

Misogyny Posing as Measurement: Disrupting the Feminisation Crisis Discourse (0066)

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Abstract

Feminisation discourses represent a melancholia and nostalgia for patriarchal patterns of participation and exclusion in higher education. It is curious why this formulation has gained currency in the context of higher education today, raising questions about the misogynistic impulse seeking to set a ceiling on women's current success by assuming it must have come about by disadvantaging men. This paper raises questions about the norms, values and assumptions that underpin the binaried conceptualisation that situates women's achievements in relation to men's putative underperformance. Feminisation discourses are unsatisfactory as they work with mono-dimensional, stable concepts of identity, ignore intersectionality, are parochial in so far as they fail to examine gender globally, reduce gender inequalities to quantification, and treat gender as a noun, rather than a verb or adjective. Higher education is gendered in terms of values, norms, processes and employment regimes, even when women are in the majority as undergraduate students.

Keywords: Gender equality, widening participation, futurology, transformation

Paper: Is the Present the Future That We Imagined in the Past?

The academy today is characterised by a mixture of hyper-modernisation via the development of global, entrepreneurial, corporate, commercialised universities and speeded up public intellectuals on the move. However, this is underpinned by the archaism of casual research labour, poor quality employment environments and conditions, and widespread gender inequalities. Policy change has been rapid and extreme. However, transformation has been driven more by neo-liberal policies than the academic imaginary or social movements. Areas such as gender equity remain remarkably resistant to change processes despite four decades of legislation.

One change that has received mixed responses is that women have become highly visible as students, or consumers of higher education, while simultaneously remaining invisible or partially visible as leaders and knowledge producers. Women have been allowed into higher education, embassy style, as micro-level representatives of a wider diverse community. However, women continue to be benchmarked in relation to male norms, entering a matrix of declared and hidden rules (Lynch, 2009).

The Feminisation Debate as Fear of the ‘Other’

Over a decade ago, the World Declaration on Higher Education identified equitable participation for women as an urgent priority for the sector (UNESCO, 1998, Article 4). There have been marked gender gains. Globally, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for higher education is now 1.08 (UNESCO, 2009) (compared with 0.96 in 1999), suggesting that overall rates of participation are slightly higher for women than for men. There are multiple engagements with women’s increased participation. It is constructed as a victory for gender equity by some, with feminist scholarship

elegantly deconstructing the misogyny that informs feminisation crisis discourses (Leathwood and Read, 2009; Quinn, 2003). Others see women's gains as an assault on masculinities. For example, the HEPI Report (2009) on male and female participation and progression in higher education realigns equity initiatives to an examination of male participation and achievement. As such, it represents resistance to distributive justice and is a subversion of gender equality successes and fuels current moral panics about women taking over the academy.

The feminisation debate is partial and exclusionary. First, it does not include consideration of leadership in higher education and only seems to relate to female participation at undergraduate level in some programmes and in some geopolitical regions. This approach positions women as turbo-charged consumers, but not in powerful positions as knowledge producers and gatekeepers, or strategic choosers of programmes that have a high exchange value in the labour market. Second, it is debateable as to whether quantitative change has allowed more discursive space for gender? For example, in the UK, increasing numbers of women students have been accompanied by the demise of women's and gender studies in the curriculum. Third, it fails to deconstruct the unified category of 'woman' or intersect gender with other structures of inequality including social class. Fourth, it reduces gender to quantitative change and confuses sex and gender. Fifth, it reinforces the gender dichotomy and constructs equalities in terms of a seesaw, rather than as a jigsaw, in which one groups must always be down when the other comes up in the world. This analysis contributes to the reconstruction of the dominant group as victims, and essentialises gender differences. One of the most dangerous aspects of the feminisation hysteria, in my view, is that it silences advocacy for gender equality.

Measurement Myths

Despite the international global policy architecture of gender mainstreaming (Morley, 2010), measurement is used highly selectively in relation to gender. It is ignored when women experience discrimination or under-representation *e.g.* the Gender Pay Gap (EU, 2007). Yet it is trumpeted in crisis form when women start to be ‘over-represented’, and pose a threat to the dominant group’s sense of entitlement. Measurement is also used, decontextually and without acknowledgement of intersectionality. While there have been significant gender gains in terms of increased representation of women at undergraduate level in some disciplines and in some geographical regions, it is important to ask which women, and what socio-cultural experiences await them once entered (Morley *et al.* 2010)?

Feminisation debates overlook the volumes of international feminist scholarship that have demonstrated that gendered power relations are relayed on a daily basis *e.g.* gender insensitive pedagogy (Welch, 2007), gendered curricula and subject choices (Lapping, 2005); gendered micropolitics (Morley, 1999); promotion, professional development and tenure (Knights and Richards, 2003), the absence of women in research (Husu, 2009), sexual harassment (NUS, 2010), gendered knowledge production and dissemination (Hughes, 2002) to name but a few. Women’s academic identities are often forged in otherness, as strangers in opposition to (socially privileged) men’s belonging and entitlement. The gender debates are full of contradictions. Quantitative targets to let more women into higher education can fail, or be meaningless, while femaleness continues to be socially constructed as second class citizenship. Women are positioned as a remedial group, failing to enter

prestigious disciplines and senior positions, while simultaneously threatening to take over or feminise (and hence devalue) the sacred space of academe.

Feminist scholars and researchers will continue to critique, theorise, audit and grieve toxic links between power and privilege in higher education, as it is a major site of cultural practice, identity formation and symbolic control. Knowledge continues to be seen as the engine of development and innovation. Yet there are some major areas of under-development in the knowledge society. The former UK Labour Secretary of State for Higher Education (Denham, 2008) had a wish list for the next 15 years that includes the expansion of technology, innovation and research-based wealth creation. Gender was not mentioned. Neither was it a category of analysis in Peter Mandelson's strategy document (2009) *Higher ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy*. Nor is a consideration in current coalition cutting of higher education (Willets, 2010). The hyper-modernisation of technologically driven liquified globalisation is underpinned by the archaism of unequal employment and participation practices. There is an urgent need to build on the momentum of women's increased participation and imagine or re-imagine a different future.

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Biography

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