

Changing Concepts of Equity in Transforming UK Higher Education: implications for future pedagogies and practices in global higher education (0080)

David Miriam¹, ¹*Institute of Education London University, London, United Kingdom*

Introduction:

In this paper, I will address the question of changing concepts of equity in UK higher education, using feminist and social science perspectives. As a social scientist, I will question changes in higher education, in relation to the global knowledge economy, families and social policies, and socio-political systems, including moves from social democracy to neo-liberalism. In particular, I will consider how changing contexts and attendant higher education policies have contributed to changing concepts of equity in UK higher education, with equity now linked to concepts of diversity in higher education in a knowledge economy. As a feminist, I want to question current policies, theories and perspectives about the changing balances between men and women in higher education, lifelong learning and academic labour markets. I will argue that current policies have lost their critical and feminist edge and have become incorporated into practices that sustain and reinforce systemic inequalities. As a second wave feminist, developing theories and practices in higher education in the late 20th century we tried to address questions of gender equity and social justice. We also addressed how contemporary policies and practices sustained power and privilege and argued for feminist pedagogies and practices. We also developed policy critiques through feminist educational research and activism to transform practices. The evidence from the UK's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) on policies and practices to widen participation in higher education shows how systemic inequalities are maintained, despite massive expansions of higher education in the UK, as globally (David 2009).

The question of how transformative higher education has been in the direction of equity is both a major policy and practice issue in the UK in the late 20th and 21st century. Given massive expansions in education, and higher education especially, over the last 20 to 30 years, how equal has higher education become for men and women from diverse families and multicultural backgrounds nationally and internationally? Has it merely created massive universities or universities for the masses (Langa Rosado and David 2006)? Has it allowed for economically and socially disadvantaged men and women to participate in forms of higher education and the labour market? The social sciences collectively have developed an important role in contributing to debates about evidence and social or economic 'impact', a tricky and contested concept nowadays, at least in the UK for research assessment and/or excellence. Given that socio-economic contexts are now uncertain how certain can we be about current transformations not maintaining inequalities locally, nationally and internationally?

Equity and the changing policy context of UK higher education:

This question of how transformative higher education has been in the direction of gender equity and social justice is no longer just an academic, sociological or intellectual issue. In the 21st century it is a central policy question for the UK, and

globally. However, concepts of equity as being about gender equity or social class, socio-economic status, disadvantage and diversity have become very divergent in the recent policy debates. Under the UK's New Labour government from 1997 to 2009 much of the concern centred not on gender but social equity. Indeed, the concepts of equality and social justice were watered down and distilled into notions of equity and its linked notion of diversity. These were also linked to the growing notion of the knowledge economy. In addition, as the New Labour government moved into its third term, in 2005, ideas about social or individual mobility as part of equity in labour market participation became more dominant as did the concept of the knowledge economy. As the concept of the knowledge economy became central to New Labour's economic and labour market policies so too did the idea of expanding, and widening participation within, higher education. Notions of access and widening participation were variously redefined to take into more account questions of individual mobility and participation in both universities and the graduate labour market. The idea of ensuring links between educational and economic participation, in terms of skills and competences for a graduate labour market gradually took hold under the 3 successive New Labour administrations.

Conclusions and contradictions in concepts of equity in transforming higher education:

It is not merely the acknowledgement of gender that is important but how concepts of gender equity and feminist perspectives contribute to reducing socio-economic and ethnic inequalities, and how they are based upon ethical principles that value and respect contributions from a diversity of people. Some recent international feminist studies have provided the basis for a more challenging future for higher education both globally and locally (eg Sagaria 2007; Leathwood and Read 2009). A vision for women in the global academy, despite academic capitalism, would surely incorporate the uses of feminist pedagogies, including developing inclusive and critical pedagogies to ensure that people's lives across the life course were enhanced and improved (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). This would not only entail the production of knowledge or research evidence, such as that from the TLRP, for policy but collaborative approaches for the 21st century, including incorporating a diversity of women in the processes of ensuring that the inclusive and flexible curricula have a strong impact upon learning outcomes and success. If we value inclusion, teachers, practitioners and policy-makers should maintain high expectations of all students, as learners, whilst recognising the diversity of their needs, cultures and identities. A vision for the global academy would surely include women's diverse perspectives on pedagogies and institutional as well as cultural perspectives. These feminist pedagogies, including inclusive, collaborative or connectionist, critical and personal pedagogies, would ensure that diverse people's lives across the life course were enhanced.

The answer to my question about how transformative global higher education has been in the direction of gender or social equity is indeed full of contradictions. Mass higher education has been critical to the global knowledge economy, both in supplying the knowledge and knowledge or professional workers for key elements of corporate capitalism (Brown and Lauder 2008). Opportunities to participate and progress through higher education and into postgraduate studies and research are extensive and yet not as dramatically different as we might have hoped for. Social

mobility remains elusive and constrained. Indeed, some argue that, with the increases in participation in higher education, higher skills development and professional education, mobility between socio-economic classes and groups is more limited and inequitable (Brown 2009). Indeed, this is the conclusion of the recent official UK inquiry, chaired by Alan Milburn (The Cabinet Office Strategy Unit 2009).

References:

Brown A. (2009) *Higher Skills Development at work A commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme* London: TLRP Institute of Education

Brown P. and H. Lauder (2008) *Education, globalisation and the knowledge economy A commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme* London: TLRP Institute of Education

Cabinet Office Strategy Unit (2009) *Unleashing Aspiration: Summary and recommendations of the full report The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions* London: The Cabinet Office

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/accessprofessions.aspx

Accessed on 27/07/2009

David M (2009a) (ed.) (with Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Gill Crozier, Pauline Davis, Hubert Ertl, Alison Fuller, Geoff Hayward, Sue Heath, Chris Hockings, Gareth Parry, Diane Reay, Anna Vignoles, and Julian Williams *Improving Learning by Widening Participation in Higher Education* London: Routledge: Improving Learning series

Langa Rosado D. and M.E.David (2006) A massive university or a university for the masses? Continuity and Change in Higher Education in Spain and England *Journal of Education Policy* vol 3 no 3 pp 343-364

Leathwood, C and Read, B (2009) *Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education A feminized future?* Maidenhead, Berks McGraw Hill: Open University Press

Sagaria, M.A.D. (ed) (2007) *Women, Universities and Change: Gender Equality in the European Union and the U.S.* London, Palgrave Macmillan

Slaughter S. and G. Rhoades (2004) *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, State and Higher Education*, Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press.