

## **Contemporary EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion) as symptom and tool of ‘neoliberalisation’ in higher education**

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### **Research Domains**

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract**

In this paper we address the phenomenon that is EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion), a globally mobile discourse reshaping the way in which efforts to identify and respond to social inequalities are taken up within mainstream institutional policy and practice. We develop an argument that, as contemporary EDI ‘common sense’ travels and produces effects in different contexts, including increasingly within higher education, it sits in tension with more potent conceptualisations attempting to apprehend and respond to entrenched systems of social inequality. Mobilising resources of higher education in ways that acknowledge the cultural, political and material complexities of social inequality (an approach we would advocate for) is presented as radically different to the perspectives guiding much EDI work which we argue can be understood as both a symptom and a tool of the ongoing ‘neoliberalisation’ of higher education institutions.

### **Full paper**

Taking up any project of ‘equity’ and/or ‘diversity’ and/or ‘inclusion’ in relation to formal education requires challenging historically entrenched social inequalities. To even begin to understand these dynamics in a context requires powerful tools such as ‘critical theoretical literatures on education inequalities that offer

sophisticated ways of understanding issues of access, participation and inequality in higher education' (Burke, 2012, p. 81). In this paper we address the phenomenon that is EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion), a globally mobile discourse reshaping the way in which efforts to identify and respond to social inequalities are taken up within mainstream institutional policy and practice.

EDI inhabits a broader terrain than higher education and this paper seeks to briefly trace the discourse colonising university structures and processes. Wolbring & Lillywhite (2021) for example describe how EDI as a term and suite of initiatives now inhabit UK universities having arrived via the Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) charter developed by Advance HE. We trace this process because EDI as an increasingly global phenomenon runs the risk of facilitating mono-dimensional responses to complex inequities, whilst obscuring diverse historical efforts and activism that have attempted to shift university systems and practices towards different possibilities. In developing this analysis, we are concerned that EDI is helping to re-shape these histories under a framing derived from highly conventional Human Resources and New Public Management perspectives. By interrogating EDI, we argue that it can be understood as a readily consumed constraint that reworks important ideas. One example is intersectional analysis (which emerged from Black Feminist legal scholarship and helps to interrogate how systems of inequality can interact in a context) which under EDI is commonly reduced to a more sanitised conceptualisation of intersectionality such as the simplistic notion that a student can 'belong' to multiple official equity groups. In this way, EDI is becoming a seductive ensemble that is both a symptom of and a tool of the ongoing 'neoliberalisation' of higher education institutions.

Neoliberalism is a term used in different ways to articulate ideas and effects that have taken hold across the globe in recent decades. Torres used the term to describe a new "common sense" to have 'percolated into all public and private institutions and thus, despite their own autonomy, into institutions of higher education' (Torres, 2011, p. 183). For some, the wild volume and variety of ways in which the term neoliberalism has been deployed risks making it meaningless as an analytical device. We take up the invitation here by Ward and England (2007) to view neoliberalism as a multi-

dimensional challenge – seeing it simultaneously as an ideological hegemonic project, as a form of governmentality, as policies and programs, and as a state form. We focus here on the idea of ‘neoliberalization’ to foreground an intensifying grip (Giannone, 2016) that is reformulating higher education institutions and practices across the planet, with a specific focus on the emergence of EDI as a stable of discourses presenting challenges to projects holding more radical social justice orientations. EDI is a relatively new formation holding associations and connotations that work again to depoliticise projects of equity and social justice in universities, operating as an effective tool of an ongoing ‘neoliberalisation’ of systems and practices. As part of an ideological project, we consider how the narrowed frame of EDI feeds a successful global struggle to restore certain economic supremacies through embedding individualisation, market security, minimal government, and choice. As a form of governmentality, we look at how less potent formations of addressing social inequality (e.g., EDI) can feed forms of power that provide ways to govern humans through self-regulation in an adherence to, for example, competitive subjectivities. As policy and program, we consider how the administrative drive to EDI outcomes can tend towards neoliberal stylings of ‘public’, and ‘private’. Brought together, we argue also that these aspects of a particular neoliberalisation (that plays out differently according to context) helps keep formal education systems increasingly in service to capitalist economies rather than a more diverse or democratic set of possibilities (Biesta, 2021).

As EDI travels and produces effects in different contexts, it sits in tension with conceptualisations of equity and social justice that we at the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) consider more potent when attempting to apprehend and respond to entrenched systems of social inequality, and when attempting to mobilise resources of higher education in ways that acknowledge, for example, the cultural, political and material complexities of social inequality.

## **References**

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