

302 The UK's institutionalisation of racialised, global inequality through its academic employment practices: Insights from the period of 2015-2020

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper raises questions about the ineffectual impact of UK employment policy and practice in addressing academic inequalities. It is informed by a study of the academic staff composition and employment conditions over 2015-2020 within UK universities, comparing them with what was observed within the discipline of Education (Belluigi, Arday and O'Keefe, 2023). Most dire was the exclusion of academics from the majority world without passport privilege, particularly women; and the marginal employment of UK academic citizens of colour. The study demonstrates how the ways in which such data is collected, collated and then re-presented by UK bodies, too easily distorts the picture needed for ascertaining if institutions are complying with their duties as outlined in national equality legislation. The study also reveals the limits of nation-bound social regulation in addressing the reproduction of global inequalities in academia.

Full paper

This paper argues that the ways in which equality is legislated and enacted within UK higher education policy and practice are insufficient to ensure protections against internal threats to its academic citizens. They enable the UK's continued institutionalisation of global inequality - reproduced through its exclusionary academic employment practices of those from the majority world. They also allow for the masking of inequalities in access and participation faced by UK nationals who are racialised as other-than the white majority, yet whose protections fall within the scope of legislation primarily concerned with the public good of the nation-state. This is particularly concerning when observed within disciplines such as Education, which have a direct impact on society and a role to play in sustainable development.

The claims outlined above are supported by a recent report (Belluigi, Arday, O'Keefe 2023) which investigated official data purchased from the Higher Education Statistics Agency for what it revealed about academic staff composition and employment conditions in UK HE in the period 2015-2020. Sociodemographic changes (in terms of sex, ethnicity, nationality, age, dis/ability and religious belief) were mapped, with identification of where social dis/advantage impacted on employment conditions and signs of deterioration or improvement. To demonstrate inequalities in access, percentages were provided of the social groups represented; with proportions of different groupings revealing globalised, racialised and gendered inequalities in participation.

This paper focuses specifically on the intersections of racialization and geopolitics. The outcomes of employment policy and practice were evident when it came to the exclusion of majority world academics without 'passport privilege'. In the UK discipline of Education, Black African females were the most under-represented. The outcomes were also evidenced in the marginalization of UK-nationals racialized as 'ethnic minorities'. The study confirms that the national student-to-staff pipelines are racialised and broken (Williams et al 2019), and cannot be depended upon to alter the elitist ivory tower incrementally. The findings demonstrate that public universities in the UK are neither fulfilling their obligations to protect their academic citizens from discrimination, nor ensuring the conditions for academic autonomy, freedom and flourishing are protected from internal threat.

What does this picture of academics' nationality and ethnicity reflect about UK HE's perceptions of 'excellence' and claims by the UK government of attracting the best global talent? The dominance of white, minority world intellectual leadership renders hollow the UK HE's discourses of 'internationalisation' and its service for its increasing international student body; of its reckoning with coloniality within relations of the supposed Commonwealth; and its

commitment to the principles of global equality which underpin initiatives such as the SDGs, global common good and the UN's Decade of People of African Descent. The impact of deficit perceptions and subordinated labour of 'underdeveloped' majority world academics is clear.

Studies such as these contribute an evidence-base for those advocating for proactive measures to address inequality. Unlike postcolonial contexts which have recognised that the discriminatory structures that were established during the British Empire contexts advantage whiteness (such as the USA and South Africa); the devolved nations of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales operate under the myth of meritocracy, despite continued evidence of the dire rates of change. The study noted differences between these devolved nations; and indeed, more research to probe the impact of the relation between devolution, equality, and HE (Shattock and Horvath, 2020) on academic staffing and practice is needed. Cross-cutting was that equality law places obligations on public institutions, including universities. However, the collection of data about such 'protected characteristics' is only legislated for 'sex', reflective of public recognition that patriarchy in the UK has advantaged males. Alongside this has been the creation and successes of practice-based initiatives for 'women', such as Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) which are well documented (Barnard, 2017; Rosser et al., 2019; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). That particular intervention was not of equal benefit to women marginalised due to racism or classicism (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Sex is a central concern of research on UK HE (Nichols & Stahl 2019; Westoby et al 2021). However, this study's findings confirm assertions that what is required is more centring of ethnicity/race (Tate & Bagguley 2017; Tate & Page 2018) and, moreover, global inequalities and migrations (Sang and Özbilgin 2013; Pustelnikovaite & Chillias, 2022), to comprehend the differential impacts of intersecting systems of oppression experienced by the academic work force. For the global common goods of HE, international attention on the damage that is reproduced through such inequalities in academic employment is warranted.

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