

***‘It’s not something that we think about with regard to curriculum.’ Exploring gender and equality awareness in higher education curriculum and pedagogy***

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**Abstract**

In recent years, gender mainstreaming has increasingly been positioned as a central policy imperative in many countries. At the same time, gender as a focus of academic study has come under attack in the USA and Europe, and some suggest there to be a crisis in feminist teaching. This renders it vital to explore in the context of contemporary higher education where gender and feminist content and approaches are present and absent.

This research set out to develop insight through a cross-disciplinary, qualitative case study including documentary analysis alongside staff and student interviews. Findings highlighted contradictions, including that people often claim to champion gender and diversity generally whilst simultaneously rejecting responsibility for the same issues in their own teaching. These insights identify challenges, including attribution of responsibility for inequalities around the representation of gender as belonging elsewhere, with others, in terms of both teaching spaces and temporality.

**Introduction: Researching gender in higher education - where and why.**

Despite stated aims across higher education (HE) institutions to further equality, diversity and inclusion, spaces which are truly open to reflexive interrogations of gender and gendered exclusions are often pushed to the periphery of the academy. Beyond its inherent value ‘for its own sake’, the focus and approach of Gender Studies and feminist inquiry fosters core skills that are championed in students, including the propensity to be inherently challenging, critical and political (Lawrence 2014; Wieler 2010; Darder and Baltodano 2003; Gore 1992). Mainstreaming gender pedagogy can also support students to develop tools to critique and problematise ideas (Gore, 1992), and challenge epistemological foundations (Mügge et al. 2018). No subject or content will continue to look the same when examined through the lens of gender thinking (Davis *et al.* 2006). Our intention is to lay foundations for ongoing collaborative development to embed gender-sensitive approaches to HE pedagogy and curricula that can be adapted across disciplinary, international and educational settings.

From the 1990s through to the early 2000s the main discussion around gender in HE teaching was the viability of women's studies or whether ‘gender studies’ was preferable (Brown 1998; Wiegman 2005). On the one hand, proponents of women’s studies highlight its personal, political, and professional power in ensuring women-centredness when White, ‘Western’ men are positioned as emblematic of human experience and where ‘*women-only spaces were very much needed but were too difficult to obtain*’ (Coate 2018: 487). Others counter that gender is now more conceptually productive as it can better account for the subsequent diversification of inquiry, encompassing intersectional, masculinities and queer studies as they intersect with feminist thought (Feitz 2016; Henderson 2018). Through the 2000s, in the UK many women's studies departments and courses closed down (Wallach Scott 2008), and since then most focus

has been on the mainstream curriculum. Most social science degree courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level have for several decades now included both advanced module options and discrete topics within core modules devoted to issues relating to gender and feminism. These, however, remain ‘add-ons’, appearing often more as an after-thought rather than integrated into core focus (Wright 2016; Naffine 2002). Opportunities for gendered approaches are reduced to ‘bite sized’ chunks of a term or even a single session. Wright (2016) argues that feminist teaching in the UK is now in crisis due to lack of attention to gendered experiences, even on many modules addressing equality and diversity. In law, Naffine (2002) describes how gender is marginalised and how the legal academy has insulated itself from knowledge produced through a feminist lens. MacKinnon (2017a) identifies a need to mainstream feminism in curricula; to be taken seriously by feminists and those who do not consider themselves feminists (MacKinnon 2017b). Moss and Richter (2011) identify the complexity of relationships between feminism and academia, given that academics have different balances of teaching, research, course development, administration and placements; some of these aspects may be informed by feminist values while others are not. Furthermore, academics have differing ability to influence, and different personal, political and conceptual orientations to feminism. Moreover, teaching gender and feminism in the UK takes place in a current context of austerity, neoliberalism and a continuing backlash against feminist and social justice politics (Wright 2016; Burke and Carolissen, 2018; Sundaram and Jackson, 2020).

This research emanated from our experiences as feminist academics across the social sciences (including Sociology, Law, Education and Gender Studies). We are all actively engaged in research and teaching over a range of specialisms including gender, HE, and equalities. We see teaching and teaching-informed research in parity to research and research-informed teaching (Giraud 2016). Moreover, we recognise the shortcomings of the neoliberal academy, located and embodied in everyday practices that we all act within and (as academics) benefit from. Our combined experiences of teaching undergraduates, postgraduates and leading academic professional development provoke our commitment to increasing gender awareness in teaching. We set out to learn through the voices of staff and students in diverse disciplines and through interrogating our own practices and understandings, whilst recognising the tensions and difficulties of ‘giving voice’ to others (Ellsworth 1989)

While this research critically interrogates gender absences and presences in HE, it also opens opportunities to affect change individually and collectively, including by creatively reimagining classroom practices and the policies, theories and tacit assumptions that underpin them. Questioning binary gender assumptions offers a framework to challenge other binaries and monolithic constructions, including simplistic ways of positioning student identity and teacher/student pedagogical relationships, emphasising the value of collective endeavour and co-construction of social and learning encounters.

### **Theoretical framings**

Theoretically, our understandings around gender and equality awareness in HE curriculum and pedagogy in this paper draw across insights from four core and interrelated areas of insight. These are as follows: spatial-temporal dimensions of absences and presences; situatedness of knowledge production; significance of intersectionality; and the transformative potential of HE. In anchoring the work within these theoretical understandings, we draw from across diverse perspectives within and beyond feminisms, synthesising insights from relevant theorists.

### *Absences and presences*

Previous research has developed understanding by interrogating *formations* of gender and HE pedagogies (Burke et al. 2013; Burke et al. 2017). We further consider the extent to which awareness around gender is present or absent in HE spaces at all. This takes inspiration from critical discourse analysis in demanding attention to both absences and presences to understand power relations (Fairclough 2010). Theoretical perspectives illuminating presences and absences are central to this research, including those around feminist knowledge(s); responsibility for change; acknowledgement of the very relevance of gender; and existence of gendered inequalities in particular temporally-bound HE spaces.

This incorporates understandings of how spatial-temporal dynamics of gender relations and *responsibilities* within HE influence feminist academic praxis (Burke et al. 2017; Massey 2005; Moss and Richter 2011). It further relates to the persistent dominance of exclusive knowledges. Keenan (2018) conceptualises the way in which these exclusions continue to define and characterise knowledge production as a temporal dislocation invoking the metaphor of ‘time-machines’, transporting inequalities into the present-day classroom.

Adam (2002, 2003) identifies changing time as an aspect of modernity reflecting wider societal values. Anything not deemed ‘productive’ in terms of capitalist output occupies ‘shadowlands’ of undervalued time falling under the radar, a space at a global level occupied mainly by women, caregivers and those requiring care or deemed unproductive. Moss and Richter (2011), drawing on this conceptualisation, explore shifting paradigms of space-time in relation to feminism and academia, recognising ongoing gendered inequalities in relation to time, human relationships, and care and support of students. Time-space constraints affect feminist practice and opportunities to develop curricula, reflecting under-valuing of such concerns in the academy (ibid. 2011).

Building further on gender absences and responsibility, Ali (2009) asserts a need to attend to where Black feminism appears in curricula material, and who is responsible for teaching it. Such absences within theoretical canons and their production are identified as ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak 1988), whereby dominant epistemological positions continue to marginalise and subjugate others. Ali (2009) argues for the need to expose and address such silences, making histories and power dynamics more visible in classrooms.

### *Situating knowledges*

Henderson (2015) traces the evolution of gender pedagogy and its role deconstructing conventions of academic knowledge production. Feminist perspectives have addressed conventions in curricula and what these mean for knowledge (re)production and prestige continually drawing attention to dominant epistemological positionalities (Kandiko Howsona et al. 2018). Nevertheless, successive feminist theorisations have struggled to overturn which dominant paradigms occupy the ‘narrow tributary’ of accepted and prioritised epistemologies (Quinn 2010). Even in sociology, for example, remains a tendency to prioritise ‘founding fathers’ (Braidotti 2013). A feminist approach to academic knowledge production foregrounds the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1992), including interplay between texts, bodies, subjectivities and spaces (both as subject matter and within the teaching context). hooks (1994) identifies the imperative of acknowledging that the different standpoints students bring are fundamental to the classroom, alongside the need to value these knowledges brought from students’ standpoints. Moreover, Koster (2011) discusses how teaching gender often includes

subject matter such as rape, domestic violence and pornography, which many women students will have experienced and which may cause discomfort for male students. It is suggested that this can create a politics of emotion and shame in gender pedagogy (Burke 2017), potentially unleashing intense emotions and distress in the classroom that teachers may not necessarily have skills for (McNeil 1992). This entails emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) on the part of students and teachers alike. Such responsibility often falls onto women, presented as being both ‘talented’ at and responsible for emotional domains and pastoral care, which require intensified levels of emotional labour (Morley 1998; Leathwood 2005; Burke and Jackson 2007; Skeggs 1995).

### *Binaries and intersectionality*

Our research set out to employ a non-binary lens to shift analysis from simplistic understandings of masculinities and femininities in the classroom (Burke et al. 2017). While explicitly focusing on gender, we recognise that gender, its performance and inequalities do not exist in a vacuum. Drawing on insights from intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1991), gender is recognised as part of a complex web of identities playing out in lived and shifting negotiations of power, privilege and inequality. Briggs (2013) argues that connecting studies around women, gender and sexuality to ethnic studies, decolonial/postcolonial studies and LGBT studies creates important space for fruitful exchanges. This acknowledges the inextricable relationship between the ‘*legacy of and continued investment in Eurocentrism and white male heteronormativity*’ and HE curricula (Maldonado-Torres et al. 2017, 66). While decolonial and feminist theoretical perspectives hold different histories and encompass multiple positionings, they can be understood as in a dynamic and synergistic (if at times conflictual) relationship which de Jong et al. (2018, xvii) characterise as ‘*productive tension*’. Ali’s (2009) work on Black feminist praxis and pedagogy in HE asserts the importance of aligning over ‘issues’ rather than ‘identities,’ calling for a ‘transversal politics’ with solidarity between anti-racism, class and sexual freedom movements. Her discussion of Black feminist praxis in neoliberalised HE posits that the post-structural turn has weakened the radical potential of Black feminism (with categories such as ‘women’ and ‘Black’ becoming debated and contested). She affirms a need to continue to ask how ‘race’, ethnicity, feminism, and their relationality are formed and reformed in HE practices, including teaching, learning and curriculum. Furthermore, Ali sees curriculum constraints that condense opportunities for feminist theory into ‘potted versions’ as undermining the rich, complexity of feminism and marginalising opportunities to meaningfully engage with intersectionality.

### *Education, transgression and transformation*

bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: education as the practice of freedom* (1994) is a key text to theorising the relationship between feminism and pedagogy, drawing on Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy. Hooks recognises that everyone contributes to and is responsible for learning, emphasising the importance of recognising difference, power dynamics and histories of domination and oppression. This encompasses attending to biases within curricula as well as pedagogical practices. For hooks, the endpoint to education is transformation of power relations, drawing on Freire’s (1970) concept of ‘conscientization’, which she translates as developing critical awareness and engagement to reflect on and ultimately change the world.

Alternatively, Giraud (2016) speaks to the difficulties of reconciling a transformative critique of power relations in a context shaped by hierarchies undermining of critical and feminist

pedagogies. The ongoing neoliberalisation of HE, in which students are positioned as consumers (Nixon et al. 2018), presents such priorities as the National Student Survey, Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework and awards, which speak to cultures of immediate gratification for students and, by extension, teachers. Consumerist models of education complicate engagement with gender in the classroom in terms of what issues are addressed, where and how (Henderson 2015).

At the same time, the rise of right-wing populism, including identified trends toward nationalism, xenophobia and a tendency towards authoritarianism, pose particular pedagogic challenges including in relation to gender equity in education (Burke and Carolissen 2018). This sits in a wider context of contemporary media tropes entrenching a broader right-wing backlash against universities through logics of masculinity and anti-elitism (Read 2018). Such agendas can act as a barrier to enacting elements of more radical pedagogic approaches including those that come from a feminist perspective (Wright 2016). Wright's (2016) more contemporary illustration of the experiences of feminist academics working within a hostile environment, whereby there are few identified attempts by colleagues to directly identify as a feminist or advocate of feminism (Ahmed 2010; hooks 2010; Lee 2005), appears a far cry from hooks' emancipatory vision for a feminist-informed education.

### **Methodology: Engaging staff and student voice through a cross-discipline case study**

Exploring everyday academic practices reveals the presences and absences of feminist approaches and gender issues (Smith 2002). Informed by this, we designed an in-depth institutional case study (Flyvbjerg 2006), reviewing existing teaching and pedagogical practice. Whilst single-site case studies exclude chances for comparison - including exploring whether phenomena are individual quirks or more widely shared - any potential omissions are recompensed by the benefits of in-depth exploration. This enabled identification of key issues and refining methodological approaches for future application across a wider dataset. The research design invited insights across diverse academic disciplines, revealing inter- and intra-disciplinary differences and similarities in gender literacy in both subject and approach.

The research approach was underpinned by an interdisciplinary feminist methodology, paying attention to the multi-layered unequal power dynamics of both the HE context and the research process (Hinton-Smith and Seal 2018; Danvers et al. 2018; Hinton-Smith et al. 2018). Such values aspire to partially democratise research process through validating the voices of diversely positioned stakeholders as equally-valued contributors (Periera, 2012; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). However, we remain reflexively aware of how all scholars, including feminists, are imbricated within systems of gender inequalities and oppression (Moss and Richter 2011). Moreover, we recognise power imbalances as interred throughout fieldwork and analysis, determining which actors are seen as valid knowledge producers, unsettling any simplistic or overly optimistic claims of truly offering an emancipatory platform (Ellsworth 1989).

Our approach to understanding academics' and students' perceptions of gender, equality and learning was deliberately open. We recognised a pressing need to collaborate institutionally and sectorally on the fundamental, ontological definitional dilemma of gender pedagogy (Henderson, 2015). Rejecting prescriptivism, we attempted to create space to hear how participants understood the term, rather than dictate its topography.

We secured access to three academic disciplines within the case study institution: one natural science, one applied social science and one humanities. We initially identified preferred disciplines based on gendered participation patterns, subject matter and epistemological canons, yet in practice had to be responsive to which disciplines were willing to participate at departmental, modular and individual levels. Indeed, a number of academic staff were either too busy, or explained that they saw addressing gender pedagogy as outside their area of responsibility. Moreover, we perceived reluctance to engage on the part of some academics as indicative of legitimate concerns of 'getting it wrong' or failing to adequately address gender.

Our prior perception was that the social sciences are often attuned to identity, including gender and feminism, whilst the natural sciences may see gender as less relevant to content and more to demographics. We also anticipated that women and gender non-conforming perspectives were less represented in the core, reified humanities canon, but would be presented in optional or add-on ways. Whilst these preconceptions emerged from the data, there were further unanticipated insights from the research.

In order to maximise the relevance of insights, we selected core modules (four within each discipline) studied by large numbers of students, rather than gender-specialist elective options. Once disciplinary access was negotiated through Heads of Department, we accessed relevant pedagogical resources via modular virtual learning environment (VLE) sites. To maximise the depth of the case study, the design utilised our own critical reflections on documentary analysis of student-facing course materials alongside the voices of teachers and students. This triangulation of perspectives (Cohen and Manion 2000, 254) was a key beneficial contribution of the research design. In total, we carried out 29 individual face-to-face interviews, comprising 18 staff members and 11 students from across the three disciplines. Table 1 provides a summary of participants.<sup>i</sup>

The research evoked some powerful interview experiences; whilst some staff shared our feminist perspectives, others made it clear that they felt the research was irrelevant either to them, or as a whole project. This echoes Giraud's (2016, 9) reflections on HE pedagogy of '*the risky process of producing knowledge by engaging with, rather than speaking for actors implicated in the socio-political structures that you are trying to contest*'. Embracing students' perspectives was particularly important, recognising their dual role as object and subject of HE provision and our feminist epistemological and ethical principles of collaboration and collectivity. This includes a commitment to resist speaking for and over others (Trin in Chen 1992), instead offering a platform for students to vocalise their own reflections on education, socio-political structures, power relations and socio-cultural theories (Giraud 2016). Brave and sometimes risky reflections were shared by HE teachers and students alike, proving central to the project's insights.

Initially we planned individual staff interviews and student focus groups to facilitate wider inclusion of student voice within constrained resources. However, a combination of student

recruitment levels and availability led us to revise the design and conduct individual student interviews with all who agreed to participate. On reflection, this yielded benefits. Students shared candid perspectives that may have been silenced in a group setting. For example, one discussed their position in what they perceived to be a marginalised minority of politically right-wing students amongst, in their opinion, a dominant leftist student body. This informed their views on gender and equity. This experience speaks to the pedagogical challenges posed by the rise of right-wing populism (Burke and Carolissen 2018) and broader contemporary right-wing media backlash against universities through logics of masculinity and anti-elitism (Read 2018). Interview recruitment challenges precluded systematic sampling for demographic characteristics, yet participants included a diversity of self-identifying characteristics include gender, sexuality, ethnicity and age. Whilst the research committed to an intersectional framing of gender, the necessity of foregrounding gender in tandem with cultural inequalities is likely to have skewed participation in terms of attracting students with an existing interest in gender. This may account for the sophisticated understandings observable in student interviewees, although we are also aware that this student gender literacy may be more widely indicative of changing times and discourses in terms of the presentness of gender as a focus of interest, particularly across social media. The research also foregrounded the mutual relevance of gender and cultural inequalities. This focus may have contributed to the high intersectional awareness of those who opted to participate, though again we recognise this as indicative of wider literacies amongst students.

Analysis was led by collaborative workshop discussions amongst the research team at regular points during fieldwork, identifying emergent themes in an interactive, abductive fashion (Fann 1970). Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using NVivo 12.0 whilst documentary analysis was conducted using an extraction framework and pen portraits.

Our knowledge-sharing approach to data includes an open-access online toolkit of resources, supporting our intention to provide a structure for ongoing collaborative journeys with academics and educators to develop gender literacy in curricula and pedagogy. The research team developed bespoke interview schedules and a documentary analysis framework which, along with signposting to other resources, are all available through the toolkit for others to use and adapt.

### **Discussion: Somebody else's problem: Locating gender inequality in another space or time**

Most participants agreed that gender-sensitive understandings in pedagogy and curricula are relevant to HE teaching and that there is still progress to be made. However, alongside broad consensus was an undercurrent (re)positioning ownership of 'the problem' beyond the individuals and departments involved in the research. Participants could thereby acknowledge and claim central principles of equity whilst absolving themselves and their immediate scholarly circles of responsibility. The pull against acknowledging collective responsibility is reflective of Jarvis' (2009, 370) observation of the '*corrosive shift from collective to individual accountability in teaching and learning environments*', resulting in feminist concerns often struggling to transcend the margins of HE teaching. This further speaks to Ali's (2009) assertion of the need to expose and address silences around gender and inequalities in classrooms.

However contentious these assumptions of non-responsibility may be, we recognise universities are ascribed various identities, and students and staff interviewed in this study discursively constructed their institution as progressive in culture. However, equally as prevalent was the perception that the prerogative to enhance gender-inclusive teaching belonged to other departments because it was deemed either irrelevant to participants' own disciplines or already satisfactorily addressed within their faculties. Variations of this theme emerged across all three participating disciplinary areas, yet with complex intra- and inter-disciplinary differences. Staff and students in Natural Science, whose work focussed primarily on non-human worlds, frequently indicated that gender had no direct relevance to core teaching content. This was reflected in documentary analysis where gender was conspicuously and persistently absent, aside from some isolated examples of gender-neutral or atypically gendered assessment questions. However, the 'irrelevance' of gender to the natural sciences is problematised by feminist perspectives which argue that scientific inquiry cannot be detached from the realm of the social (Richardson 2010), given the embodied situatedness of knowledge across disciplines (Haraway 1992; Henderson 2015).

Whilst Natural Science staff exteriorised gender from teaching content and delivery, there was widespread commitment to gender equality in HE as a broader issue facing the discipline, driven by an awareness of demographic trends and Athena Swan<sup>1</sup> participation.

*'My first thoughts were that we don't really embed any of these issues into our pedagogy at all. I mean, we are interested in women in [discipline] and we have got Athena SWAN. You know about Athena SWAN?'*

(Natural Science staff 2)

Separating 'the environment' from 'the curriculum' when exploring inequalities such as gender or colonialism in education contexts reduces and reifies inequalities to their material dimensions. Accordingly, the complex ways in which exclusions are supported at the level of symbolic representation are silenced. Nonetheless, despite Natural Science having least substantive gender focus, interviews displayed considerable openness compared to other disciplines in the research, for example when revisiting assumptions and critically reflecting on practice. This is indicative that gender perspectives can help us to engage with difference, diversity and intersectionality, opening space to reflect on equalities more widely, as discussed above in the theoretical framing of this paper (Lawrence 2014; Wieler 2010; Darder and Baltodano 2003; Gore 1992; Mügge *et al.* 2018). For example, junior female colleagues openly and constructively commented on the importance of challenging the Eurocentric epistemological basis (Maldonado-Torres *et al.* 2017) and male-dominated canon of science. This suggests that self-review processes like Athena Swan may positively encourage people and departments to interrogate and improve gender practice in fruitful ways, although critiqued for invisibilising race (Bhopal and Henderson 2019).

*'It's not something that we think about with regard to curriculum. I don't know whether we should. A lot of what we do is the sort of core [discipline]. I wouldn't say that the examples that we draw on are particularly associated with any gender. I don't*

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<sup>1</sup> Athena SWAN was established in 2005 to support women in Science subjects in higher education. In 2015 it was expanded to other disciplinary areas. The charter now recognises work undertaken to address gender equality more broadly, and not just barriers to progression that affect women.



*think it's a case that we're using as examples things that necessarily appeal to one gender or the other, although there might be some bias that I haven't really thought about. '*

(Natural Science staff 2)

Conversely, in Humanities and Applied Social Science, staff viewed gender as fully-embedded and no longer a priority. Conaghan (2000) has discussed how equality law can lead to complacency around inequality, particularly within some applied areas of the social sciences. Indeed, work on implicit bias illustrates how people who identify as self-aware, tolerant and inclusive can unwittingly perpetuate inequalities as their critical self-reflection wanes (Herbert 2013). In this research, a number of academics suggested that gender was no longer the prime curriculum concern, with focus instead directed towards the unarguably important decolonisation agenda:

*'For me, in terms of my own personal practice, I am actually less gender aware than I am other types of diversity. So I know, for example, [a colleague] has done a lot of work in terms of thinking about the gender balance of reading lists and exposing students to new ideas or just getting colleagues as well to think about reading lists. So, when I go through my reading lists, I tend to be less focused on gender and more focused on what parts of the world people are writing from, where people have been educated'*

(Social Science staff 1)

Locating the need for gender action as a past concern erases colonialism's continuing legacy of entrenching deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing oppressive structures of relations not only in terms of race and ethnicity, but also other related aspects such as gender, sexuality, age and disability (Maldonado-Torres 2017). Unwarranted complacency around gender risks the voices and representation of women of colour being overlooked if decolonisation lacks a gender-sensitive lens due to the erroneous assumption that gender absences have been 'fixed'. We therefore see casting a spotlight on gender in HE pedagogy and curricula as inextricable from this endeavour. Ali (2009) presents a postcolonial framework as a way forward; recognising that studies of race and ethnicity in Britain have been shaped by colonial histories, and the place of gender as a foundational organisational principle of these histories of imperialisms and colonialism.

Perspectives covered by Humanities and Social Science staff could often present as binary and hierarchical, at odds with assumed disciplinary critical literacies and the complex contributions of queer theory and work on sexual dissidence as well as colonial studies (Briggs 2013). Just as gender itself could be siloed as a particularity, more critical, non-binary modules of gender appeared as a niche within a niche for those staff and students motivated to engage in specialist courses and modules:

*'It is very heteronormative. It is very binary. Because again, another anecdotal example, again, during the [...] class, it was always this man and this woman and it was always very gendered, heavily gendered language. But also, we only talked about trans issues once, and it was in this abstract, hypothetical scenario'*

(Social Science UG student 2)

Intersectionality was little spoken of or alluded to by staff, which may reflect the more recent mainstreaming of the term, the lack of broad understanding outside of feminism or disciplines which have an explicit focus on intersectional issues, and prevalent siloed models of EDI<sup>2</sup> where gender competes for attention against categories including race and disability as separate imperatives (Bhopal 2019). Students, however, explicitly recognised this absence, perhaps indicative of a recent resurgence of feminism with a particular focus on intersectionality amongst a younger generation and the lived experiences of several students who positioned themselves as women of colour with experience of postcolonial geographies.

Moreover, whilst interviewees often affirmed a commitment to decolonising curriculum, again responsibility and relevance was often (re)located to other departments, including one Natural Science student positioning this as something relevant for the arts, not scientific research. Where the colonial legacy of HE teaching and curricula could not be actively displaced as irrelevant, Eurocentrism was instead deployed to construct epistemological biases as naturalistic, inevitable and ‘sensible’:

*‘[Reading lists] naturally focus very much on the Western philosophical thought and Western political thought. But within the context of the study, within the context of the materials, it makes sense to do that and I don’t think anybody questions why they do that’*

(Social Science UG student 1)

The apparent inevitability of Western-centric epistemological exclusions was often located in the context of time (Adam 2002, 2003). Silences and lack of acknowledgement were temporally-located in a ‘less aware’ past which was nevertheless upheld as the reasoning for a continually skewed canon of thinking. Natural Science students particularly expressed these interpretations, with several noting the economic, imperial and gendered privilege that was necessary to facilitate respected scientific inquiry in previous epochs, leading to a homogenous knowledge base, or as one student put it, a context where the biggest difference between thinkers was ‘*varying degrees of beards*’. Nonetheless, with the general acceptance that historically-produced theoretical frameworks formed the basis of the discipline today, such discussions indicated a temporal exteriorisation of ownership, locating the ‘problem’ of gendered silences to an immutable past:

*‘[Science is] a little different to the arts in that you require, or you did, probably still do, require a fairly high level of privilege in order to be able to do this stuff. Setting up a lab is expensive. Historically, the only people that did it would be the third sons of various lords who were, literally, they had nothing else to do and loads of money. So it’s, by that selection, most people who you learn about are rich, white nobility. At least until pretty recently... I don’t think that’s due to leaving people out. I think it’s due to the climate necessary to be a science researcher in the 1700s, or whatever’*

(Natural Science PG student 2)

These material conditions and specificities of knowledge production in the natural sciences may not have maliciously excluded or ‘left people out’. However, the wealthy white male privilege necessary to do scientific research in the 1700s necessarily produced exclusions on

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<sup>2</sup> Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

the basis of gender, race and wealth. That these exclusions continue to define and characterise knowledge production in the natural sciences thus relies on a radical temporal dislocation (Keenan 2018) to maintain their ‘objectivity’ and authority, which in fact is particular from the point of view of white, male power (MacKinnon 2007). Keenan employs the metaphor of a ‘time-machine’ to evoke the incubation of these naturalised inequalities transported through time to the present-day classroom.

In our research the maintenance of this epistemological lens of privilege was highlighted by one participant who cited the example of the science of the material Velcro being considered as ‘fluffy’ because it was taught by a woman. As one student highlighted, they would have liked to refer to women scientists but questioned whether this would be considered as valid knowledge. This student expressed that they felt cautious of referring to anything outside the accepted canon, a view reinforced aesthetically through visual imagery around the Natural Science department displaying pictures of prominent white male scientists. This speaks to the epistemological and definitional position of power (Brayson 2019) of scientists and of positivist science, which is so deeply embedded as to understand gender as only relevant to the conditions of science rather than to pedagogy and the production of scientific knowledge.

Where gender was present in Humanities and Social Science curricula, this was linked to staff specialisms and students’ interests, rather than being systematically embedded (Wright 2016; Naffine 2002). For example, interviewees in Social Science cited explicitly feminist texts on reading lists, but these seemed to be only used for modules with an explicit gender focus led by staff with a personal interest in feminist perspectives, leaving ‘*not much that challenges the paradigm*’ (Social Science staff 1) in the mainstream. Whilst modern, modular HE curricula are sometimes lauded for allowing students to specialise in areas such as gender, this also allows staff and students to consciously or subconsciously navigate away from and around gender and wider equalities, positioning these as topics of interrogation only for those who opt in. Gender becomes a peripheral elective topic, rather than central to teaching and learning.

*‘It will vary between colleagues, because different modules reflect different colleagues’ research interests and the way they want to do their teaching and the nature of the material they’re working with. So it won’t be everywhere. It won’t be that all colleagues absolutely are always pressing the gender button, but I think the way our teaching works here... It’s often student led and our teaching is a lot of seminar-based work so, if the interest is there in the group, then that’s something that can emerge.’*

(Humanities staff 1)

*‘There are some areas that I would expect our curriculum to be doing very well, and other areas where there’s just no awareness or very little awareness, because we’re such a big school. I’ve been here for a long time. When we were smaller, it was much easier to bring everyone on board with discussions. Now you can set up discussion groups, but only seven, eight, nine people turn up, and they’re the people most interested in the debate already, and you’ve got a problem’*

(Social Science staff 1)

Staff and students commented on patterns of responsibility for teaching gender (McNeil 1992). Frequently, this was delivered by women (Koster 2011), thus effectively positioning gender as a ‘women’s issue.’ Relegating gender to the periphery of HE disciplines resonates with Jarvis’

(2009) assertion of the ongoing challenge of drawing gender in from the margins, challenging academic cultures which manifest as sex-segregation within disciplines; to move away from 'feminine' and 'masculine' stereotypes, substantive areas, methodological approaches and journal authorship. Discussions in Humanities depicted a perceived uneven balance of responsibilities, with senior staff being more 'complacent' about gender whilst junior and/or precarious staff in '*low level positions*' doing substantial pedagogical work but not necessarily feeling so rewarded for their expertise and input.

*'[Gender was] touched on mostly by female professors. A male professor said something about it, and then he giggled about it and was like, so and so, our female professor, she'll go into that. But the majority of the time [...] the in-depth conversations that I remember having were done by the females'*

(Social Science PG student 1)

### **Conclusion: Historicising the present – individual and collective action for the transformative future of higher education**

Observing presences and absences of gender in HE teaching should not be used as an opportunity to point fingers, but provoke recommendations to achieve positive change. Staff and student perspectives about the responsibility for gender action matter, as they indicate how we move forward. Jarvis (2009, 369) reminds us that our classrooms, staff rooms, field trips, conferences and other spaces all '*function as critical sites within which gender relations are performed and reproduced, frequently (though avoidably) in ways that reinforce dominant patriarchal, elitist and ethnocentric power relationship and assumptions*'. Beyond vocalising the size of the challenge, this reminds us of the breadth of opportunities for inclusive teaching through planning, delivery and evaluation.

Courses and disciplines can vary widely in how far gender has been considered in terms of substantive topics; theoretical, methodological and pedagogic approaches; and canons of perceived disciplinary expertise. There is a need for more in-depth, pedagogically-oriented exploration of how such gender illiteracy or absences operate within diverse disciplines, alongside identifying elements of transferable good practice to lead wider cultural change.

This research underscores the need for collective reflective work to develop strategies for addressing persistent absences and inequalities in the presentation of gender and wider inclusive approaches in HE curricula and pedagogy. Examples of good practice offer opportunity to share and build on these successes. However, the extent of the issue runs deeper than this; to tackle identified challenges we must acknowledge that problems exist and we are responsible for addressing them. If there is one overarching lesson from what we have discovered so far it is that while there is wonderful practice that we can benefit immensely from sharing more between us, responsibility for incorporating gender and wider aspects of identity more inclusively in university teaching cannot be attributed to any one space or group. No-one is immune from the risk of perpetuating inequalities, although many believe responsibility for remedial action belongs elsewhere. Perpetuating or redressing gender and cultural inequalities in HE cannot be neatly consigned to somewhere else – to students, staff, promotion patterns,

other disciplines, colleagues, or genders. This is and must be a collective endeavour; we are all responsible for making changes for the better and in doing so informing the gender equality contribution that HE can make to the rest of society.

It is clear that we are in a challenging time for incorporating gender and feminist approaches meaningfully in teaching gender in HE. This includes wider political trends within Europe and America that see feminism as a threat and consequently seek to censor the teaching of Gender Studies within the HE classroom (Ahrens et al. 2018). This was notable in some of the anti-feminist sentiment expressed within our student interviews. Within the neoliberal university, the ethic of a politically transformative HE can be seen as pushing against the grain of a dominant learning and teaching agenda aimed instrumentally toward employability (Moss and Richter 2011).

Against this backdrop, gender and social justice content and feminist, critical and decolonial pedagogies remain vital in raising student awareness, addressing injustices and empowering students to address such issues in their own and others' lives. As Briggs (2013) contends, that these issues are more relevant than ever and that many working in academia are sympathetic to social justice concerns can provide leverage in ensuring funding for and continuation of women and gender studies related courses, curricula and teaching. Unfortunately we cannot consign gender and wider inequalities to the past in the HE classroom or anywhere else. Rather we must as Ali (2009, 79) has asserted, continue the endeavour to '*historicise the present*' through acknowledging the persistence and perpetuation of inequalities in these as other spaces.

While we have identified the challenges of making changes within the structures of the neoliberal university, we wish nevertheless to maintain optimism as to the opportunities for individuals and groups of staff and students to continue to challenge these by pushing against them and by finding creative means to reimagine and reinvigorate the emancipatory potential of HE teaching.

### **Ethical Approval**

The research received ethical approval from the relevant UK Higher Education Institution Ethics Committee on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020. The approval number has been provided to Gender and Education but is withheld here for purposes of anonymity.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all of the staff and students who gave so generously of their time to contribute to this work through agreeing for their departments to be part of the research and particularly to those who agreed to be interviewed.

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	<b>Female staff</b>	<b>Male staff</b>	<b>NR staff</b>	<b>Female UG</b>	<b>Male UG</b>	<b>NR UG</b>	<b>Female PG</b>	<b>Male PG</b>	<b>NR PG</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Natural science</b>	3	3	-	1	1	-	-	3	1	12
<b>Social science</b>	4	2	-	1	1	-	1	-	1	10
<b>Humanities</b>	3	3	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	7
<b>Total</b>	10	8	0	3	2	0	1	3	2	<b>29</b>

Note: NR = gender not reported.