

Gender equality and meritocracy in research policy in Sweden (0161)

How academia handles gender equality depends on its remit: to produce and communicate knowledge. In this paper, we follow two lines in discussing why political intervention in gender equality recurrently meets academic resistance.

First, we analyse how specific logics, based on the culture of academic research, are hard to reconcile with logics based on political justice that govern the politics of gender equality. To understand how gender equality is conceptualised in higher education, one must scrutinise the logics involved and how they conflate and (re)construct each other.

Secondly, gender equality is often understood today as concerning knowledge produced by research. When gender equality is discussed, politicians highlight the need for more gender research. This leads to conflation of gender research and promotion of gender equality. The result is a confusion that causes problems both for the research field and for gender equality in higher education.

1. Meritocracy as justice and lawful political intervention

In Sweden, the issue of gender equality in higher education and research has been on the agenda since women entered universities in significant numbers more than 40 years ago. Politicians' lack of trust in the capacity of higher education to deal, unaided, with the extreme imbalance between men and women in top-ranking positions has led to several political initiatives. Political efforts have been crucial to enhanced gender equality but, at the same time, they have been essentially contested in academia itself.

This, we believe, is an outcome of diametrically opposed notions of fairness arising from contradictory logics regulating the academic and political worlds. There are obvious tensions between the legitimacy of political intervention and academia's self-perception as a seat of freedom based on independence and creativity. Norms developed by Robert Merton in the 1940s still govern the approach of making institutional imperatives form the ethos of academic research. Communalism, universalism, disinterest and organised scepticism need constant emphasis and have become the essence of academic endeavour. Even when they are supplemented with norms that fit in better with the ongoing transformation of higher education and new techniques of governance, there are certain non-negotiable values.

Meritocracy is one, and an embedded prerequisite. The most qualified person is the one in charge and the assessment, resting as it does on the Mertonian imperative that academic research must be judged independently from the sex of the researcher, is considered impartial.

Political efforts to encourage women in top positions by affirmative action are one example of the current clash. In 1995 the Swedish Minister of Education decided to create a number of professorships for the underrepresented sex, as part of a concerted, large-scale initiative to promote gender equality. The response from academia was strong. Some, who saw the new positions as degrading and belittling, judged the initiative as illegitimate. Initially, such judgements also spread to observers.

The latest example of government intervention is the final report from the *Delegation for Higher Education*, published in January 2011. It pinpoints the slow process of achieving gender equality. As political appointees, the Delegation's members started with the premise that the aim was to introduce the same rights and representative principles as in other organisations. They proposed a coherent package of measures at different levels, including improved objectives for professors' recruitment. Our paper discusses the questions of why legitimacy for equal opportunities is so hard to obtain in higher education/research and what happens when such issues are transformed into proposals.

2. Confusion between gender research and gender equality

Ever since the 1970s, the two lines of development — more women in academia and more gender studies — have been intertwined in Swedish research policy. Support for female-dominated research fields like Gender Studies has been perceived as supporting gender equality in higher education. Gender Studies have, in many ways, benefited from this support but, at the same time, reduced the field to being a matter of gender equality, rather than a research area in its own right. Consequently, Gender Studies in Sweden have been challenged from other disciplinary perspectives by those who claim that they represent not research, but a political endeavour to bring about gender equality.

However, the presence of more women in higher education is not merely understood as promoting gender equality. The raised female proportion is also expected to bring about a qualitative leap in research. A governmental committee in the early 1980s, for example, stated in one report that male researchers' choice of data and research methods must be supplemented by research from female researchers' points of view. The underlying assumption of this argument is an empirical hypothesis concerning sex differences that is given epistemological significance. However, references to the sexes' dissimilarities approach

an ontological level at which women and men are visualised as fundamentally different groups of researchers. A complementary ‘add women and stir’ view of gender has arisen. This is criticised by feminist researchers as reconstructing traditional views, contrary to gender theorists’ aims.

Conclusion

Without a clear distinction between methods of improving conditions both for women researchers and for gender research, the two will be conflated. This confusion is problematic not only for women involved in gender research but for the field itself. Supporting Gender Studies may be dismissed as political and incompatible with academic doxa and self-understanding. On the other hand, favouring women in the name of gender equality is incompatible with the understanding of fairness, which forms the meritocratic order in academia.

References

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