

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0489

Tue 07 Dec 2021

15:40 - 16:00

Reinvigorating the Gender Agenda in Higher Education Curricula: Problematics and Possibilities for Gender Work in the Contemporary UK Context

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: Academic staff concerned with developing gender-focussed curriculum and pedagogies frequently experience complex barriers, despite EDI agendas and emphases on gender mainstreaming. Yet it can be contended that in this current moment considerations of gender have never been more urgent: Gender-based violence, harassment and sexism linked to rigid gender stereotypes are widespread and prevalent on university campuses; debates and controversies recently surrounded the UK government consultation on gender recognition, impacting on transgender students and staff in particular; gender inequalities persist while feminism and feminists are misrepresented and frequently face a hostile environment; finally, in the context of rising populist authoritarianism, gender studies is subject to contestation, underlining the need for enhanced gender awareness among higher education staff and students. Research presented here draws on in-depth academic staff interviews, outlining complexities of undertaking 'gender work' in this context. Nevertheless, we argue that addressing such barriers and reinvigorating the gender agenda is crucial.

Paper: Introduction

HE practitioners concerned with developing gender-focussed curricula and pedagogies frequently experience complex barriers. Yet we contend that considerations of gender in HE are urgent in this context, hence a need to reinvigorate discussions: Gender-based violence, harassment and sexism are prevalent in universities (Jackson and Sundaram, 2020); controversies surrounding the recent consultation on gender recognition impacts on transgender students and staff; gender inequities are ongoing yet feminism is misrepresented and feminist scholars maligned in popular press (Ringrose, 2018); finally, in a context of populist authoritarianism, gender studies is contested, underlining the need for enhanced gender awareness across the sector. The notion of 'gender work' follows Ahmed's (2012) elucidation of *diversity workers* and chimes with Henderson's (2019) conception of the *gender person*, positioned as responsible for gender issues in their organisation.

The research team initially set out to address three central research questions:

1. In what higher education spaces is the teaching of gender and with feminist pedagogic approaches present and absent?
2. How are gender and feminist topics and approaches presented, including embedded in the wider curriculum or as add-ons, and intersectionally with wider identities or not?
3. What are the reasons for the presence and presentation of gender and feminism in higher education teaching?

This paper focusses specifically on academic staff perspectives drawn from 18 interviews as part of a multi-layered institutional case study project. Participants are presented anonymously, data was recorded with permission, stored securely and anonymised. A thematic approach to analysis was deployed (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Competing conceptualisations of gender form a backdrop to the complexity those involved in 'gender work' must navigate. While some academics had specialist knowledge, others felt gender was of little relevance to their discipline. Gender was alternately conceived as a binary formation of biological men and women, a fluid construct encompassing a range of identities and expressions, and as one of many intersecting dimensions of oppression. For several interviewees, gender pertained to historical inequalities between men and women, numbers of women entering HE used to bolster the view of feminism as a historical concern (David, 2016). Yet ongoing gender disparities arose, including unequal gendered dynamics in learning spaces and continuing inequities around staffing, with women frequently assigned more low-status administrative, pastoral care and EDI related roles (Morley, 1998).

Another dynamic is gender's association with feminism, sometimes viewed as having an 'image problem' in the light of ongoing backlash (Faludi, 1991), gaining new momentum due to far-right populisms (Ringrose, 2018) while media tropes position feminism as 'anti-man' within 'men versus women' constructions (Ringrose, 2012). Male students are sometimes positioned as avoidant of or negatively affected by feminist or gender-related content. Amplification of anti-feminist discourses with gender studies presented as dangerous ideology (Ahrens et al., 2018) means it is unsurprising that some staff distance themselves from feminism.

Another area of contestation were valid concerns that feminism has at times served to invisibilise marginalised women, reflecting ongoing histories of exclusion within feminism (Hill Collins, 1990). Foregrounding white, privileged cis-women's experiences has further excluded and silenced diverse women's voices (Jonsson, 2021; Phipps, 2020). Feminist concerns can therefore be perceived by some as obscuring race and intersecting forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Perceptions that 'gender' refers to foregrounding 'cis-women' only (Phipps, 2020) makes the task of gender and feminist work more challenging, especially pertinent in view of reports of hostility towards transgender, non-binary and otherwise marginalised staff and students. Hostility was also directed towards those engaged in social justice orientated teaching, reflecting the wider socio-political context (Morris, 2021). This hostile environment particularly constrains the gender work of

precariously employed and lower status staff concerned about student evaluations (Read and Leathwood, 2020; Teffernan, 2021).

Conclusions

Gender work entails multiple contextualised challenges in relation to curriculum development and pedagogies. Interviews drew out a range of positions on gender, influenced by varied, contradictory and contested approaches to and discourses surrounding gender. These reflect widespread post-feminist framings (McRobbie, 2004) and echo research identifying how aspects of social justice are viewed as 'in competition' (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019). Gender concerns are often perceived as inseparable to feminism, bringing some problematic, exclusionary histories of feminism into the spotlight. In the light of ongoing inequities, contemporary hostilities and more students presenting as gender-variant, there is an urgent need for gender literacy in HE (MacKinnon, 2017). There are ongoing questions and discussions to be had; we do not claim simple solutions but a commitment to opening up conversations and engaging in complexity. The paper will conclude with recommendations for practice and ways forward.

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