

## *Gender and Education* Themed Issue on Higher Education

### Editorial

This themed issue of *Gender and Education* features articles about higher education (HE), exploring how students and staff experience, reproduce, and contest the gender regimes of HE, including as these intersect with race and class. To situate these articles, from my perspective as a sociologist with a research interest in queer feminist approaches to academic work, I've raised three connected issues.

First, universities are not feminist, we do not have gender equality in HE, and in this context feminist and gender researchers encounter the frustrating necessity of repeating themselves (Ahmed 2017; Breeze & Taylor 2020). For instance, there is an oft-identified dissonance between a 'scholarly commitment to questioning the regimes of truth embedded in dominant institutions... and the tacit systemic inducements *not to* relate such questioning to... everyday academic work' (Butterwick & Dawson 2005, 52). While such dissonance persists, interdisciplinary feminist and gender studies research has long critically analysed HE hierarchies and power dynamics, although this rich body of work can be overlooked. This means that as well as advancing original insights and innovative understandings, research about gender and HE necessarily revisits, revises, and reiterates established feminist ideas.

Second, gender and HE researchers investigate phenomena that they themselves are substantively involved with and implicated in: institutions, social relationships, and forms of oppression/marginalisation that cannot be conceptualised as separate from the researcher and their research practice. Contemporary calls to look to our own complicities in the HE structures we criticise (Bacevic 2018) echo established feminist commitments to identifying and undoing such complicities, for instance the ambivalent joys of intensifying 'our own subjection in neoliberal terms' (Davies et al. 2005, 353). Academic subjectivities are constituted by the audit and performance management regimes of neoliberal HE, just as academic practice can reinforce and/or contest prevailing institutional cultures. Feminist approaches to understanding gender and HE can include working to transform universities, at the same time as seeking recognition for feminist epistemologies and pedagogies within the dominant terms of the non-feminist or anti-feminist university (Pereira 2017).

Third, HE is structured by and (re)produces entrenched intersecting inequalities, that re-emerge as they are fractured by differences through time and across geographical and institutional locations (Breeze, Taylor, & Costa 2019). The insides, outsides, and margins of HE are claimed, contested and re-enforced, as universities promote a supposed commitment to 'diversity' and 'inclusion', exposed as non-performative (Ahmed 2006). In the UK for instance, universities develop initiatives to *celebrate* and *showcase* (overwhelmingly white) women's leadership in the sector, and such initiatives can compound enduring exclusions including extremely low numbers of Black women professors (Rollock 2019) and Black PhD students (Williams et al. 2019). The inequality regimes of HE entwine with workforce casualisation, acute in the 'early career' as well as stretching across the career course, with precarity functioning to gatekeep access to an academic career. BAME academics are more likely than their white counterparts to be employed on insecure, hourly paid and zero hours contracts (UCU 2020). For instance, 42% of BAME academics are employed on fixed term contracts compared to 31% of white academics (UCU 2020). Movements to decolonise the curriculum demonstrate the foundational imperialism, racism, and white supremacy of the university as the 'home of the coloniser' (Bhambra et al. 2018, Arday & Mirza 2018, Doharty et al. 2020) and efforts to combat gender based and sexual violence among and between staff and students show how abusers are often tolerated and protected in HE (Bully & Rye 2018).

I think a brief rationale (2-3 sentences) here as to why the articles raised these 3 particular issues for you.

These three issues are woven throughout the articles which follow. Reading the articles underscores, for me, the abundance of cumulative knowledge about gender inequalities, and injustices, in HE. This Themed Issue articulates how much is known (for instance) about barriers to women's career progression, about ineffectual and counter-productive responses to gender based and sexual violence, about the persistence of white middle-class hetero-masculinity making the 'ideal' academic subject, and about racist hostility in universities, and this raises difficult questions for feminist and gender studies scholars working in HE. While HE and education more broadly can be understood as sites of emancipatory potential, engaging in HE in pursuit of gender equality, liberation, or justice, also means being 'complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure' (Shotwell 2016, 7). Writing in July 2020 it is impossible to ignore how the global COVID-19 pandemic sharpens the gendered inequalities that define HE. Emerging evidence shows how women's publication records are negatively impacted by an intensification of unequal divisions of domestic and caring labours (Frederickson 2020), as the heteronormative 'household' is retrenched (Grewal et al. 2020). Announcements of redundancy schemes, pay and promotions freezes and job losses at UK universities, especially the non-renewal of temporary and hourly paid contracts, crowd social media. Contemporary responses to the inequality regimes of neoliberal HE include wildcat strikes and marking boycotts in London and California, ongoing industrial disputes in the UK, movements to resist universities as border control agents and efforts to establish alternative feminist and anti-racist institutions (such as Unis Resist Border Controls, the Feminist Autonomous Centre in Greece, and the Free Black University in the UK).

While the articles in this themed issue were written before the current pandemic, they all make clear that the gendered terrain of HE is contested. The articles present research from a variety of national contexts – Australia, Finland, Norway, Taiwan, the UK and USA – and authors have deployed a range of research methods including photo-voice, qualitative interviewing, institutional ethnography, and autoethnography, echoing the methodological innovation that characterises feminist research.

Two articles share a focus on men and masculinities. Allen (2018) investigates Black men's experiences as students at a predominantly white liberal arts university in the US, and combines post-structuralist gender and critical race theory to analyse participants' performances of multiple Black masculinities. Allen finds that, in a context of racist hostility on campus, there is a tension between participants' agency in contesting hegemonic racialised masculinities and the institutional failures of a predominantly white institution. Continuing the theme of student performances of masculinity, Jeffries (2019) explores lads' performances of lad culture at an English university, aiming to identify 'opportunities for engaging laddish undergraduate students', arguing that 'lads' should be involved in interventions against misogyny. Jeffries' findings show how participants are cognisant of the damage done by their 'laddish' behaviours, attempt to distance themselves from the most misogynistic and homophobic aspects of lad culture, and struggle to reconcile their positive identifications with laddishness with their awareness of its harms. Ikonen (2019) also addresses young people's negotiations of gender, focusing on femininity and class in young Finnish women's 'mindsets' as they make sense of education and employment. In a context where state feminism co-exists with the retrenchment of gender equality via austerity, Ikonen analyses how young white Finnish women's class positions interact with post-feminist attitudes valorising agentic, entrepreneurial, responsabilised individuals, concluding that 'classed capacities' exert an influence on the affective and psychic life of post-feminism.

A major theme in this issue concerns understanding and addressing gender inequalities in HE, in articles on: the Gender Equity Education Act (GEEA) in Taiwan (Liao 2019), mentoring programmes

(Brabazon & Schulz 2018), feminist writing groups (Sheridan et al. 2019) and the use of metaphors to describe women's academic careers (Moratti 2018). Liao conceptualises the GEEA as an attempt to institutionalise gender equity on campus and uses Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography methods to explore the experiences of frontline GEEA case coordinators. Liao identifies the limitations of the Act, which defines gender equity narrowly to equate to sexual violence and subordinates case coordinators' expertise to the administrative hierarchy. Therefore the act reproduces – rather than transforms – what Liao describes as a specifically Confucian form of patriarchy. This makes a significant contribution to understanding how HE equalities policies can fail to bring about their stated aims and indeed compound the injustices they otherwise claim to address.

Depressingly, Brabazon & Schulz come to a similar conclusion in analysing their experiences of a mentoring programme that was *initially* orientated towards remediating a lack of women in senior leadership positions in Australian HE, but which was later 'standardized to upskill a broad base of academics' in line with neoliberal audit cultures: how to network more intensively, manage time more efficiently, publish more prolifically, and 'capture' grants more effectively. This demonstrates how mentoring schemes do not automatically remediate structural barriers to women's academic career progression. While Brabazon and Schulz criticise mentoring schemes in general for responsabilising individual academic women, similar dynamics are present in feminist approaches to mentorship which can likewise rely on the unrecognised labour of individual feminists (Breeze & Taylor 2018).

Sheridan et al. discuss the evolution of their feminist writing group into a peer mentoring and support group, allowing the authors to navigate a HE environment characterised by competition for scarce resources, increasing workloads, and burgeoning bureaucracy. The interdisciplinary writing group of supported members to sustain their academic careers over 20 years in ways that were intrinsically rewarding as well as meeting externally imposed definitions of 'success'. Sheridan et al. describe HE as a 'chilly climate' for women, and it is precisely this kind of metaphor that Moratti assesses in her article, evaluating metaphorical descriptions of women's academic careers. Pointing out that many such metaphors (including mothers, housewives, and maids in ivory basements and leaky pipelines, bumping up against glass ceilings or falling off glass cliffs) can naturalise barriers to women's career progression. Moratti suggests that such metaphors can unintentionally locate the problem in women, and homogenise academic women as a group without accounting for differences according to class, race, age, and dis/ability. Moratti argues convincingly that metaphors can disguise the issue of sexism in academic hiring and promotions practices, and ultimately conceal rather than elucidate, concluding that literal language enables conceptual clarity.

The final article in the Themed Issue is by Ollilainen (2019) who explores how pregnant academics manage their presentation of self as productive workers in a context where pregnant embodiment in HE can disrupt the disembodied masculinity of the 'ideal' academic worker, an ideal which can pressure pregnant academics to minimise or disguise their pregnancy, continuing to perform disembodied professionalism through pain, discomfort and health complications. While prevailing academic culture devalues and depends upon unpaid care work, this article pushes back against the supposed 'incompatibility of motherhood and professional commitment', and reminded me of the importance of long-standing feminist theories of gestation, care, and social reproduction *as work* and of decoupling pregnancy from a naturalised gender binary (Lewis 2019).

This themed issue gathers together a range of research in the field of gender and HE, demonstrating that it remains crucial to not only understand, but work to transform and dismantle, the gendered hierarchies and inequalities of higher education.

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