

Why isn't my professor a black woman? A clue to gender inequality in higher education from websites and prospectuses.

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Gender inequality in higher education has been described as a 'seven-headed dragon that has multitude of faces in academic life' by van den Brink and Benschop (2012). It is a globally recognised problem. Monroe *et al.* (2012), who examined the issue of gender inequality and discrimination in a university in the United States, noted that women attributed the persistence of gender inequality in academia to the professional environment of the place where they worked; the authors suggest that academia is a reflection of the society in which gender inequality still exists.

Rabe and Rugunaan (2011) have noted the uncondusive working conditions for female academics in South Africa. They suggest that the culturally diverse society of the country contributes to the inequality and an unwelcoming environment that the female academics experience, believed to be even worse for black female academics.

The United Kingdom is considered a racially and culturally diverse country, so scholars in the field of gender studies need to explore questions such as: what are the prospects for a black woman in UK universities? In keeping with this need, this study aims to provide a deeper insight into the status of the female gender in higher education in the UK, as portrayed through the marketing and communication materials of the UK universities.

The research examines the websites and prospectuses of UK universities to find out how they feature the images of their students and staff. This adds another perspective to the understanding of gender inequality in higher education as experienced by students and staff in UK universities. The research considers the incidence of female students on the websites and prospectuses and also takes into account the leadership roles within the staff and student bodies (e.g. vice-chancellors and presidents of student unions).

Kotler and Fox (1985) argue that, for students who might not be able to attend the open day or visit the university campus, images on websites and prospectuses provide a cost-effective way to 'virtually' experience universities. Kittle and Ciba (2001) also note that an appropriate use of images can make students consider the university a place where they feel welcome; seeing a vibrant and diversified community, they would look forward to being a part of it.

Various research methods have been used to investigate gender inequality in higher education, mostly comprising surveys and interviews. However, content analysis has been deemed suitable and appropriate for this kind of study. It can be quantitative when applied to examine communication content, at the same time allowing the researchers to gain insights, increase understanding and acquire meaningful, practical information about a phenomenon as in a qualitative method (Kassarjian, 1977; Krippendorff, 2004, 2013).

The sample for this research consisted of the homepages of 134 websites of UK universities, and 2015-2016 prospectuses of the Million+, Russell and University Alliance Group universities. The prospectuses of the universities in London, the Golden Triangle universities and the eight most research-intensive universities in the North of England forming the N8 research group were also considered.

The unit of analysis was at least one female human character/model displayed in a dominating shot on the websites or featured in the prospectuses. This could be the image of a student, lecturer or public figure. Their races (black or non-black) were also considered.

In order to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the results, two individuals served as the coders, independent of each other. The different categories of analysis were pre-tested, and all website homepage screenshots and prospectuses were coded by both. After initial coding, the differences were discussed, discussions held and adjusted scores analysed.

The results of the analysis show that females were featured more widely on the websites of UK universities. The same trend holds true for prospectuses – 54.9% of the students featured in the prospectuses were females. Among the females, students of white appearance were featured in an overwhelming majority of the images, with only 3.8% of images featured on websites and prospectuses being of students from black minority ethnic groups.

Thus, the inequality portrayed among the students seemed to be based on race rather than gender. However, an entirely different pattern was observed when the images of the staff (including professors and vice-chancellors) were analysed. While only 34% of the staff featured on the prospectuses were females, female professors formed a meagre 20.4% of all the professors featured. Moreover, the presence of black female lecturers or professors on the prospectuses was insignificant. In an extreme example, one of the universities featured 47 staff members in its prospectus with no black academics, whether male or female.

Thus, the findings of the study suggest that the marketing communication materials of the UK universities still convey a subtle message about the state of racial and gender equality in academia. These materials are available to prospective students, staff and other stakeholders, and therefore raise concerns about the prospects for, say black female members of academic staff, making them wonder how far they can go in academia.

The outcomes of the study are relevant to all stakeholders, including policy makers, academic researchers, and especially the marketing communication and recruitment departments of the universities, who must strive to show a diverse institution by featuring more individuals from minority groups. Recalling the observation of Kotler and Fox (1985) mentioned earlier, providing prospective students with visual images makes for a cost-effective alternative for them to ‘virtually’ experience the university, thus enabling them to make right decisions.

As with any other study, this research had some limitations and the findings should, therefore, be interpreted in the light of these limitations. Among these, the seasonal bias induced by a sample of websites collected over a period of time could be considered a major limitation, as websites change their appearance quite often. Therefore, future researchers in this field should strive to devise a more rigorous sampling procedure to overcome this limitation, which could perhaps be a cross-cultural analysis of another racially diverse country like America.