Remain in the Brexit referendum. Because only the first author was a co-investigator in the original research, we chose to utilise anonymised deposited data for this new analysis. Doing so also adequately addressed our current research questions, which have a different focus compared with the original study. The semi-structured interviews cover five topic areas: European engagement, effects of Brexit, retaining and attracting EU staff, European students and the external environment. The content transcripts of the interviews amount to approximately 500,000 words.

Methods

To analyse a large volume of interview data effectively, a multistep approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods was employed (see Fig. 1). The first step consisted of analysing 15 sample interviews for relevant metaphoric expressions, i.e. those referring to Brexit, the EU or to UK universities in relation to either. For that sample, we intentionally selected two interviews from Wales and Northern Ireland, three from Scotland and the remaining ten from England. Whenever possible, we included one interview with a senior leader at each institution. We subsequently randomly selected the remaining interviews to encompass the diverse roles of our participants. The analysis followed the metaphor identification procedure MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007), a method that, along with its further development (Steen et al., 2010), is widely accepted as the standard in the

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[4] The Russell Group comprises 24 universities and was named after the hotel where the group was founded in 1994. It serves as both a lobby for its members' interests vis-a-vis the government and uses its research-intensive status as a branding tool for the student 'market'.

linguistic analysis of metaphor. In brief, it comprises reading the text to gain a general understanding of it, dividing it into lexical units (one word or several words) and identifying the meaning each unit has in the text. At this point, the analyst determines if the meaning in the text is different from a more basic meaning, i.e. one that is more concrete, more physical or historically older. If the meaning in the text can be understood in relation to that more basic meaning, then the item is marked as metaphoric. For example, note the word 'barriers' in example (4):

(4)   There may be <u>barriers</u> which start to <u>appear around</u> research collaboration or exchange students.
          (Senior administrator, pre-92 university, Scotland)

The word 'barriers' has a basic meaning of physical obstacles in one's path. However, in this specific example, the speaker refers to difficulties rather than material obstructions. The metaphorical usage of 'barriers' in this context can be understood by relating it to its physical meaning.

After conducting an initial manual analysis of the 15-interview sample, the relevant metaphoric expressions that appeared at least three times were identified and then searched for within the entire corpus of interviews, allowing for a more comprehensive examination of their occurrence and patterns. This was undertaken with the help of the UCREL semantic annotation tagger, which is part of the Wmatrix corpus analysis interface (Rayson et al., 2004). Working with an underlying, manually compiled lexicon, the software automatically, i.e. without any input from the researcher, allocates at least one semantic domain to each word. For example, the word 'barriers', identified as a relevant metaphoric expression in the initial analysis, falls into a domain called 'Hindering'. To find further relevant metaphors, we looked at other words in the corpus in the same category (e.g. 'blocking', 'obstacle') and checked manually if those were used metaphorically as well. Using a semantic tagger thus helps to find more relevant metaphor candidates beyond word lists drawn up by the researcher. (For further methodological details, see Demmen et al., 2015.)

To efficiently manage the substantial volume of data at that stage, we had to impose limitations on the selection of metaphoric expressions for identifying metaphor scenarios. We selected the most prominent semantic domains—movement, location and direction—and, within these domains, focused on metaphoric expressions, which had a maximum occurrence of 300 and were combined with at least one other relevant expression within a sentence (e.g. 'There will be bureaucratic <u>hurdles</u> and organisational <u>barriers</u>').[5] This left us with the following seven words for metaphor scenario analysis: 'access', 'network(s)', 'streams', 'link(s)', 'barrier(s)', 'driven' and 'reach'.

Musolff (2006, p. 28) defines metaphor scenarios as follows:

a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about 'typical' aspects of a source-situation, for example, its participants and their roles, the 'dramatic' storylines and outcomes, and conventional evaluations of whether they count as successful or unsuccessful, normal or abnormal, permissible or illegitimate, etc.

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[5] Sentence boundaries were indicated by full stops in the transcripts.

Moving towards the concrete application of this concept, the following questions can help identify a metaphor scenario (see Koller & Ryan, 2019):

- Participants: Who are the actors?
- Processes: What actions do participants take, and what actions are directed at them?
- Circumstances: What is the context of participants' actions?
- Evaluation: Who or what is evaluated in positive or negative terms?
- Modality: What actors and actions are presented as likely, possible and/or desirable?

Metaphor scenarios do not necessarily require every component to be explicitly named; in fact, it is common for certain elements to be inferred within these scenarios. While the scenario is indicated by the relevant metaphoric expression, some of its elements may have to be derived from the co-text around the metaphor. Taking example (4) again, the metaphors 'barriers' and 'appear' refer to the participants and processes in the scenario, respectively, whereas 'around research collaboration and exchange students' indicates a circumstance, i.e. where the barriers appear. While modality is encoded in the modal verb 'may', evaluation is implicit: we can assume that the speaker, as a university representative, sees 'research collaboration and exchange students' positively, so 'barriers' around them would be negative.

The four steps of the analysis are summarised in Fig. 1.

In the following section, we scrutinise the scenarios surrounding Brexit in the interviews.

Metaphor scenarios in the higher education discourse on Brexit

One criterion for selecting a limited number of metaphors for further qualitative analysis was that they should co-occur at the sentence level with at least one other relevant metaphor (see previous section). Figure 2 shows that the frequencies of both the metaphors and their co-occurrences differ notably, with larger circles indicating higher frequencies and thicker lines indicating more co-occurrences.
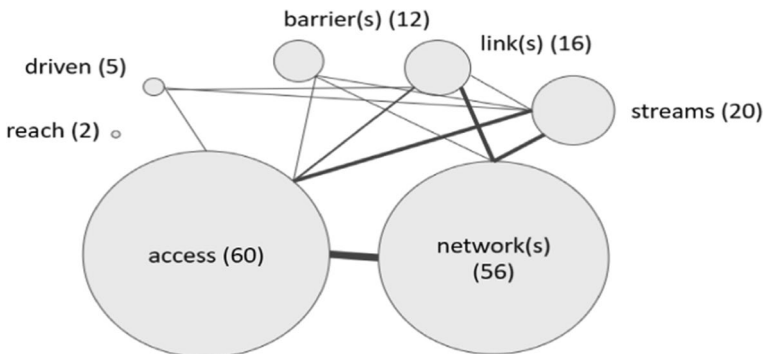

Fig. 2 Frequency and co-occurrence of selected metaphors

In view of these patterns, we disregard the unconnected 'reach' and the infrequent 'driven' and discuss the scenarios enabled by the remaining five metaphors in descending order of their frequencies.

Access

As shown in Fig. 2, 'access' occurs mostly with 'networks'. Table 1 shows what other words and phrases come before and after 'access' in the data. (Other relevant metaphoric expressions have been underlined, and those selected for analysis appear underlined and in bold.)

Apart from access to networks and programmes, interviewees also talk about access to money, visas, jobs, education and people, or access across the (European) continent. For scenario elements, the most frequently mentioned participant is 'we', a pronoun that can refer to an unspecified group, a department, faculty or university, all UK universities or indeed the whole country. Less frequently observed are instances of the generic 'you' (e.g. 'if you lose touch with your colleagues'), as well as references to the scientific community and the UK government. In the interviewees' discourse, these participants have the ability to access resources and opportunities, broaden their scope to include new actors and pursue their goals. If they do not yet have this agency, they believe they can 'open it up' or find a 'route to' it. However, Brexit imposes limitations on their agency, placing the community of UK researchers in a position where access may or may not be granted. This uncertainty and shift in power away from UK universities creates a sense of vulnerability and raises important questions about the future of UK universities and their ability to maintain their global standing. Interviewees may hope to maintain or retain access, but the challenges they face make it difficult, and there is a possibility of losing access. In such cases, they may have to rely on alternative means such as 'backdoor access' to secure EU funding. Given that the interviews were conducted during a period of significant uncertainty, even more so than at the time of writing (March 2024), all the scenarios involve linguistic expressions of probability and hypothetical futures (e.g. 'if we have access to European research funding'). Additionally, references to circumstances of time (e.g. 'over the next 10 or 15 years') and place (e.g. 'outside Europe') were made. Overall, the evaluation of the situation is generally consistent across the data, with a positive view of the present (pre-Brexit) but an uncertain outlook for the future, which may turn out to be either positive or

Table 1 Co-text for 'access'

have/having		across Europe
widening		(in)to funding (**streams**), loans, source of funding
open (up), route to		to EU programmes, **networks**
get, gives us, allow us/we will be allowed, enable, being able to/ability to	**access**	to visas
continued, maintain, retain, still have		to jobs
(make) difficult to		to education
lose/lost/losing, loss of		to other people
can no longer, don't have, lack of, if there's no		
backdoor		

negative. Notably, a pessimistic perspective, coupled with a sense of self-deprecation (e.g. 'us lot'), is expressed in examples (5) and (6):

(5) If that [pot of money] is <u>taken away</u>, almost by definition, the enthusiasm of people who still have **access** to that pot to talk to us lot <u>diminishes</u>.
     (Executive, post-92 university, England)
(6) Well, I do think if we <u>lost</u> the **access** to that research funding there'd be some level of <u>erosion</u> in terms of larger projects which are developed across boundaries.
     (Senior academic, Law, Russell Group, England)

In contrast, example (7) shows a more optimistic and positive, albeit still hypothetical, view of the future. This suggests a reappropriation of agency and hence power and emphasises continued collaboration with European counterparts, irrespective of the facilitating factors that may be removed as a result of the UK's exit from the EU.

(7) If we can <u>carve out</u> some sort of very sensible, <u>open</u>, engaged partnership that … gives us still **access** to collaborative research **networks** … that's fine.
     (Governing body member, pre-92 university, Scotland)

Networks

As shown in Fig. 2, the second most frequent metaphoric expression, 'network(s)', is strongly linked to 'access'. Table 2 shows its co-text in the data.

The term 'network(s)' is commonly used in noun phrases such as 'network events' or 'network partners'. Unlike 'access', networks can also be seen as actors themselves, capable of coming into existence, expanding or ceasing to exist. Interestingly, the metaphoric expression 'network(s)' can also serve as the target domain for another metaphor, specifically one that draws on the concept of organisms (e.g. '<u>networks</u> that currently kind of

Table 2 Co-text for 'network(s)'

established, <u>healthy</u>, <u>strong</u>, very good		of very <u>deep</u> relationships
<u>big</u>, <u>huge</u>, <u>wider</u>		collaboration
international		events
academic, collaborative, integrated, personal and professional		grants
series of		partners
<u>build</u>/<u>building up</u>, <u>create</u>, <u>develop</u>, <u>produce</u>, <u>set</u>/<u>setting up</u>		of exchanges
widen	**network(s)**	of universities
explore		<u>building</u>, happen <u>organically</u>
<u>joined</u>/<u>join</u> in with, <u>jump straight into</u>, getting people <u>on board</u>		<u>extends</u>
access to, belong to a, have, be <u>part</u> of, be a <u>member</u> of, involved in, <u>ran</u>		are brilliant for sharing ideas
<u>fed off</u>		<u>atrophy</u>, might <u>go</u>, problems to <u>stay</u> together
can't be <u>part</u> of, <u>loss</u> of, <u>isolate</u> oneself from		
<u>dismantle</u>		
<u>diminished</u>, informal, <u>small</u>		

atrophy', 'those international <u>networks</u>…most of which happen <u>organically</u>'). A network can be characterised as healthy (e.g. 'there's a very <u>healthy network</u> of exchanges') or strong, as possessing an international or professional scope and a substantial size. Networks can be built, created or expanded, particularly in response to the impact of Brexit, where new networks need to be explored to fit new political realities and individuals must join or get on board. Conversely, existing networks may be lost and dismantled, resulting in researchers becoming isolated and losing power. As a result, the network becomes diminished and small in scale.

Participants are slightly different in the 'network(s)' than in the 'access' scenario: there is again a prominent 'we' that can be unspecified or refer to a university or the UK as a country. There is also the generic 'you' and reference to academics, but other participants are UK students and EU universities. Occasionally, speakers also refer to themselves when talking about networks (e.g. 'I <u>ran</u> a <u>network</u> of researchers … located on five continents').[6] The future is almost uniformly negative in the 'network(s)' scenario, be that for the country and its universities or for students:

(8)   If [the] UK can't … be <u>part</u> of that **network**, then it will certainly <u>fall behind.</u>
      (Academic leader, Medical sciences, Russell Group, England)
(9)   We <u>survive</u> and thrive through those international **networks** … if that begins to <u>reduce</u>, then … what does that say about the future of a university, not very <u>healthy</u>.
      (Senior administrator, Russell Group, England)
(10)   Some of the very few opportunities that some of our students may have to engage with people from … another country is through the Erasmus **network** and that's then … <u>developing</u> a <u>silo</u> mentality.
      (Senior executive, pre-92 university, Northern Ireland)

While the above future scenarios remain hypothetical, they are indeed characterised by a combination of negative evaluation and a strong sense of certainty, intensifying the speakers' pessimistic outlook. The temporal context also plays a significant role in understanding the impact of Brexit on academic networks, as demonstrated when a senior executive expresses concerns about the adverse consequences of Brexit (example (11)).

(11)   The kind of academic **networks** that exist now that didn't exist those 20 plus years ago, it takes 20 years to <u>build</u> that stuff <u>up</u>, it takes about one year to <u>dismantle</u> it.
      (Senior executive, post-92 university, England)

The interviewee highlights how the disruptive nature of Brexit can potentially lead to the rapid dismantling of these networks, resulting in a significant and immediate impact and decentring of UK universities.

Streams

The third most frequent metaphoric expression, 'stream(s)', occurs mostly with 'access' and 'network(s)'. As part of the broader metaphor of MONEY IS WATER, it refers exclusively

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[6] It seems that some participants saw the interview not only as an occasion to promote their university (e.g. 'we're highly successful in getting ERC grants') but also to establish their own credibility.

to funding and income in our data. This metaphor, which captures the idea that money is fluid and can move from one place to another, is often used in economic or financial discourse to describe the movement of financial resources (Silaški & Kilyeni, 2011). This conveys a view of money having a dynamic, universal nature and of (economic) systems as interconnected. In this scenario, streams can flow and gain momentum, or they can dry up and potentially be replaced (see Table 3). Brexit may impose barriers that could impede or completely cut off the flow of these streams. In such cases, speakers mention the potential for accessing domestic funding or alternative sources of income, highlighting the need to diversify their finances to adapt to new social realities and avoid a loss in power and relevance. Time also plays a role, as interviewees refer to future funding, although its specifics may currently be unclear ('access to future funding streams, I think that it will need a little bit of clarity').

The participants in the 'streams' scenario are mostly unspecified 'we', followed by academics and the government. The interview partners expressed a high degree of uncertainty when talking about the effects of Brexit on their institutions' income:

(12)   Whether there are **barriers** put in place to slow down movement or funding **streams** … I've no idea whether anything will be adopted that equates to Erasmus.
       (Senior academic, Health Sciences, post-92 university, England)

Others explicitly express their personal optimism, particularly when discussing long-term timeframes, and exhibit a sense of certainty:

(13)   There'll be some lost income **streams**, but in the very long run, I don't think it will have an impact, because I'm an optimist.
       (Senior administrator, Russell Group, England)

Other interviewees attribute agency to themselves and outline the actions they need to take to transform a present that is more negative than the past into a positive future.

(14)   We will have to … talk to all the European partners and say, … what is blocking us now that maybe was not blocking us before, or what are the new opportunities that … we can have **access** to other funding **streams.**
       (Executive, post-92 university, England)

Table 3 Co-text for 'stream(s)'

available through our funding, **access** to EU/European funding		dry up
barriers to slow down funding		are developing
cutting off important funding, lost income	**stream(s)**	will be replaced
able to potentially **access**		
alternative income, diversify our funding, emerging alternative funding, other funding, UK funding		
future funding		

Links

Like 'network(s)', with which it co-occurs most frequently, 'link(s)', too, includes an aspect of connection. It suggests the existence of a bond or relationship that joins different entities together and conveys the idea that individuals or institutions are connected through shared interests, collaborations, or common goals (Table 4).

The connections mentioned by the interviewees pertain to academic collaboration and involve European countries, universities and colleagues. Unless these connections already exist, they need to be established or, to extend the chain metaphor, forged. They are positively evaluated as close or strong (e.g. 'we have at the moment quite <u>strong</u> <u>links</u>'), and the speakers express the desire to maintain or even expand and strengthen them. The co-text for 'link(s)' does not inherently suggest a negative future: while Brexit is recognised as a potentially critical event that could test them, the interviewees express optimism that these links can withstand its impact.

The participants within the 'link(s)' scenario are once again a collective 'we', which may either remain unspecified or refer to a faculty or university, in addition to the UK government and, similar to 'network(s)', universities in Europe. While these participants retain agency in response to the effects of Brexit, they are sometimes also portrayed as powerless and as being exposed to negative developments beyond their control:

(15)   Obviously the ideal outcome would be that we can still engage with Erasmus because it just <u>opens up</u> that <u>wider</u> **network**, but in the meantime, we are <u>strengthening</u> **links** with … a select group of European universities.
        (Executive, Russell Group, England)

(16)   Because we're <u>cut out</u> of a lot of research around academic **links** with some of our best and geographically closest partners and although we are <u>reaching out</u> to other parts of the world, that … won't sufficiently offset the <u>decline</u> with European markets.
        (Executive, Russell Group, England)

It is likely not a coincidence that the evaluation becomes more positive, albeit in a hypothetical sense, when the speaker presents their university as having agency (example (15)). Other participants discuss the actions of the UK government and evaluate its impact. In example (17), European universities are depicted as having agency, whereas their British counterparts are relatively powerless and are subject to the actions of the government.

Table 4 Co-text of 'link(s)'

bilateral, Erasmus, European, EU research		their research institutions
academic, collaborative		into [a European organisation], with a European university, with Europe, with European Union countries, with a select group of/key European universities
existing		will hopefully still <u>survive</u> Brexit
<u>build</u>, <u>forged</u>	**link(s)**	
<u>close</u>, <u>strong</u>		
keep <u>strong</u> and <u>healthy</u>, maintain, retain		
<u>develop</u>, <u>extend</u>, <u>strengthening</u>		

(17)   Then you <u>go</u> the opposite <u>way</u> that most universities in Europe are <u>going</u>, where they're gradually trying to **link** their research institutions with universities; they [the UK government] want to <u>go back</u> to <u>isolate</u> research institutions, hopeless.
(Governing body member, pre-92 university, England)

By using 'they' to refer not only to European universities but also to the UK government, the speaker distances themselves from the latter. Together with the negative evaluation ('hopeless'), the interviewee thereby expresses discontent with the actions of the British government. On the whole, however, the pronoun 'we' predominates with the use of the metaphoric expression 'link(s)'.

Barriers

The least frequent metaphoric expression is 'barrier(s)'. In contrast to the other expressions discussed above, this one is inherently negative in the context of higher education. Barriers may either appear on their own or be put in the way by an unmentioned actor or by the abstract actor that is Brexit. Barriers are seen by the interviewees as jeopardising the success of British universities, so only their absence can lead to optimistic predictions (Table 5):

(18)   I don't really foresee Brexit as <u>putting</u> a **barrier** <u>in place</u> in terms of staff exchange or necessarily student exchange.
(Executive, pre-92 university, Northern Ireland)

Other voices are also optimistic; paradoxically, this negative metaphoric expression is talked about most positively and with most certainty.

(19)   There will be bureaucratic <u>hurdles</u> and organisational **barriers** and different funding regimes, but we will all muddle through successfully, I think.
(Senior administrator, Russell Group, England)

One interviewee uses an additional metaphor to give the grounds for their optimism, seeing the quality of UK universities as a 'beacon [that] will shine through':

(20)   In terms of the quality, … ultimately that <u>beacon</u> will <u>shine through</u>, whatever **barriers** are <u>put in</u> the <u>way</u> by Government and politicians.
(Senior administrator, Russell Group, England)

Others hedge the negative effects of Brexit by mentioning circumstances and social realities that are only temporary, expressing a high degree of uncertainty ('might') and limiting the number of barriers ('some'):

Table 5 Co-text of 'barrier(s)'

we had basically no		to carrying on the collaboration, <u>in</u> the <u>way</u> of success
organisational	**barrier(s)**	are <u>put in</u> the <u>way</u>/in place
there should be no		start to <u>appear around</u> research
face some, there may be		

(21)   If they [people coming to work in the UK] conclude that UK is not the <u>open</u>, hospitable place that they thought it was, then we might, at least temporarily, <u>face</u> some **barriers.**
        (Governing body member, post-92 university, England)

It seems that when talking about possible negative consequences of Brexit in terms of 'barriers', speakers are keen to downplay its impact and express faith in the strength and quality of UK universities. This suggests a belief in the enduring value and reputation of UK universities, which are seen as robust and resilient institutions capable of navigating and adapting to the challenges presented by Brexit.

Metaphor use across professional roles

Although we can only provide a primer within the scope of this paper, analysing metaphor use across different professional roles at a university can reveal important differences in how various participants conceptualise and communicate Brexit's impact on higher education. Institutional theorists such as March and Olsen (2008) explain that actors in different organisational positions may internalise and express institutional norms and challenges differently. For example, senior executives may use metaphors reflecting their focus on institutional legitimacy and long-term strategy. Academics might focus more on the academic mission, whereas students may concentrate on the immediate impacts on their educational experience. This analysis illuminates how different actors conceptualise and communicate institutional challenges following the 'rules of appropriateness' (March & Olsen, 2008, p. 659) that guide decisions and actions. It reveals how institutional norms are interwoven into the diverse fabrics of collective experience within the university, manifesting in distinct processes and expressions of meaning-making.

A sample of 13 representative interviews (see Table 6) with executives, members of governing bodies, senior academics, senior administrators and student representatives from different types of universities and different parts of the UK was subjected to quantitative manual analysis.

As shown in Table 6, executives are overrepresented in their use of the five metaphoric expressions analysed above. Moreover, that group alone employs all five metaphors, with four of them being overrepresented compared with the total word count for executives. Members of governing bodies use three of the five metaphors ('access', 'network(s)' and 'link(s)'), with the latter two being overrepresented. Senior academics use the same three metaphors, but only one ('access') is overrepresented. Senior administrators use all of the

Table 6 Distribution of interview participants by professional role

	Number of interviews	Number of words (percentage)	Percentage of metaphoric expressions
Executives	3	10,797 (27.29)	44.62
Members of governing bodies	2	4907 (12.41)	15.38
Senior academics	3	7077 (17.89)	13.85
Senior administrators	3	10,881 (27.51)	23.08
Student representatives	2	5889 (14.89)	3.08
Total	13	39,551 (99.99)	100.01

metaphors except 'barrier(s)', with 'stream(s)' and 'link(s)' being overrepresented. Finally, student representatives use only one of the metaphors ('barrier(s)'). These patterns suggest that in regard to metaphor, higher education discourse on Brexit is largely defined by university executives and, to a lesser extent, by members of governing bodies.

Taken together, the five metaphor scenarios construct UK universities as facing a potential loss of power as Brexit changes social, professional and political realities. The possible new realities are conceptualised and referred to as loss or retention of metaphorical access, networks, links and (income) streams and as the possible erection of barriers. The ideology underlying these constructions is characterised by the value of interconnectedness as conducive to institutional and individual success, with a loss of openness leading to a reduction in agency and hence power. UK universities are believed to be of high quality but possibly threaten their status within Europe and globally. Interestingly, the metaphor scenarios are largely advanced by executives and governing board members rather than interviewees in other professional roles.

In the final two sections, we summarise the findings to answer our research questions and discuss contributions and future research.

Discussion

The role of metaphors in the Brexit higher education discourse

In addition to the divisive Brexit vote and its present and future effects, our study reveals a reliance on the figurative language used by university leaders, specifically everyday metaphors. This allowed them to convey their evaluative perspectives without directly revealing their political position or sensitive institutional strategies. By their indirect nature, metaphors enabled participants to gauge Brexit's effects, explore future implications and express emotions while avoiding the specifics of the situation, which, at the time, was heavily framed by both political polarisation and the narrative of uncertainty. Everyday metaphors, often employed unconsciously, provide valuable insights into individual thought processes (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, when these metaphors are examined from a broader social and discursive perspective, it becomes evident that they are not just self-contained individual expressions; rather, they represent the perspectives of whole discourse communities, especially of their most powerful members. The latter are social ensembles, and their utilisation of metaphors is shaped by their social, cultural and material conditions and circumstances (Mills et al., 2017).

Metaphors carry ideological weight and shape social meaning, influencing perceptions and actions. They are inherently political, as exemplified by the context of Brexit in higher education. We contend that everyday metaphors, though frequently overlooked, are valuable for probing collective perceptions and assessments. Metaphors permeate professional discourse, appearing inconspicuous at first, yet subtly moulding collective understanding—especially in our context, where they reveal perspectives on the causes, implications and strategies surrounding Brexit.

Metaphor analysis: elucidating UK higher education's Brexit discourse

Given the widespread consequences of Brexit for higher education (Courtois & Veiga, 2020; Highman et al., 2023), there is a surprising lack of discourse research on this

topic to date. We have addressed this gap, although much more needs to be explored, such as differences by nation, academic discipline and type of university.

Metaphor analysis offers unique and valuable insights into complex sociopolitical issues such as Brexit that might otherwise remain hidden. It complements traditional thematic analysis in higher education research by revealing underlying conceptual frameworks, collective values, implicit institutional and individual attitudes and dispositions for action. However, metaphor analysis alone may not capture all the perspectives that emerge from different roles and positions within universities. As an example, Papatsiba and Marginson (forthcoming) highlight a divergence in perspectives: senior leaders prioritise overall institutional financial health, accepting potential restructuring of academic units, whereas staff members express concern about the sustainability of specific departments owing to potential loss of EU students. This contrast underscores the market-driven nature of UK higher education and raises questions about preserving academic knowledge amid changing student demographics. We hope that our findings will serve as inspiration for future research on the discourse of Brexit in higher education, which has thus far been largely 'lost in the noise' (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2021). The following paragraphs discuss the key findings that emerged from our study in response to our research questions.

Key findings: metaphors and metaphor scenarios

The first research question guiding this study was what metaphors and metaphor scenarios the 127 interviewees—university executives, senior administrators, senior academics, governing body members and student representatives—use to talk about Brexit and its potential effects on their institutions and the sector. The study identified five frequent metaphors—access, networks, streams, links and barriers—along with their associated scenarios (Musolff, 2017), which are imbued with evaluative sentiment and projective power. We summarise each of these in turn.

The metaphor of 'access' and its related scenario speaks to the institutional vulnerabilities resulting from policy changes that obstruct participation in EU-wide schemes while also highlighting the determination to maintain involvement in European institutions, funding programmes and networks. This signifies a pragmatic approach that is needed to navigate the challenges imposed by top-down policies. The 'network(s)' metaphor and its scenario portray a relational landscape of alliances and connections. This highlights a negative outlook for the future, reflecting the pessimism caused by the disruptive nature of Brexit on the current ease of connectivity and interactions. The 'streams' metaphor and its underlying scenario illustrate the disruption of funding caused by Brexit. However, senior leaders maintain a sense of confidence, as they consider strategic financial diversification and explore alternative funding sources. The 'link(s)' metaphor and its scenario emphasise the importance of collaboration driven by personal relationships and interactions that are formed around shared research and teaching interests rather than relying on external structures. Existing links were positively assessed, with optimism indicating that they can withstand the impact of Brexit. Surprisingly, the 'barrier(s)' metaphor is also linked to a positive scenario, indicating confidence in the reputation, strength, resilience and agency of the UK higher education sector to overcome the obstruction of newly erected barriers. This, in turn, downplays the potential impact of Brexit-related policies on a sector that interviewees generally consider an 'order taker' instead of an 'order maker'.

Implications for university identities and futures

Our second research question invites us to delve deeper into what these metaphor scenarios suggest about the identities and potential futures of UK universities post-Brexit. The analysis demonstrated that while interviewees expressed concerns about the negative implications of Brexit for UK higher education and research, such as the loss of resources, reputation and talent, their evaluative scenarios, with the exception of the one associated with networks, conveyed a paradoxical sense of optimism. The participants highlighted factors such as the strong brand of UK higher education and research, their intrinsic strengths, traditions of academic and institutional autonomy, and the perceived separation between politics and science, where scientific interests would prevail in case of conflict. They also expressed faith in the power of reason and rational policy-making to eventually prevail despite the acrimonious negotiations and find mutually beneficial solutions towards and after Brexit.

The paradox of loss and hope

With respect to the participants' concerns about the negative implications of Brexit for UK higher education and research, they anticipated a decline in EU students and staff—a prediction that indeed materialised (Highman et al., 2023; Marini, 2024). This is due to factors such as international tuition fees, immigration policies, reduced engagement in EU-funded research and limited mobility initiatives. Additionally, concerns were raised about potential risks to UK leadership in EU research funding, with the possible consequence of losing infrastructure and resources. Isolationism and self-reliance were feared to damage the reputation of UK universities and make them less attractive to renowned researchers and able EU students (Papatsiba & Marginson, forthcoming). However, despite these legitimate concerns expressed by the same interviewees, the prevalent metaphor scenarios projected a degree of optimism that requires further probing. Previous findings concerning the analysis of emotions in the same data revealed that 96% of participants expressed strongly negative emotions such as pain, anguish, confusion and a sense of loss, whereas 60% also expressed hope (Marginson et al., 2020). The latter appeared to serve as a means of resisting hopelessness caused by top-down policies that were beyond their control. Hope seems to have functioned as an instrumental necessity for university leaders facing external challenges, providing a sense of direction and motivation to navigate the projected complexities of the post-Brexit landscape.

Interconnectedness: a core identity issue

A pivotal identity issue faced by UK universities and their leadership teams revolves around the theme of interconnectedness. This can be inferred from all the studied metaphors, underscoring the perceived threat posed by Brexit. For academic communities, interconnectedness is viewed as crucial, encompassing cross-border collaborations, the exchange of knowledge and ideas, individual academic mobility and the cultivation of an open and global mindset. This concept lies at the heart of their understanding of the purpose and role of universities, highlighting the identity challenge posed to UK institutions by Brexit.

The participants emphasised the importance of retaining ties with Europe and fostering student diversity, including the presence of EU students, for the success and identity of universities. The metaphor of 'networks', shrouded in negative evaluations, is particularly significant here. The participants expressed concerns about Brexit leading to a loss of international connections, which could impact institutional identity and mission. There was apprehension that Brexit might result in insularity, potentially damaging the UK's position in global higher education and research. Moreover, they appeared sceptical about the potential benefits of Brexit in terms of expanding international presence and forming new partnerships that EU membership over the years would have constrained. This underscores the importance of universities being connected in broader global networks as well as how vulnerable being involved in international relations and geopolitics makes them (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023).

Two narratives of interconnectedness: loss and agency

Two main narratives can be identified regarding interconnectedness. These findings help us elucidate the paradox of simultaneously anticipating and assessing the negative impacts of Brexit while displaying optimism about the future. The first narrative revolves around the notion of loss, whereas the second narrative is centred on agency.

In the narrative of loss, there is a fear of losing access to networks, of potential barriers and restrictions hindering collaboration and of opportunities dwindling. The weakening of connections, whether through administrative barriers or perceived isolation, can diminish the agency and collaborative potential of individuals and universities, hindering their access to valuable networks. This narrative of loss is tied to the broader concept of 'status anxiety' (Glencross & McCourt, 2018) surrounding the UK's position in the international system in the post-Brexit era. It also echoes sentiments of 'existential anxiety' and 'ontological (in)security' (Browning, 2018) and raises concerns about the role of universities as outward-looking, internationally minded institutions and the impact of Brexit on alliances and British influence globally. This introspection can be seen as a reflection of deep-seated wider concerns about Britain's status on the global stage and its ability to navigate a changing geopolitical landscape (Rogstad & Martill, 2022). Directly addressing sector-specific concerns, this anxiety can also indicate the defence of universities as internationalist institutions, contrasting it with the idea of universities as nationalist projects with their enduring colonial imaginary and legacies. Subjecting internationalisation to neoliberalism and its market imperatives (Bamberger et al., 2019), the loss of EU membership is likely to further exacerbate the situation.

The second narrative concerning interconnectedness centres on agency, specifically *relational agency*. Within this narrative, there was a sense of confidence among participants that the impact of Brexit-induced barriers may be limited. Many consider the potential for alternative connections in the future, even if they are small-scale or informal. The perspective was that the activity within higher education and research transcends national borders and rigid structures, even when organisations are located within specific geographic localities and national systems. Universities are characterised by fluid and personal collaboration, grounded in shared research interests, knowledge generation and knowledge transmission. This narrative of agency highlights the traditional autonomy of academe, providing a sense of stability and flexibility despite external challenges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present analysis of the perception of Brexit's impacts on higher education, achieved through the systematic identification of metaphors within a large corpus, highlights that while the challenges were acknowledged, there was still a belief in the strength of the UK higher education brand, academic autonomy and power of reason to navigate the post-Brexit landscape. The surprising orientation of these metaphor scenarios, which predominantly convey hope despite an underlying sense of loss, may be partially attributed to the expectations placed on senior leadership at UK universities. As our analysis of metaphor use across professional roles reveals, the frequent metaphors identified are employed primarily by participants in executive leadership positions within our sample of 127 interviews. This pattern suggests that the optimistic tone embedded in these metaphors might reflect the perceived responsibility of university leaders to project confidence and resilience in the face of adversity. Vice Chancellors and their teams, as institutional advocates, may be compelled to present their organisations in the best possible light and espouse positive notions of the future as an attempt to maintain institutional morale and stakeholder confidence during a period of significant uncertainty and potential disruption, as well as for their own career prospects. Perhaps hope can also represent an activating force that empowers individuals to envision a brighter future and pursue their goals, even when faced with overwhelming obstacles (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Senior leaders play a crucial role in maintaining their organisation's positive outlook and persuading others that the sector has the resilience and adaptability to 'weather the storm', which, in our case, means overcoming the challenges posed by Brexit. However, further examination through follow-up studies is warranted to explore the extent to which universities are proactive institutions traversed by relational agency. The current financial difficulties in UK higher education serve as a stark reminder of the compounding vulnerability brought about by external political events, such as Brexit, impacting interconnectedness in a globally tense environment. Although its importance may be overshadowed by domestic policies directly affecting the higher education system and its conditions, Brexit has nonetheless initiated a substantial and enduring transformation in the UK higher education landscape. This encompasses shifts in staff and student composition, resource flows, collaboration and research leadership positions, all of which underscore the necessity of redefining its identity. In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated the sociopolitical significance of everyday metaphors as powerful tools for investigating the geopolitical and economic dimensions of Brexit for the higher education sector and probing its future trajectory.

Data Availability The data underpinning this analysis is publicly available and can be accessed via the UK Data Service at https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/853824/.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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