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Universities' pursuit of inclusion and its effects on professional staff : the case of the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper explores the proliferation of non-academic professionals as a cultural response to universities' mission of inclusion. Departing from a neo-institutionalist perspective, the author argues that the diffusion of highly rationalised models of institutional action shapes universities as formal organisations who engage with new levels of professional expertise in the pursuit of goals and missions. The United Kingdom (UK) offers an illustrative example, the emergence of statutory equality duties on public institutions (race equality duty 2001, disability equality duty 2006 and gender equality duty 2007) nurturing an image of universities as strategic for the pursuit of demographic inclusion. Using yearly longitudinal data on 109 UK universities from 2003 to 2011, the author shows that universities increase their professional staff in catering for demographic inclusion in terms of ethnicity and disability, revealing highly rationalised institutional responses to the aforementioned equality duties. The findings contribute to the neo-institutionalist literature drawing

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attention to the transformation of universities into organisational actors (i.e. highly integrated entities, strategically oriented towards the pursuit of formally articulated goals and targets), which contrasts with traditional conceptions of the university as an institution with a taken-for-granted societal role and loosely defined organisational backbone. The findings provide the impetus for further empirical research into the role of professional staff as universities assimilate new goals and missions.

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