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Gender and the implications of current Government research policy for academic research on higher education in the UK (0165)

Research policy in the UK, like the vast majority of policy in the field of higher education, presents as 'gender neutral'. A significant body of feminist and other critical scholarship has, however, challenged this neutrality and highlighted the gendered, classed and racialised processes, cultures and practices of the academy. The field of higher education is a highly gendered one (Currie, Thiele et al. 2002; Leathwood and Read 2009) with consequences for staff that go far beyond horizontal and vertical stratification and pay gaps to normative constructions of 'the academic' as a (white, upper or middle-class) masculine subject (see, e.g. Morley 1997; Stanley 2006). The demands of hyper research productivity, researcher mobility and fixed-term contracts (Reay 2000; Hey 2001) along with an academy characterised by 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010) have significant gendered implications. Research policy technologies such as the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), whilst apparently gender-neutral, can be seen to institutionalise hegemonic masculinity (Harley 2001), with men far more likely to be selected for entry into the last RAE than women[1] (HEFCE 2009). Gender data from the research councils shows a mixed picture in terms of grant application success rates, although in general fewer women apply for grants and men still tend to dominate research grant decision-making. In 2008-09, men constituted 65% of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Council, Boards and Committees, and whilst the success rates for women applications for research grants and fellowships were slightly higher for women than for men (21% compared to 18%), men were far more likely to apply and so were granted over twice as many awards as women (ESRC 2009). In the same year, women applicants for all types of grant from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council were less successful than men applicants.

Contemporary research policy is epitomised by an increasing focus on research 'excellence' and selectivity geared to the intensified concentration of research funding (Leathwood 2010). Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency indicates that there tend to be fewer senior women academics in the elite research-intensive universities than in post-1992 institutions, suggesting that men are likely to benefit from this increased concentration more than women. The research councils are also currently consulting on and/or implementing processes of 'demand management' of research grant applications which may further advantage those in research intensive universities. Furthermore, research funding for the STEM subjects, where men also predominate, is being prioritised. In addition, increasing government influence of research agendas may mean that it becomes increasingly difficult to obtain funding for research that offers critique, including feminist research.

The policy focus on research excellence, selectivity and concentration draws on notions of 'meritocracy' and 'just desert' to legitimise the inequalities that are inevitably produced. The underlying rationale is that research funding will go to those individuals and institutions that are producing the most excellent, indeed 'world class', research, and that such processes are

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[1] Disabled academics and those of Black ethnicity were also less likely to be entered.

neutral. In contrast, feminist researchers have problematised constructions and assessments of 'excellence' (Wenneras and Wold 1997; Deem 2009; Sandström, Wold et al. 2010) and highlighted the subjective and gendered aspects of these. All of this has implications for the kinds of knowledge that are valorised (see e.g. Alldred and Miller 2007) and who obtains the funding to produce it.

This paper explores these issues through the analysis of data collected through email interviews with academics who research in the area of higher education. The aim of the study, which has been funded by the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) from June 2011 to June 2012, is to explore the implications of current Government research policy for academic research on higher education in the UK. Email interviews are being conducted with 25 academics based in the UK to explore their perceptions and experiences of the impact of current research policies on their research activities. The intention is to produce a purposive sample of academics to reflect the diversity of the field, including those in elite, 'old'/pre-92 and post-92 HEIs, at different stages in their academic career, gender, age and ethnicity. This will enable us to explore the ways in which policy developments are perceived differently in relation to individual and institutional identities and to consider the potential impact of these developments on research capacity in the field. The study is designed to provide a snapshot of academics' perceptions and experiences of this emerging policy agenda and the impact it may have upon their own research and on research policies and activities within their department or university.

Although only recently emergent as a research tool, email interviews have been successfully utilised in a number of educational research studies (see James 2007), including a study on academics' perceptions of speaking and writing in HE conducted by one of the presenters of this paper. Email interviews can produce richer and more nuanced data than a survey, especially with the greater interactivity between researcher and participant. The study adopts a policy sociology approach to 'describe and critically analyse changes in policy, policy technologies and policy regimes' (Ball 2007, p. 1) in relation to higher education research policy and its impacts on HE research and researchers. Critical discourse analysis (Taylor 1997), along with a poststructuralist approach, are utilised to explore the ways in which research policies are constructed and framed, and academics differently positioned within this policy field.

In this paper we will focus specifically on a gender analysis of the data. Our intention is to challenge the 'absent presence' of gender in higher education research policy in the UK by applying a gender lens to our analysis of data from women and men academics to explore the ways in which current research policy developments may be impacting upon their research activities.

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