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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender back on the agenda in higher education: perspectives of academic staff in a contemporary UK case study

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ABSTRACT

Higher education practitioners concerned with addressing gender on the curriculum inevitably come up against a complex range of institutional barriers. Research presented here, drawing on in-depth staff interviews, sheds light on such 'gender work' and the challenges and its complexities in the current moment in the UK context. Through an institutional case study, we identify multiple ongoing and contemporary challenges arising for those engaged in this work. A constellation of intersecting obstacles are elucidated, wherein gender, far from being 'mainstreamed', is continually side-lined and deprioritized due to being positioned as peripheral, optional and of questionable value in the neoliberal episteme. Yet with urgent challenges inherent in gender equity and social justice education in the contemporary socio-political context, we contend that addressing such barriers and moving the gender mainstreaming agenda forwards is crucial. Renewed emphases on curricula may yet offer an opportunity to re-open discussions, reimagine and reinvigorate gender mainstreaming.

Introduction

This paper contributes insights into multiple barriers faced by those currently engaged in 'gender work' in higher education (HE) curricula and pedagogies. Such work is situated in the current UK context in relation to marketized HE, contemporary working conditions and the broader socio-political context. It calls for a renewed sense of urgency in the light of this context for institutions to address barriers to addressing curricula gaps in relation to gender. We draw on the notion of 'mainstreaming gender', referring to integrating gender across whole organizations (Morley, 2007) in line with broader political goals of gender parity and inclusion (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2002). This concept involves recognition of myriad ways in which lives are gendered (Walby, 2005), ideally working towards transformation of gendered power relations (Rees, 1998). We argue that the rise of far-right authoritarianism in tandem with 'anti-gender' rhetoric necessitates a recentring of such goals in HE curricula and pedagogies (Giroux, 2021; Tudor, 2021). Barriers to mainstreaming gender notwithstanding, a recent re-focussing on curricula, particularly surrounding the decolonizing agenda (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nisancioglu, 2018), provides an opportunity and imperative to reignite the mainstreaming gender agenda.

Inspired by Ahmed's (2012) elucidation of institutional barriers or 'brick walls' facing *diversity workers* and chiming with Henderson's (2019) notion of the *gender person* – referring to the person who is identified as holding responsibility for working on gender issues in their department or

organization – we explore challenges and complexities surrounding working on gender curricula in the contemporary milieu from the perspective of academic practitioners. Such *gender work* creates additional, often unpaid and unrecognized 'labours of love' (Morley, 1998), institutions often relying on women, marginalized and precariously employed academics' 'passionate attachments' to such work (McAlpine, 2010). The co-researchers and authors of this paper think and write collaboratively, from locations as 'gender workers' in the academy: Our shared starting point entails attending to gender and intersectional power dynamics in learning spaces; ensuring all genders are recognized and validated; incorporating inclusive language and recognizing how gender influences learner and educator positionalities (Henderson, 2015; Hooks, 1994). Ahmed (2012) observed the gap between official 'diversity speak', the performative dimensions of equity and diversity work, and realities of institutional constraints. That contemporary gender workers continue to face barriers despite institutions' public commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), is concerning. A sense of urgency is required, given the current socio-political context (to be further explored) of rising fascism – accompanied by virulent misogyny, sexism and transphobia – and the responsibilities of educators to meet such challenges (Giroux, 2021; Phipps, 2017).

Feminism is understood as a diverse global movement with the broad aim of challenging and combatting sexism (Hooks, 2015). Our emerging envisioning of mainstreaming gender and gender pedagogy in contemporary academia are informed by ideas of 'gender sensitivity' – being acutely attuned to how dynamics of gender play a role in all facets of life (Drew & Canavan, 2020) – encompassing awareness of the varied, multi-faceted and shifting locations learners occupy: we are explicitly concerned with avoiding notions that 'gender' is a concern for 'women only'. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) forms a conceptual touchstone for our approach, entailing considerations of race, sexuality, class, (dis)ability and other interconnected facets of power and experience. Renewed foci on curricula through EDI imperatives alongside reinvigorated discussions surrounding decolonization open new questions and possibilities for moving the gender agenda forwards. We now turn to map key perspectives and concerns which have shaped our approach before considering the broader contextual background and socio-political moment in which this project was undertaken.

Feminism and gender in UK higher education

Feminist scholarship and activism have been closely intertwined since the second-wave movement in the UK context (David, 2016). From the 1970s onwards multiple women's studies programmes were launched and feminist content and pedagogies developed (David, 2016), despite frequent sidelining (Weiner, 2006). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, ontological tensions and boundary debates emerged in the shift from women's studies to gender studies (Coate, 2018; Henderson, 2018). This followed closures of many women's studies courses through the 2000s, necessitating considerations of how we might mainstream gender (Wallach Scott, 2008). Yet despite this drive, Wright (2016) identifies ongoing lack of attention to gender in curricula.

There is continued dominance of privileged white male voices, patriarchal frameworks and languages (Bhambra et al., 2018; Bhopal, 2020); in sociology, for example, there remains a tendency to highlight the work of 'founding fathers' *as* 'theory' with feminist perspectives positioned as peripheral (Ahmed, 2012). In law, Naffine (2002) describes how gender is marginalized and how the legal academy has successfully insulated itself from knowledge produced through feminist lenses. MacKinnon speaks of a determined 'gender illiteracy' amongst scholars (MacKinnon, 2017a) that must be tackled through mainstreaming feminism; a serious task for all – not just feminists (MacKinnon, 2017b). There are disciplinary variances in the extent to which gender has been considered at all in curricula, including substantive topics; theoretical, methodological and pedagogic approaches; and canons of perceived disciplinary expertise (Hinton-Smith et al., 2021).

Increasing foci on developing inclusive curricula and pedagogies in support of EDI agendas (Haggis, 2006) informs an imperative to interrogate politics of gender in HE learning contexts,

alongside interrelated aspects of identities and inequities. This imperative sits alongside (although in complex relation to) the current drive to decolonize many disciplines' 'legacy of and continued investment in Eurocentrism and white male heteronormativity' (Maldonado-Torres, Vizcaino, Wallace, & Jeong Eun, 2017, p. 66). The 'decolonising the curriculum' movement seeks to challenge colonial thought, practice, ways of being and teaching (Bhambra et al., 2018). Decolonization contains both tensions and synergies with feminism and gender, including the development of feminist decolonial pedagogies (De Jong, Icaza, & Ritazibwa, 2018), which opens up possibilities for rich discussion and questioning of intersecting power dynamics in knowledge production. It is vital to recognize interconnections between gender, race and coloniality (Lugones, 2007) and address these through curricula. To fail to engage meaningfully with these agendas risks continued silencing and obscuring of marginalized voices and knowledges in the academy (Tudor, 2021) and within the feminist movement (Phipps, 2020). Developing mutual agendas, synergies and alliances is necessary in challenging the augmentation of interrelated sexist, racist, misogynistic, transphobic, homophobic, anti-migrant hate and violence (Giroux, 2021; Phipps, 2017; Tudor, 2021).

Concurrently, alongside identified 're-politicization' of students (Nielsen, 2019), there is some rejuvenation of interest in feminist pedagogies and gender content (Henderson, 2015). Beyond its inherent value 'for its own sake', a gender focus offers wider value to fostering development of valuable capacities, including the propensity to be inherently challenging, critical and political (Darder & Baltodano, 2003). Opportunities offered by gender curricula and pedagogies to engage with difference, diversity and intersectional identities, open spaces to reflect on inequalities more widely, supporting students in developing the tools to critique wide ranging phenomena (Gore, 1992), and engage with politics of knowledge production (Mügge, Montoya, Emejulu, & Weldon, 2018).

Socio-political context in the UK

While focussing on a single institution, this work speaks to the broader landscape of marketized HE which presents challenges for gender content and pedagogies. The research was conducted in a moment where gender is debated and contested, in the light of Gender Recognition Act debates in the UK. Global gains made in respect of gender equity and social justice goals more broadly are threatened (Burke & Carolissen, 2018) due to a prevalence of far-right authoritarianism. In connection with this, recent years have seen global attacks on emancipatory knowledge production, including trans/gender studies (Tudor, 2021). In the wider European context, Gender Studies departments have been closed (Ahrens et al., 2018), considerations of gender presented as a dangerous 'ideology' (Tudor, 2021); such 'anti-gender' campaigns have a global reach (Corrêa, 2018). Tudor (2021) has noted a convergence of nationalist, racist, anti-immigration, transphobic and 'anti-gender' (or so-called 'gender critical') discourses and emphasizes the need to challenge the status quo of existing knowledge paradigms and ongoing power disparities in education. Giroux (2021) calls on critical educators to play a key role in challenging far-right rhetoric which, it is argued, has intensified through social media and in the global pandemic context.

A global backdrop of rising far-right authoritarianism must therefore be considered in relation to HE pedagogies and curricula (Burke & Carolissen, 2018). In the post-Brexit UK context, expressions of hatred including racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia and islamophobia are rife, with hate crime on the rise, including in university environments (Kayali & Walters, 2019). Widespread misogyny and normalization of sexual violence and harassment have been observed in HE contexts (Phipps & Young, 2015; Jackson & Sundaram,2020). Simultaneously, there has been constant undermining of the value of HE itself in UK popular press (Read, 2018), particularly in relation to supposed suppression of 'free speech', such discourses deployed to valorize reactionary speakers and hate speech (Phipps, 2017). Concerningly the UK Government are proposing intervening through the introduction of a 'free speech' champion (Department for Education, 2021). Yet simultaneously, teaching of 'critical race theory' is derided and critiquing capitalism in schools has recently been banned

(Department for Education, 2020). Emergent political and media discourses undermine feminism and decolonization in the academy (Tudor, 2021) and position academics as ideologues intent on brainwashing students with social justice orientated agendas (Read, 2018). Violent effects of this hostile environment are being felt within teaching sessions and written work; we were sad and concerned to note direct impacts on staff of emboldened expressions of racism and sexism. These instances speak to an urgent need to collaborate, support those affected and identify ways forward for gender and social justice orientated education, ensuring goals of tackling gender and intersectional inequalities are recentred.

Methodology and methods

The research project from which this data is drawn is underpinned by an interdisciplinary feminist epistemology, attending to multiply-layered, unequal power dynamics of HE and fostering equitable research processes (Hinton-Smith, Danvers, & Jovanovic, 2018; Danvers, Hinton-Smith, and Webb 2018; Pereira, 2012a; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). A qualitative case study approach applied multi-layered strategies within a research-intensive English university, reviewing practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and identifying presences and absences of gender within this case study institution. Accordingly, the following overarching research questions were interrogated:

(1) In what higher education spaces is the teaching of gender and with feminist pedagogic approaches present and absent?
(2) How are gender and feminist topics and approaches presented, including embedded in the wider curriculum or as add-ons, and intersectionally with wider identities or not?
(3) What are the reasons for the presence and presentation of gender and feminism in higher education teaching; including resources, policies, student demand or teacher inclination?

Ethical approval was granted by the lead institution's[1] research-ethics committee; participant information was provided and consent forms signed. Research involved data collection within participating departments at the case study institution, including documentary analysis of course materials; semi-structured student interviews with 11 participants and staff interviews with 18 participants across a spectrum of teaching and managerial roles (nine men, eight women). This approach facilitated validity and trustworthiness through the triangulation of data sources. Following initial conversations with Heads of Department as gatekeepers, participants were self-selecting. Staff interviews, capturing staff perspectives and experiences of curriculum development, are the specific focus of this paper: Interviews were conducted on campus and typically took forty-five minutes to one hour. We have been careful for ethical reasons not to include demographic information which might identify staff but have referred to academic disciplines where relevant.

Thematic analysis of interviews was undertaken, drawing on the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): This entailed immersion in the data, applying research questions and theoretical lenses alongside allowing new themes to emerge; identification of sub-themes; refining emergent themes to create overarching themes, and developing a narrative. Regular peer debriefing and reflection took place. Four broad overarching themes were articulated across the whole data-set: Curriculum design, pedagogical practices, academic cultures and barriers to mainstreaming gender.

Here, we focus specifically on staff interviews drawn from this case study, analysing perspectives of those concerned with developing gender-sensitive content and pedagogies and interrelated social justice-orientated approaches. The following section identifies key barriers to mainstreaming gender faced by those engaged in such gender work, including gendered academic cultures and subsequent de-prioritization of gender, gendered facets of teaching, contemporary working conditions, and hostility to social justice content and marginalized staff.

Findings

Gendered academic cultures and de-prioritization of gender as a 'live concern'

Continued dominance of white, cis male[1], straight, economically privileged voices and canons within the disciplines, even where the particular department has a high proportion of women, was apparent. For staff working with gender and other equity concerns, this was deeply embedded in departmental cultures. One participant noted that in terms of representation, whiteness rather than gender dominated as a characteristic, however when it came to more prestigious positions these tended to be dominated by men, an observation borne out by existing research (Bhopal, 2020).

> 'I would say, numerically I don't think it's necessarily men, but in terms of the highest positions of prestige and things like that it is, disproportionately. I would say in terms of the baseline demographics, the whiteness is more striking than a numerical dominance of men.'

This reflects what we noted was a widespread focus on numbers and the notion that gender equality simplistically entails numeric representation (David, 2014). Yet this serves to invisibilise the need to attend to gender. Attending to whiteness in the academy is crucial (Arday, 2018) and not to be overshadowed by gender concerns (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019). Yet some junior women academics we spoke to found themselves at times struggling to get gender and interconnected equity issues on the agenda at all. Gender work, it should be noted, tended to fall to women (Morley, 1998). There was a desire from these staff to include curriculum content that addressed historical inequities and exclusions and to develop gender inclusive sensitivities and competencies, recognizing that 'You can't have optimum research in an environment where you've got this huge number of the same kind of people. Or, whether it be the same gender, the same ethnic background, cultural educational background'. However, these participants identified lack of interest at more senior levels: 'Some people think it's a waste of time and I think people that think it's a waste of time are often the privileged ones. That's because they're at the top of the mountain, so they don't see the climb everybody else has to make'.

Even where women have high numeric representation, it does not follow that they have parity of esteem or power (David, 2014; Reay, 2004), particularly in intersection with raced and classed inequities (Muhs et al., 2012). There were reported perceptions that gender is no longer a 'live concern'; that 'the feminists' had dealt with gender in the academy 'in the '70s', chiming with post-feminist notions that the goals of gender equity have now been won (Gill, 2016); that it was a 'special interest' topic rather than of mainstream value, or simply an afterthought:

> 'I think for some people this is very much, because of their own lived experiences . . . this is something that people think about. I think for some people it's really not, or is in uneven and incomplete sorts of ways . . . I think more obviously incomplete in, oh I'll add a week with women, but not actually change anything else about the way I teach the material.'

Inclusion of gender in curricula, according to participants, tended to be limited to a 'week on women', the field of gender frequently viewed as interchangeable with or only relevant to women. It sometimes involved inclusion of a feminist perspective, presented tokenistically as an 'alternative' perspective – separate to mainstream 'core' theorists – or simply as an 'add-on' (Hinton-Smith et al., 2021; Wright, 2016). Consequently, as one participant suggested, there were 'pockets' of good practice where there was a pre-existing interest in gender but no central drive to ensure gender was embedded; it therefore fell to individual staff. Despite efforts to engage colleagues with transforming curricula and conversations about gender, these gender workers faced being ignored or dismissed. This reflects cultures of silencing academic women (Aiston & Kent, 2020) and continued dismissal of feminist knowledge (Code, 1991), alongside downplaying the relevance of gender. Attendees at gender and EDI events were 'self-selecting'; in our own work, we are strongly aware of the phrase 'preaching to the converted' where only those already engaged attend:

'I think it's being addressed in pockets, and you've got very engaged members of staff . . . You know the people who are really engaged in gender pedagogy, or gender research in their own research and in their own research clusters. My concern is the areas where those discussions are not taking place, because people have a more traditional doctrine and approach to the research. Any time we've attempted to have those discussions it's been quite difficult to bring other people into those discussions, and self-selecting, certain people turn up to certain events.'

Therefore, while individual educators with a pre-existing interest engaged with gender and sought to draw this awareness into their pedagogy and curricula, this was not generally perceived as a priority. This participant notes that despite efforts to shift the agenda, their discipline continued to be canonical and inflexible with use of standardized texts, critical or 'alternative' perspectives viewed as non-essential:

'Teaching x, I have to be more aware, but for other people who want to get through the topics that they need to cover for a x degree, the standard textbooks are fairly doctrinal. They set out the facts . . . They don't bring in those more critical perspectives or just even an alternative framing, and there's sometimes a fear, if they use an alternative text, that they're not then covering [what] they need to know.'

One participant identified various sub-disciplines which may lend themselves towards considerations of gender in course materials, asserting that they had developed a 'mixed' reading list in relation to gender. Yet there was a tendency towards binary framings of gender running through many accounts, including the notion that because we 'talk about women' or women are well represented in departments or in course materials, there is not an issue. In some cases, there was recognition of the need to move beyond thinking about gender simply as the inclusion of women to exploring multiple gender identities:

'I think some sub-disciplines are more male dominated than others, and so I think definitely within the department there's that. I think my reading lists are probably fairly mixed. As I say, with various [examples] we probably talk more about women than we do about men. Maybe that's a problem, but obviously we talk about gender identity, because that's relevant as well.'

Gendered dimensions of teaching

Efforts to ensure women and non-binary authors are included and visible in course content are important considerations. However, there remain pertinent issues in relation to pedagogical delivery: One participant identified the continuation of a highly gendered 'genius model' of academia, notions of 'genius' and 'brilliance' more readily attaching themselves to male bodies in academic cultures (Morley, 2013):

'I think there are some faculty members, mostly senior men, who . . . Who are stuck in . . . a particular kind of pedagogical imparting of genius model . . . It's not just on a political basis that I would reject that, I'm actually not that good at it, so that's not the most effective way for me to teach, so I avoid it. But I think that is the way that some of my colleagues, brilliant colleagues, approach teaching.'

This 'imparting genius mode' was discussed within the interview as finding its ultimate expression in 'the magisterial lecture' where an enigmatic professor speaks on a topic of (his) specialist expertise. While the participant viewed this as one of many possible pedagogical approaches, this transmissive style has drawn critiques from feminist and decolonial perspectives (hooks, 1994) as it fails to recognize, silences and devalues multiple perspectives and forms of knowledge. The 'genius model' encapsulates patriarchal-colonial paradigms and can be viewed as a continuing vestige of archaic forms of academia (Morley, 2012), in interaction with emergent dominant masculinized expressions of pedagogy within the neoliberal academy, which Smyth (2017) sees exemplified in the 'rock star' academic.

Fundamentally, the work of developing gender-sensitive curricula and pedagogies was frequently perceived by participants as undervalued. Such devaluation is augmented by the issue that those

engaged in such gender work are often women in teaching-focussed roles and less likely to receive recognition than those embodying the most highly valued roles embodying (male) 'genius'. This concern reflects that teaching activities can be perceived as holding less prestige than research and, despite the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework, accorded less institutional support (Morris et al., 2021). It also reflects ongoing feminization of certain aspects of academic labour including institutional EDI work (Ahmed, 2012), pastoral care and teaching (Morley, 1998).

Binary divisions underpinning academic culture have long been critiqued by feminist scholars (Lynch, 2010), encompassing devaluation of 'caring' work associated with bodily and emotional domains, and with women. Beyond 'representation' in terms of 'numbers of men and women' as gender equality is sometimes perceived (David, 2014), the kinds of work staff are engaged in and accompanying recognition and reward systems available are key here. Representation of women and non-binary staff in senior roles matters but so does the esteem in which non-senior or teaching-focussed staff are held – ensuring that women and non-binary role models occupying a range of positions are available alongside explicit valuing of their contributions:

> 'Certainly, in terms of promotion structures it would be very helpful if the university didn't have a gender pay gap or promoted women or recognized some of the feminized labour that people do in departments. So, the enormous amount of work that some people do to engage with pedagogy, make sure it's ethical, make sure it's diverse. That's not necessarily recognized, those people don't necessarily get promoted. So, I feel like, in terms of its own structures of reward and promotion and recognition of work, the university could do a lot better to help colleagues.'

Working conditions in neoliberal academia

Lack of time-space for academic practitioners to undertake curricular development work around gender and feminist concerns is an ongoing concern (Moss & Richter, 2011) and arose as a theme here (Hinton-Smith et al., 2021). These challenges are likely to be augmented in an era of ever-increasing intensification of academic labour (Hall, 2020; Sang, Powell, Finkel, & Richards, 2015). Multiple pressures on staff in a competitive marketized sector are tangible, particularly in relation to detrimental impacts on staff members who face competing demands, increasing precarity (UCU (Universities and Colleges Union), 2019), long-hours and toxic working cultures (Gill, 2010; Pereira, 2016; Sang et al., 2015). Pressurized working environments as a barrier to gender work were apparent:

> I would say the biggest obstacle is just overwork, just being so over-committed with teaching and admin and stuff that it's really hard for us to find time. I just think, as with every other higher institution in the UK, we're just so overworked. We're so over-committed. It's such a fight to find time to review your materials. And to do the level of research it takes to rectify issues where you find them.

In terms of EDI institutional requirements, the laborious work of documenting and evidencing compliance and developing institutional plans can take precedence (Ahmed, 2012) over meaningful change, particularly at curriculum level. While institutions, in strategic plans and marketing materials, frequently make reference to desires to 'innovate', 'disrupt', 'revolutionize' and 'transform', drawing on emancipatory language of liberatory pedagogies (Tudor,2021), the reality for many staff is that institutional bureaucratic processes surrounding curriculum development, are time-consuming and constrain what is possible:

> 'I think there's a real institutional problem in that, although there seems to be a lot of talk about developing pedagogy and developing innovation the reality is it's very bureaucratic . . . How we spend our time is very much determined by bureaucratic processes, and sometimes engaging in some of these bigger issues seems like a luxury.'

Staff spoke of feeling exhausted and demoralized, reflecting intensification of academic work under neoliberalism (Gill, 2010; Hall, 2020; Sang et al., 2015). This impacted on motivation for

curriculum development; such issues intertwined with a sense of disillusionment at the lack of progress on EDI goals with perceptions of 'lip service' being paid but a lack of meaningful change on the ground (Ahmed, 2012).

Also apparent were perceptions of gender in competition with other facets of identity and power (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019). We were inspired to see that the decolonization agenda was frequently referred to, demonstrating how this idea has gained momentum. However, there was little recognition of interplay of intersecting dimensions of power or a sense that attending to gender forms a vital aspect of decolonization due to their deep interconnectedness (De Jong et al., 2018; Lugones, 2007; Méndez, 2015; Tudor, 2021). Rather, the need to decolonize tended to be viewed as the only current priority, leaving no time for gender. As previously touched on, participants referred to high numbers of women faculty, perhaps indicating that gender issues are paradoxically less likely to be viewed as relevant due to the presence of women; this quotation recognizes non-ethnically diverse faculty and western-centric knowledge. It alludes to the particularly gendered nature of institutional EDI and curriculum development work and expectation that women will adopt these roles:

'I think for me the decolonizing agenda is more urgent, because I think there have been improvements within the sector in relation to gender equality . . . As someone in a now more managerial role, you realize how far we still have to go in terms of gender perceptions and in terms of the assumptions that people make and in terms of gender stereotyping. I'm one of those people who does exactly as a woman is supposed to do, like the citizenship roles, but obviously we have a lot of women in faculty.'

Another participant identified the importance of providing in-depth explorations of different forms of oppression while retaining an intersectional lens. There was a perception that this can be conceptually and pedagogically complex and challenging – indicating a need for resources for those engaged in this important work, rather than leaving it up to individual lecturers to grapple with these issues:

'I think it's actually helpful to see them [issues of gender, race and other categories] separately but bearing in mind that we need an intersectional approach, so that's why it's contradictory. I think it's not enough just to look at gender, but sometimes, when you try to do too many things, it all gets muddled, and I think it's partly about identifying where the problem is.'

Hostility to social justice content and marginalized staff

A further dimension to challenges of prioritizing gender content and pedagogies, relates to consumerism and the employability agenda, reflected in perceptions and responses of students who may not see the relevance to their particular career pathway (explored further in Hinton-Smith et al., 2021). While gender has relevance to many careers and life experiences, this emphasis reflects marketized HE and the instrumentality it fosters: In this milieu, students are reduced to consumers (Brule, 2004) purchasing a degree in order to facilitate entry into their chosen profession. Student responses may be simultaneously influenced by concerns in the popular press about the validity of degree courses, value of university education and perceived imposition of social justice content and practices (Read, 2018). Several academics reported student expressions of resentment towards social justice content and theoretical lenses in their evaluations and some were unfortunately exposed to hostile sexist and racist content in class discussions and assessments, reflecting the wider socio-political context (Giroux, 2021; Tudor, 2021).

'A few of them have been like . . . There was one who, in the evaluation, said something like, why are we even bothering with the theory side of things? Why don't we just do [subject]? It is a Marmite type of module in as much as I'd say the vast majority of students get it, enjoy it, engage with it, but we do get a kind of resistance . . . What are we doing this for, what's the point, this isn't going to help me if I go and work in [field of work]. But we do have people here who are here because they want to earn lots of money and become successful [in their

field] and when you ask them about gender or race, they're not interested. They're not the majority, but it's quite a strong resistance movement, shall we say.'

The relatively recently introduced Teaching Excellence Framework means student evaluations hold weight and can discriminate and impact on academic careers; feedback may carry sexist and racist overtones (Heffernan, 2021). The spectre of negative evaluations may dissuade academics, particularly those on temporary contracts (Read & Leathwood, 2020), from introducing challenging content. Narrowly instrumental foci which dismiss theorization of social, contextual factors as irrelevant is concerning, especially given the urgency of responding to the current socio-political context (Burke & Carolissen, 2018). There is an important case to be made to students, departments and institutions around ensuring learners are provided with critical tools to challenge dominant conceptions, interrogate contexts in which they live, work and research and to understand histories of sexism, racism, colonialism, classism, ageism and ableism which contribute to shaping their experiences and those who they encounter in everyday and professional lives. Transparency and explaining why we are doing what we do, even though it may feel discomforting to students (Pereira, 2012b) may be one strategy. However, these are not pedagogical challenges individual lecturers, especially those occupying marginalized positionalities, should be left to deal with in isolation.

Conclusions

This article contributes a case study of experiences of those who are committed to developing gender in the HE curriculum in the contemporary UK context. It is contextualized in the current moment with multiple challenges facing staff involved in curriculum development. We address the lack of gender mainstreaming in this context, considering impacts of the socio-political milieu alongside intensification of neoliberal management practices and poor working conditions. The article identifies multi-faceted challenges facing HE practitioners committed to 'gender work' and challenging continuing gendered inequities in the academy. We echo work which locates feminist and gender work as operating beneath the radar of mainstream institutional practice (Moss & Richter, 2011) in contradiction to stated institutional commitments to gender equity (Ahmed, 2012).

Differing perspectives were undoubtedly influenced by many varied, often partial, contradictory and contested approaches to and discourses – surrounding gender. These included notions that gender is not currently a priority – positioned as the goals of gender equality having been won, a reduction of the field of gender to numerical representation, and other social justice issues requiring more priority. This reflects continuing post-feminist framings (Gill, 2016) and echoes commentators who have found that different aspects of social justice are often viewed as in competition (Bhopal & Henderson, 2019), that attending to one facet means abandoning another. In line with MacKinnon (2017a), this suggests that there is an urgent need for more gender literacy among HE staff to enable them to respond to EDI requirements and meaningfully work to embed gender in the curriculum. We further emphasize a need for intersectional understandings in shaping curricula and pedagogies. Institutional commitment and resource is required, rather than relying on the 'good will' of often marginalized and precariously positioned individuals. In relation to debates around mainstreaming gender, there is much to be said for drawing on the expertise of staff with specialisms in gender and intersectionality to contribute enhanced up-to-date knowledge and understanding to strengthen curriculum development.

Our research indicates the impossibility of separating out learning and teaching from academic cultures and environments, from the working conditions of staff and shifting dynamics between lecturers and students within marketized HE. There are indications that the current reactionary political climate (Burke & Carolissen, 2018) – in tandem with historic and ongoing inequities – permeates learning spaces, creating hostilities towards marginalized staff delivering gender and social justice content. There is an urgent need to address this reality and support staff as they tackle these issues, in some cases facing harassment. Feminist, decolonial pedagogies and social justice content can be risky for (predominantly women) staff employed on insecure contracts (UCU (Universities and Colleges Union), 2019), potentially

attracting poor student 'satisfaction' ratings or complaints (Heffernan, 2021) thus further constraining curriculum innovation (Read and Leathwood, 2020); contemporary working conditions are inevitably part of the wider conversation. Notwithstanding complex challenges, we take hope and inspiration from the committed and thoughtful participants we spoke to who care deeply about their students, bringing creativity, commitment and passion to their work. Renewed conversations about gender, the drive to decolonize and increasing recognition of the interconnectedness of gender, race and other facets of oppression have created a timely moment to rejuvenate ongoing curriculum development efforts. Working collaboratively and in solidarity to share interdisciplinary perspectives and expertise and to make the case for institutional support and resource, is a starting-point for ensuring gender remains firmly on the HE agenda; together we might even begin loosening and removing some of the bricks in the 'brick walls' (Ahmed, 2012) which at times inhibit this crucial work.

Note

1. A person who identifies as male and who was assigned male at birth

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Sussex. Her primary research interests relate to 'non-traditional' students in higher education, and experiences of (un)belonging and marginalisations. After developing an academic career in Sociology, including as Co-Director of the Centre for Gender Studies; she moved to the Education department at the University of Sussex in 2014. Here she has continued to develop and expand her interests around people's experiences of accessing and participating in compulsory, further, higher and informal educational contexts; and the organizational cultures that support or inhibit this.

Dr Rosa Marvell is Student Success and Progression Postdoctoral Research Assistant at Oxford Brookes University and recently completed their ESRC-funded PhD in the Department of Education at the University of Sussex, associated with the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning Research (CTLR). Her doctoral study, entitled 'Exploring postgraduate taught (PGT) trajectories through the narratives of first-generation students enrolled on Master's Programmes in England', is focused on the complexity and topography of journeys into Master's-level study, explored through life-history narrative interviews and visual timelining.

Professor Kimberley Brayson joined Leicester law School in 2020 and prior to that was Senior Lecturer and Co-Director of the Sussex Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Sussex. She completed her Ph.D at Queen Mary, University of London (2014) and have a bilingual masters in Legal Theory from the European Academy of Legal Theory, Brussels (magna cum laude) with a semester spent at the EUI, Florence (2006). I completed my undergraduate degree in English Law and German Law at the University of Kent with a year spent at the Phillips Universität, Marburg, Germany (2005).

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