

STATE OF THE PROFESSION

The University in Crisis: Why (Neoliberal) Diversity Is Not the Answer

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Abstract

The academic profession is often perceived as the epitome of meritocracy, while Critical Diversity and University scholars have demonstrated how it continues to grapple with gender and racial inequality across all levels. This article delves into the challenges of inequality in academia, particularly in the context of Belgian universities, and proposes a transformative approach to address these issues. Based on my previous work, I discuss how Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) policies are misused and serve as a smokescreen to achieve the neoliberal interests of universities while remaining largely non-performative. Even more, EDI policies are introduced to bypass power, rather than change the power structures that continue to reproduce gender and racial inequality in academia. Using a praxis of hope, I move beyond identifying the problem by proposing the 'University of the Common' as an alternative academic system that goes beyond superficial diversity, aiming to create a university founded on social justice and in service of the common good. Key features include decolonizing knowledge, promoting antiracist feminist governance, and fostering a collective effort by academics to build an equitable university.

Keywords: diversity, gender equality, academia, policy, decolonization.

The academic profession is often held up as the epitome of a meritocratic profession in which one is judged only by one's performance, achievements and merit. Anyone regardless of their gender, race or class should be able to climb the academic ladder. However, universities are challenged with a lack of diversity among their faculty. When it comes to gender, universities deal with a persistent 'leaky pipeline'. The leaky pipeline refers to the decline of women scholars in top positions. In Belgium, the majority of university graduates are women, but this majority already disappears at the lowest academic level. More specifically, 48% of doctoral students are women, which remains relatively the same at the postdoctoral level with 46%. The issue emerges at the transition to the level of professors, where we observe a sharp decline to only 29% women professors (European Commission, 2021). In addition, as in other European countries, several cases of sexual harassment and racism have come to light at Belgian universities. In 2021, whistle-blowers

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published a story in a Flemish newspaper about the sexual harassment they experienced at the hands of a professor at their university. Although more than 23 complaints were filed by women scholars and students about the same professor over the course of ten years, the university launched an internal investigation only after being pressured by the national body on gender equality. At the same time, professors got caught making racist comments about their students in both formal and informal conversations. The hazing death of black student Sanda Dia in 2018 also raised the issue of racism in universities. The question, then, is how universities deal with this crisis of ‘diversity’, or more accurately, the crisis of sexism and racism. By presenting my theory of the university as a *neoliberal diversity complex*, I first explain how universities’ current diversity strategies are failing or rather aiming to fail. I then demonstrate that this is an issue that we, academics of all disciplines, should be concerned with and how we can collectively create a university that is welcoming to all.

1 The Neoliberal Diversity Complex

With the democratisation of higher education, universities have profiled themselves as gender-free, race-free spaces that serve as the great equaliser in society. Initially, gender and racial disparities were mostly understood through individual-merit explanations in the sense that men outperform women and white researchers outperform researchers racialised as non-white in terms of, among others, publication and citation rates, which serve as the most important indicators of scholarly potential. While the belief in these individual-merit explanations has not disappeared, there is increased policy-level attention to achieving diversity, and especially a gender balance, at all academic levels. This follows from the European Union’s advice, which starts from an economic-instrumental rationale of how a gender balance is beneficial for the university to improve human capital and avoid wasting talent. However, they give little attention to the structural and cultural barriers caused by unequal power relations in the university. As a result, we see a shift where universities are now trying to create an image of themselves as inclusive and diversity-oriented institutions that are committed to tackling the leaky pipeline, mostly in terms of gender while disregarding race.

Flemish universities only started committing to tackling gender inequality in 2012, following a new decree requiring gender balance on boards and management structures. Over the past decade, Flemish universities have introduced gender and diversity plans, hired diversity officers and established diversity offices and complaints service points. At every university, the (in)famous Gender/Diversity Week is organised, and, across campus, various awareness campaigns on issues such as sexual harassment are put front and centre. At first glance, these diversity measures seem to show universities’ commitment to eliminating inequality. But instead, these measures serve as a smokescreen as they are largely non-performative and achieve the opposite.

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Flemish universities in Belgium developed a paradoxical climate where they work on a culture that is completely absorbed by Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), while at the same time, their policy measures are largely ineffective. That is because materialising their commitment into a variety of EDI policy measures primarily serves the university's private neoliberal interests. With the Bologna process, universities have entered a competitive market system in which they have to attract students and staff from the same pool (Curaj et al., 2012). This led universities to seek ways to make themselves unique. Therefore, the story of EDI has been used by Flemish universities as a marketing tool to attract new students and staff. EDI acquired a commercial value where universities engage with these topics, as it is good for business. Working on EDI, then, emanates from business-related rather than justice-related goals. This is reflected in policy documents where universities refrain from talking about inequality by using a 'language of diversity'. This language of diversity is a form of 'happy talk' that suggests that diversity is positive and beneficial for everyone within the institution. It is portrayed as something fun and nonthreatening. This seemingly small change of words has large consequences for the possibility to tackle inequality as it allows universities to 'bypass power' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 193). By not calling the problem by its name – that is, by not calling it sexism or racism – change can be kept superficial. In my research, many women scholars pointed out the risk of this culture as it exacerbates victim-blaming rather than making racism and sexism more discussable. This was clearly evidenced in their experiences with the complaints service points. The establishment of these offices has been heavily advertised in the media to build a good image for the university to the outside world. On the inside, however, many women who filed a complaint at these offices have not received the right support, never heard back about the next steps of the procedure, and some were even told to keep quiet about their cases and move on. Their complaints end up in the "complaint graveyard" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 91) where they get hidden in a drawer or even disappear entirely from that drawer. Therefore, the construction of this neoliberal diversity culture leads to 'managing' inequality, by making it invisible rather than reducing it.

As advised by the European Union, to achieve a gender balance Flemish universities focus on fixing glitches at different academic stages. They mostly pay attention to the recruitment and promotion process which they aim to make more gender-conscious. While I agree that it is important to pay attention to formal settings and practices, it is equally important to recognise that inequality is produced and reproduced in the context of everyday interactions with peers, students and other faculty. As my previous work demonstrates, the exit of women scholars from academia is due to an accumulation of seemingly banal and mundane inequality practices that happen in interactions on the work floor. One of the most pertinent interactions that highly contribute to women leaving or staying in academia is those with their supervisors. The relationship between supervisors and their doctoral supervisees is aimed at preparing them in acquiring the right knowledge, skills and values of an independent scholar. These developmental relationships should support early-career academics in learning the rules of the game. Women academics, however, get excluded from academic opportunities such

as project writing and networking compared to their male counterparts. What I observe is how supervisors ‘clone’ themselves in which they (un)consciously privilege those who look like them because they would have the same abilities and especially the same ambition to build an academic career. As most supervisors are still predominantly men, they tend to engage less with their women supervisees in giving them the access and knowledge to land, for example, a postdoctoral position, while they work well in advance with their men supervisees to get into those same positions. While women are already disadvantaged by supervisors who tend to clone themselves, women experience additional barriers due to the current superficial diversity culture. One of the most perverse effects of this superficial diversity culture is how women scholars’ work and achievement are devalued by supervisors and peers arguing that their success is thanks to their gender and not their merit. The perceived diversity culture is now being used *against* women scholars instead of in favour of them.

The neoliberal diversity complex ultimately leads to and induces the belief that racism and sexism no longer exist within the university. Women scholars who actively resist this culture by openly sharing their experiences get reprimanded by their peers and other faculty who (un)consciously reproduce the status quo. Therefore, I argue it is incorrect to talk about women scholars ‘leaking out’ of academia. Instead, they are being ‘pushed out’ due to the constant sexist and racist struggles they endure which remain invisible due to the happy diversity narrative (Tuck, 2012).

2 The University of the Common: A Praxis of Hope

The real political task is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent, and to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked so that we can fight them. (Ball, 1994, p. 27)

To combat racism and sexism, we need more than the glossy EDI policies that universities currently hide behind. What we need, instead, is to rebuild a university that breaks with the current neoliberal, patriarchal, racist and colonial foundations. Some might say that this project is impossible as racism and sexism are part of the DNA of Global North institutions. I, however, start from a praxis of hope, by looking for the cracks that crises offer us in reshaping relationships, structures and entire organisations. If we look at the recent global pandemic, we have seen how universities are able to quickly adapt to a new reality by completely re-shifting their operations. So, if universities would acknowledge that sexism and racism too are crises, we can actually build an alternative academic system that is for all of us.

This alternative academic system is what I call the ‘University of the Common’. With this notion, I want to show, above all, that we should not aim at a university that is solely ‘inclusive’ and ‘diverse’. We need to reject the idea of ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity’ which are superficial as they only bring marginalised academics into structures that are not built for them. Achieving gender or racial balance does not

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mean that we have achieved a culture that truly reflects gender and race equality. It does not touch upon dismantling the exclusionary structures upon which the university is built. At the University of the Common, we should, therefore, not be concerned with how to diversify spaces that are already masculine and white, but be concerned with creating spaces that start from a foundation of social justice. With the notion of common, I also want to point out that the university must be in the service of society, of the public and, thus, of the common good, and not in the service of the institution's capitalist private interests. To achieve this alternative university, I believe there are three key features we should work on: 1) decolonising, 2) antiracist feminist governing and 3) collectivising.

First, with decolonising I refer to the deconstruction of the hierarchy of knowledge and the knower that privileges white masculine thinkers. It is about challenging the current power structures that determine what credible research is, how it needs to be produced and who can produce it (Bhambra, 2018; Mignolo, 2007). This does not mean that we have to completely eliminate the current standards of knowledge production; rather, it is about creating a knowledge system that "is open to epistemic diversity" (Mbembe, 2015, p. 19). In Flemish universities and Global North universities in general, it is also about re-centring phenomena such as racism in understanding how it has shaped the world today. Like racism, sexism and other systems of inequalities have largely been neglected within the traditional Global North academic canon. Still, these traditional worldviews remain to be considered universally applicable. Therefore, it is crucial to centre the work of racialised and women academics, as their knowledge and experience allow them to make the invisible visible.

Second, antiracist, feminist governing is a form of governance that starts from public instead of private interests, translating values of community, empowerment and care (work) into leadership that is collaborative, transparent and equitable (Hil et al., 2021; Liu, 2021). Today, university governance is called democratic because elections are organised for the university administration. However, apart from these elections (which sometimes even exclude non-tenured, temporary and non-academic staff), there are very few ways to incorporate the needs and ideas of staff on how they would build a better university. We, therefore, need shared governance (governance of the common) where power is redistributed among everyone, staff and students included, to minimise administrative management and top-down decision-making.

And third and, most importantly, it is up to us, academics, to achieve the University of the Common. Our responsibility is to show transversal solidarity to our students, personnel and colleagues. Isolated individuals who dare to resist risk losing their careers as they are easier to mute or take out. Radical change, therefore, requires more than the resistance of a few. It should be driven not only by those marginalised by racism and sexism but also by those who enjoy the privileges of the same systems. Especially with the neoliberalisation of the university, the majority of academics risk experiencing exploitation and power abuse. If we become aware of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the struggles of different groups within the university, we can collectively defy the current patriarchal, racist, capitalist system and build a university that is *truly* equal.

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