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Social diversity and democracy in higher education in the 21st century : towards a feminist critique

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Abstract

This paper takes a feminist perspective on the UK literature on mass higher education in the 21st century, building on US critiques about marketization, neo-liberalism and 'academic capitalism'. Concepts of equality and diversity have been transformed by neo-liberalism and how these changes have constrained democratic contributions to UK higher education policies and practices is the focus. Diversity has replaced more traditional conceptualizations of socioeconomic inequalities, and has shifted from being about ethnicity/race to one of 'widening participation' or 'fair' access to higher education, including social class, disabilities, gender and age. Debate focuses on individual students on first or undergraduate degrees, whether full or part-time, and how higher education institutions can contribute to graduate employment, individual or social mobility, rather than re-inscribing social stratification. I present an analysis that demonstrates the challenges and dilemmas about equality and diversity in UK mass higher education and conclude that despite expansion of higher education 'persistent inequalities' remain. I reveal UK policy shifts around gender as concerning women, as

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students or academics, to one about lack of educational opportunities in post-compulsory education for young men from poor or disadvantaged family backgrounds as students, ignoring the question of women's opportunities and contributions to new forms of academic practice. I argue that this illustrates how new forms of higher education, despite expansion and increasing participation, remain resistant to some of the feminist and critical yet creative challenges about transformations in academic practice and development. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)