

10th European Feminist Research Conference

Difference, Diversity, Diffraction: Confronting Hegemonies and Dispossessions

12th – 15th September 2018 in Göttingen (Germany)

Panel

*“The Pursuit of Excellence in Contemporary Universities and the ‘Business Case’
for Gender Equality: Critical perspectives from gender studies, the humanities
and the social sciences”*

14th September 2018, 1:00-2:30 p.m., Room: VG 0.110

Convenors:

**Fiona Jenkins (Australian National University) and
Heike Kahlert (Ruhr University Bochum)**

The claim that the excellence of research integrally involves an equity component has been an important element in the most recent push to improve diversity in universities internationally and appears everywhere as part of the ‘business case’ for gender equality. This panel explores contemporary discourses on the intersection of gender equality and excellence in knowledge-production from a perspective that opens out critical questions concerning what this relationship may really be or what it might mean. Critical investigation of leading discourses on the relationship of equality and excellence is timely given the ways in which these are currently becoming established in research and higher education institutions. As well as examining the construction of ‘merit’ and the ideologies underpinning gender equality initiatives such as Athena Swan in the UK, the panel asks how gender inequality affects the construction of knowledge claims.

The argument that knowledge is improved through diversity in research teams is an important one. Yet in making this argument, the focus has primarily been on STEM disciplines, and humanities and social science disciplines – which have had much to say about the feminist transformations of knowledge necessary for gender equality, besides suffering their own gender imbalances in many areas – have rarely been discussed as posing specific issues. Given this, there is a real risk that the accounts that have been given of the positive relationship between the pursuit of gender equality and disciplinary excellence not only lacks depth, but presents an idealization of knowledge that covers over the real histories of gender relations in disciplinary contexts, and complex inequalities. If the account given of the relationship between gender inequality and distortions in knowledge is wrong or misleading, so too may be the proposed remedies. It is therefore urgent to form a deeper theoretical, historical and sociological account of these issues.

Programme

(1) Title: Gendered Excellence in the Social Sciences

Author: Associate Professor Fiona Jenkins, School of Philosophy, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Fiona.Jenkins@anu.edu.au

Abstract:

Several disciplines in the social sciences have performed far worse than others in achieving gender equality, notably economics, political science and philosophy have been slow to integrate and advance women, as compared with the disciplines of sociology and history. This paper first discusses the question of how we can best analyse the relationship between persistent gender inequality and distortions in knowledge-production. Does gender inequality in academia result in knowledge that distorts our understanding of social, economic and political realities? How do methodological differences impact evaluation practices and how do these, in turn, intersect with gender? How is excellence understood in these differing fields, and what are the specific forms of its relationship with gender inequality in the contours of disciplinary research?

In the prevailing discourses on gender equality in universities, the relationship between two objectives – improving gender relations and improving knowledge – is often taken to be straightforward. However, engaging with the questions posed by gendered hierarchies of knowledge, as these play out as disciplinary level, rarely provides uncontroversial results. The second question addressed by the paper is how can that order of disagreement, dissent and even conflict be better acknowledged and engaged with? What implications should recognizing the complexities of the relationship of equality and excellence in knowledge-production have for improving gender equality policies in universities?

(2) Title: How Academic Excellence and Gender Equality (Not) Intertwine in University Reforms – Conceptions and Legitimations

Author: Professor Dr Heike Kahlert, Ruhr University Bochum, Faculty of Social Science, Heike.Kahlert@rub.de

Abstract:

New Public Management and new forms of governance have dominated the agendas for reforms in research organisations and higher education in many countries all over the world for several years. Neoliberalism and the idea of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ have produced a shift in the way universities and ‘ideal researchers’ are defined. One strategic focus of the latest state-run reform programmes has been to promote ‘excellence’ in knowledge production and scientific organisation(s). Now every researcher and every research organisation has to be or become excellent. Another reform focus lies with ongoing reforms with regard to gender equality in the academic world. However, what is happening and how these developments match seems to be unclear. What are the effects and

implications of these new formations of power/knowledge in the system of research and higher education?

In the paper I will discuss empirical findings on various discourses on ‘academic excellence’ and ‘gender equality’ within the latest university reforms in Germany that are influenced by the introducing of New Public Management to research and higher education. The presentation will focus on the national policy level and investigate how ‘academic excellence’ and ‘gender equality’ are conceptualised and legitimated and if and how both concepts intertwine. The paper will be based on analyses of documents and interviews with influential actors by using the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse. Its aims are to offer critical analyses on current reform discourses and suggestions for improving gender equality policies in universities.

(3) Title: Gender, Academic Excellence and Career Advancement in the Context of University Reform: Problems and Prospects for Institutional Change Towards Gender Equality

Authors: (1) Prof Yvonne Galligan, School of History, Anthropology, Politics and Philosophy, Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, United Kingdom, Y.Galligan@qub.ac.uk

(2) Dr. Sara Clavero, School of History, Anthropology, Politics and Philosophy, Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, United Kingdom, Sara.Clavero@qub.ac.uk

Abstract:

The principle of merit governs the selection processes in the hiring and promotion of academic staff in higher education (HE) institutions. In today’s universities, merit is assessed through a set of standards of ‘excellence’, which are assumed to be objective and measurable through a variety of indicators, including publications in peer reviewed journals, PhD supervision and membership of editorial boards. These standards of excellence are assumed to provide everyone – irrespective of their social class, gender, race and ethnicity, religious belief, age, sexual orientation or ableness – with equal opportunities to advance and obtain rewards solely on the basis of their individual talent and effort.

Yet, despite its claim to fairness, the belief that selection decisions in HE institutions are based solely on individual qualifications and the ability demonstrated by the candidates irrespective of their gender and other personal attributes has been challenged by numerous studies. However, efforts to revise the merit principle and to uncover its gendered construction meets with considerable resistance and are rarely incorporated into gender equality policies of HE institutions.

This paper presents an analysis of actions included in the Gender Equality Plans of six European universities aimed at redressing gender inequalities in the hiring and promotion of academics and scientists: It interrogates the extent to which these plans challenge the

gendered construction of merit. It also discusses the obstacles to revise the standards and measurements of excellence in the context of recent university reforms.

(4) Title: Gender Discourses and Ideology in Higher Education – From Institutional Documents to the Lived Experience and Back

Authors:

(1) Dr. Charikleia Tzanakou: Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill Rd, CV4 7AL, Coventry, UK, Charikleia.Tzanakou@warwick.ac.uk,

(2) Dr. Jo Angouri, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill Rd, CV4 7AL, Coventry, UK, J.Angouri@warwick.ac.uk

(3) Polina Mesionioti, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill Rd, CV4 7AL, Coventry, UK, P.Mesionioti@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

Gender equality in higher education has become very topical especially since the emergence of gender equality programmes such as the Athena SWAN Charter Mark in the UK. Higher education institutions invest resources and efforts in collecting and analysing quantitative data to design and implement actions plans to address gender imbalances. However, there has been less attention on the nuances of the institutional discourse and the complexity of the lived experiences of individuals. This paper focus on an institutional case study to enhance our understanding of the dominant discourses and ideologies that circulate in one HE setting through 2 different lenses a) an analysis of institutional documents and texts related to gender and 2) lived experiences of individuals (to whom these documents are addressed). Firstly, while making the invisible visible has been on critical discourse analysts' agenda for decades, gender ideologies in the academic context remain under-explored. Secondly, it brings together critical discourse analysis of institutional documents and lived experiences of institutional practices to investigate gender ideologies and how the congruence between the two can limit the potential effect of gender equality programmes in transformative institutional change.