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Researching inequality in higher education: tracing changing conceptions and approaches over fifty years

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Abstract

Fifty years ago, higher education globally had started to change radically in terms of the proportion of young people enrolled in the system as well as society's expectations for what this would deliver. From the outset, *Higher Education* has featured research interrogating various aspects of inequality in higher education, including institutions and staff as well as students. This article offers an overview of that work. Our analysis is structured around three levels at which major questions on this topic have been framed and investigated. The macro level focuses on national systems and looks at widening participation, especially the increase in access to higher education for young people. The meso level mostly focuses on institutions and their engagement with organisational inequality. The micro level focuses on the lived experiences of academics, in this case focusing on gender and race. We adopted a thematic and purposive approach to article choice, ultimately selecting key papers for further illustrative analysis. In our analysis, we tracked changes in areas of empirical or other emphasis, the use of a variety of theoretical and epistemological frameworks and methods, policy recommendations, and the geographical locations of authors and their content. We noted a growing emphasis on intersectionality and a widening range of countries but also more critical analyses and suggestions for more radical changes in higher education systems.

Keywords Inequality · Discrimination · Widening participation · Organisational policy · Lived experience

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Introduction

Over the last half century, higher education systems around the world have expanded substantially — at different rates in different places — and, overall, these days a far larger group of young people globally participate in higher education and mature students also have greater opportunities. Over this whole period, policymakers have had their sights on the impact that expanded higher education (HE) systems might have on social inequality. Attention has also been drawn to inequalities amongst those who work in universities, whether this relates to recruitment, contract type, pay, work cultures, workloads and division of labour, promotion or institutional ‘voice’. In this article, we examine and give examples of how work published in *Higher Education* dealing with how aspects of research on inequality at different levels of HE systems and organisations has developed since the journal began in the early 1970s, around the start of the period of widespread expansion in higher education.

The concept of inequality covers a huge range of topics; from massification of university study, through racism and gender discrimination in HE institutions and discriminatory treatment of students with a disability, to international comparisons of funding and other inequalities between and within different national HE systems. Conceptually, it includes everything from equality of opportunity and diversity to critical race theory and ideas about what inclusivity means in contemporary higher education. Inequality research covers both highly academically oriented studies (often but not always quantitative), through those more ‘on the ground’, comparing female and male experiences of working or studying in different universities or HE systems, to highly activist-driven pieces on issues like deaf studies or the decolonisation of the higher education curriculum. The emphasis on practice and activism in inequality studies has increased in recent times, alongside critiques of those universities and HE systems (particularly in the Global North) which are highly marketised, increasingly based on neo-liberal values and grounded in imperial and colonial attitudes (Giroux, 2018; Jansen, 2019; Riegraf & Weber, 2017).

Many inequality studies attempt to contribute both to academic debates and to bringing about changes in practices and policies and this paper demonstrates that dual-purpose coverage. We show that these authors come from several academic disciplines, including education, itself not a discipline but drawing on many different disciplines (Deem, 1996), as well as sociology, social policy, economics, psychology, gender studies, geography, disability studies and race/ethnicity studies. Few writers on inequality in higher education are engaged only in research. They also teach, supervise, do administration and third mission work and thus do not usually form part of an elite group of ‘dedicated’ HE researchers with extensive publication records but largely detached from day-to-day university work, as identified in some recent large-scale surveys of academics (Kwiek, 2015). Many but not all inequality researchers have a personal interest in the topic which is not just based on academic knowledge and expertise but also on lived experience of discrimination. Thus there are many fewer non-disabled white male authors of inequality articles than there are other genders, people of colour and people with a disability. Methodologically, there is a wide range of approaches, from highly quantitative statistical studies of big data sets and analytic papers to semi-structured interviews and small-scale in-depth ethnographic studies. There are also a variety of theoretical approaches ranging from feminist, critical race and anti-ableism perspectives to mainstream social science theories. Indeed, it has been suggested that higher education research tends to borrow theories from other social science fields rather than develop its own theories (Tight, 2014), although the wisdom of valorising

theory over other aspects of social science research in research on education is still a point of debate.

The three authors all have a longstanding interest in different but cognate aspects of higher education inequality, as reflected in the three themes covered in the paper: (1) widening access; (2) organisational equality matters; and (3) the higher education experiences of black and female academics; which in this paper we have categorised as respectively, macro, meso and micro levels of analysis. We were also interested in papers on inequality which go beyond an emphasis on contributing to an academic body of knowledge and engage with practice and or activism. We began our search for suitable *Higher Education* articles by doing a series of keyword searches across the decades of the journal's existence, which produced a very considerable array of papers for reading and cross-consultation between us. We gradually evolved a way of selecting exemplar articles covering the chosen three themes. Our methodology for doing this is discussed in more detail in the next section. We do not claim that the articles chosen are necessarily 'typical' but we have tried to ensure some variation in the geographical location of the authors.

Methodology

From the outset, we grappled with how we might best undertake our work for the paper.¹ We decided upon a process with an interpretive rather than systematic orientation. By definition, this approach does not offer reproducibility, but in sacrificing quantitative accuracy, it aims for conceptual depth.

To begin scoping the data, we went through the titles and abstracts of all articles published in *Higher Education* during its first three decades; and listed all those that somehow pertained to questions of (in)equality. To keep the scoping task manageable, we then identified three prominent themes to guide the investigation: (1) increasing access to undergraduate education (widening participation); (2) institutional policies and practices; and (3) the composition, and demographics of the academic workforce. These three themes do not and are not intended to cover all aspects of inequality in higher education. For example, our three levels of analysis do not include a meta-analysis of the field itself, such as research on the use of criticality in studies of higher education (Mwangi et al., 2018) or a recent study of how international student literature has shifted to more often include students' voices (Page & Chahboun, 2019). These are also important studies but ones that are not included within the scope of this paper.

Each theme frames its major questions at a different level of analysis (access at macro level, organisational analysis at meso level and academic lived experience at micro level). We chose to organise the selected papers according to these levels in order to highlight how the different themes lend themselves to different scales of the HE system. However, this division is not always clear-cut. Studies at each of these levels may also include data that

¹ We contemplated using a systematic literature review, which has become increasingly popular in the social sciences (Bambra, 2009) and lends itself to technically sophisticated (often quantitative) analyses of selected articles over a period of time. We carried out a series of pilot systematic reviews; searching for certain keywords in particular contexts, such as 'non-traditional' as a descriptor for students, used in title and/or abstracts of the articles published in *Higher Education*. We concluded that such reviews would be too compromised by the intrinsic assumptions of what can be said using papers from one journal and that the superficiality of an analysis resting on keywords would add little to the literature.

seems to pertain to the other levels, such as policy document analysis or individual interviews. However, key to categorising an article at the macro, meso or micro level lies in the overall questions being addressed.

Each author took one theme and read through the titles and abstracts of all articles published on their inequality topic in the fifty years of the journal's existence, developing a list of all articles presenting research on that theme. For each theme we then identified sub-themes which could be applied to each article and also noted bibliometric characteristics such as the geographic base of the author(s). We found that while growth in particular fields can be observed more generally, we remained acutely aware that all we were analysing were the articles in one journal. Furthermore, we were conscious that the publication of the papers was almost certainly influenced by changing editors and editorial board membership and the existence of specialist inequality journals, as well as by prevailing societal debates that academics chose to write about.

In the second phase of the analysis, we retained the selection of articles in each major theme while focusing on the purposes of studies, the way research questions were framed, the methods they used, and the outcomes and findings. Across the first two themes (widening access and organisational policies and practices), we identified clear broad stages of evolution of each research field. For the third theme, we were unable to identify quite such clear stages, possibly due to the initially more limited representation of this work in the journal (compared to its representation in the field more broadly) but could nevertheless point to significant changes over the fifty years.

In line with the emerging orientation for this analysis, we then identified a small number of articles for each theme, which could exemplify the trends we identified. These articles were selected through an iterative deliberative process, to yield a selection that illustrated changing academic trends, theories and methods as well as findings and a geographic spread of authors. We also sought to identify articles that were particularly impactful, although this was not always easily identified just by virtue of citations. These articles we discuss in some detail to contextualise these investigations against the backdrop of fifty years of dramatic changes in higher education globally. To assist the reader, the article is structured with subheadings signalling each of these exemplar papers.

The macro level: system growth and widening participation

The origins of the journal *Higher Education* were closely linked to the growth in participation in higher education that was starting to gather steam from the early 1970s in many western countries. The journal's initial orientation was substantially towards informing national policies on evolving HE systems, with a policy maker and planner audience, but it quickly transformed into an academic journal with its intellectual debates going beyond the pragmatic needs of planners. The expansion of higher education was informed by human capital theory's emphasis on the need for countries moving into the post-industrial era to more fully embrace the emancipatory potential for university education being made available to a wider group of young people, not just a small elite. Rhetorically this seemed a significant advance for equality in society but researchers in the journal and beyond started to document what was happening and ask whether higher education was able to or ever could live up to these emancipatory ideals. These questions are illustrated by observations made by the renowned Swedish educational researcher, Torsten Husén, in a paper published in

Higher Education in 1976, entitled ‘Problems of securing equal access to higher education: The dilemma between equality and excellence’:

Now in the mid-1970s we are both conceptually and empirically in a position to deal much more fruitfully with problems pertaining to equality of access than we were some 20-25 years ago. In the first place, we now have a more sophisticated conception of equality. ... We have as a consequence begun to realize what I have called certain ‘equalization incompatibilities’. ... The mood has swung from the almost euphoric conception of education as the Great Equalizer to that of education as the Great Sieve that sorts and certifies people for their slots in society. (Husén, 1976, p. 411)

... the education system cannot serve as a substitute for social and economic reforms. One cannot have more equality in education than exists in society at large. (Husén, 1976, p. 412)

This part of our analysis considers articles like these that have empirically examined the expansion of undergraduate places in higher education and what this has meant for widening access to broader social groupings than those who historically accessed higher education. In total, we identified 73 articles on this topic, with more than half of these published in the last decade. This trend outpaces the overall growth in the journal over time and shows how this topic continues to be a significant one. The majority of studies (58 articles) are quantitative analyses done at a national level. A much smaller and relatively recent line of work (15 articles) are studies on widening participation that are qualitative in nature and typically done at an institutional level — but still aimed towards the macro questions in relation to widening participation at the national level. Overall, the work is dominated by European and Australasian contexts, but from early on there has also been some representation of Global South contexts.

A significant focus in this theme, and still ongoing, is an examination of what expansion of overall places in higher education has meant for participation of social groupings who historically had less access. Typically, which groups are focused on is related to the national context. The sociological terminology of social class has often been used, especially in European contexts, where there are established ways for assigning class based on entries in national surveys. Some studies have simply used socio-economic status (typically defined according to national policy and available data), and others have used parental highest level of education. Our survey of this work noted the emergence of new terminology such as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘non-traditional’ and ‘first generation’ (or ‘first in family’) students. There is a smaller representation of work on gender, with this largely in Global South contexts and in these contexts also some work on race and ethnicity, and more recently on disability.

Early research in the widening participation field tended to contextualise itself in the light of recent national policy shifts. Investigations were intended to contribute towards ongoing policy debates, for example Reuterberg & Svensson, (1983), who looked at the impact of a recent significant change in financial aid provision in Sweden. Five decades on, similar studies have been conducted across many national contexts. Findings generally show some widening of access for these social groups who were historically underrepresented in higher education, but basically never to the full level of their representation in society — there are gains, but not as originally anticipated by policymakers and reformers. Some work looking to explain these patterns investigates student aspirations for higher education and how these are framed by family and high school contexts, as well as the academic preparation that such contexts provide. Another key causal focus is the impact of financial aid in supporting broader participation.

From the 1990s onwards, widening participation had become an established and ongoing dynamic in higher education, now starting to reach most parts of the globe. A small but important line of investigation considers to *which* institutions and *which* programmes non-traditional students are gaining access. Overall, these studies find over-representation of these students in lower status institutions and programmes, with limited access obtained to elite domains of higher education. The first paper published in *Higher Education* on widening access, in 1976, had in fact investigated the class associations with programme choice in Scotland, finding that working class students continued to be overrepresented in programmes like engineering. The topic of institutional differentiation is a vexed one, since most policymakers recognise the need for differentiation in an advanced system but the problem stems from the association of status and potential future earnings with particular institutions.

A key concern of policymakers from early on in this expansion was about the implications for efficiency and a concern that widening access would be associated with poorer performance of students who would not have previously accessed higher education, as well as labour markets' inability to absorb these new graduates. Regarding academic outcomes, some of the research sought to understand the relation between part-time work (more prevalent amongst students from less privileged social groupings) and academic performance. The research on academic performance has an array of outcomes, but mostly tends to refute the assumption that 'non-traditional' students would reduce efficiency in the system. Even when there are performance differentials, there are still overall absolute outcomes in terms of graduates who previously would not have had the opportunity to do a degree. Similar findings emerge regarding employment, with changing patterns of graduate employment not easily attributable to an oversupply of graduates in economic contexts that are not highly planned.

The emergence of qualitative studies investigating widening participation is relatively recent. A first line of enquiry seeks to explore the lived experiences of students from underrepresented groups, comparing these to the intended goals of widening participation policy. There is a wide variety of approaches under this umbrella. As might be anticipated, some of it focuses on perceived problems and barriers, especially earlier work, but some work also subverts this assumption of deficit. A new line of research that has emerged in the last decade that critically interrogates policy at both national and institutional level, as well as some studies that look through to institutional implementation of policy commitments, e.g., in the processes for promotion of faculty. In line with the overall shift in the journal alluded to earlier, the authors are no longer policy insiders but tend more to be academics working in institutions closely with the students that have been the beneficiaries and subjects of these developments.

Exemplar paper 1: Chanana (1993) Accessing higher education: the dilemma of schooling women, minorities, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in contemporary India

Many of the early quantitative studies of widening participation were conducted in Western contexts. We chose this paper to show that these concerns were also shared by newly independent postcolonial countries, such as India. Karuna Chanana is an internationally renowned sociologist at Jawaharlal Nehru University who is still researching women's participation in education. The study assesses the progress made in post-independence India in relation to access to higher education for groups that were the focus for activism, policy

discourse and constitutional provisions after independence in 1947. Women's education had been a major focus for development strategy in the early post-independence period. Scheduled Castes and Tribes became a focus for particular constitutional reservations in higher education (women don't have this provision). Religious minorities (especially Muslims) obtained the constitutional provision allowing them to set up separate institutions.

The method for this paper compares absolute enrolment data from the period 1950–1951 with the period 1988–1989. Over this period, overall enrolment grew tenfold, while, for example, women's enrolment grew from one-tenth to one-third of total enrolment i.e. significant absolute growth and at a higher rate than men. A key constraint on the study lies in which data were available for analysis. For Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the paper only reports the proportion of total enrolments for 1988–1989. For religious minorities, data was more complex to obtain, and the author obtained data from religious affiliated institutions. The methods in this paper are characteristic of many papers in this period; purely descriptive with aggregate enrolment numbers for particular time periods. Following a detailed analysis, Chanana (1993, p. 89) concludes:

An overall conceptual framework is sadly missing at the policy level. The impact of various strategies too is difficult to assess in the case of women since most of these have been adopted during the last few years. The assessment of facilities for Muslims, Scheduled Castes and Tribes have been provided in the annual reports of respective Commissioners. They do not give much hope. The reservations have also not been very effective. The lacunae at the implementation stage are far too many and the situation is far too complex. Micro planning and decentralisation are the suggested alternative approaches to educational planning (India 1990b), but there has been a large gap between policy and practice especially because the implementation is left to the provincial governments while the policy pronouncements flow from the federal government. This gap, apart from unrealistic planning, reflects a schism in ideal and reality which, in turn, explains the extent and nature of educational disadvantage in India.

Exemplar paper 2: Boliver (2011) Expansion, differentiation, and the persistence of social class inequalities in British higher education

This paper is a significant exemplar of the growth in scope and depth of the quantitative research on widening participation. Boliver, now Professor of Sociology at Durham University, considers Britain from the 1960s through to the mid-1990s, and rigorously tests the hypothesis that expanding access will reduce inequality. The 1960s and the late 1980s through to mid-1990s were periods of significant expansion in participation in UK higher education. Across this full period there was a seven-fold increase in participation, from 5 to 35% of the youth cohort. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), Boliver selects a sample of those who were 18 years old in the years from 1960 to 1995. The data allows for the identification of social class based on the occupational class positions held by the fathers when the respondents were children. Using binary logistic regression, she can determine the odds for overall participation in higher education, as well as access to a degree programme and to an elite institution. The major finding of this ambitious study is to show that for most of these periods of expansion, the inequalities based on class for the odds of reaching higher education remained intact, and only started to decline when the more advantaged classes had reached saturation in the 1990s. In relation to which programmes and institutions students were accessing, these social class inequalities have

not changed. Thus, as was hypothesised, when higher education expands, the more advantaged classes are typically better placed to take up the expanded opportunities for participation in higher education. They also can use their resources to access the higher status programmes and institutions. Boliver (2011, p. 240) comments on these findings:

That said, it is noteworthy that although social class differences in the odds of higher education enrolment (whether in general or specifically in its more prestigious forms) did not become more equal as a consequence of expansion, nor did they become more unequal. On reflection this is perhaps rather surprising. Indeed, it might well have been expected that those from more advantaged social origins would have monopolised the new enrolment opportunities opened up by expansion and that those from less advantaged backgrounds would have been largely excluded from doing the same. And yet, those from different social class backgrounds in fact appear to have benefited more or less equally from expansion even if less advantaged groups continued to lag substantially behind in their enrolment rates. In this limited sense, then, the expansion of higher education in Britain could be said to have been inclusive rather than exclusive (cf. Arum et al. 2007).

Compared to the earlier work on this topic of which the previous paper is an exemplar, there are several points of difference in methods and approach. Firstly, Boliver can take in a longer sweep of time. Secondly, she doesn't only track participation but also looks at which programmes and which institutions are being accessed. Finally, the use of binary logistic regression models allows for a determination of probabilities of access to higher education.

Exemplar paper 3: Leathwood (2006) Gender, equity and the discourse of the independent learner in higher education

This paper is located in a UK period (especially in England) where broadening of access was tied to economic imperatives through policy statements emphasising 'independent life-long learners' and is a significant exemplar of a new stance in relation to policy, also reflecting the growing critique of now entrenched neoliberal politics. While the neoliberal agenda appears to offer better outcomes for those who did not traditionally access higher education, the problem is that it doesn't actually secure job stability but rather imposes the responsibility on the employee to repeatedly retrain and upskill as economic demands shift.

This research is located in one institution, a 'post-1992' university. This term refers to former polytechnics and central institutions given university status (but not a Royal Charter) in 1992 — thus ending, in theory, the binary line between polytechnics and established universities, and granting to the post-1992 institutions the autonomy to award degrees.

Leathwood, now a professor emerita at London Metropolitan University, locates the study in a critical analysis of the discourse on 'independence' showing that this is not a neutral terminology but is significantly associated with gender and race in its normative orientations. The empirical part of the paper looks at how students construct 'independence', drawing on focus groups and interviews conducted longitudinally across the years of study. Most of the students who participated in the study were mature students, also a majority were female, and many were also Black or Asian. i.e. these would largely be considered 'non-traditional' students — a term only starting to feature in the literature from around this period.

The study found that students valued independence both for being a student and what they were learning about coping in life both in the workplace and personally. However,

they also valued support and would not fit the profile of the completely self-directed learner that the policy discourse seems to imply. Some students struggled with the perceived lack of support in the senior years. Overall, the author argues that students are not served by this discourse of ‘independence’ which, she argues, allows universities to absolve themselves from responsibility for student support. She writes (2006, p. 630):

In this paper, I have suggested that the ‘independent learner’ is a gendered construction and inappropriate for the majority of students. In many ways, ‘independence’ is a masculinist myth; what suits (some) men is defined as the ideal that all should be striving for, whilst men’s dependence on others remains hidden.

The meso level: institutional policies and practices on equality

The second main category of papers we identified addressed the meso level: HE institutions as the sites in which equality plays out. Many of the 56 articles in this section overlap somewhat with the afore-mentioned theme of widening access. Similarly, the majority (35) of these organisation-focused articles actually concentrate on the lived experience of individuals or groups of individuals, such as women, disabled people, or international students, in a particular organisation or groups of organisations. As those are addressed in the other two themes, in this section we instead highlight the more organisation-centred articles. We identified 21 articles that explicitly focus on higher education institutions’ policies or practices for reducing inequality, attempting to be more inclusive and diverse, and providing an equal studying and working experience for all their students and staff.

While the first institutional article— Barrett & Powell’s (1980) study of a special admissions scheme developed to facilitate admission for non-matriculated mature students in a single Australian university — was published in 1980, equality in the institutional context only emerged as a prominent topic in the early 1990s. The articles adopt varied approaches in terms of thematic focus, geographical location, and methodological and theoretical approach. Gender or ethnicity have been fairly constant (in)equality themes since the 1990s, whereas the status of disabled or international students and academics arose as a topical issue only a decade later. Other themes such as socio-economic status, age, motherhood, immigrant or refugee background or sexuality appear much less prominently. Methodologically, the early studies tend to be quantitative and/or descriptive, while the later decades bring in a breadth of qualitative, interpretive and critical studies. The higher education institutions addressed in the articles are typically located in the Anglo-Saxon countries, but as the number of articles increased in the past two decades, so too did their geographical spread.

A broadening set of concepts around which the papers are built reflect the shifting debates around inequality in higher education and society over time. Many of the early papers focus on the notions of *affirmative action* and *equality of opportunity*. Some early examples include e.g. Cavalier & Slaughter (1982) on the costs of affirmative action policy in a US institution; Ganesh & Sarupria (1983) on elite reproduction in Indian higher education and Twale et al. (1992) on affirmative action programmes in professional schools. In the more recent papers, concepts such as *equity* (Renn, 2012, on women’s higher education institutions; Zerquera & Ziskin, 2020, on performance-based funding and equity) and *inequality* (Sadiq et al., 2019, on academic promotions at a South African university) also emerge. Specifically interesting is *diversity* which features as a key concept in many articles, starting from Bastedo & Gumpert (2003) on mission differentiation and academic

stratification in the USA as the first example. Diversity is also the key concept for Kezar et al. (2008) on leadership strategy for diversity in US institutions, Timmers et al. (2010) on institutional gender diversity policies in Netherlands, Ferfolja et al. (2020) on gender and sexual diversity in an Australian university and Bird & Pitman (2020) on the diversity of authors of texts in academic curricula.

In the following, we look more closely at three meso level studies which highlight some of these different methodological and conceptual approaches while explicitly aiming to fill empirical research gaps on topics they consider understudied.

Exemplar paper 1: Cavalier & Slaughter (1982) Autonomy versus affirmative action: What price social justice?

Early articles looking at organisational policies and practices primarily used a quantitative approach with descriptive statistics to describe the characteristics of the organisation (Guri, 1986), or an analysis of institutional documents to describe action taken by higher education institutions address given equality issues (e.g. Murphy, 2007; Twale et al., 1992).

The article by Cavalier & Slaughter (1982) is a typical example of this early period in that it adopts a descriptive mixed-method approach to calculate the direct and indirect costs of affirmative action/equal employment opportunity policy in one middle-tier American research university. The article was topical in its time, in that the US federal policies on higher education were subject to much debate nationally. In addition to filling an empirical gap in terms of measuring the direct and indirect costs related to these programmes as well as the outcomes achieved, the article offers a contribution to the policy debate not just on the affirmative action per se, but on the wider policy debate on university autonomy. As a result of the programme at this university, about 40% of the new hires were women or belonged to underrepresented minorities and their overall share in the personnel rose by 1.9%, although most of the increase was concentrated in the lower academic ranks such as lecturers and assistant professors. The overall costs of the programme were only 0.4% of the institution's total budget. The authors noted that while the programme was inexpensive compared with other federal social justice programmes, such as social security, it only benefited selected people. In the qualitative interviews with faculty, the programme was generally endorsed, but often placed in opposition to principles of meritocracy, quality, and hiring 'the best'. Thus, the success of the programme was dependent on cultural rather than merely technical change in the institution.

As the main cost of the programme was shown to be that of academics' time, the authors argue that care must be taken to ensure that the burden of fulfilment of the programme would not disproportionately fall on early career and minority staff. This concern is later validated by Baez (2000) who illuminates the challenges faced by minority ethnicity academics in balancing race-related and general service expectations with research and teaching expectations. Eventually, Cavalier and Slaughter argue that while educators have criticised the programme for being costly and not effective, they have done so without having comprehensive information about the real costs and effects. The critique was ultimately directed at what was considered shrinking academic and institutional autonomy:

... educators are not concerned with the actual dollar outlay for AA/EEO but instead use its intangible educational costs as a symbolic issue in their struggle with the state over university autonomy. This struggle is set within the wider context of the fiscal crisis of the state: the federal government is increasingly unable to generate the tax dollars on which higher education has come to depend.

Educators see the resulting federal and public demands for accountability as threatening traditional prerogatives - encompassed by the term 'autonomy' - setting higher education off from other publicly funded agencies. Representatives of the academic community are convinced the special nature of their enterprise calls for opposing state encroachment, but AA/EEO is the only issue on which they can afford resistance.' (Cavalier & Slaughter, 1982, p. 382.)

Exemplar paper 2: Kezar et al. (2008) Creating a web of support: An important leadership strategy for advancing campus diversity

Another set of institution-focused articles comprise qualitative studies that draw from personal or shared observations and conclude with organisational implications or prescriptive advice. An example we chose to highlight in this category is Adrianna Kezar and colleagues' 2008 study on institutional leadership for diversity. The authors note that:

... advancing campus diversity is complex and compounded by the demands competing for presidents' attention such as fundraising, developing external partnerships, and being responsive to changing community needs. At the same time, campus diversity is an issue that has high stakes and garners much campus attention, and has the potential to trouble an otherwise successful presidency. (Kezar et al, 2008, p. 70.)

The article thus aims to contribute to the literature on organisational strategy and leadership, as well as offering advice and practical tools for university leaders. The authors bring together literature focussing on advancing diversity on campus with theories on presidential leadership. They argue that the predominantly structural approach adopted in the literature on campus diversity, with its focus on integrating diversity questions into the institutional agenda, establishing diversity committees and councils, and allocating funding to diversity actions and evaluating their success is limited. It can be supported by the literature on presidential leadership which:

suggests the need for more expansive understanding of the leadership strategies associated with leading campus-wide diversity efforts, including strategies that focus on relationship-building, meaning-making and interpretation, as well as power and influence (Kezar, 2001, p. 73).

Based on interviews with 27 university presidents representing different types of institutions around the US, the article presents three findings. First, a successful leadership approach adopted by campus presidents is a collaborative one and can be likened to a spiderweb in which interlinked nodes and strands reinforce each other. Second, multiple actors, such as faculty, administrators, staff, students, boards and various external organisations, representing the nodes of the spider web, are all vital to the diversity agenda. Third, these nodes are supported by multiple strands: strategies that highlight the action taken to foster diversity and inclusivity on campus, as well as garner support for it. The article also highlights how, by the late 2000s, diversity as a key concept was a taken for granted starting point; implicitly defined in terms of expanding and supporting a diverse student populace and faculty.

Exemplar paper 3: Bird & Pitman (2020) How diverse is your reading list? Exploring issues of representation and decolonisation in the UK

Not all the meso-level articles focus on the entire organisation and its policies and practices. Bird & Pitman's (2020) article represents another angle into the internal life of the universities, as it is not focused on the organisational level or the questions of leadership or strategy. Yet by illuminating how diversity is manifested in what the university does in one of its main functions, education, it highlights the lived practice of (in)equality. Framing the article in terms of the many calls around the world to diversify and decolonise university curricula, the authors note that empirical analysis on the diversity of reading lists is rare and that this article aims to contribute empirical evidence for the UK debate. The authors note that the article attempts:

... to establish whether white, male and Eurocentric authors dominate university reading lists. This type of enquiry represents a crucial step towards developing and transforming our curricula in response to the global decolonisation agenda. (Bird & Pitman, 2020, p.904.)

The article examines reading lists of two modules drawn from social sciences and sciences in a research-intensive university in the UK and asks whether the authorship of the literature on those reading lists is descriptively representative of the university community. The authorship is examined from the perspectives of gender, ethnicity and the geographical context of institutional affiliation, and compared against the demographic characteristics of the academic staff and the student body. The results highlight the differences between sciences and social science disciplines and show the disparity of the gender and ethnic makeup between the authors of the literature and the constituents of the institution.

The authors acknowledge that in selecting only three demographic dimensions, their method overlooks other potentially significant dimensions which function to disadvantage individuals, such as disability, social class, religion or sexual orientation. In line with its critical approach, the article notes that heterogeneity is hidden in broad categories such as white ethnicity and that adhering to such categories inadvertently strengthens them, instead of making their boundaries more fluid.

The article concludes with four sets of recommendations. The authors first note that the university needs to engage in a transparent dialogue with stakeholders on the diversity of reading lists. They also call for the entire sector to develop coherent strategies instead of piecemeal solutions adopted for a single classroom or module. Individual teachers must take the initiative and not wait for institutional action on the matter, but institutions must also develop tools for teachers to review their curricula. The article finally concludes by reminding the reader that the entire sector should recognise and combat structural inequalities, such as the dominance of the Global North in the publishing landscape. A similar call is also made by Mwangi et al. (2018) in their insightful analysis of the journals in the field of higher education research.

The micro level: black and women academics' lived experiences

The emphasis on black and women academics' lived experience in *Higher Education* papers was chosen to illustrate a micro-level methodological approach (often based on qualitative interviews) in papers focusing on the experience of female academics in higher education institutions in different countries and across disciplines. These articles reveal how women academics perceived their situation at different points between the 1980s and 2021. The papers consider to varying degrees to what extent each such approach could act as a trigger for activity to reduce sexism, racism and discrimination. Large scale quantitative surveys using anonymised data were initially considered (Blackstone & Fulton, 1974; Tuckman & Tuckman, 1981) but their emphasis is on overall data trends, not lived experience. Purely analytic articles also tended to ignore the latter (Freeman, 1977). Surveys also seldom examine who should be responsible for orchestrating change, ranging from women themselves, through universities as organisations, to policy makers. Papers were sought in which, at a micro level, female academics and academics of colour expressed their concerns and challenges in their own words.

Fourteen papers which fitted the specification were identified by reading all articles concerning black and women academics published in *Higher Education* from 1972 to 2021. Of these 14, six were written by US authors, with three written or co-written by UK authors and three written or co-written by Australian authors, although the article content was sometimes more international. No suitable articles on black or women academics' lived experiences were found in the 1970 volumes, despite this being a decade of considerable growth in published work on sexism and educational inequalities (Deem, 1978). Much of the academic debate on sexism in *Higher Education* in the early days originated from the USA but gradually shifted to embrace other regions. This included Europe where EU Article 119 of the 1957 Treaty of Rome emphasised equal pay for equal work (Jacquot, 2020) and established a series of EU directives on inequality between women and men from 1975 onwards (Arribas & Carrasco, 2003). Possibly the relative absence of 1970s articles in *Higher Education* about academic women's lived experience was because there were many alternative places to publish such papers, as research on sex discrimination started to grow. A new journal with a higher education policy focus was not an obvious outlet for feminist research at that time. We now turn to the three selected papers.

Exemplar paper 1: Jensen (1982) Women's Work and Academic Culture: Adaptations and Confrontations

This paper examines 42 early career female academics' cultural adaptation to academic life in the USA, with interviewees from five western/midwestern US higher education institutions (Jensen, 1982). The paper's aim is to construct a model of women's academic acculturation, concentrating on 'academic culture' but also on 'women's culture' and the process of acculturation between the two. From her data, Jensen developed a model of three different responses, namely *reorientation* to academic norms (termed the 'male model'), *reaffirmation* of traditional female roles while also taking on parallel professional academic roles, and a *reconstitution* of the two cultures in a new form of professionalism. Jensen rejects the idea of her respondents having experienced professional socialisation into academic cultures as doctoral students, since women PhD candidates during the early 1980s would seldom have encountered other women academics. Jensen notes that those who followed

reorientation routes were encouraged to abandon their ‘femaleness’ in order to be taken seriously, while those who pursued *reaffirmation* paths tended to think of themselves as ‘superwomen’ who do everything that is asked of them inside and outside paid work. By contrast, the *reconstituting* group sought a move into a new lifestyle workspace, which they negotiated with the help of collegial support (mostly from other women) and were less individually competitive than the other two groups. The women in the *reorienting* category emphasised their academic work and its separation from other aspects of their lives. They rarely had female academic role models or friendships outside higher education. A number had considered not marrying. The *reaffirmation* group responded separately to academic work expectations and traditional female roles (e.g. being a mother). Almost all of them worked full-time and were generally more committed to research than teaching. They rarely identified as feminists. They also spent considerable time on their non-work lives. The *reconstituting* group contained both married and unmarried women, some were mothers and four had not taken their husband’s name. Most identified with feminism. Teaching (including support of female students) and research were both valued, the latter often focusing on new frontier fields. Time was also given to other non-work activities.

Jensen’s overall focus on ‘women’s culture’ as a starting point for her article would be regarded as very old fashioned now (she does not mention either sexuality or gender categories beyond female and male). However, her research approach, based on long qualitative interviews, would stand up to contemporary methodological standards, as would her careful attention to data coding practices. On the other hand, beyond the desire to develop a multi-faceted model of acculturation, the paper does not really have a strong conceptual framework, which sets it apart from recent work on gender and academics. There is also not much indication of attention to intersectionality (e.g. race and ethnicity), as only four of the 42 interviewees were women of colour or Hispanic Americans, although that might also reflect the composition of USA early career women academics at the time. The article’s conclusions reflect on and reject the extent to which holders of the three acculturative types were just measures of politicisation. Jensen suggested that the *reconstituted* group in particular, were looking for a holistic way to integrate their life activities in both academia and womanhood within a distinctive women’s culture. The range and significance of her research is nicely summed up in this quote from her article, which reflects on both the concepts of women’s culture and acculturation but also the socialisation process for new women academics in the USA in the early 1980s:

Without disregarding institutional constraints and status conflict, it seems important to know more about women’s own perceptions and experiences in the pursuit of academic careers and compatible personal lifestyles. This study depends on the proposition that there is an institutionalised academic culture which can be described. Additionally, the study posits the existence of an unarticulated world of women’s culture. This theoretical construction of women’s culture is based on the general agreement of traditional and radical analyses of the behaviours and personality characteristics common to women ... The idea that women’s professional behaviours were not simply structurally determined, but at some level chosen and learned suggested an acculturational model of women’s participation. As academic women rarely learn their profession from an older cohort of women, the professional socialization concept seemed inappropriate. Instead, women experience a process of acculturation to the male dominated and defined professional world ... But as acculturative results of ethnic group and other subcultural contact can take several forms, so do the outcomes among women in academia. The orientations depend in part on the conditions of

contact with the dominant culture: particular strengths of each subculture, graduate school experiences and relationships, definitions of career and professional conduct. (Jensen, 1982, p. 68)

Exemplar paper 2: Bagilhole (1993) Survivors in a male preserve: a study of British women academics' experiences and perceptions of discrimination in a UK university

This paper on sex discrimination experienced by women academics in a variety of disciplines in one UK university is based on a qualitative interview-based study (Bagilhole, 1993). There were a very similar number of interviewees (43) to Jensen's paper, although all career stages were included in Bagilhole's sample. Bagilhole does not mention whether everyone she interviewed was white or not and refers to her data coding in just one sentence. She also does not use an overall theoretical framework but draws on a variety of different literature, such as the idea of dominant and muted groups (Delamont, 1989). Both Jensen and Bagilhole were pioneers in gender research. Jensen was Co-founder and Director of Women's Studies at Wyoming University, with a focus on women and work (Anon., 2010), while Bagilhole was interested in sexism in the construction and engineering industries, as well as forming the international Women in Higher Education Management Network (Gould, 2015). Bagilhole's broader work on several EU research projects emphasised sex discrimination in construction and civil engineering, including male-dominated networking, excessive working hours and sexist language. Her research showed how these factors affected women's work experience. She initiated a programme of organisational change that shaped both construction bodies' and the European Commission's policy on changing women's experience of the construction industry (Valentina, 2015).

Bagilhole's analysis in this paper focuses on how the women she interviewed coped with discriminatory practices and beliefs emanating from both students and from male staff. The women academics she interviewed lacked support systems, had little access to mentors or role models, faced hostility from male colleagues as well as students and were sometimes left out of communication networks. Bagilhole cites a quantitative paper on the position of women academics in US and UK universities (Blackstone & Fulton, 1975) which showed that female academics were not rewarded for their academic endeavours in the same way as their male peers. She notes that statistical surveys draw attention to the problem but do not make visible how sexism actually operates. Indeed, she suggests that some male writers of quantitative studies ignore the impact of such behaviour and blame women for any problems female academics encounter, as was the case in a big survey of British academics (Halsey, 1992).

Bagilhole's interviews involved women academics in different departments and the majority were in lecturer level posts. Bagilhole found that her sample were almost always in a minority in their departments, which meant they were sometimes invisible (e.g. in promotion) and at other times too visible, such as in classrooms dominated by male students. Women students were generally regarded by respondents as easier to deal with, but some women academics did not want to focus too much on female students for fear of criticism from male peers. Women respondents often found it difficult to permeate academic networks and some had resigned from jobs due to unsupportive male colleagues who derided women's achievements and excluded female academics from department social events. Other women did not feel they belonged in academia and some shied away from contact with other female academics, fearing it weakened their position still further. Only 15 (out of 43) interviewees were unreservedly in favour of women's studies (mostly those in social

sciences or arts/humanities) and just 3 actually taught women's studies courses. 18 women had reservations about women's studies and 10 were totally opposed to them. Bagilhole compared her findings with a five-country study of women academics (Sutherland, 1985), which showed very similar responses and patterns. Bagilhole ends her article by saying that the processes of sex discrimination illustrated by her study needs to be highlighted to universities so they can take action to provide much greater equality. This awareness of the importance of change being orchestrated by institutions rather than women themselves (as was stressed in Jensen's work) connects with Bagilhole's other experiences of working to change sexist practices towards women in construction and civil engineering. Bagilhole powerfully sums up the challenges that the women academics working in a male-dominated university face and the impact of this on their professional careers:

It is suggested ... that women academics' experiences of being in a minority with the accompanying lack of support systems, and their difficulties of integrating into a male working environment can be seen to influence their perception of themselves as real academics and to affect their professional careers. They feel that they do not belong and are not true academics. Nearly two-thirds of the women (28) felt that there was a problem with the concept of a woman academic. Many of them felt that this was a bad thing for the profession and denied female qualities and potential. This reflects in part their struggle to keep their home life and professional life separate. (Bagilhole, 1993, p. 441)

Exemplar paper 3: Belluigi & Thondhlana (2019) 'Why mouth all the pieties?' Black and women academics' revelations about discourses of 'transformation' at an historically white South African university.

This paper focuses on how different forms of inequality in higher education link with discourses about and practices related to post-apartheid efforts directed at the transformation of South African universities. The authors engaged with black female and male academics who had attended special development programmes for black academics at a Historically White Institution, in a context where institutional power relations and organisational cultures still retain many colonial elements (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019). Recent student protests in South Africa had drawn attention to the persistence of institutional practices that were deemed to be colonial in origin (Jansen, 2019; Pennington et al., 2017), as did the emergence of new theories such as Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. The authors used a survey and interviews to explore the misalignment between espoused discourses of the university concerned and institutional practices aimed at keeping dominant groups in positions of power. One author had been a programme recipient and the other worked in educational development and both admit struggling with their own positionality in relation to the research. Positionality was not mentioned by either Bagilhole or Jensen's articles.

This article focuses on the intersectionality of 'race' and gender at a critical time in South Africa's universities' post-apartheid development. Particular emphasis is placed on the extent to which long established patterns of power and dominance in South African universities have persisted for many years. This includes the continuation of the stark differences between historically white and historically black universities. During the early 2000s, new 'development' programmes for black academics (e.g. leadership training or 'capacity enhancement'), often funded by Global North philanthropic organisations, were offered at several universities. These programmes often happened *before* issues of

programme recipients' job security were decided, while also trying to reinforce staff adaptation to existing institutional norms and values.

A total of 27 programme recipients participated in a questionnaire and follow-up small group discussions and the paper particularly draws on answers to the transformation questions in the questionnaire. There was evidence of respondents' fatigue in relation to institutional research on transformation, which was regarded as a way of powerful groups evading tackling actual institutional change. Participants' reactions to transformation discourses included reference to recurring concepts, such as reparation, evolution and compliance. While concepts like psychological change resonated with most participants, other concepts evoked concern about the gap between discourse and practice. Other criticisms included that transformation discourses were often window-dressing, with little actual change occurring. Black academics were seen not as scholars, but rather as people who need to be sent on special courses, while racism, sexism and patriarchy continued apace. On occasions, evidence of these phenomena occurring was ignored or glossed over. The authors' evidence suggests that both institutions and the entire HE system in South Africa need to be held responsible for the failure of transformative change. They convey in this quote some of the frustrations of female and male black academics noted during the research:

As the participants of our study are those bestowed with hope, aspiration and a degree of individual agency to influence higher education in the future, their experiences have considerable importance for realising equality in the South African academy. The retention of black academics is a recognised problem in the sector. Common across participants' narratives was the disheartening impact of the misalignment of discourses with practices, on their initial commitment to equality. Becoming conscious of the ugly realities of the institution resulted in disillusionment in an institutional culture which did not "accept the necessity of reparations or restructurings, so why mouth all the pieties? Initially, it feels as though it's a start, and one feels bad about complaining when others seem to be trying. But after many months of it, you realize that it's really the whole deal, and there's nothing more. That's a disturbing realization". The vast majority of the participants articulated feeling their agency frustrated by institutional, cultural and individual resistance to substantive transformation. This was particularly the case with those who self-identified with an obligation to effect transformation, who had become increasingly exasperated by how their agency was most often thwarted, rather than supported or extended, by larger institutional approaches. Being at the 'rockface' between the politics of representation and the politics of belonging was for many untenable and unsustainable. (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019, p. 959)

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis has surveyed articles published on inequality in higher education over the lifespan to date of this journal. This has offered insights into the changing methods, theories and forms of empirical research used in inequality studies conducted at what we categorised as macro, meso and micro levels. Here, it must be noted that these levels of analysis tend to nest within each other. Work tackling macro national level questions often needs to draw on meso institutional and micro individual data in order to deliver grounded insights around the impacts of policy. Likewise, we found that the meso institutional focus was almost always located within a national context and drew often on interview and survey

data with individuals in the institution. And our final category focusing at a micro level on women academic's experiences typically also had important findings in relation to institutional and national policy on women's academic careers.

Our analysis looked at changing trends in the methods used in our selected research studies. From the macro perspective, our study identified a significant evolution in how quantitative studies were conducted, moving from descriptive studies with absolute numbers and proportions, through to more fine-grained studies looking at access patterns to different institutional types. Recent studies draw on regression techniques to determine the odds of different social groups attending particular institutions based on their socio-economic background. All these studies are of course, dependent on what national data are collected, which makes comparison across countries difficult. At the meso level, the focus has been concentrated on studies that describe and analyse organisational characteristics, policies, and practices about equality for women, ethnic minorities, students with disabilities or learning difficulties, or other disadvantaged groups. Here the methodological focus tends more towards a mix of quantitative institutional data and conceptual overview of policies, coupled with qualitative analysis of faculty and student experiences. At the micro level, research has tended to focus on interviews or focus groups and has aimed at surfacing participants' voices. It is only in recent work at this level that we see explicit statements of author positionality, although earlier authors were keen to emphasise their commitment to feminism and to trying to eliminate discrimination against women academics.

Conceptually, there is an eclectic spread of concepts from social science that researchers have drawn on to conceptualise inequality in higher education. Across the widening participation field as a whole, there has been an emergence and evolution of terminology, concepts and theories that speak to these empirical findings, for example the evolving terminology to refer to the social groupings as a focus for access, including the emergence of terms such as 'non-traditional student' and 'first generation student' and the conceptual deliberations in relation to these. Overall, we find that the early papers focus more on women and on people's socioeconomic background (although Cavalier & Slaughter's, 1982 paper also talks of 'protected classes') and foci on race and ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identifying students and academics, or international students and academics, only emerge later. Similarly, the conceptual foci gradually broaden from affirmative action and equality (of opportunity) to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Some of the debates, for example, about diversity, originated in the USA but have not always been interpreted in the same ways in other contexts. Key concepts can also change their meaning over time. Thus, for example, inclusivity, for several decades, was largely the preserve of studies about supporting those with a disability or learning difficulties but more recently inclusivity has widened out to include other disadvantaged or discriminated against social and cultural groups, with an emphasis on universal design approaches to higher education (Leišytė et al., 2021). Diversity is another interesting example of a key concept, which has been defined somewhat differently in the context of a European discussion, compared with a US one, where it was initially applied to businesses rather than educational organisations. Critical theory, while not new in itself, has grown in its prominence in use in higher education studies, particularly in relation to race, black feminist thought and queer theory. Intersectionality, using a perspective taking into account the experience and effects of different but overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage, has also become more commonplace.

In terms of the researchers themselves, in the widening participation work, we found a wide spread of people working in this area, including social scientists from different disciplines such as education or sociology, sometimes working in conjunction with economists or using their techniques. The more recent qualitative studies on this topic tended to be

institutionally focused and either unfunded or supported by local funding sources. Overall, we noted the ongoing broadening geographical spread of the papers, as well as authors and the rising numbers of papers in general. The close-up analysis of papers on women's lived experiences shows a strong evolution towards more activist stances. The overall message of the paper by Belluigi and Thondhlana is that the development programmes aimed at transformation of South African universities, both historically white and historically black, as well as the discourses and alignments of practice with policies, have failed both female and male black academics. This is a much harsher message about the failure to overcome significant inequalities amongst black male and female staff than the messages about change emanating from the nevertheless important work by Jensen and Bagilhole. Even here there is differentiation. Whereas Jensen's 1980s paper attributes responsibility for change largely to women academics themselves, Bagilhole's 1990s paper links women academics' discrimination to the failures of universities as equitable organisations.

Higher education across the globe has changed dramatically over the five decades in which researchers have been publishing in this journal. Expansion and growth have been the dominant trends, and with this participation by a larger proportion of the youth cohort in all higher education contexts. With growth in the numbers of academics there has been a similar, although less marked, shift in the demographic makeup of those who teach and research. Throughout this period there has been an anticipation that these changes will be instrumental in advancing equity in society. Many researchers in Higher Education have kept this anticipation central to their work but have not shied away from looking at the empirical evidence to see whether this was matched by what really transpired. In our analysis, we looked closely at changing approaches to how this research was conducted, both in terms of theoretical underpinnings and empirical methods. There seems no doubt that these research questions are far from exhausted, and the next five decades should see further evolution in the field.

Looking forward it seems clear that research on inequality in higher education will continue to grow in prominence in the field, with much scope for ongoing inclusion of social, cultural and ethnic groups under focus. Our analysis has shown how gender (focused initially on women's participation and experiences) and social class have been strong foci since the 1970s, while race, and gender, conceptualised more broadly to include LGBTQI dimensions, are now significant foci, reflecting political trends especially in the Global North, while an emphasis on cross-national inequities is now more prominent with increased voices from the Global South. It is hoped that this journal will continue to aim to stay at the vanguard of this important work.

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